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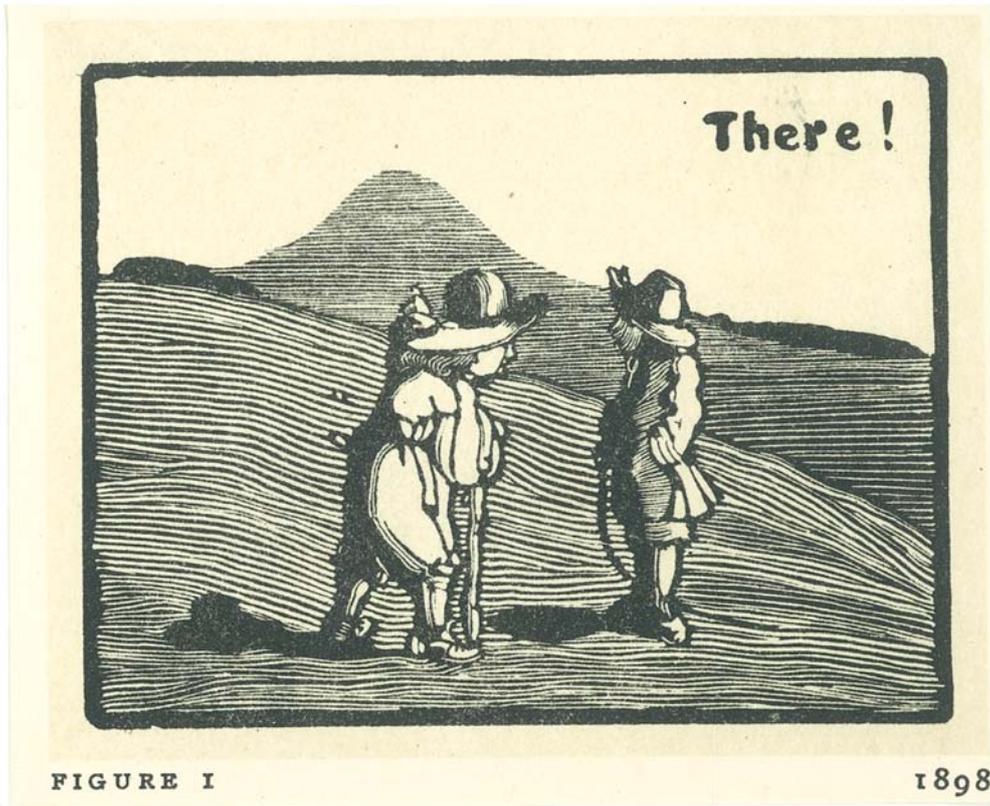
**THE LIBERATION OF ACTING**

*A SELECTION OF 26 STUDIES AND CLASSES*

By

Peter Bridgmont

*Foreword by Mark Rylance*



*Woodcut by Edward Gordon Craig*

## DEDICATION

*To students past, present and future.*

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## **FOREWORD**

Peter and Barbara Bridgmont made a profound difference to my persona as an actor with their teaching about voice and speech. I use the word 'persona' carefully, as they taught me how to move with sound, through sound, persona. In our visual-material age, sound is the great undiscovered or forgotten land for actors and audiences. Reason and Emotion are all very well in speech, much needed, but with Peter and Barbara I learnt of the limbs of speech, the feet, the legs, the arms, the great will and beautiful spirit to move with speech. Just as a marvellous javelin thrower wills his spear down the pitch to the winning distance and harnesses every muscle necessary in perfect balance to achieve his aim, so, when appropriate, we speak in space and silence. It was a lucky day for me when I met them; they know some great secrets and forgotten pathways.

Mark Rylance

## PREFACE

Dear Colleagues,

having completed eight years as an actor in weekly repertory companies, twice nightly touring, and a survival course in London's West End, a day came when I was given a small booklet introducing the work of the actor and stage designer Edward Gordon Craig. His book, 'On the Art of the Theatre', stopped my career. For the first time in my life I put myself out of work, wrote to Craig, made masks and pined for the stage. This came to life again when I joined Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop and, incidentally, met my future wife Barbara, who was at that time the darling of the Company. Two seasons with Workshop brought to life the dreams of a new theatre; inspired by Craig. I was invited to work with Rudolf Laban. This heady life was completed by a honeymoon in Venice and three interviews with Craig. I formed my own Mime Company and, after three years of touring, determined to stay at home. Our other inspiration was the 'Speech and Drama Course' of Rudolf Steiner. We studied his speech technique with Dr Ernst and his wife and later with a fine teacher; Maisie Jones. We formed our own school in our own theatre, teaching and touring for the next twenty-four years. Finally, semi-retired, we met many young actors, queuing for work. At least in my time we had Weekly Rep. Today's young talents are not so fortunate.

