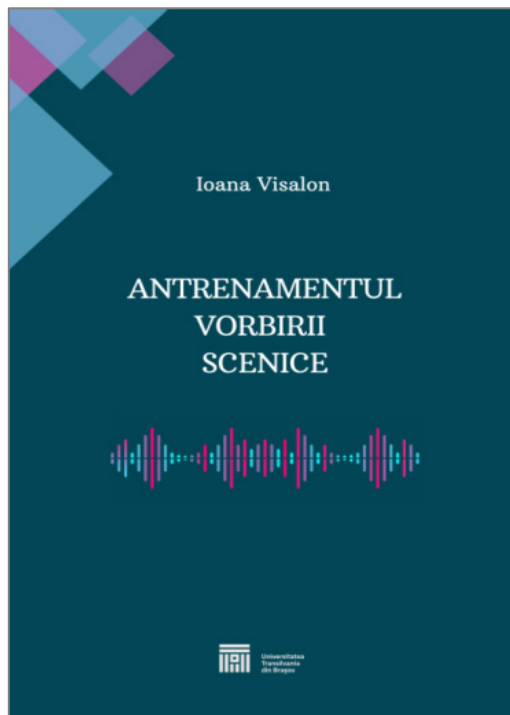


*A Textbook by Ioana Visalon, Dedicated to the Organic
Approach of Acting*

Book review: Ioana Visalon, *Antrenamentul vorbirii scenice (The Voice & Speech Training)*, Braşov: Transylvania University Publishing House, 2023



This textbook concentrates a pedagogical experience of over 25 years dedicated to the integration of stage speech in the organic approach of acting, an approach based mainly on the methods created by K.S. Stanislavski, Viola

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Spolin, and Ion Cojar. The author substantiates her pedagogical approach on the need that the actor's speaking be the expression of spontaneous, honest reactions to the *Magical If*¹. This requires a training that progressively consolidates the use of new speaking skills in the complicated process of rethinking the memorized text and activating the creative imagination.

The book is also the first Romanian Voice & Speech textbook that offers a coherent and comprehensive training method structured on the Broadwell model of learning skills (adapted by Carey & Clark Carey to Voice & Speech practice²), it capitalizes on in-depth documentation, not only in the specialized literature of the discipline, but also in fields such as neuroscience or psycholinguistics, and includes no less than 104 exercises, described comprehensibly and in detail, as well as an excellent theoretical apparatus updated and adapted to the needs of student actors.

Ioana Visalon's³ pedagogical approach is based on the understanding of speech as a complex phenomenon that involves both conscious cognitive processes, and a multitude of automated, almost unconscious processes. The entire pedagogical method described in this volume starts from the fact that precisely this automation allows us to have spontaneous, immediate reactions to stimuli in real life. Therefore, in order to have a speech adapted to the demands of the stage, but as natural and sincere as the everyday one, it is

¹ K.S. Stanislavski's method involving the "Magic If" (Stanislavski, K.S., 1955, *The Work of the Actor with Himself*, third chapter *Action, If, The Given Situations*, 50-73) is an important part of his system for training actors and describes the ability to imagine oneself in a set of fictional circumstances. The actor's job is to be believable in unbelievable circumstances and the first step to achieve this "truth" is to use the "Magic if": "What would I do if I found myself in this circumstance?". This helps the actors of all ages, with or without previous theatre experience, to realize "on their own skin" the consequences of finding oneself facing a particular situation. By doing this, the actor steps easily from reality to fictional stage convention and gains the ability to transform the convention into an "objective reality" (according to I. Cojar, *The Poetics of the Actor's Art*, 1998, 78).

² D. Carey, R. Clark Carey, *The Vocal Arts Workbook + video: A Practical Course for Vocal Clarity and Expression*, 1st edition (Methuen Drama, 2008).

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necessary that the newly learned skills become automatic (through their daily use, in private life), and can be accessed in the same spontaneous way as in real life. This kind of speech can be achieved – according to professors David Carey and Rebecca Clark Carey from the *Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts*, quoted by the author – following a learning cycle that has four essential stages, that determine the structure of stage speech training.

A very valuable novelty element is the training structure that ensures the progressive passage through the four stages of learning – from *unconscious incompetence* to *unconscious competence*. Containing 10 specific objectives for the fulfillment of which it uses 4 types of programs, the training offers not only pragmatic and scientifically sound pedagogical tools, but also space for exploration and creative freedom of students. The four training programs, *class study*, *individual study*, *warm-up routine* and *micro-habits* ensure a gradual development of the targeted skills and are excellently oriented towards their use in the daily life of the student. Thus, the first two programs (class study and individual study) ensure the transition from unconscious incompetence to conscious incompetence and then to conscious competence, while the following two have the role of making the transition from conscious competence (in which attention is focused on conscious learning of new skills) to unconscious competence, where “the body knows by itself” because the new skills have become reflexes. Also noteworthy is the ingenuity of the *micro habits program* (adaptation of the “tiny habits” method of changing daily habits created by applied psychology professor B.J. Fogg) which allows the gradual insertion of new skills into current speech in a very flexible manner. This program directly involves the student in creating individualized exercises adapted to his/her needs and life schedule.

The manual is structured into 14 chapters. The general theoretical framework and the training methodology are presented in the first four chapters, and a separate chapter is dedicated to each of the ten specific objectives, which includes a short theoretical introduction followed by the description of the exercises (chapters V-XIV).

