CHAPTER 1

Personalities and emotions

Contrary to popular misconception singers and actors are seldom neurotic—but they are sensitive, working in a position which is physically hard, difficult, uncertain, demanding and creative of tension. Were they of a calmer temperament they would be very dull artists, whom no-one would be interested in seeing. Frequently their main anxiety relates to the vocal mechanism, which is often their most vulnerable organ. A performer, if he is fit enough to stand on his feet, will almost always get on stage, provided he is confident that his voice will not fail, or become harmed to the detriment of future commitments. Doctors, and especially laryngologists, should understand this, and regard vocal problems in those who use their voices professionally (a group which includes teachers, barristers, broadcasters and public speakers) as potentially serious and often urgent problems. It is no use offering an appointment several days ahead for someone who has to sing, or act Othello in a matter of hours! It is equally useless to advise vocal rest for a week or two as a matter of course, unless the history and laryngoscopy make this essential to avoid vocal failure or long lasting damage.

It is essential to have some knowledge of Theatre, Opera and other vocal professions, and to relate each patient according to his particular commitments and individuality—not forgetting domestic, social and emotional factors, which may well be part of the picture.

(A recently-seen cabaret artiste comes to mind: it was not so much the vocal strain of her performance that was damaging her larynx, but shouting at a misbehaving son! I advised her to buy a whistle on a neck-chain and if he did not 'come to hand' to slap his behind hard—and psychiatrists can comment if they want to). Personal involvements, which may cause strain and tears, should often be considered. With their unavoidably disorganized lives, living from production to production and working with so many colleagues here and there, emotional stability is often upset, and this may affect the voice and the performer's control and balance. A doctor's understanding and confidence may be very helpful.

A quality most important to a performer is reliability. It only needs a whisper to get around that a certain singer is suffering from permanent vocal dysfunction for immense harm to be done to his reputation, to the detriment of future offers of engagement, to the public's confidence, and thus to his finances. A single poor performance can start such a whisper, and if there is appreciable danger of such a disaster the laryngologist should say so and forbid his patient to sing. The decision needs great judgement, experience, and the acceptance of responsibility.

The relationship between performer, teacher and laryngologist should be mentioned. A 'three-cornered' consultation, or at least communication, may be most valuable and solve a problem of vocal failure or damage.

There are exceptions to artistic and emotional over-sensitivity, but I do not think that anyone accustomed to working with theatre people would deny the above. To quote from a previous book (Punt, 1979):

It has been called the artistic temperament and much nonsense and not a few jibes have originated from the phrase; yet it should not be difficult to understand, for if actors and singers were dull, phlegmatic, placid people, no one would go to the trouble of listening to them. So of course they may be

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022215100095189 Published online by Cambridge University Press

excitable, neurotic, volatile, temperamental, changeable, moody, intemperate, vain, unstable and so on. But they are also usually pleasant, cheerful, grateful, generous personalities endowed with tremendous courage. Moreover they are not only artists, but artists whose medium is their own bodies, and the very nature of their Calling (Irving's word) with its uncertainties and rapidly changing emotional atmospheres, makes it no occupation for the lover of well-ordered placidity. Lest the eternal amateur gets the wrong idea we must interpolate that the portrayer of emotion on the stage is NOT experiencing a like emotion at the time; but he would not so portray it if he were incapable temperamentally of sympathetically comprehending that emotion. As evidence one may cite the well-known difficulty in finding a satisfactory Juliet, no actress young enough to look the part having sufficient experience of life off the stage to be able to play it.

But this question of the psychology of actors has been dealt with by the great critic and essayist William Hazlitt in a fine passage which is at once vindication and salutation:

'With respect to the extravagance of actors, as a traditional character, it is not to be wondered at. They live from hand to mouth, they plunge from want into luxury; they have no means of making money breed and all professions that do not live by turning money into money, or have not the certainty of accumulating it in the end by parsimony, spend it. Uncertain of the future they make sure of the present moment. This is not unwise. Chilled with poverty, steeped in contempt, they sometimes pass into the sunshine of fortune, and are lifted to the very pinnacle of public favour; yet even there they cannot calculate on the continuance of success, but are, "like the giddy sailor on the mast, ready with every blast to topple down into the fatal bowels of the deep!" Besides, if the young enthusiast who is smitten with the stage, and with the public as a mistress, were naturally a close hunks, he would become or remain a city clerk, instead of turning player. Again, with respect to the habit of convivial indulgence, an actor, to be a good one, must have a great spirit of enjoyment in himself—strong impulses, strong passions, and a strong sense of pleasure: for it is his business to imitate the passions, and to communicate pleasure to others'.

