

Materials used in the course

# “Gestures That Make Sense”

taught at HCNW

by

Roger Mills, Presentation Judge

David Craig, **On Performing** :

**Focus**

“Focus, like your hands, wants to rise...when you feel your focus climbing, become your own editor and bring it down. You must create a life, a recognition of a reality to which you will sing, or you run the risk of singing to yourself. There is nothing wrong with that when you are alone. In a crowd, however, it passes as eccentric behavior, a religious dialogue the deity.”

**Technique**

“Stanislovsky has said: ‘Technique is only of value on the stage when you forget all about it’, but technique must be mastered before one is able to forget it.”

“Technique is the imprisoning means to liberating ends.”

**Nervousness**

“Nervousness and fear are mutually exclusive words. Fear is always destructive. Nervousness is an indication of the heightened awareness brought about by the significance of the event.”

“Locate any physical tension; isolate and rid yourself of it. Pay particular attention to unlocking your fists and monitoring the rising and tightening of your shoulders.”

Tony Robbins, **Interview with David Craig** :

“I had studied singing at the High School for the Performing Arts, and I had sung in college musicals, but I was uncomfortable with it because I didn’t know how to involve my body physically or, for that matter, any *part* of my body...even my face. I was focused on the sound of my voice and the meaning of the song, and I was busy responding to the song instead of creating it. I guess the most important thing I ever learned about acting was your revelation that the verbalization of something was always behind its physicalization if the idea was born out of truth. You taught me how to work, to feel the image strongly enough in myself, and only then could it be verbalized. ....Once I learned how to do that, it totally eliminated my problem, and still does. I find I use it even in a straight play....to resist the temptation to speak and allow something to happen “on” me which will be far more eloquent and propelling for the words that follow.”

Larry Ajer, summarizing Delsarte :

“Remember that not all movements involve hands and feet. In fact, most do not....The meaning of a movement is strongly influenced by the part of the body in which it originates, and then influenced by the parts of the body through which it travels before completion. Where does a handshake originate? If it originates in the hand and ends in the hand it is meaningless. If it originates in the hand and ends with a smile, it is insincere. If it originates in the heart, proceeds through the smile, and ends with the hand, it is wonderful.”

David Craig, On Performing :

### Trust

“You must remember that much of the success of what you are doing will be attributed to the mere fact that *you* are doing it. If who you are and how you project an ease in the presentation of yourself are combined with an interesting (both to the eye and to the ear) performance, there is no need to resort to busy-ness by pressing on the loud pedal. By busy-ness, I mean an insistence that it *is* you who is singing. But *you* are singing and to insist upon what is evident is not only redundant but counter-productive. After all, what is simple is pleasing to the eye. Too much hand- and foot-work can be a distraction away from *you* toward what you are *doing*. ....But if what you chose to sing and your performance of it has merit, why ”argue” that the merit is there by resorting to over-decoration? You must learn to trust that you, the singer of the song, by virtue of the fact of your humanness, can be interesting. It is not so much a question of ‘less is more’ but that less may be more stageworthy.”

“All great performers are always more interesting than anything they sing.”

### The Audience

“When you know what you are supposed to do and more, how to achieve it, there is nothing as soul-stirring as standing in the center of a song and, as you create its vocal life, making the power of your performance irresistible to an audience.”

“Any artist worth the name early on learns to put aside ego, or at the very least, to place it at the service of the art. When you sing with imagination and taste, there is a fine and distinct balance between you, the song, and the audience. Each element is, or should be, so balanced that no one part takes precedence over the whole.”

“It is important always to keep in mind that when you are working, whether it be on stage, in a club, on record or on the screen, it is for an audience. You are not singing for yourself alone—you can accomplish that in the bath—but for someone, to someone, and because that someone is there. Your ability to create the illusion that it is their very presence that produced the need to have a song to sing (and even more, the particular song you chose to sing) is what makes the bond between an audience and the singer.”

