

Pilates Training and the Actor/Singer

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There are distinct differences in breathing technique between most Pilates training and voice work for the actor and singer. Yet the powerful benefits of Pilates training may override those technical incompatibilities. This article suggests practical solutions to specific problems through 1) communication between Pilates trainers and voice specialists, 2) individual adaptation of voice-related breathing patterns to Pilates work, and 3) the use of modified Pilates-based exercises in the voice class.

Pilates training is now a part of many performing arts programs, along with the Alexander Technique, Feldenkrais, yoga, Suzuki, and other movement-related work. Pilates was a well kept secret, known mainly to classical dancers and a few athletes before the 1990s, when studios began to appear in major cities throughout the US, UK and in other parts of the world. The training is named for its creator, Joseph Pilates (1880 – 1967), who was born in Germany, emigrated to the United States in 1926, and taught in New York City until well into the 1960s (Gallagher & Kryzanowska, 1993). The Pilates method involves slow and controlled movements, either on Pilates equipment, the best known of which is probably the *Universal Reformer*, or on a mat. The Reformer looks like a long table with straps, springs and a box for activities designed to strengthen muscles and joints. The training is usually available in individual sessions as well as in small classes. "The beauty of Pilates is that it engages the body and mind simultaneously.

The actions, which are gentle and flowing, promote excellent tone, sleekness and grace” (Ackland, 1998). Approaches vary from one part of the world to another and can range from calisthenics-like multiple repetitions, to individualized programs for specific concerns.

My first awareness of Pilates training came during a visit to Gastown Actors Studio (GAS), in Vancouver, Canada, in the winter of 1995. Although I did not observe a Pilates class at GAS, I was intrigued by the enthusiasm with which the training was described. It was four years later before I had the opportunity to do a three-week intensive with an excellent Pilates teacher in San Luis Obispo, California. I was an immediate convert and continued to train with the head of a dance program near my own campus. I have found that Pilates has a strong appeal to me personally and it has obvious applicability to my teaching of voice and movement to actors and singers.

When Pilates is taught as a separate course in a performing arts curriculum, communication among voice and movement specialists can be a critical factor in the success of the program. Movement and voice need to be related and integrated for the student; otherwise confusion reigns and benefits dissipate. Students hesitate to contradict their teachers; yet teachers will seem to contradict one another unless technical differences and appropriate modifications have been discussed in advance. Integration can be brilliantly facilitated by the use of movement-based exercises in the voice class, and there is outstanding precedent for such integration:

The Fitzmaurice approach to theatre voice uses modified yoga postures to wonderful effect in deepening the breath and opening both resonance and emotional response. In an excellent article for the *Voice & Speech Review*, 2000, Ruth Rootberg describes her application of Laban/Bartenieff principles to a Linklater vocal warm-up. Tadashi Suzuki's challenging physical work incorporates voice and has direct application to the theatre voice class. The Alexander Technique has a unique place in the training of all performers, and singers especially benefit from the gentle physical efficiency of this work.

Pilates training can enhance the study of anatomy and physiology and supports the actor/singer's work on alignment, balance and centering. Perceived conflicts emerge, however, as we look for consistency among physical "truths," especially in the sensitive and critical area of breathing. Integral to Pilates movement is a type of breathing that seems alien to good voice use. Pilates teachers often demonstrate and encourage an audible inhalation and forced and audible exhalation. Breathing is centered in the chest, with no abdominal release, and anterior expansion of the lower ribs is strongly discouraged. As singers and actors, we have learned a very different physicality, and our use of breath is intimate to our craft.

In her classic text, *Dynamics of the Singing Voice* (Springer-Verlag, 1982), Meribeth Bunch says, "During inspiration the lungs expand by means of enlargement of every dimension of the thorax . . ." and from *A Handbook of the Singing Voice* (Bunch, 2000):

The breath is silent rather than gasping or gulped and full movement of the diaphragm and the back portion of the lower ribs is possible . . . Raising the shoulders to inhale and pushing them down to exhale [is a common problem]. This usually occurs because there is no movement in the lower back and abdomen.

Pilates training opens the back portion of the ribs and develops awareness and strength in that part of the body. At the same time, it permits little movement in the abdomen.

Also from *Dynamics of the Singing Voice*:

Dancers must keep the abdominal muscles contracted for support of the vertebral column, therefore their breathing pattern results in movement of the upper abdomen and lateral movement of the ribs with little movement of the lower abdomen.

Lateral movement of the ribs is often new to singers and, therefore, an added benefit of Pilates training. Actors, on the other hand, experience lateral breathing as they learn to work with as little rigidity as possible so that the whole torso is free to respond to impulse, action, imagination and characterization.

For both actors and singers, a high sternum, is ideal for vocal production. When the sternum is high, the anterior portion of the lower ribs and cartilage is free to expand. When, as in Pilates training, the ribs are tucked, or closed, the sternum cannot be high and the singer/actor feels restricted. The height of the sternum not only affects the performer's breathing and vocal sound, but also changes the position of the shoulders,

which round slightly when the sternum is lowered, thus diminishing the performer's apparent confidence and openness.