That was written 150 years ago and it is still true, notwithstanding modern financial techniques arising out of taxation and accountancy.

Fame, wealth and realization of artistic ambition apart, the life of a leading international singer is not to be envied. These artists become unsettled by constant changes of scene and climate, by uncomfortable travelling from airport to airport and from hotel to hotel, and also by the lack of 'roots' with a home, family and close friends. Young singers, especially, suffer from insecurity and the disruption of personal attachments. It is not unusual for a consultation to start on the theme of 'laryngitis' and end with tears and the story of a broken engagement.

We must also remember (as Hazlitt wrote, in the idiom of his time) that although leading performers earn large incomes, they practice in an uncertain and overcrowded profession, are frequently forced to retire relatively young, and come into the financial category of casual labourers.

Special mention should be made of the agonizing art of the clown. The great drolls of the time—the 'comics' as they are now called—usually, in the writer's experience, endure agonies of anxiety and depression. Few professional people suffer as much as the player who must step upon a stage and make his audience laugh, knowing full well that if they don't laugh, he is not funny—and that no excuse or argument can mitigate a failure. The sad and worried clown is a heart-breaking sight, and the £2,000 a week he may be earning is small consolation. If he ceases to be funny the money will stop—and very quickly too!

Any actor or singer will agree that all this is true, but some may wonder what it has to do with the throat and voice. It has a great deal to do with the vocal organ and its performance. The vocal mechanism may be healthy and undamaged, but the precision

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022215100095189 Published online by Cambridge University Press

with which it responds to the subtle and intricate demands made upon it is often affected by the state of mind and emotions of the performer, perhaps especially when it is concerned with the exceedingly delicate and complex series of co-ordinated movements which result in song. Tranquillity and confidence, anxiety set aside, yet sensitivity to the emotions of the dramatic situation and of the participating audience, should be the player's aim. But this ideal is rarely achieved, and such failure is often a large factor in the singer or actor not making the most effective use of his voice. On occasions it may be the *only* cause of disaster, but in *any* dysfunction, or even disease of the throat, this emotional factor may be of importance and this should never be forgotten, nor yet over-emphasized, by anyone concerned (the Management will usually blame the emotions, and the artist will probably rationalize according to personality; but the laryngologist has to evaluate all the possible stresses).

These disturbances take many forms. They are usual as 'first-night nerves': all beginners suffer from them, as do most experienced artists, however fine; they are met with in an exaggerated form as the result of bad news or a fright, the victim being suddenly 'struck dumb' or speechless. Many long-standing speech defects have a similar aetiology.

So if a worried student thinks that he is exceptional in enduring such torments, he can at least be assured that they are not only frequent, but usual: most of his colleagues, his seniors and the famous leaders of his profession suffer similarly, although they often use their acting ability to disguise them off the stage as well as on.

Before a First Night, I once visited a dear friend with sixty years' experience of the Stage and with many fine performances behind her—and a 'simple' part to play—to find her trembling with fright and saying 'Oh, why do I do it?' (Her performance was most moving and immaculate, and the un-knowing must have thought it so easy.)

Professional confidences must be inviolate but one may quote from published writings of great artists of the past:

First, Caruso: 'Of course I am nervous. Each time I sing I feel there is someone waiting to destroy me and I must fight like a bull to hold my own. The artist who boasts he is never nervous is not an artist—he is a liar or a fool'.

Next Irving—not an actor one associates with nervousness—yet, Ellen Terry writing of his early days at the Lyceum when his first-night playing of Hamlet had been below his achievements on tour, and he had 'seemed stiff from self-consciousness', blamed his habit of waiting for his cue in the wings: 'I begged him to give up that dreadful paralysing waiting at the side for his cue'.

Most singers and actors are abstemious, but it is as well to make tactful enquiry about alcohol and smoking. The 'pop-singing' fraternity particularly may use drugs, especially hashish, which harms the throat and themselves generally. My colleagues in the U.S.A. told me this pernicious addiction would become more frequent in the U.K. and they were right.

The larynx to the singer is as precious as are hands to the surgeon, limbs to the dancer or eyes to the marksman. No wonder that vocal problems or unusual sensations in the throat or neck worry the performer!

So to end this preliminary chapter where it started, please take performers' vocal troubles and anxieties seriously, and worthy of detailed, careful attention.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022215100095189 Published online by Cambridge University Press