

Jan Gist

Jan Gist is currently the voice, speech, and dialect coach for the Old Globe Theatre and professor at the University of San Diego Graduate Theatre Program. Previously she was head of voice and speech for the Alabama Shakespeare Festival for nine years and 140 productions. Her regional coaching includes La Jolla Playhouse, Oregon Shakespeare Festival, the Shakespeare Theatre Company (DC), Milwaukee Rep., Arena Stage, and others. Recently she gave workshops at Russia's Moscow Art Theatre and London's Central School of Speech and Drama. She has been published in *The Complete Vocal Workout*, *More Stage Dialects*, and *VASTA Journals*.



Photo by Alan Decker

Background

Nancy Saklad: What drew you to voice work, Jan?

Jan Gist: I tell the story that when I found out there was such a thing as voice work, I felt like it must feel if you're a tall person finding out there's such a thing as basketball. I felt it was the place I belonged. When I went into theatre, I studied with Jerry Blunt at Los Angeles City College. He had published *The Composite Art of Acting*, which has a lot of voice in it, and had also published dialect books. Then he made me the tutor of dialects in my third and final year there. So Jerry became my mentor, and I demonstrated dialects for him at conferences. I'm on the recording in his *More Stage Dialects* book. (I'm one of the two Yiddish voices.) Then I went to Carnegie Mellon for my BFA, where Edith Skinner taught. I didn't identify with Edith's work, but I learned there was such a thing as the

International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). I had learned from Jerry that there was IPA, but Edith clarified it and introduced her “narrow transcription.” I went to Wayne State’s Hillberry Repertory Theatre for my MFA in acting, from 1974 to ’76. When I graduated, I was looking for “what to do now,” and it seemed like teaching voice was the thing. In 1992 I worked with Cicely Berry, who brought about fifty people from all around the world into what she called “Voice ’92,” held at the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford-upon-Avon. I saw this gathering of international theatre-voice specialists and realized I felt a kinship with people as far away as India, New Zealand, and Australia. There was a similarity of perception and sense of purpose. We are all facilitators of other people. We are listeners. We are lovers of story and culture and humanity and language. All those intersections were places where I could do what I wanted to do. And just as my career began, the Voice and Speech Trainers Association (VASTA) was also beginning. Mary Corrigan, Bonnie Raphael, Dorothy Mennen, Lucille Rubin, and Barbara Acker, all of those dear women who founded the organization, welcomed me into the field and told me if I was going to go into voice work, I’d need to know anatomy and verse and Shakespeare, and they told me where to start looking. So I kind of fell into it.

Saklad: Were there others that you consider your mentors?

Gist: First of all, Jerry Blunt is the main mentor—he and his wife Andy Blunt. (Betty Andrews was her writing name.) She was a television writer in the 1960s and a poet and a playwright. The two of them were sort of my theatre parents. They were absolutely informative to me personally, as well as professionally and artistically. Jerry taught me how to work in theatre. He used to love to invent phrases. He would say, “Go to work hard, early.” And he loved coining things like, “Everything on stage should be definite, dynamic, economic, and meaningful.” So everything had a kind of coinage of phrase, and he gave me his library of dialect interview tapes when he retired. Then Edith Skinner taught me. I didn’t even know how much I was learning from her until I started teaching voice and speech. At the end of my very first class I looked at the blackboard I had been writing on and thought, “That’s what Edith’s board used to look like.” Her approach was more linguistic than Jerry’s, more specialized. Another early mentor was Bonnie Raphael. When I got my first coaching job of Shakespeare at the Utah Shakespearean Festival, I called Bonnie

and asked, “What do I do?” And Bonnie told me to look up every word, scan every line. “Start there.” So that’s what I did. Susan Sweeney has also influenced me. I met her when she was vocal coaching at a summer theatre in Milwaukee and I was performing Emily in *Our Town* and Hermia in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Susan showed me the journey of thought through Shakespeare’s language, sentence structure; how to move through the ideas to move the argument and debate forward; phrasing, emphasis, pitch to lift the words—that sort of thing. That was in 1983.

The Voice and Speech World of Today

Saklad: What features would you say distinguish your work in the field?