The first chapter includes the purpose and general objectives of the training resulting from the comparison between the conditions of communication in everyday life compared to the stage situation. In the second chapter, the

integration of stage speech into the organic approach of the actor's art is argued by the appeal to the stages of the learning cycle and to the use of new reflexive habits/dispositions in current speech.

The third chapter provides elementary notions of acoustics, the physical principles of the phonatory apparatus as well as the principles of the Alexander technique. These notions form the basis for understanding effective voice production. Next, the author analyzes the stages, main objectives, principles, and structure of stage speech training.

The fourth chapter presents in a succinct and accessible manner notions of voice anatomy and physiology as well as the sequence of physiological processes involved in voice production. The explanations are accompanied by suggestive, clear images adapted to the needs of student-actors. This chapter provides an excellent scientific basis for understanding the organic processes that support the functioning of the voice and speech.

Chapters V-XIV are each dedicated to a specific training objective, contain concise and excellently documented theoretical explanations of the methods and principles specific to that objective. All the exercises are very well described and exemplified with representative illustrations. These chapters work on the principle of communicating vessels, often the same type of exercise solving more objectives than its main purpose.

The targeted objectives meet the "on-the-ground" needs of current pedagogical practice and are achieved through effective and innovative pedagogical tools. Some "classic" objectives, found in most Voice & Speech textbooks, such as posture, efficient breathing, clear articulation, are pursued using established methods such as the Alexander technique, the McCallion and Linklater method, carefully adapted to the needs of Romanian students.

Innovative – at least for the Romanian space – is also the way in which the author uses a pedagogical tool proposed by Michael McCallion, *the vocal chain*, both for the development of "engaged speech" (the term belongs to the author and refers to a speech in which posture, breathing, articulation contribute for optimal voice amplification), as well as to combat precipitation and the tendency to "sing" the text.

The chapters dedicated to objectives that have not been addressed at all or only at the surface in the relevant specialized Romanian literature are also exceptionally useful. Among these, two particularly caught my attention – chapters IX and XII –, training programs for certain difficulties reported by

acting teachers. Chapter IX, dedicated to the correlation of speech speed with the length and complexity of ideas, is based on the Levelt model of incremental information processing in speech production. This model provides a better understanding on how the brain processes information during speech and therefore a pertinent insight into the correlation of speaking speed with that of rethinking memorized text and expressing ideas. In light of this new perspective, Ioana Visalon uses not only *the vocal chain*, to which I referred above, but also a series of exercises adapted from Barbara Houseman to physicalize energy and the fluency of ideas. Chapter XII integrates cutting-edge information from phoniatrics and behavioral neurobiology to explain the physiological reality of using the voice at high volume and with strong emotions, providing an excellent scientific foundation for training designed to solve one of the biggest problems encountered in acting practice. Thus, the training, using solid knowledge of phoniatrics, aims to develop the ability to produce strong sounds through the correct use of breathing and supraglottic resonators, avoiding the danger of laryngeal hyperfunction, i.e. forcing the vocal folds (Heman-Acka, Sataloff and Hawkshaw, 2013, as cited in Visalon, 182).

The need for specific training is convincingly argued.

“We are born with the ability to make loud sounds, we use this ability in the first years of life, while we are very vulnerable, and it is vital to signal when we are hungry or cold. As we grow up, we are taught NOT to express our feelings through loud sounds. We are discouraged daily from early childhood to shout or speak loudly. Consequently, as we grow older, the phonatory apparatus loses its training to produce loud sounds. That’s why almost every time we scream it stings our throat. The ability to make loud sounds (which we all have in early childhood) is lost in adults through lack of exercise. It is therefore logical that, in order to vocally express strong emotions, a retraining of the phonatory apparatus is needed.” (Visalon, 181)

The author structures the specific training starting from the physiological conditions necessary for the efficient production of loud sounds, which she describes clearly and convincingly. To meet these conditions, she accurately states the objectives and principles of training for the use of voice at high volume. The training program contains variants of some of the exercises by

Barbara Houseman and Carey & Clark Carey, excellently adapted to the needs of Romanian students and exemplified on extremely well selected texts. The exercises appeal in a playful way to the imagination of the students to access and rediscover the effective predispositions of breathing and emission used in early childhood that “civilized” life disabled.

The chapter dedicated to the correction of speech faults is also excellent, which provides the principles of this type of training as well as the complete programs for correcting the most common faults, namely sigmatism and rhotacism. A separate chapter is also dedicated to the acquisition of the literary version of the pronunciation in the case of students with regional speech. Thoroughly explained, the training is accompanied by texts specially created for this objective.

In conclusion, this manual offers an integrative and up-to-date system of Voice & Speech practice, identifying for each type of exercise the purpose and principles implemented, work stages, and pedagogical approach. The methodology and exercises described are pragmatic, directly oriented towards solving the problems reported by Acting teachers and have been constantly subject to feedback from the interested academic environment, both directly and through pilot materials (see articles by the author in the *Concept* academic journal⁴) representing the result of a didactic practice of over 25 years. The training contains both own, original pedagogical approaches and adaptations of established methods in the international space – created by McCallion, Carey & Clark Carey, Linklater, Rodenburg, Gutenkunst & Gillett. The textbook is therefore an original and important contribution to the development of the Voice & Speech discipline and a pedagogical tool of great value for the training of young actors.

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⁴ I. Visalon, “Integrating Voice & Speech into the Organic Acting Process. An Interdisciplinary Perspective”, *Concept* nr. 22, 1 (2021), 260-275; “Principiile corectării defectelor de pronunție în Vorbirea scenică. Studiu de caz: sigmatismul”, *Concept*, nr. 20, 1 (2020), 170-181.