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Vocal Traditions: Miller Voice Method

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ABSTRACT

Vocal Traditions is a series in the *Voice and Speech Review* that highlights historically important voice teachers and schools of thought in the world of vocal pedagogy. In this essay, Miller Voice Method (MVM) offers its overview, history, teaching style and philosophy, goals, and details on certification. The key features of MVM are explored including: active breath, the attention blueprint, athleticism, on-camera applications, and text transfusion. The essay discusses the importance of integration—how the methodology assists actors in bridging the gap between technique and application, and the vital connection between the philosophy of the work and the work itself. The essay also describes unique MVM offerings including a video series highlighting core exercises (found on its website), on-camera techniques for vocal diagnostic and development, personalized action plans, and perspectives that reprioritize the audience's experience as a vital component to actor training.

KEYWORDS

Voice; speech; breath; memorization; Miller; actor training; presence

Overview

The Miller Voice Method (MVM) endeavors to solve the paradox of acting, namely inhabiting spontaneous recognizably human behavior *while* attempting to execute well-rehearsed moments under the duress and expectation of performance, which we then call “truthful”—a decidedly un-human human event.

Add to that the demands of making all the information in a given moment accessible to an audience, who often comes to the event expecting to be “done to” rather than engage in a quid pro quo relationship.

We model our exercises on how the brain works and how humans process thought and motor function: think and (re)act. Embedded in our approach to text analysis, memorization, and breath work are tools to keep the actor from fantasizing about how a scene should go or did go in a rehearsal last week. Rather, the actor has a method to connect exclusively with present information in the room and trust that the exhaustive exploration of the pre-rehearsal and rehearsal process will inform each moment without conscious thought about it.

We have developed a series of physical exercises and integrative techniques to create habits that use minimal effort for maximum efficiency in the production of sound. Upon this baseline, we develop each actor's full melodic range, placement, and tempo suppleness in order to deliver intonation that supports strong and clear points of view, which opens the gateway for the audience to see more of themselves.

History of MVM

About the Founder

While my (Scott Miller's) parent's drugs of choice were the more traditional ones for parents of the 60s and 70s, my muse was sports. It provided immediate and reliable feedback from the ball; it went where it was hit, passed, or thrown. Opportunity presented a neighborhood of older kids, which meant being the least skilled and last chosen for every game; improvement was a pre-requisite to survival. Home experiences taught that any delusions of superiority or safety resulted in vulnerability, which invariably led to a kind of emotional decimation. To feel superior was a luxury that encouraged a kind of falling asleep to present information, and that was literally very dangerous. In athletics, the transaction is dispassionately fair-minded. Work equals progress.

Withholding reliable boundaries for children ironically restricts the freedom of the child. Children spend attention developing their own boundary lines rather than in outright play. Not surprisingly, much of my adult exploration in the pursuit of knowledge comes through the portal of provocation, testing the lines. A passion in academia, which examines the holes and antiquated paradigms in the American Actor Training system, is squarely in-line.

A montage of life experience brought me to New York City after finishing law school to pursue "the actor's dream." It began with a few lessons from a very old Sanford Meisner, then Uta Hagen, and then Carol Rosenfeld for prolonged study. One of the most formative lessons Ms. Hagen bestowed upon me (and eventually MVM) was the basic concept of experiencing every choice full throttle, no matter the stage of development. "After all there was no other way to see if it was useful," she simply reminded.

Throughout training in the 90s, I remained a muddy speaker with a muffled voice, ironically born blue, strangled by the umbilical cord. The relationship between technique and ability to express it were light years apart. Finally, eight years in, the requisite pain and frustration had reached that threshold where the critical point of obviousness transformed choice into decision.

What would follow was a complete overhaul of an operating system, acting and otherwise. Two years of voice, speech, and Shakespeare work with Shane Ann Younts (now a colleague at NYU Grad Acting) began the journey. I later worked with her mentor, the late esteemed Robert Neff Williams from Juilliard, who developed a methodology in his own right but chose never to publish it. I also worked with two core energetic therapists and spent five years with two healers on theories of attention in the Catskills. This combined training grounded the work.