Putting together all that Barbara and I have done in our school with the dogged help of Elisa Terren, a tenacious actress and relentless critic with the voice of today echoing down the corridors of yesterday, we created this Book.

With these studies you can work alone, with a colleague, with friends, form a company, or form a school if you must. Let actors begin to discover what they have got and from their talent and no one else's look towards what the future of the live theatre wants from you. For a time, let the actor go free and make his own discoveries and laws. It is time he took over the reins and drove the theatre into the magical world where it belongs!

## INTRODUCTION

When asked what the difference was between the Chrysalis Theatre Acting School and the more conventional drama schools, I would answer that our work comes out of the periphery; as opposed to out of the central, centripetal, or centrifugal impulse. In other words instead of thought, breath, speech, gesture, and the impulse to move coming entirely from within yourself, they would approach you as an inspiration out of the periphery; stimulated by 'Entheos' from which the word enthusiasm comes, and originally meant 'to be touched by the Gods'.

All these studies take for granted that a living actor is communicating with a living audience, and therefore they are only relevant to live theatre. So, presenting all the exercises and ideas developed in this work, is only like placing the tools into a sculptor's hands; from then on he's on his own to create the future. Giving him the tools is an activity from the present and even from the past; the development lies in the future. Therefore what I say only describes the exercises, the purpose of them, and perhaps the history, but it's from the experience of DOING the exercises that you make discoveries; after all 'Drama', in Greek, actually means 'A DOING'.

If you ask an actor to create something with no thought of what may result, then there is a space for discovery; we do not know the future, and that not knowing is our freedom. But if you work on something where you know what the result 'should' be, then it has no freedom and therefore no future. When you walk into the unknown it may also have no future, but there still is a very good chance that something will arise from your work which until then you had never conceived.



When visiting California I would always try to take some time off to visit a surfing beach, for I always felt the surfer to be like an actor. There is the actor/surfer on his little stage, the surfing board, being carried by the huge wave of drama. Without the wave where is the drama?

On the beach there are practice boards on springs for the surfer to rehearse his moves. But we all know there is no surfing without the waves. In theatre the actors on their stage should reveal the large wave which carries them through the play. Marie Steiner, the speech teacher, illustrated this in speaking alone by saying, “First master the audible – then discover the inaudible – in the spoken word – and then reveal the inaudible in the audible.”

# **FIRST STUDY**

## **RELEASE**

The living space around the artist is the support to all his work. The actor, as a speaker in live theatre, is fully aware of it. He then imagines an approaching flow of activity; as though from another, perhaps spiritual, world, coming over his head and plunging; by way of his physical breath and the vibrating activity of the larynx, to soar onwards into the material space. Such pictures are essential; one may change them, improve them but never forget them. The gathering of the approaching desire to speak is balanced by the equal desire to release the speech into whirling space.

### **Breathing Out**

In order to begin to sense this idea of coming from the periphery we need to learn to exhale. Today we store breath; it is even a technique for speaking; we store breath and then release it, as though rationing it for future use. This style of breathing lives with us in our daily experience; we can breathe in, but find it more difficult to breathe out. We are inhalers.

This holding onto the breath is also psychological. We so often save something, hold back, withdraw. Our very speech is restrained and presses against a deep instinct not to release. The actor expresses emotion by apparently restraining it. We guess what the emotion may be by his disguise of it and if he then has to release pent-up feelings, according to the demands of the play, a deep resistance to such a demand causes him to wrestle with his voice and force it out against, it would seem, his inclination. This is not a criticism of actors for it is deeply embedded in our modern cultural life. To release the word on the breath almost calls for a complete reappraisal of one's lifestyle.

The pity is; the breathing technique for opera singing has been passed on to speaking in drama schools. By all means store the breath for singing, but not for speaking; they are two completely different techniques.

This first exercise is one to practice exhaling.

Use up all your breath in each line. One could even slightly collapse in each line.