The Pilates method of breathing is described as the “cleansing breath,” in that it “emphasizes the importance of keeping the blood-stream pure . . . [with] full forced exhalations followed by a complete inflation of the lungs” (Gallagher & Kryzanowska, 1993) so as to oxygenate the blood and eliminate noxious gases. Another explanation of the audibility in the method is that it is a technique used to make people aware of their breathing (Noble, 2001). Although these are valid perspectives, they reflect a world of movement without sound. Dancers seldom speak or sing as they move, except in musical theatre, and a major problem for dancers who study singing is the physical conflicts they encounter around breathing.

A young Pilates teacher came to me recently as a student. She is a dancer and a member of an excellent professional company, as well as a talented actress who was advised to study voice because she was straining and going up in pitch when she had to speak loudly. After a bit of discussion about alignment and breathing I worked with her on a mat using basic Fitzmaurice Deconstructing positions. These are modified yoga postures which open the entire torso to breathing in a very unstructured way and which make it virtually impossible not to let go of abdominal holding. In our initial conversation I had observed a thin voice that lacked richness and color. With the work on the mat the voice changed immediately and she was amazed at the depth, power and fullness of her sound.

In order to access and develop the actor's vocal potential and range the abdominal muscles must be freed and the ribs uncensored.

My personal solution to the breathing conflict in Pilates training is to release the abdominal muscles more or less, depending on the exercise, and inhale silently. I believe we can adapt singer friendly breathing patterns to the smooth, controlled nature of Pilates movements without losing the tone, sleekness and grace that are the trademarks of a Pilates practitioner. Even with closed ribs, the breathing can be deep, if not full, and many Pilates movements offer ample opportunity for creative breathing!

When Pilates principles are taught as part of the voice or voice/movement class, they serve to connect and support other aspects of the work. For example, in actor training, we speak of working from center, or from a place of balance. Eli Simon, Head of Acting at the University of California, Irvine, calls it a "ready position." In the context of readiness, or the actor/singer's "neutral," I find Pilates to be particularly useful. We want the actor to understand her/his own body as thoroughly as possible, to be aware of habitual use and able to let go of that use when it is not efficient. We're looking for a clean slate, physically and vocally, so that the freedom to do "anything," in terms of character and style, can come out of the physical efficiency of that neutral.

The Pilates concept of the neutral pelvis is especially applicable to readiness. Finding that position of the spine, lying down, sitting or standing, in which we maintain the natural curve at the waist, neither arching nor tucking the pelvis, makes for safe and

efficient use of the body and releases abdominal holding that can inhibit the freedom to breathe deeply. One quick way to help students find a ready position is to ask them to stand with their feet parallel and rise to their toes *by lifting from the pelvic floor* (Shanley, 1999). They should focus on a low physical center and come down gently without rocking back to their heels. Even in a sitting position, lifting the pelvic floor does wonders for the actor's balance and alignment, and the energy in a room can change immediately with the simple instruction, "Think of lifting the pelvic floor."

There are other Pilates-based exercises that relate directly to opening the breath and releasing the body to speak and sing. For example, side stretches done on the Reformer or in the course of a mat class can open the rib area laterally and contribute to flexibility in a part of the body we often hold rigid. Upper body exercises also teach excellent use of muscles beneath the shoulder blades, thus releasing the trapezius and freeing the head, neck and shoulders for vocal production. One of my favorite Pilates-based exercises for vocalizing playfully and doing a variety of text, is the often photographed V shape, in which the performer balances on the buttocks and makes a V with the legs and torso. To facilitate speaking or singing, hold the feet or ankles with the hands and maintain an elegant, elongated spine. It's an exhilarating exercise to do near the end of a warm-up!

At acting and voice juries we frequently hear the comment: "S/he's acting from the neck up," or "S/he's singing from the neck up." Translated: the voice seems disconnected from the body, both in sound and in its relation to the character. Pilates and other movement techniques can help us connect the voice to the body, and as we produce

sound through movement, we tap into emotions that we might never experience otherwise. Thus we begin to act and sing with the whole person, and our performances become infinitely more interesting. I do not suggest that we must move in order to sing or speak well, rather that the experience of integrating voice and movement can take us to a different level of awareness and performance energy, even when we are still.

The perceived conflicts between Pilates and voice training must be dealt with if actors and singers are to incorporate this technique into their collection of developmental tools.

1) Communication among specialists, 2) individual adaptation of modified breathing patterns in the Pilates class, and 3) use of Pilates-based work in the voice class may be key elements in the resolution of those conflicts. When we use movement and dance work in the context of voice training, we seldom transplant it whole; rather we adapt and embrace what is applicable and compatible. Pilates teaches us to use our bodies with greater efficiency, as we become aware of isolating actions and learn to move in a smooth and confident manner. Self knowledge and work on the self, I believe, is the domain of Pilates training, so in addition to the sleek, toned body that results, Pilates can assist our growth as artists as we become freer to express through an ever more beautiful and efficient instrument.

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