In training as an actor and in teaching in MFA programs, what became evident was that voice teachers were often expected to know about voice, and they were required to sensor their language about acting. Movement teachers were treated similarly. And acting teachers generally did not know much about the pedagogy of either voice or movement training.

“Could you imagine a more inefficient system if you tried?” I thought. Experience in professional sports and 40 years in training and coaching led to a bias toward integration. For example, pitching coaches are expected to know about hitting and speak of it adroitly. In American actor training, it seemed this cross application did not apply.

MVM began out of a desire to fill many of the holes in American actor training that failed to link breath, sound, movement, attention, and objective in a way that did not splinter apart the moment the actor stepped outside the safe haven of that discipline’s studio and into the rigors of professional acting. The more practical challenge was not simply in opening an actor’s capacity of expression; the challenge was to train actors in a way that they would survive the duress of live performance: integration.

Life in academia began in 2001, first in the undergraduate drama program at Tisch, and then a few years at Rutgers’s MFA program. By 2003, due to the Internet, it was clear this next generation of actors (with their entitlement to information and easy access to it) sought an integrative model free from silo approaches and ego-driven teachers. In January 2003, I was hired by Zelda Fichandler, the chair and visionary of the Graduate Acting Program at NYU. In my first faculty meeting, Zelda welcomed us all as “acting teachers.” I knew I was home.

The fundamentals of the work came together over the next five years or so. The excellent tutelage in voice, speech, and Shakespeare; a sports background; Alexander Technique; a learned approach to breathing (which was pioneered by Carl Stough and passed on by the precise Jessica Wolf); and more extensive “character voice” exercises from provocative work with Lenard Petit and The Michael Chekhov Technique all led to an approach which seeks to teach the ability to integrate multiple disciplines and intentions efficiently.

The Creation of the MVM Studio: Enter John Patrick and Liam Joynt

The next seminal moment happened in 2007 when John Patrick, whom I had taught at the Rutgers’s MFA program, re-emerged. Zelda had encouraged all of us to source replacements in case of illness or professional conflicts. John was the obvious choice, a life-long teacher who came with more experiences in the various voice approaches than I did. With the permission of NYU Graduate Acting, for two years John trailed me and assisted me with the students.

Over the next 10 years, the work at Graduate Acting began to solidify, both in becoming a more permanent fixture on the floor, as well as in the methodology itself. With Mark Wing-Davey’s arrival and support in 2009, the teacher training process became more formalized and recognized.

By 2010, John, along with the next two teachers in training, Liam Joynt and Rita Marchelya, pushed for the work to expand outside the narrow halls of Grad Acting. We met continuously for a year, and the foundations of MVM Studio were born. From the start, we always had a name dilemma. I was neither intrigued by having my name on it nor quite satisfied with the “Voice” in the name. Because at its heart, MVM is a method in integration through voice and breath, but it is primarily an acting and living model.

In the years to follow, Liam and John remained as pillars of the approach, while Rita moved on to pursue other goals. John is now head of voice and speech at UNC Chapel Hill’s MFA Professional Actor Training Program, and Liam serves on the voice faculty at NYU in Graduate Acting. The academic synergy has allowed an expansion of the core exercises, which includes: the actor’s relationship to the audience, the text and memorization, and the

camera. John's work with the camera (as a diagnostic tool and its application to TV/Film work) has been groundbreaking. Liam has pioneered personalized assessments and action plans from both anatomical and neuroscience perspectives which offer students truly lasting habit change that can withstand the duress of performance. My area of concentration has focused on the audience: how, when, and why do humans pay attention, and what does the performer do or not do to maintain or break it? We embrace a constant re-evaluation of the work semester to semester, looking at the viability and efficacy of our current progressions and approaches.