### Breathing Out

Oh no	O why did it have to be now?
It can't be true	Why not later?
They lie	Or earlier?
They are false	Before the meeting
It cannot happen	Not on this day
It will not happen	Of all days
All is lost	It is too much
All is gone	It cannot be
Nothing	It must not be
Nothing remains	Prevent it
	Cancel it
	End it

To lift our concept of speech from the breathing, larynx, lips, tongue and teeth, which are so important in elocution, we adopt a style that we call 'spear throwing'. This consists of reaching back into the invisible space behind you and then imagining that out of this space comes the impulse to release one's speech into the theatre.

The following exercise brings into play our Spear Throwing Style.

Exercise:

I throw long spears  
I throw them High  
I throw them Far  
Let's throw Spears.

Description: Spear throwing was part of speech training in the ancient times and even now one can speak of the "spear throwing style".

Instruction: Stand sideways to your aim. Looking over your left shoulder, and stretching out your left arm, you should hold the spear upright in your right hand and say "I throw". On the word "long" you lift your imaginary spear above your head and pointing forwards you lean back stretching out your arm behind you. As you reach back, picture that your arm encompasses the blue sky so that your impulse to throw comes from the cosmos. You lean and stretch back and then picture on the word "spear" that an invisible impulse flings your arm forward in an arc, always at full stretch, and as you fling your invisible spear you cry out "spear."

You stand again within yourself and say "I throw", then on the word "them" you reach back across the blue heavens, collect the impulse which flings the invisible spear forward again, and cry "High". The same with "Far" and finally "Lets throw"; standing and silently reaching back into the invisible world silently receive the impulse to fling the spear forward on the word "spears."



I'd like to share this quote from an interview with William Gaskill; speaking about Laurence Olivier:

“I suppose the outstanding impression I'm left with is his energy. My memories are of those moments when he projects his energy outwards – in speaking, for example, when he hurls a line as if it were a javelin. He has the ability to take his voice and actually throw it, knowing exactly where it will go.”

With the same sense of Spear Throwing in the speech, but without the movements, deliver these lines:

## Exercises

The War Song of the Saracens [Excerpt]. By James Elroy Flecker

We are they who come faster than fate;  
We are they who ride early or late;  
We storm at you ivory gate;  
Pale kings of the sunset, beware!  
Not in silk nor in Samet we lie,  
Not in curtained solemnity die,  
Among women who chatter and cry,  
And children who mumble a prayer,  
But we sleep by the ropes of the camp,  
And we rise with a shout and we tramp,  
With the sun or the moon for a lamp,  
And the spray of the wind in our hair.

Fundamental approach in this study

- Sense that the speech comes downwards from above and descends as a breath into the physical mechanics of vibrating tone. Like a waterfall. In the Greek this would be called the vital life force: RYTHMOS.
- You commence your impulse to speak as though it comes from above and behind you, as though the impulse to speak came from another realm.
- You as a speaker provide lungs, larynx, teeth, tongue and so forth (we deal with this later), but you reach back to grasp the spirit of speech when spear throwing.

## **SECOND STUDY**

### **SPEECH AND SPACE**

The inner movement of the speaker is revealed in his speech. Physical movement, dance and gesture play an important part in creative speaking. This may sound most strange, but one of the most repeated criticisms from a director, which can be irritating for the actor, is the statement “But your speech is not moving.” A speaker/listener will soon recognize when the words and the speaking are not moving. One of the most common faults, and I am sure elocution teachers will agree, is the ‘shortening’ of the word. By this I mean the time it takes to say a word.

The word today has no place to play; there is no space for the word to flow out, except maybe in the theatre. This is not only true for speaking; in modern dance you see now that the professional dancers jog forward, then back, then sideways, and then stick out an elbow, a knee, and so forth. In my time with Rudolf Laban and his Art of movement, this form of dance would have aroused ridicule and derision. Dancers are to move through space, to travel, to ‘indulge in space’. The jerking, sclerotic movement of today could have then been considered more of an illness than a style. The same applies to speaking, the word must move.

First of all we will illustrate this by Greek style ‘running’; in that time they would run with their arms outstretched before them, which would show their emotional state, as opposed to pumping away with the elbows. The runner is reaching for the winning post, he feels himself pulled towards it, his arms outstretched in front of him, and his feet flying under him; at the same time the wind is pushing, or carrying him. Only having passed the winning post will he plant his feet firmly to slow himself down. He has been flying.

