Dancer to Actor to Voice Specialist: An Interview with Francine Zerfas

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March 2013, New York, NY

As published in VoicePrint, Newsletter of the Australian Voice Association, December 2013

Few voice teachers, in theatre or music, begin their careers as professional dancers. Yet that is indeed what Francine Zerfas did, and her transitions from dancer to actor to voice specialist are fascinating!

Having had the privilege of working with several of Francine’s students, both individually and in workshops, I knew directly how free, open, confident and competent they were. I’d also known Francine since 2005 and over the years we’d communicated via email.

It was mid-day at Atlantic Acting School, New York University Tisch School of the Arts. Francine had organized a classroom for the interview and we had just an hour before students came pouring in for the next class—as we continued our conversation in the hallway.

FZ: In my first-year voice classes, after weeks of working on softening abdominals, opening ribs and freeing the diaphragm, my students almost always ask, “What is the right way to breathe?” I have students who do all sorts of sports and martial arts, gym classes, or who have trained in dance since they were young—each activity requiring a different kind of muscular engagement, a different approach to breathing. If they are truly skilled, they come into the room with those habits. It’s then that I open up a conversation about how we’re trying to understand our anatomy in the context of speaking, of voice and acting, and that those activities require yet a different action. However, I go on to say that when you go to your Pilates class or you have to train intensively for the next equestrian championship, you need to follow what your teacher or trainer asks of you. And if you are also an actor, you need to have the flexibility to adapt. I encourage them not to take that physical work [of sport or dance] as a lifestyle—which I understand, having been a dancer many years ago.

When you’re a dancer and you’re serious about it, you live that life. You turn into a body…I just realized, I don’t think I thought about my breath when I was dancing. The way in which I used my body—the way I walked, the carriage of my back—all of that was based on what I was doing eight or nine hours a day. I would stand at a bus stop and practice the adagio of the last class I took. My body was being trained in such a way that I inhabited that skill even when I sat in a booth of a diner. And when I switched from dancing to acting, I had to
rethink this. It was very confusing to me, this difference between how you move as a dancer and how you inhabit your body as an actor. It took me about three years of great confusion to work through that difference, and it was something that I had to teach/experience myself.

There is a different way that one inhabits the body as a dancer. It’s not only the turned out feet or hips that lead when walking, or the long neck or very erect spine; in my experience, dancers move as if architecting the space around them with their limbs. There is a strong sense of the lines one is making when dancing, even in everyday life.

When I transitioned from dancing to acting, it was not only about turning my feet to parallel and learning how to slouch again, it was learning how to find a different center and grounding. Voice class was the key for that, not my classes in movement for the actor; and breath was key. It took me quite a while to realize I not only had to free my abdominals, but to soften my entire spine, particularly the held ribs and tensed sternum I’d developed as a dancer in order to free my breath and impulse. I held all that core tight and constantly engaged, and when I flexed my spine in non-ballet techniques, like Graham, my abdominals and ribs were still very controlled.

In acting, I came to understand that movement was still generated from the spine, but it was a freer spine to which my breath was responding. When I moved this way, even abstract movements, I began to feel emotions surface as well as images and impulses. Another step was what I mentioned earlier, becoming more pedestrian in the way I inhabited my body. Learning how to sit with greater ease, which allowed me to feel and in a sense, hear my impulses, was a kind of chore. I guess that’s what I mean when I say to my students “Let the impulse land,” as it is a physical experience and a subtle one at times.

And then of course, there was another element: how to move naturalistically, instead of shaping the movement. That’s the connection of mind (thought), body and breath that I strive for when teaching, and I think is the business of voice work. I can act in an avant-garde play where the movement is choreographed and still inhabit myself as an actor, because of the breath connection to my movement now. And I can also act in a production of something like Shepherd and let go of the dancer and discover the body, movement and gesture more naturalistically.

Sometimes my students panic, as in get confused, because one technique wants you to do this with your abs and breathing, while another technique wants you to do something else. I’ve tried to say that in my opinion—which is simply that, my experience and knowledge—that you have to adapt to what is asked of you, yet realize you can’t continue holding on to those abdominals. You can’t expect yourself to be versatile enough to shift into acting/speaking if you continue to breathe and tighten the abs as a ballet dancer, or a Taekwando master, or whatever. But what’s needed physically is incredibly complicated.
JM: When did you start studying dance? When did you feel you wanted to change directions? Anything you want to share about how this happened?

Good question. I began dancing—I’m not exactly sure how old I was. I think I was 14 or 15. Unfortunately for me, I started late because I was in the Dakotas. I had wanted to dance since I was five, but that simply wasn’t going to happen because I was in an 8,000-person town. There was no culture, nothing like that. Then it happened that a Russian ballerina who called herself “Madame something or other,” from Sioux Falls, South Dakota, chose to come to Madison (my home town) and offer a ballet class. My mother, sensing my teenage angst and lost-ness, one day said, “I read that there’s a ballet teacher who came to town and I signed you up!” It really was miraculous. My life changed utterly overnight. Everything about me started to make sense when I took ballet class. I was too old to be a ballerina, but I didn’t care.