Teaching Style and Philosophy of the Work

At the start of any new semester or workshop, we do a “circle talk” inspired by my years with Native American healers. In the MVM version, we sit in a circle; each participant then gets an equal amount of prescribed time to talk. Only the leader may chime in if there is an opportunity to share some edicts of the work in those early stages.

The purpose of the talking circle has many components. By giving the same allotment to each person, it begins to blur the illusion of status almost immediately. It provides a space solely devoted to the seeing of the other and, equally, to being seen. It allows for essential components of the work to reveal themselves as they begin to see the role of leadership as simply designed to provide boundaries and safety (i.e. direction and context).

Training can be hard work for actors; they are not generally trained like athletes, dancers, or musicians with the hours of repetitive habit breaking, which is then sculpted with curated work. In the beginning and by the end, it takes every ounce of the leader's passionate and performative self to keep learners compelled and focused on the artisan's work: building attention, focus, and curiosity.

In the work, we are fond of the phrase “falling” as a way to describe that experience of being completely dependent on present information, as opposed to the memory of a rehearsal or projected fantasy of the future. The exercises are designed to avoid breath holding and the organizational moments, which separate the student from present experience. We repeat (knowing nothing can ever really be repeated) in order to build the connections in the brain.

We seek transparency as much as humanly possible, even as transparency is clouded by confirmation bias. We seek to find ourselves incorrect or inaccurate, like any scientific method. The work posits that there is no such thing as knowledge, in so much as it means a fixed knowing. That knowledge evolves moment to moment influenced by the next new piece of information.

We devise exercises aimed at partnering with intuition over prediction. We understand prediction is a fundamental way our species survives. However, in the safe space of acting, intuition (not prediction) creates compelling moments.

We train our teachers to “fall” in the same way that they teach their students to rely on the information in the room, buoyed and framed by a prepared syllabus.

We train individuals to embrace rigor over preciousness and not to fear exceptionalism. We encourage integrity in the work over force, believing stamina and strength are inevitabilities when one is committed to integrity.

We believe life is a series of attempts, and then you die. There are no such realities as success or failure; these are merely angles.

Key Features

Centered in Integration

MVM was born out of a deep desire to bridge gaps between technique and application. The very gaps in how we as trainers communicate information. Imagine, I “observe” your experience, and I speak in “observational language.” Now you must (hopefully) translate that language into “experiential language,” for example. We understand that when the actor experiences *A* it most likely will produce *B* in the audience, not *A*. So we must (it seems) re-learn our very language of communication as trainers for the sake of efficiency and come to the performer rather than the old model of forcing the performer to come to us. This is the new model: everywhere and in everything, there is a curated individualized experience; this is the “new” universal.

The Active Breath

MVM employs a breathing pattern that we call the Active Breath (AB) as a fundamental technique that allows moment-to-moment acting to occur more readily. Essentially, the AB is a continuous flow of inhale and exhale without the pauses or holds at the top or bottom of the breath, which would normally occur in passive breathing states. The AB is more akin to an athletic or cardiovascular breath in its flow pattern, but AB does not have the speed of an athletic breath. The AB helps to stave off old habits. For instance, performers develop breathing habits throughout the memorization and rehearsal process. These habits can be rigid in their response to present moment impulses and invariably manifest in inefficient vocal use (an unbalanced use of intonation and airflow). The AB helps to both prevent and alert the actor to these covert habits. There is a musculature to the voice and the coordination of breathing that shifts when an actor is playing a projection of the scene (“idea”) rather than being fully immersed in the moment-to-moment flow.

Beginning a scene with the Active Breath is the very manifestation of “trusting yourself.” It is in this simple moment of presence that we have found encourages actors to “fall” into the scene and bravely work moment-to-moment. By engaging something simple, physical, and present as a scene begins, an actor does not rely on something dead (their historical preparation) or on something fantastical in anticipation (manipulating through tension). This is not in lieu of understanding what comes right before a scene or what the character wants from a scene; rather, this is how to actually launch from your known preparation into the unknown of present information.

