

# VASTA



*Voice and Speech Trainers Association, Inc.*

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VASTA is a non-profit organization and also a focus group of ATHE (Association for Theatre in Higher Education)

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## **Images in Vocal Training: Scientific and Mind-Body Contributions**

By Lissa Tyler Renaud, Ph.D.

*Science News* reported a breakthrough in neuroscience in its November 2001 issue: simply thinking about a movement changes the functioning of the muscles used to perform the movement. They found that people were able to increase the strength of their biceps, for example, by 13.5% simply by visualizing a series of simple exercises. Related studies were also reported in a January 1995 issue of *Newsday*: researchers at London's Institute of Neurology had seen on brain scans that "visualizing a movement...turns on 80% of the brain circuits used in the actual movement." An article about this in the *Journal of Neurophysiology* noted that musicians and athletes often rehearse movements mentally to improve their performance.

This last reference to musicians is very apt, and might include singers and performing artists of all kinds as well. As the article implies, the sciences are working to prove what performers have known experientially for a long time. The notion that images in the mind can change muscles and improve movement is the basis of what have come to be called the "mind-body" disciplines. In the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Europe saw an explosion of revolutionary, mind-body approaches to physical re-education, with particular application to performance. For many, the Alexander Technique and the Pilates Technique are the bodies of work that will be most familiar from that period, and there were other

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### Images in Vocal Training

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exciting innovators as well.

Many of the pioneers and important practitioners of movement re-education have had a background in voice. One of the earliest mind-body techniques was developed around the start of WWI, by a Boston voice teacher named Mabel Todd. Todd's 1937 book, *The Thinking Body*, is a profound work on the application of the mental processes to movement, and it remains unparalleled in our time. The foremost teacher of Todd's work today is the incomparable Andre Bernard, who had early careers in both radio broadcasting and acting; he has been teaching body alignment at NYU since 1966. Currently on sabbatical, Bernard has entrusted his teaching to Lynn Martin, who is a devoted and published alignment teacher, as well as an accomplished singer. (It is interesting to note that Martin was a very long-time student of Bernard's friend, Carl Stough [d. 2000], who was originally a voice teacher and choir director. Stough went on to make definitive discoveries, far ahead of conventional medical science, on the role of the diaphragm in natural breathing coordination.)

I was fortunate to attend Bernard's most recent

advanced workshops in California, in 1999 and 2000. Bernard teaches *ideokinesis*—movement informed or facilitated by an idea or thought. He uses images to modify the message that is going to the muscle to change its pattern. As he said in a 1995 interview, "I along with others believe you are what you think." This also means that you move what you think—move how you think about movement.

This idea has proven enormously productive in my work with voice students. In that context, we might say that you sing or speak how you think. When someone uses his voice, we can hear what he believes or imagines about his voice. When we introduce new images to the mind's eye, we can hear the sound change. I often tell my students that the task is not to learn what to do, so much as to figure out what to think about—visualize—when they are doing it.

I was struck by how efficiently this approach worked at two workshops I gave recently. The December 2001 one was for radio anchors (National Radio Project), where the speakers work in the close space of the recording booth and want to achieve an intimate sound. The January 2002 one was for comics (MotionFest Physicality and Performing Arts Festival)—stand-ups working in loud clubs, for example, or street performers—all people who need to sustain a big, public sound for long stretches. Some of the images we used were skeletal: releasing a tense jaw by imagining the upper molars to be growing, or finding new resonance by watching the spine lengthen in two directions, or quieting the breath by "seeing" the expansion of the lungs behind the medial plane of the body. Some of the images gave a sense of freedom from the skeleton: releasing the tongue by shifting the mouth to the forehead, or improving vowel placement by changing the light in the "chamber" of the mouth, or (Bernard's image) thinking of the feet as tassels. We were able to give the enclosed radio people a sense of space with images such as rising escalators or growing trees; we were able to give the outdoor performers a new sense of physical release and vocal intimacy with images (continued on page 4)

