



## Voice and Speech for Musical Theatre: A Practical Guide

by Chris Palmer, London, Bloomsbury, Methuen Drama, 2020, 186 pp., US \$25.95 (paperback), ISBN 9781350011250

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Voice and Speech for Musical Theatre: A Practical Guide**, by Chris Palmer, London, Bloomsbury, Methuen Drama, 2020, 186 pp., US \$25.95 (paperback), ISBN 9781350011250

As the performance demands placed on musical theater actors continue to change, so must the techniques teachers use to train the next generation of musical theater students. Chris Palmer's new industry-leading book answers this need in a concise text that strengthens the voice and speech skills of these performers as they navigate between speaking, singing, and performing in various production styles. She utilizes easy-to-follow terminology, and a structure—"Feel it first," "Understand it," and "Practice it"—throughout each chapter that makes this book versatile and accessible for students and teachers alike.

At the start of each chapter, there is a list of keywords to help direct the reader's thinking as they progress. As the reader moves through each section, there is a mix of self-guided exercises and video references to support individual explorations of the material. Throughout the entire book, the author inserts "Tips for Teachers," along with possible question prompts for students. At the end of every chapter, there are alternative song/text suggestions for exercises (where applicable) and lists of "Further Readings."

In Chapter One: "Posture, Alignment, and Neutral Plus," Palmer lays the foundation of her overall training sequence, which she continually builds throughout the book. These exercises dealing with body awareness reference other influential techniques like Alexander Technique or have a clear connection to other pedagogies such as Fitzmaurice Voicework. A little later she introduces the terms Neutral, Neutral plus (N+), and Neutral minus (N-). She describes these labels not as new terms, but as tools to be "used in class merely for awaking the imagination" (37). Palmer further clarifies that the neutrals are intended "to distinguish when moving from speech to song. It is meant as a *framework* for understanding the other important disciplines that make up a[n] MTP (Musical Theatre Performer)" (36).

There is clear importance on the connection between breath and intention at the onset of Chapter Two: "Breath, Dance, and Movement." Palmer makes this clear by saying, "Breath for sound, breath for action, reacting and impulse [...] needs to be consciously met, understood, and acted upon" (46). She starts building this awareness of breath with exercises from Tai chi and a video example titled "Accessing the Breath" that is reminiscent of Fitzmaurice Restructuring work. As the chapter progresses, Palmer breaks it into sub-sections helpful for understanding the performer's breath use: "Breath Management and Stamina, Phonation, and the Diaphragm and Breath." Within the sub-section on Phonation, there is a helpful exercise that students can use to better visualize and comprehend the true scale of the vocal folds:

Look at the size of your legs . . . and the energy required to move you around . . . look at your hands and pick up something lighter, something that requires your hands and fingers to work together [...] notice your little finger then look at the nail on your little finger. Imagine two lines from your cuticle to the end of your nail; those lines are roughly the size of your vocal folds. Small, aren't they? (50-51)

This exercise demonstrates Palmer's keen ability to combine simple anatomical references with comprehensible images. From this chapter onward, Palmer continues to explore exercises that challenge MTP students to expand their awareness of what is possible with

their voices. At the start of Chapter Three, “Building the Voice,” Palmer wastes no time reminding readers of the actor’s emotional responsibility for every role they perform. She states, “Being technically accomplished alone does not necessarily mean a *great* triple threat performer” (77). She uses vowel explorations and connection to imagery and emotion to build the actor’s emotional connection. Exercises such as rocking backward-and-forward on different vowel sounds and intoning text gives the student different avenues to find “a deeper connection to the words, as the words become physical” (80). A few pages later, she attempts to blur the lines between speaking and singing, reminding students and teachers, we perform with one voice, and asks the question—“Where does speaking end and singing begin?” An exercise that explores this question is found on pages 91–93. The sequence has participants intone pitches (C4 or middle C through B4) while placing the sensations in line with chakras and imagining various colors. This exercise is similar to Linklater Voice Method’s “Zoo-Woe-Shaw” and would be a helpful overlapping exploration of voice for any acting or musical theatre student.

Near the end of the same chapter, Palmer continues to explore the importance of blending the spoken and sung qualities of the voice. More specifically, she encourages readers to “make speech sound like song, and song sound like speech” (95). Most of this section is framed around the importance of vowel modification and understanding the use of accents in musical theatre. Examples such as Sondheim’s *Company*, the song “I Believe” from the *Book of Mormon*, and the musical *My Fair Lady* are listed to support her arguments. Throughout this chapter, one of her clear goals is to give students more creative tools when working in technical one-on-one singing lessons.