The Attention Blueprint

We detail the Active Breath concept and physical technique in a lecture called “The Attention Blueprint.” The Attention Blueprint is a drawing crafted in real time in front of students, so they can see a visual representation of these theories. In the blueprint, we posit that we can directly link hitches in breathing/speaking patterns to an audience’s span of attention. The Attention Blueprint was born when MVM began to turn our primary attention away from the experience of the performer and became more interested in the experience of the audience. We are less interested in how something feels to the performer; instead, we are

more interested in what information we get back from an audience in response to techniques an actor employs.

In this, we explored an exciting link between a performer's breathing habits and the way in which an audience unconsciously breathes in response. If a performer is holding their breath, so does the audience. If the performer is breathing in a predictable pattern, so will the audience. And if the audience falls into a mind-space where they can consistently predict what's going to happen, they will begin to lose attention. This is the difference between a 90-minute play feeling like it lasts four hours vs. 10 minutes. In film and television, the editor can completely control the audience's empathetic tendencies in this manner and can keep us hanging by a thread in great anticipation and suspense. For the theatrical actor, our breathing and vocal rhythms *are* the editors. How empowering. How terrifying.

The blueprint also details the importance of the audience being satiated with an abundance of information. This means if the audience does not have enough to be beautifully baffled by, then they will again lose interest. This "information" can be broken down into "intellectual" information and "visceral" information. Intellectual information consists of elements like interesting plot lines, characters, and language that is intelligible and understandable. Visceral information is the emotional and psychological experience shared through the quality of vocal/physical expression: a kind of uninhibited resonance that vibrates the room and results in the audience feeling surrounded and invited by the performer. If we keep the audience occupied with abundant information to process both intellectually and viscerally, then we keep them in a sustained state of suspense where their attention is rapt, so they can truly receive the dilemma of the play as perhaps a personal dilemma.

Acting is an Athletic Event

Another integration gap we observe surrounds the emphasis of "release and relaxation" in actor training. Quite simply, we do not understand what is relaxed about playing through heightened circumstances live in front of 500 people or on a film set with 50 million dollars at stake. Of course, shifting attention away from performance anxiety to the simple reality of doing is essential for success, but how in the world do we do this with everyone watching us? It is quite easy to find this deep state of relaxation in the vacuum of the studio or rehearsal hall where you build trust over several weeks, months, or years. But how does this relate to the intense audition room or the critic-filled opening night?

In response to the above phenomenon, we theorize that acting can be viewed more accurately as an athletic event. The correlations between the two arenas are staggering: big crowds looking on, athletes/performers required to be in the moment, and huge stakes of circumstance. Moreover, actors and athletes are instantly replaceable due to the high supply of talent, minimal opportunities, and constant states of free agency.

Any athlete that has attempted to produce at a high level understands that there is nothing natural or normal about that circumstance. Therefore, there can be nothing natural or normal about the way they breathe and focus. The breath must encourage the body and focus to be super-sensitized and ready for anything. And all this happens *before* attention is put on a partner or the task at hand, just like the pitcher or quarterback. Actors/athletes get their body at the ready, look up, see the target, and *then* go, working to maintain this state of flow as obstacles emerge.

On-camera Integration

MVM utilizes the camera to make voice and acting training as objective as possible. Starting with diagnostic work in the earlier days of training through modules involving vocal resonance and dialects, we are able to *show* a student the physical habits that are possibly inhibiting the work rather than only relying on verbal and physical feedback. Learning becomes exponentially more efficient when an actor sees their habits shift on screen at the exact moment when their classmates erupt in positive support of the moment. This inclusive approach to voice work utilizes the technology available to us as well as acknowledges technology's pervasive presence in the field. Students by the end of training should be as comfortable with a camera in their workspace as the props they utilize for scene work.

Text Analysis and Memorization: "Text Transfusion"

Another integration gap we observe is how actors memorize lines. How is it that a universal task that actors engage in is not discussed by any major acting technique with prescriptive best practice for memorization? If the goal were to simply memorize the material, then the "how" does not matter. Just get it done.