#### Tell a friend about VASTA

##### Membership Categories

**1) Individual Membership:** Has voting privileges, receives the VASTA Newsletter, the *Voice and Speech Review*, the Membership directory, and upon request the Suggested Model for Evaluation for Tenure and Promotion and Guidelines for Training. Eligible for reduced VASTA Conference fee. Annual dues \$65 + \$6 p&h = \$71

**2) Student Membership:** Currently enrolled in a training program. Receives same benefits as above. Annual dues \$35 + \$6 p&h = \$41

**3) Organizational Membership:** Receives all publications listed above. No voting privileges. One person from the organization is eligible for reduced VASTA Conference fee. Annual dues \$65.00 + \$6 p&h = \$71

To join VASTA, log on to <[www.VASTA.org](http://www.VASTA.org)>; print out the application, fill out, and mail with dues (US currency only) to: Craig Ferre, P. O. Box 524, Laie, HI 96762.

VASTA membership year is dated from the date of receipt of dues to the same date of the following year.

**Images in Vocal Training**  
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towards them from above.

For nearly a century, there has been an enormous amount of cross-pollination between the fields of physical re-education and voice, and both have benefited. With the mainstream sciences now contributing their perspectives as well, perhaps these benefits will find their way to an ever-larger public.

*Lissa Tyler Renaud, Ph.D. (UCB '87 summa cum laude) won five fellowships and three awards for her acting, including the prestigious Sturgess Prize. She is a recognized director, a published writer-scholar, and Program Director/Teacher (since 1985) of InterArts Training, which provides comprehensive, cutting-edge professional training and master classes in acting, voice and movement. Her students are working internationally in all media.*

[www.interarts-training.org](http://www.interarts-training.org)

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**President's letter**  
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deadlines and dropped stitches, I ask pardon. For the opportunity to serve, I give thanks. I conclude my presidency knowing that we are engaged in important work, fine work, work which empowers human beings to make joyful noise unto whoever has the ears to hear.

In gratitude and hope,

Kate Burke, VASTA President  
Kate Burke, Associate Professor  
University of Virginia  
President, Voice and Speech Trainers Association, Inc. <[www.vasta.org](http://www.vasta.org)>

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**BREATHE**

**2002 VASTA Conference**  
**San Diego State University, California**  
**July 29 - August 1, 2002**

The VASTA Conference is very exciting this summer. Our theme this year is BREATHE, focusing on 3 differing applications of breath. Our three presenters are: Susana Bloch, who will present on Alba Emoting™ and Breath; Diane Elliot, with Body-Mind Centering® the Breath and Bill Helm, who will present Five Animal style Qi Gong: Breath, Qi and Movement.

The conference begins Monday evening, a whole day after ATHE ends and continues to Thursday evening, when participants have the option of staying an extra night and seeing a show at the Old Globe Theatre with the VASTA gang. Accommodations are available through SDSU's dorms, which are brand new and in excellent condition. The rooms are in suites which group 6 rooms around a central hub, with two bathrooms for each suite. (For those who cannot bear to share a bathroom, there are a very limited number of real singles available on a first come/first served basis.) We are also planning a small group discussion session around Things That Work, hosted by Kate DeVore, and an evening session with some doctors – a pulmonologist and an otolaryngologist. Don't miss VASTA's annual business meeting, too.

Applications for the conference, and more information about the presenters and their workshops, are available online at <http://www.vasta.org/conf2002/conf2002.html> Please note: the application deadline is JULY 1, 2002.

Got questions? Don't hesitate to call Eric Armstrong at (312) 341-4329 or email him at: [earmstro@roosevelt.edu](mailto:earmstro@roosevelt.edu).

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**VASTAVOX**

VASTAVOX is a listserv owned by Dudley Knight at UC-Irvine, where members can discuss, via email, concerns about Voice and Speech. This open list allows anyone to join. VASTA members are encouraged to subscribe.

How to subscribe: Send an email message to [listserv@uci.edu](mailto:listserv@uci.edu); leave the "subject" field blank and write in the body of the message: SUBSCRIBE VASTAVOX First name, last name, as in the example: SUBSCRIBE VASTAVOX Dudley Knight. In short order you should receive a welcome message from VASTAVOX.