After high school, I left the Dakotas and moved to Minneapolis to train. I thought I was just going to take ballet class, but then I was introduced to modern dance, which opened my eyes again. I studied Graham. That was probably the modern dance technique that was most suited to my body because I have a long torso. Loved it, loved it, loved it! I took three different classes a day and in a couple years apprenticed for a time. There aren’t a lot of dance companies in Minneapolis, but there are many choreographers there. So, I began dancing and performing in independent works. (I haven’t really thought about this in a while, so my order is a little wacky.) At that time, I was also a member of a dance company called the Hoover Uprights. We even had our own rock ‘n’ roll band, The Psychonauts. It was actually very theatrical with a great sense of humor. The choreographer, Denise Gustafson, was a brilliant athletic dancer. She was very original in her work, choreographed dances based on the movement of The Flintstones TV show, and dances where we had to read our moves from cue cards—reminds me a bit of Judson Church dance [New York City].

I think what happened was, at one point in Minneapolis, I had roommates who were visual art students. They were painters, photographers, video makers—they, too, were multi-taskers. I started to meet a lot of visual artists and found myself in their films, photos, and performance art pieces. So the idea of performance was beginning to change and now included visuals and language. Eventually, I found myself in Berlin, Germany, with my boyfriend for what turned out to be many months, and that changed me. He was a painter, writer and filmmaker, studying German at the Goethe Institute. I was just the girlfriend who followed him and had a chance to go to Europe for the first time in my life.

The world opened up again, even wider. I tried to take ballet class, but was too scared as I didn’t know German, plus I had very little money. So I stopped dancing during that time and did things I’d never done before, like stay in bed for three days reading a book. My friend
and I—at that time the Berlin Wall was up—made an art installation, so to speak, on the Berlin Wall. And I started writing, I think because it was very difficult there, but very profound. I was learning about my young self.

I came back to Minneapolis, was accepted into a company as an understudy, the New Dance Ensemble. So I returned to dance. Not long after that, I was observing a rehearsal of a musical that a friend was choreographing, an avant-garde musical. During that rehearsal their lead actor quit and I suddenly found myself singing in a musical and playing a transgendered guy. I don’t know how I ever got the nerve to say, “Yes!” I had no idea what I was doing. It was spectacular fun and it turned out I could sing—ish. When I returned to dance rehearsals, I found myself feeling that dance no longer expressed enough for me—that seems like an awfully lofty thought, but it is true. Words became important to me, and visuals. So I decided I was going to try and come to New York to go to acting school.

Where did you go to school?

Undergraduate school, I went to NYU, and actually my graduate degree is in creative writing. My first full-length play was directed by my dear friend of many years, Kristin Marting. We, along with two of our peers, Tim Maner and Kristin Ames, formed a theatre company called The Tiny Mythic Theater, which really had its birth during our time at Harvard, when we were Guest Artists and teaching assistants. Years later, after I had left the company to be a freelance actor, that company merged with HOME for Contemporary Arts and is now the theatre, HERE Arts Center, in New York City. At NYU, really one of my best teachers and my most important acting teacher was my voice teacher. I have to say I learned the most from that man.

Was that Chuck Jones?

Chuck Jones. Yes. He liked dancers in his classroom, which makes sense. He was a man who not only had a partner who was a dancer, but if you went to his house, you’d find he had a Pilates machine in his bedroom! He was serious about using his body as an actor. I think what he liked about dancers is that dancers are disciplined, they work hard, they know how to practice and listen. You ask them to do something, and they’ll do it. Voice work was yet another physical skill that showed me what more was possible. It is cheesy to say he gave me my voice. But it is true. He gave the nasally, tight-jawed girl from the Prairie a voice. He invited me to train with him as a teacher, and so I did for a number of years. Then he sent me off on my own path with the words “Make it your own.” Ask how I made that transition, that’s how I can make sense of that journey.

And of course, you use everything in your life in your teaching.
That is absolutely the case.

…and in your performing.

Yes. When I finally figured out how to move as an actor, I found that movement only improved my experience of acting and was the tool that helped me understand my voice beyond my training.

*That is gold!* It really is, especially for people who think movement is something against voice.