Instead, the goal for us was to replicate the way the brain remembers things in unscripted conversations, and certainly, it was not by blandly saying things over and over. We registered feedback from actors that no matter how well memorized a piece of text was, when it was uttered in acting it felt slightly different in experience than when talking in life. Why?

Human memory is made up of multiple quadrants taking in multiple types of information at once (visual, auditory, sensory), and when it fires during recall, all these areas "light up." Every word we speak to further our intention in life engages our memory and all its quadrants. Imagine now how unfulfilled our memory is from simply staring at a page saying words over and over. Associations, on every informational level, are associative to the memory, and they come along for the ride as they stir recall. Could even the actor's fear and desperation to get "off book" be part of the memory? Why not?

The final piece to come together was the notion that activity in the thought area of the brain preempts motor function (speaking/moving). That is, we "have thought, recall, move," which are all inspired by stimuli from the outside world or from our inside world (i.e. a trigger). There is a common fear that if actors memorize their lines too early then they could become inflexible. We found that actors become less flexible as a result of *how* they get off-book, not how *early* they get off-book.

Our systematic approach called "Text Transfusion" was designed to address the missing pieces in an actor's process toward verbatim recall, allowing the brain many more pieces of experience on its journey toward speech. Remember, every physical experience in life contacts the memory before execution.

Goals of the Organization

The MVM approach continues to grow, and we share the work with people in a variety of occupations where the clarity of expression is vital: actors; singers; voice, speech, acting, and movement teachers; and those in the non-performance world like business leaders, newscasters, athletes, politicians, lawyers, doctors, religious leaders, and more. Those who

find their way to the MVM are people who seek a training system founded in compassion, transparency, frankness, and curiosity.

In theatre programs, we strive to assist students not only with a fundamentally sound vocal technique but also with an integrative model that blends the fabric of all their work into the tapestry of a compelling performance. We believe that the actor's use of breath can no longer be secondary or an afterthought or something that the actor "hopes" will happen in the acting class if they release tension. We seek to help teachers understand how to integrate this work as a basic component of acting training, where training the breath takes on just as much importance as any other component of the acting work. To that end, we aim to break the mold of what a "voice teacher" does or what they have traditionally done. No longer is it enough to help produce a healthy, flexible, resonant voice and then hope for the best under the duress of performance.

We desire a world where parents, spouses, and intercultural participants have vast access to MVM training to increase capacities of patience, compassion, effective listening, and conflict management. We seek to bring the work into grammar schools where access to free flow of breath and voice may already be stunted.

Current MVM collaborations are underway with top MBA business programs that specialize in global communication strategies and conflict/mediation resolution, as well as LGBTQ centers with members who feel their voice is marginalized or literally redeveloping as they coordinate their voice after gender transition surgery and/or hormone therapy.

To summarize, we continue on the path of:

- Integrating intention with breath, building a flexible, responsive, and resilient voice through extended and received movement, thought, emotional life, and point of view—in short, a way to transform competent into compelling.
- Developing actors and other communicators who work with the Active Breath as a tool to both receive present information and reveal maximum information in their sound while maintaining dynamic performance/presentation work.
- Training teachers who are curious, compassionate, frank, and transparent, and who are interested in modeling these qualities and fostering them in their students.
- Sharing the work globally via our web-based tutorial video series and through trainers who travel, live, or work outside the U.S.
- Continuously evolving the method with the aid of science, experience, and up-to-date knowledge as a baseline, valuing rigor over preciousness by discarding what becomes ineffective or irrelevant to the needs of the twenty-first century communicator by treating the studio like a laboratory.

Certification Process

Historically, our teacher training model first required a person to have experience in the work as a student, so they might develop a psychophysical understanding of the work and an appreciation for the challenges and revelations that arise in the training. Then, after a time, they could move into the role of apprentice, typically for a two-year period. The apprenticeship allowed for hands-on work with the students, a key component to our work. Once the apprenticeship had ended, teachers-in-training would return for various workshops, continued education opportunities and receive mentorship.