Gist: I start with a sense of purpose and the question, “What is the purpose of the work we’re walking into?” If I have been given an assignment for a class, I ask, “What is the purpose of this particular class for these specific students?” When I’m coaching a show I now ask, “What is this playwright’s purpose in writing a play? What is the purpose of speaking for these characters?” Pinter’s characters speak for a different reason than Shaw’s characters speak. Then, I suppose influenced by Jerry, I also invent mottos for myself. One that’s been long lasting is, “I want to be of service and have fun.” So how can I be of service? I often will sit in a vocal coaching session and I look at that actor and think that I have no idea how to help, or even if he or she wants any help. So I sit back, I give them room, and I think to myself, “How can I be of service and have fun?” Then I listen more carefully to them and ask questions like, “how can I support you?” Once the actors see that my goal is to be of service to them, they can relax, drop their defenses, trust me, and we can get down to deeper, more courageous work.

Saklad: You have worked in such an extensive range of prominent theatres. Would you define your role as professional vocal coach?

Gist: I think of myself as the facilitator between the script, the director, the actor, the audience, and the space of the theatre. I try to bring all of those elements together—like what Arthur Lessac said at the 2009 VASTA conference, “there’s communion”—so everyone’s life is enhanced through this experience.

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Saklad: Are there universal elements in voice and speech work that allow you to traverse the boundaries between graduate actor training, professional coaching, and other professional work?

Gist: No matter where I work, there in front of me is a human being. The voice is the same basic anatomy, and there's a soul and an intellect of some kind. We are looking for a relationship of trust. I try to be sensitive to each person's capabilities and possibilities. I often tell them my job is to congratulate them on what they already are doing well, then to see how far I can encourage them to go further. Over the years of working with accents, my strategy was to find real-life human beings who lived through similar circumstances of the story of the play. Then I would interview them for the sound of their accent. But if they were willing, I would ask them to speak of their lives. Usually when human beings feel witnessed with patience and compassion, it is such a rare and delicious event that they respond by opening up to reveal themselves. When I worked at Alabama Shakespeare Festival in the 1990s, we did a lot of plays that took place in many different parts of the American South. I interviewed family members who descended from slave owners, and other members of neighboring families who descended from slaves. Not only did I record the way they spoke, but I asked them to open up with their life experiences and family stories. Then I could take back to the actors the culture and history of these real people, so there was depth to the rehearsal process. So, talk about "invitation," here's an example of my inviting the dialect interviewees to speak from their depths, and their responding invitation to me to enlarge my appreciation of them and bring that into the theatre. All of this is very human and requires tremendous trust. These issues of humanity and trust enter into our work with everyone: interviewees, students, and professional actors.

Saklad: How would you describe the current state of affairs of actor training in voice and speech?

Gist: My understanding of actor training before universities took over was that if you wanted to be an actor, you went to a theatre company and found a willing mentor who would personally work you into that company or that kind of theatre. There was a personal, individual responsibility to develop the next generation one person at a time. When training shifted

to universities, some things got mixed up. One example is that in order to have grades and semesters and class hours and credits, skills had to be separated from one another. So we had to have a separate voice class, a movement class, an acting class, and a styles class. Each of which is great, but students get the impression that there is such a thing as acting without voice skill or movement skill. In truth, all of those disciplines must work together. Really they are all one thing. In theatre, there is no such thing as acting without voice or voice without acting. So I've had to learn how to take a nontheatre structure like the university system, and translate it and integrate it to make it work for theatre training for professional employment. Within the university system it is possible to train those skills to work together, and you can train them very well, but only if you recognize that you have to consciously design the fit of theatre into the university schedules and structures. Nowadays there are more jobs for teachers than performers, so there is more theatre going on at universities than in professional theatres. The good side of putting theatre in a university is that there is a community of great intelligence, so students and productions can deepen their understanding of language, history, culture, etc. So I think internships at professional theatres are very important. Young actors need to get onstage with experienced actors. This way we are helping student actors become professionally employable, and helping theatres have more skilled actors.

Saklad: What unique role does voice and speech training play in performance training?

Gist: It teaches actors how to work. A lot of acting in America has moved into internalized psychological space rather than the physical space and time of the theatrical event. That's why Anne Bogart's Viewpoints and Laban movement work have been so helpful, because there's been a diminishing of the idea that a rehearsal is about physically and vocally filling space and time. So since acting has gotten more and more internalized, movement and voice have taken over to say, "How about expressing something so an audience can get it?" It's not about the actor feeling it; it's about the audience feeling it. Voice training is really acting training while you're talking.