I did appreciate, when reading Catherine’s [Fitzmaurice] essay, “Breathing is Meaning,” the phrase, “Voice is an action.” That was a really profound statement that helped me understand the idea that it’s my body in action. And that, I think, is also my strength as a teacher. In my Fitzmaurice work I’ve been called *athletic* in my teaching. I think of voice work as a very athletic experience. I know the body from my own experience of it—from a girl with seven brothers who could play any sport they could, a dabbler in gymnastics in grade school, to a dancer, an actor, and a long-time student of yoga and Pilates. My approach to voice is from this strong movement understanding, and a very technical understanding. I by no means understand the anatomy like you do.

*You understand at a deep level.*

I understand at a very intuitive level and I do my best to educate myself. And I trust my instincts—well, most of the time. What keeps me intrigued in teaching voice is that, as you say, everything I do, and have done, comes into my classroom. I’ve just finished reading Patti Smith’s recent book about her and Mapplethorpe when they were kids in New York City. I started listening to her music again, which I hadn’t heard in over twenty years. I was astounded at what I was hearing now, not only at this age, but also with this ear and knowledge. I watched her performances in the seventies on YouTube and was in awe at what she was doing with language, with her body, and her voice. I’m bringing that into my classroom, asking my students to lie back and just listen to her sing “Birdland.” Talk about body in action, from tongue to toe.

I think I do teach what I’m interested in, and I teach what I want to learn, as well as what I know. I am finding my own way in my teaching, and movement and language are primary. I’ve learned a lot along the way. I understand dancers. It’s possible to dance, sing and act. You don’t have to throw the rest away just because you want to act as well.

*The fact that you’ve done all this yourself—you’ve experienced the transitions and apparent contradictions—makes you so much stronger as a teacher because you’re not just talking. You’ve really been there.*
I can remember at NYU, when I was an acting student, trying to do a class exercise—I’m not exactly sure what the exercise was, something like take an object and tell a story about it while moving. (It was still early in the stage of transitioning from dance to acting.) I have always thought of a dancer as an architect of space and an actor as inhabiting the body differently. I’m not sure if I even know how to express this. It’s not about design and it’s not about an extension of limbs in space. In this object exercise, I felt I could do anything interesting with my body and this object, but my teacher kept saying “But there’s no story. You’re not connected to it.” What does that mean? What is it I’m not doing? What does connection mean?

When I saw Pina, the movie, I was so moved. I laughed, I cried, I longed. I have to say that when I saw that, I really felt that if I had known about her when I was dancing, that would have been the company—and if I had better legs and feet—that would have been the company for me. I feel her work is both dance and theatre. In the movie, Pina was interviewed about her role in Café Müller. She spoke about her experience when rectifying that role and how in rehearsal she knew that something was missing, but couldn’t figure out why it didn’t feel right. (What’s important to know about that role is that she was dancing with her eyes closed in a café filled with chairs and tables that the dancers were constantly moving around.) She explained that she discovered that there was a difference when her eyes were closed if she was looking down or looking up. So, where the eyeballs were positioned completely informed her interior life, and that was what she was missing. Ah, how amazing. That is the transition from dance to acting. It is about moving internally. And yet, she did both.

How long have you been teaching?

I think I started in 1991. I was first trained in Chuck Jones’ work and co-taught classes with him for a time before being allowed my own classes. He was a generous guy. I taught that work for many years before training in Fitzmaurice work. When I was finishing my certification with Catherine, she asked me what and where I was teaching. I was teaching Chuck’s work, which is based in Iris Warren and Kristin Linklater’s work, and I was trying to figure out how to bring Fitzmaurice into my teaching, which I’ve been doing now for about eight years. I have a much better understanding of what I’m doing now and why I think it’s important. My student’s really dig it. They see, like I, the merit of both and how they are complimentary. I remember, when answering Catherine’s question, she responded by saying she thought her work was very complimentary with other techniques. I was really grateful for that. I am fully committed to Chuck’s work and don’t consider my voice worked out sufficiently without it. I think his “channel” work continues to change my voice. But Catherine’s work appeals to the dancer in me, and has connected me to the deep interior of my voice through my body.
As a vocal coach, when you have an actor who sings and dances, or an actor who’s not a dancer but can move well and has to act, I began to think, “Well, wait a minute, I still don’t have the right equation.” Then I realized we simply have to be adaptable. I’ve done a good amount of movement/theatre, whether it was a devised piece or a new interpretation of a play, and came against that issue of speaking and moving a great deal without much awareness. But as a teacher, I’ve had to wrestle with this in order to open up my students’ voices and get them to meet the demands of the play or production.

You’ve had a fascinating career, with some remarkable changes of perspective. Any thoughts about where you go from here?

No, I think that’s exactly where I am at this point in my life, asking where am I now? I find myself increasingly impassioned by singing but no experience of singing except in the shower…

And on the musical theatre stage…

Well, if you’d call it that. I would be afraid to see a video!

What’s next? I don’t quite know. I’m not sure what inspires me right now.

Fair enough. Thank you so much, Francine!