After nearly 20 years of research in the field with our teacher trainees, we are now prepared to share our findings and experiences with those that wish to become certified in our comprehensive approach. Our hope is that the number of instructors teaching the approach in academic programs across the United States and the world continues to grow. Equally, as our focus expands beyond actors, the need for trainers schooled in our approach is growing.

We see great value in sharing tools with anyone who desires to better align their intended expression with what is actually communicated. To that end, we are launching our Teacher Certification Program in the summer of 2018. The diversity of our offerings will include:

- Philosophies of teaching
- Our “Attention Blueprint”
- Core MVM exercise progressions and hands-on work
- Acting integration work
- Text transfusion: MVM’s script analysis and memorization process
- Scene integration process
- Character voice work
- On-camera work
- Teacher feedback from lead teachers
- Mentoring and guidance throughout the training and after
- MVM Video Series with lifetime access to curated workouts, how-to videos, and the full video library

Contact Information

Please visit our website to learn more about the MVM Video Series, read about our teachers, and learn more about our upcoming Teacher Certification Program: <https://www.miller-voicemethod.com/>.

If you have questions or want to discuss the work please email us at info@MillerVoiceMethod.com. Social media communication is on Facebook by visiting “Miller Voice Method Studio” and on Twitter: @MVMStudio. The Miller Voice Method team is incredibly excited to share the work. We would love to hear from and learn from you.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors



Scott Miller has 40 years in the training universe. Scott’s diverse life paths include two sports at the professional level; a law degree from George Washington University; clerking at DC’s Public Defender Service; time as a producer, actor, and director; a trainer of lead teachers; training in counseling and holistic practices; and for the last 15 years, a professor at NYU Tisch’s Graduate Acting Program. Scott has trained professionals from over 50 countries; these include executives; managers; Oscar, Tony, and Emmy Award winners and nominees; Olympic athletes; news anchors; and the not-so-heralded individuals simply seeking improvement and fulfillment.

Founder, Miller Voice Method.



John Patrick is head of voice and speech for the Professional Actor Training Program, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. JP serves as resident vocal coach for PlayMakers Repertory Company and company vocal coach for Gulfshore Playhouse, Naples, FL. JP has taught for New York University Graduate Acting and NYU Steinhardt School, Rutgers University, Southern Methodist University, The Lyric Theatre and Queen's University in Belfast, Northern Ireland, Theater Academy at the University of the Arts at Helsinki, Finland, and New York Film Academy. MFA acting, Rutgers University; BFA acting and musical theater, TCU. Co-founder MVM Studio, co-contributor to Miller Voice Method, and MVM Master Trainer.



Liam Joynt serves on the faculty at the Graduate Acting Program of NYU Tisch School of the Arts where he teaches voice and vocal coaches. He is a certified teacher of Knight-Thompson Speechwork. He has been on faculty at Fairleigh Dickinson University and Maggie Flanigan Studio and taught in the BFA and BA programs at Rutgers University, where he received his MFA. As an actor he has worked in mega-budget and no-budget films, daytime and primetime TV, Off-Broadway and regional theater. He has produced world premiere productions for playwrights including Lee Blessing, Samuel Brett Williams, and Lia Romeo. Co-founder MVM Studio, co-contributor to Miller Voice Method, and MVM Master Trainer.



Kristi Dana is a visiting assistant professor of voice and speech at Penn State University (AY 2017–2018). She served as interim head of MFA Acting, Brooklyn College, CUNY 2016–2017. Vocal coaching includes Liz Lerman's *Healing Wars* and *Marie Antoinette* at Soho Rep. Kristi was mentored by Scott Miller, hosted in part at the Graduate Acting Program at NYU Tisch School of the Arts. She is certified in Knight-Thompson Speechwork and holds a Certificate of Completion from the Michael Chekhov Association. MFA, acting, Brooklyn College, CUNY; MA, theatre education, Emerson College; BA, theatre arts, Penn State University. Associated Teacher of MVM.