As an exercise try to emulate our Greek runner. First you might want to run with the sense of being attracted to the winning post; that you are being pulled and that for a moment you resist the pull until you are ready and then imagine you are pulled (by desire) to win or just to reach the finishing line. You feel dragged along, your legs only just keeping up with you.

The second time round have the sense of being carried by the wind. Of course all this is largely imagination but feel you are being lifted into flight. And in a third time sense both the pull to the winning post and the sense of being carried by the wind. As you run feel yourself rising in an arc and then settling down at the finish.

This is to live in space in a focused way and with the will and desire to travel across the surface of the earth. For the Greeks a precious experience. As you fly you have to stamp upon the earth in order to stop and resist the flight. But you have had “lift off.” A Greek runner could be judged by the small impact of his foot in the dust as in his running he feels to be flying.

This same applies to speaking, helping us towards the ‘Syllable Step.’ And what is it? Well, simply, you step out each syllable of the line like in Greek running. So from your experience of running you now release your words as if they were a little athlete coming out of your mouth and running in front of you; in this way your speech becomes athletic. If one does not develop this as a habit, one is literally speaking to oneself; in drama you wish to reach out to your fellow actor and he in turn, in a duologue, will step the syllables back to you. In this way we illustrate Molière’s thought that Drama happens between the actors.

As an introduction to Syllable Step the following small exercises encourage the speaker to experience the idea of stepping through the words out into space.

Exercise:

O why did it have to be now?

Why not later?

Or earlier?

Before the meeting

Not on this day

Of all days

It is too much

It cannot be

It must not be

Prevent it

Cancel it

End it

Tell me the truth

Seek and you shall find

Speak out your mind

See, the moon

Fly to the sun

Look before you leap

He who hesitates is lost

Do your very best

Do not lose heart

May good fortune be with you

If you wish, you could now go back to the excerpt of the War Song of the Saracens and try to travel along the lines with Syllable Steps.

The War Song of the Saracens [Excerpt]. By James Elroy Flecker

We are they who come faster than fate;

We are they who ride early or late;

We storm at your ivory gate;

Pale kings of the sunset, beware!

Not in silk nor in Samet we lie,

Not in curtained solemnity die,

Among women who chatter and cry,

And children who mumble a prayer,

But we sleep by the ropes of the camp,

And we rise with a shout and we tramp,

With the sun or the moon for a lamp,

And the spray of the wind in our hair.

Here are two speeches from *The Seagull*, by Anton Chekhov (Translation by David Ifffe). Try to use the same principle of ‘Stepping Out’.

TREPLEV: We need a new theatre – a theatre with new forms, and if we can’t have them, we’d better do away with the theatre altogether. I love my mother. I love her deeply. But she leads such a useless life, always going about with this novelist, her name bandied about in the newspapers – it torments me. I often wish I hadn’t got a famous actress for a mother. How much easier life would be if she were just an ordinary person. I suppose it’s stupid to be jealous of one’s own mother, but you’ve no idea how difficult it is for me sometimes, and how foolish I feel. She used to entertain all sorts of famous artists and writers and I used to be the only nonentity among them. They tolerated me only because I was her son. Who am I? What am I? I was sent down from University before I’d finished my third year. I have no talent and no money. My father was a shopkeeper in Kiev, though he did at least achieve distinction as an actor. But I, I am nothing. So you can imagine what it was like – all these artists and writers assembled in her drawing-room, graciously favouring me with their attention, and it seemed to me that they were looking me up and down and measuring my insignificance. I guessed their thoughts and suffered agonies of humiliation.

NINA: Why do you say you kissed the ground on which I walked? You ought to kill me. I’m so tired. If only I could rest – rest. I – am a seagull. No, I’m *not* – I’m *not*. I’m an actress. That’s right – an actress.

(*Arcadina and Boris laugh off*)

So he’s here. Well, well. Never mind. He didn’t believe in the theatre. He was always laughing at my dreams and little by little I stopped believing too, and lost heart. And then I began to get worried about things. I grew jealous. I was afraid of losing him and I was always anxious about the

child. I grew bitter and quarrelsome. My acting got worse and worse. I didn't know what to do with my hands. I didn't know how to stand. I couldn't control my voice. You've no idea what it feels like when you know you're giving a bad performance. I – am a seagull. *No, no, no* – I'm *not*. Do you remember when you shot a seagull? A man came along by chance and killed it because he had nothing better to do – theme for a little story – what am I saying? Where was I? Oh yes, the theatre. I'm not like that any longer. I'm a real actress now. I enjoy acting. I revel in it. And now when I act, I know I'm acting well, and it's a wonderful feeling. And while I have been living here, I have been walking; walking everywhere and thinking, thinking and feeling, and every day I see things more clearly. I know now, Costya, that for an artist – it doesn't matter whether he's an actor or a writer – the important thing is not to be famous and to have your name in lights nor any of the things I dreamed about, but simply to be able to suffer; know how to bear your cross and have faith. I have faith and life's not so bad, and when I think of my calling, I'm not afraid of life.