Saklad: Some of the obvious benefits of voice and speech are an evolved instrument and an improved use of it. What are the indirect benefits?

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Gist: Self-awareness, better communication, improved health, patience, a work ethic, an efficiency of work, a love of language . . . Good voice work is an awakening of your humanity through your voice.

Saklad: Where does vocal presence come from, and is it teachable?

Gist: Yes, I teach exercises about vocal presence. At an NEH conference I even taught English professors how to stand onstage and have presence—physical/vocal—because I don't think there's such a thing as vocal presence without physical presence.

Practical Considerations

Saklad: Do you think that performance students should study multiple approaches to the work?

Gist: I do. Every master teacher has brilliant gifts, uniquely magical. Let's put it all together; let's draw from all of them.

Saklad: What does the body need to produce optimal vocal work?

Gist: I have certain things I do that include release and alignment and efficiency of effort—release the jaw, release the tongue. When I'm coaching individuals, I look for those releases, but we must pay attention to individual processes. There are some people who are not released but have fine voices even within their tensions. Each actor must be viewed as a distinct individual, not as proof that our beliefs about voices are right. And to truly produce optimal voice work, the speaker must be aware of the theatre acoustics and, as Jerry Blunt coined it, “fill the space with ease.”

Saklad: What types of body work do you use?

Gist: I draw from everything: Alexander technique, martial arts, dance, physical therapy, yoga, walking and talking, sports analogies—anything that will connect to anybody. And I turn those things into exercises in the class. I believe in hands-on—you know, my hands on people's ribs and bellies—and I have my students partner with each other, hands-on, to feel the anatomy working.

Saklad: Does an understanding of anatomy deepen the student's relationship to his or her voice?

Gist: Very much so. They need a scientific and a metaphorical understanding of anatomy. Anatomy needs to be poetic because it needs to fuel their imagination and their personal ownership of their body. It must not be only a science that separates the body from the head. For actors, the study of anatomy must engage the imagination and sensual awareness.

Saklad: How do you address breath work?

Gist: I draw from everything. We lie on the floor. We move through the room. We partner holding each other's ribs and bellies. We speak memorized text and we speak spontaneously. We do the ballet bar exercise. It's one of many to enlarge inhalation, expand duration of exhalation, enhance tone placement, and increase pitch range. (You can get this in Janet Rogers's workbook: *The Complete Voice and Speech Workout*.)

Saklad: What does it mean to support the voice?

Gist: Supported breath means you have enough breath to speak the thought clearly with rich resonance that fills the house easily. Breath is the fuel that the voice runs on. Inspiration means both getting the idea and getting the inhale. Both are a simultaneous, at-once impulse. With memorized text, the speaker needs to have the idea occur. Something triggers the idea to speak, and that trigger also causes the inhale, which naturally brings in enough air to fuel the whole length of the idea to the end of the sentence. Or there is the intention to speak to the end, and if the sentence is long, a catch-breath comes in, in between phrases, to support to the very end. The inhale turns into speaking with tone placement to carry that thought, to convert the listener to the speaker's intention. The actor is supporting the vocal instrument and at the same time fueling the character's need to win the argument. As the trigger changes and the idea changes from line to line or beat to beat, the breath automatically changes. And by automatically, I mean that in rehearsals, the actor explores how the breath becomes the character's natural and efficient thought process. And all this happens because the muscles have been trained to respond to the need. Abdominals, intercostals, all the muscles from the floor of the pelvis through the torso are coordinated within a released and spacious physical alignment.

Saklad: How would you describe the role of listening in voice and speech work?

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Gist: When you are speaking, you want your voice to not only go to the front of your listeners. You're not speaking to the surface of their face. Your voice is breaking past the obstacle of their contrary debate, past their face bones and into their brains, past their rib bones and into their heart. Likewise, when you are listening, you are not listening at the outer level of your skin and ears. You the listener are taking in what that speaker is saying into the organs of your brain and guts, into the spirit and organ of your heart. (I draw from body/mind centering work here.) From your deep internals you are feel-hearing, which causes deep responses that then trigger you to speak with internal, personalized connection and passion. Also, in complex text you have to hear the specific words that make you know that you are winning or losing your intention toward that speaker.

Saklad: Do you teach the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA)?