From the onset of Chapter Four: “Pitch and Tune,” instead of going directly into scale exercises, the author provides a better understanding of the historical context of how/why the spoken and sung sounds required of MTPs have changed over time. Palmer chooses examples, from Cole Porter and the Golden Age to Lin Manuel Miranda and contemporary pop/rock musicals, that demonstrate a clear importance for why “blending the speaking voice in pitch to the singing voice is [therefore] a necessary part of creating pitch and tune understanding” for the MTP’s vocal success across genres (107). From a technical perspective, this chapter provides many easy to incorporate exercises that link pitch to physical sensation and emotional connection. For example, word lists and sentences are provided in categories of “high pitch/excitable,” “low pitch/sad,” “weather words,” and words that are onomatopoeic. All these examples are structured in a way that “highlights the extremes of vocal playfulness” (114). This chapter concludes as it begins by exploring rhythmic chants set on a music scale. Without analyzing pitches and notes, the text pays respect to the historical origins of many cultural and political chants. By sharing the deeper meanings behind these vocal expressions, Palmer has created opportunities for students to explore their vocal pitch in a way that connects their sound to relatable actions.

At the start of chapter five, Palmer invites the reader to “develop your knowledge of ‘creative articulation’” (125). This is a refreshing view of “articulation” given the amount of stigma surround the idea of “good” or “correct” speech within articulation. The reference videos are helpful additions while working through this section. The visuals clarify the instructions beyond simply reading the exercise on the page. Exercises such as: Lip Gym, Jaw Spa, and Tongue-tastic videos are short, informative and (along with amusing names) make for useful explorations that can be utilized in or outside the classroom. Furthermore, Palmer does an excellent job in this chapter balancing classic bone prop exercises with the investigation of “nonsense sounds” much like the “Omnish” exercises in Knight-Thompson Speechwork (145).

Near the end of the chapter is a portion on patter speak, rap, and poetry. This section is a wonderful addition, as there are many examples that illustrate the importance of these skills

for an MTP. From the classic example of “Modern Major-General” to *Hamilton*, Palmer shows how pater speak and rap are used in “forming a relationship between speech and song” (150). It is clear Palmer is not trying to establish a “correct” form of speaking, but instead is focused on creating clear communication for musical actors.

In the final chapter, Palmer “bring[s] all the elements of the speaking voice together, using resonance as its vehicle” (155). The reader is guided through awareness building exercises and is encouraged to use simple technology (audio recording a text passage and spectrogram images) to better understand sensations in the voice and get a clear (literal) picture of what resonance looks and feels like. The chapter also covers differences between the male and female voice and how this impacts their resonance. Furthermore, she covers anatomical differences and explains acoustic variations in a way any reader could digest. Additional exercises use different resonance placements to explore the differences between vocal parts (soprano, mezzo-soprano, contralto, countertenor, tenor, baritone, and bass) and create a three-dimensional feeling of resonance in the body. Near the end of the chapter, Palmer includes sub-sections on accents in musicals, impersonation, and safe screaming/shouting. The last few pages include example semester curriculums for using the text, and a detailed bibliography. Within the “Accents for Musical” section, a short list of example shows with different American and British accents is provided, as well as a broad exercise for maintaining different accents among character interactions. I agree with Palmer’s view, “Does it matter if the singing is different from the speaking in a play or musical? Yes, it does,” and I believe there is much more to explore within this sub-section of musical theater (166).

Overall, Chris Palmer has written a well-structured text that elevates the importance of voice and speech training in musical theater. While each chapter addresses specific points for building the voice, she has established a holistic pedagogy that uses contemporary musical theater technique and honors the core of theatrical voice training. This book may be categorized as a voice and speech workbook, but I would highly recommend this text to any music or theater teacher that focuses in musical theater performance.

## Notes on contributor



**Colton Weiss** is an independent scholar and freelance voice, speech, and dialect coach based in Columbus, Ohio. He is a proud graduate of the American Repertory Theater Institute at Harvard University where he studied voice, speech, and acting. His teaching credits include Harvard University, Ohio State University, Capital University, and Boston Conservatory at Berklee. Favorite coaching credits include: *Matilda the Musical*, *Billy Elliot* (Weathervane Playhouse), *Disney’s Newsies* (Gallery Players), and *The Winter’s Tale* (Tecumseh Drama). Some of his research interests include dialect coaching for musical theatre and devising new work focused on mental health awareness and LGBTQ+ advocacy (colton-weiss.com).

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