## THIRD STUDY

### BREATH FORMS

We will now commence where we left off in the part about Breath in the first study. We talked about the singer's technique of storing the breath and we introduced the concept of the actor's technique, which should be to not store the breath. You might ask: "How does one speak by 'not storing' the breath?" We would say, "By releasing it". Releasing all of it, in every possible place.

Musicians use the term phrasing. Imagine a violinist playing a whole phrase of music without once lifting the bow from the strings; tone, phrasing, enharmonics, would cease to exist. However, when he releases the bow from the strings for each new moment in the music, then the music begins to appear. The same applies to the speaker; where the violinist lifts his bow, we release the breath; as the violinist returns his bow to the strings, so we, with a new breath, return to the words.

For example let's take this line from Macbeth:

"My Lord, as I did stand my watch upon the hill I did look towards Burnham, and anon methought, the wood began to move."

In a way one could release the breath completely every time in the line one can ask 'What?', 'When?', 'Where?', 'Why?' etc. Then one has what the musicians would call phrasing.

So: "My Lord, [*what?*], as I [*what?*] did stand my watch [*where?*] upon the hill [*what?*] I did look [*where?*] towards [*where?*] Burnham, and [*what?*] anon [*what?*] methought [*what?*] the wood [*what?*] began [*what?*] to move."

The actor, of course, would choose the best places to breathe, but one must have released all the breath in every small section.

Sometimes I will say to my students, “Don’t snatch for the breath”; this is because it isn’t necessary. We worry far too much about when to breathe in, whereas when the lungs are empty the air just pushes in. We don’t need to snatch for it.

At the beginning, when we start experimenting with this concept, we often find that we don’t actually know when we’re breathing in or when we’re breathing out, for, if I may say so, the technique of storing breath is incredibly lazy, because we can go on for a line or two without having to make any ‘breath’ decisions. One of the reasons why it can be difficult to allow one’s self to empty the lungs is that the storing of breath has something of a defensive quality about it. When we prepare to do something rather challenging often we suck in the breath and brace ourselves, this gives us a feeling of strength; if, on the other hand, we gasp out our last breath this can create a strong feeling of vulnerability.

This releasing of the breath in the line, on a broader level, releases the whole play, giving it freedom; instead of hanging on to it or standing in the way of drama the actor releases it. Bringing more breath into the speaking carries the drama to the audience. If you don’t have this releasing, nothing new can come in, and the play soon becomes stale. In the releasing of the breath we leave a space for something new to come in; we call it the ‘creative chink’.



I've included this picture of Nike because we feel that the large wings are but an extension of our lungs, and often as an imagination consider our breathing to be like the beating of large wings.

With these exercises, which we have already encountered in study one, this time say each line trying to release all your breath with the words, and then observe how much breath is left in the lungs by hissing out what is left.

Oh no  
It can't be true  
They lie  
They are false  
It cannot happen  
It will not happen  
All is lost  
All is gone  
Nothing  
Nothing remains

O why did it have to be now?  
Why not later?  
Or earlier?  
Before the meeting  
Not on this day  
Of all days  
It is too much  
It cannot be  
It must not be  
Prevent it  
Cancel it  
End it

The following poem may help you to experience what we have been talking about. As a little hint, make sure you start strongly at the beginning of the line.

“Who comes so Gracefully” by Tom More

Who comes so gracefully?  
Gliding along  
While the blue rivulet  
Sleeps to her song;  
Song richly vying  
With the faint sighing  
Which swans in dying  
Sweetly prolong.

So sung the shepherd boy  
By the stream's side,  
Watching the fairy boat  
Down the stream glide

Like a bird winging  
Through the waves bringing  
That siren singing  
To the hushed tide.