Gist: Yes, I teach Edith Skinner's version. IPA is an important aid for precise articulation. It helps people understand the specific job of the articulators in forming each vowel and consonant sound, and it makes listening more precise when you're hearing other people speak, finding the pronunciation of words and discerning and learning accents.

Saklad: Do you teach Standard Speech?

Gist: I teach an evolved, more current version of Edith Skinner's standard. She called it "Good Speech for American Actors in Classic Plays." I teach a comparison of old Standard American (based on Northeastern **American Received Pronunciation** of about the early 1900s to about 1940s) to General American (or Western Standard) compared to varieties of Standard English, of many eras, styles, and classes. I talk about the history of how Standard American and Standard British have evolved. Then I say, "Here's the standard I learned. Here's what I am hearing the standard transformed into," and then we work on a range of standards. So, you could have a liquid /u/ and not an "ask" list. You could have a blown /hw/ and not a liquid /u/ or vice versa. You could have varying degrees of rounding of the vowels in "all honest fathers." You could have varying degrees of "r-color." So there are options; there are ingredients. It's important to teach that there are reasons to choose different options for different styles of production, for different characters, and even for different moments

within one character's storyline. The study of Standard American Speech offers skills to hear and speak a wide range of distinctions.

Saklad: How would you describe the relationship between emotion and voice and speech work?

Gist: Emotion needs to serve the play. It is an actor's job to be emotionally connected and open and available and honest. Emotion is certainly part of the toolbox. I find many times actors put too much value on their own personal emotion and no one can tell what they're saying. That's not of service to the play. There needs to be the question of purpose—you know, what is the purpose of the moment? Technique and feeling need to go hand in hand; one does not work without the other and both must always serve the play and serve the audience's reception of the play.

Moving Into the Future

Saklad: What advice would you give to voice and speech teachers at the beginning of their professional careers?

Gist: You need to know the actor's process personally if you're going to work with actors. You need to study everything the voice might possibly do so that you're well rounded. Go to a lot of theatre. Expose yourself to what voices have done in the past by reading theatre history and reviews of plays from earlier times and by watching old movies, especially movies that show great actors who were trained for the stage. Listen to recordings of actors from the 1920s and onward. Then compare all that to what they're doing now on stage and screen. Learn about vocal health. Have a good voice. I think you should not be a voice teacher unless you yourself have a good voice and good, clear articulation, because I don't think you should be teaching what you can't do. Excel at every skill you teach. Inspire as a good example and model of authenticity and believability.

Saklad: What advice would you give to students on the brink of their careers?

Gist: Learn how to tolerate not knowing. It's a muscle to develop. Learn what you care about so that you are studying what you care about. You need to know what you care about. Go to work hard early. Learn how you

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learn. Learn how to work. Translate what you're told into something you can do. Read. Speak out loud. Read out loud. Cultivate a sense of humor. Cultivate your wellness. You need to know how to be well—physically, vocally, spiritually, emotionally. You need to become more and more well. Do not put your sickness on others. Be kind to yourself and to everyone around you. Be generous. Be responsible. Learn how to schedule work. Select your teachers. Teachers are going to teach differently, so find teachers that you want to learn from. And keep learning. You never stop learning. Your education is going to be the beginning of your learning career.

Saklad: What do you think the future holds for voice and speech training?

Gist: Well, I fear that we're becoming more splintered into disciples of particular gurus, but I hope we are joining together and that the master teachers are forming a conversation together. So I have a fear and I have a hope. I don't want us to be splintered into combating religions, and I don't want voice teachers to limit themselves. So I hope that we are all learning from each other as voice and speech teachers. That's one of the reasons I'm in VASTA, to continue to learn and teach each other as voice teachers. And I hope that we keep helping people become more literate, more able to embody all sorts of language and speak it with imagination and commitment for an audience to receive it deeply.

Saklad: What impact do you hope your work will have on vocal training at large, Jan?

Gist: I hope I can influence people to come together for the conversation of what voice is, what training is, so that I encourage people not to separate into different religions of voice. I hope I encourage the conversation between us all. Personally, I just hope I'm making my contribution of what I was built to be, so I keep looking for what is the purpose of my life, and that includes speaking and helping other people have a voice, have their voice, have the voice of the play. I hope I can help theatre be better. I think there's a lot of crap. And I'm sad and tired of plays that are bad for people, bad for actors, and bad for audiences. I would like to help intelligence: intellectual intelligence and emotional intelligence and spiritual intelligence, through theatre and voice.