“Stay,” said the shepherd boy  
“Fairy boat, stay,  
Linger sweet minstrelsy  
Linger a day,”  
But vain was his pleading  
Past him unheeding  
Song and boat speeding  
Glided away.

This ancient Celtic verse, “The Mystery of Amergin”, allows us to breathe slowly into the nature forms described. The Priest does not think he is all of these things; he speaks on behalf of them. Therefore he lets them appear in his speaking. He does not stand in the way. The first line gently indicates the attitude and style we must adopt. Only the last three lines may denote the human individual who begins to question. Imagine it is in the stillness of the evening and then the voice begins.

Note: ‘Ahroe’ is intoned slowly with three separate tones: Ah – roo – ae.

The Mystery of Amergin. Old Irish

I am the wind which breathes upon the sea. Ahroe,  
I am the wave of the ocean, Ahroe,  
I am the murmur of the billows, Ahroe,  
I am the ox of the seven combats, Ahroe,  
I am the vulture upon the rocks, Ahroe,  
I am the beam of the sun, Ahroe,  
I am the fairest of plants, Ahroe,

I am the wild boar in valour, Ahroe,  
I am a salmon in the water, Ahroe, Ahroe,  
I am a lake in the plain, Ahroe, Ahroe,  
I am a word of science, Ahroe,  
I am the point of the lance in battle, Ahroe,  
I am the God who creates in the head the fire, Ahroe.  
Who is it who throws light into the meeting of the mountain?  
Who announces the ages of the moon?  
Who teaches the place where couches the sun?

Next, we could approach a scene. The characters are aware of an invisible presence and can hear the presence speak. I wrote this little scene just for the actor to try and live in another world with their speaking. The scene has no esoteric significance whatsoever; it is for fun and a sense of speech that lives in the space around them. Our ability to truly listen has been damaged by our careless every day speaking; and our ability to speak has been damaged by ignorance of the true nature of listening. This scene may in a slight way awaken us to the breath life and space in both the qualities of speaking and listening. After all you don't hear Chopin; you listen to Chopin.

### Exercise

The Existence. Invisible gesture within the Group

- A. Dear God, what a place.
- B. Well, at least it's dry and out of the wind.
- C. But it's so dark.
- A. What do you expect – a moonlit castle would hardly look like Piccadilly Circus.
- B. That name, Piccadilly Circus is somehow cheering.
- A. Familiar.
- C. It's the unfamiliar that scares me.
- B. The unknown.
- A. (Quoting) The unknown passing through the strange.
- B. I don't mean we are unknown, I mean this place is unknown to us.

- C. Or rather the situation is unfamiliar to us.
- B. Yes, we are known – but this is certainly strange.
- A. Anyway...
- A.B.C. It's dry and out of the wind. (Silence)
- B. I think I'd prefer the wind and the rain.
- C. We know that, the wind and the rain – but a moonlit castle – that's difficult to come to terms with...
- B. It's so silent now.
- C. And still.
- A. And watchful.
- B. Do you think it knows we are here?
- C. Who?
- B. The Castle.
- A. Dear God, what a conversation – would you ever believe, that in the eyes of the world, we are intelligent, qualified people – we talk like idiots.
- B. Listen.
- C. What?
- B. I heard a word.
- A. A word?
- B. "If" (As if quoting)
- C. "If"?
- A. I heard a word – a whisper (Quoting) "I".
- C. "If I".... (Pause) "Exist." I heard it, I heard it.
- A. "If I exist."
- B. "If I exist" – God, what a thing to say.
- C. What a thing to think – "If I exist."
- A. But who is saying it?
- C. "Who."
- B. What?
- C. I heard "who."
- A. (Softly) So did I.
- B. "Am." I heard it. "Who am."

- A. "I."
- B. I heard it.
- C. I heard it.
- B. We heard it.
- C. "Who am I?"
- A. "If I exist, who am I?"
- B. Oh God, save our souls. (Weeps)
- C. Save its soul.
- A. There again.
- B. Yes.
- C. I heard it.
- A. "If I exist, who is I?"
- C. We don't know who you are.
- B. You don't exist.
- A. You do. You do. Lost soul, you do exist. (*Silence*)
- C. It's gone. (*Long pause*)
- B. You know, this place could be quite cosy for the night.
- A. Do you think we have done a good deed?

To exhale the breath into the word is a vital quality, without such an ambition the mechanical side of speaking will predominate. To store breath is frankly unhealthy and inartistic.