### Gestures

“Empty gesturing, no matter how beautiful, is disconcerting. An audience can always be relied on to take the path of least resistance. Why give them something to see when it is what you are singing that you want them to hear?”

### Performance

“Singing what you want (need) to say requires an interior height.”

“A great song is a great song. When it is not performed well it simply waits around until someone appears who **can** sing it. A song is sized, and it requires someone larger than itself to give it verticality. Every song seeks its own elevation. You cannot stop its built in determination to reach the apogee....the best of singers is not only aware of this height and its placement, but will be there moments before to make certain it occurs. Always chose a song less tall than you.”

David Craig, On Performing :

### Hands

“Hands and feet have lives that are dictated by what we are thinking. When you stop telling them what to do, or worse, fail to deal with the significance of the lyric (which is what creates organic body language) they will go up, go down, go out, then up and down and out again in an endless semaphoric ballet of nonsensical gesture. They can be as destructive as a two-year-old reaching for a crystal ashtray on the coffee table. Like two-year-olds, they want to be told; given the margins of permissible behavior. When those margins are not defined, hands, feet, and children will test you in order to find out how far they may go before you yell, “Stop!”

When I teach, I tend to yell “Stop!” early in the game, because I ask a “good nothing” from the performer before a “good something” can be trusted. Also, when the quality of the body language is of little to no value, nothing is to be preferred. What people do not see, they cannot fault. The performer’s intention may well have been to stand there and sing. “Do” something, and that something is immediately vulnerable to criticism.

...Pretty hands are not, in themselves, without virtue. But they are, finally, decoration. How long can decoration remain pleasing to the eye? Not long enough. We may like what we see, but a law of diminishing returns is soon operative. Since decoration is less than skin-deep, emotional response to it is cut off by the very prettiness the eye sees.

...But hands have a disturbing habit of wanting to get in to the act. As a rule, they are always too high and too wide when they have little or nothing to say. It is good training to teach them their place. If they can perform their task lower, teach them to do so. Remember that it is not the doing of something that is valuable, but how *well* you do it. How well you do it will be advertised by how well you get in and out of what you are doing. Wide and high may have their moment in the sun, but what then? Where do they go next? Too wide and too high? And how do they get there without betraying a manifest lack of style?

Only when you are free of the script (lyric) of the song, will you find your hands and your feet and, for that matter of fact, all of you, behaving in a sane and human manner. But this requires more than learning the song. Your imagination, your sense of *why* you are singing it, your skill at creating conflict (drama), your attention to the significance of what you are saying (singing)---all of these, supported by a sane focus directed through the fourth wall, will introduce you to what singing and, in fact, life is all about. We speak because an idea occurs to us and we feel the need to communicate it. We sing because the idea is more important, more urgent, more needful of the language of music to make itself understood. Music gives speech a greater dynamic. You only have to watch great singers (performers) at work to realize the tyranny they hold over your attention.

...What do you do with your hands and your feet? Leave them where they are. Allow them to execute their contribution to your performance when they must. Just as they function when you speak, they will do what they have to do to complete the “picture” of what you have to sing.

## Gestures

Ted Shawn, **Every Little Movement** :

“Nothing is more deplorable than a gesture without motive, without meaning.”

“The most powerful of all gestures is that which affects the spectator without his knowing it.”

“Outward gesture is only an echo of the inward feeling that gave birth to it and rules it, and must be inferior to it.”

“Let the face foretell what the gesture will later make obvious.”

Larry Ajer, **The Ballad, Its Magic and Mystery** :

“Establish the meter of the upcoming song in the space between applause and first sound. If a pitch is used, further confirm the meter with the pitch taking technique. The downbeat occurs after the singer’s first breath and after the singer’s first expression of the song’s mood. The first note and word sound cannot coincide with the first expression. If the expression occurs before the sound, it will throw emphasis on the sound and enhance the effect.”

“Not moving in harmony with the forward direction of thought and mood is fundamentally wrong. ....When a performer sings a ballad without moving, he tells the audience that he is simply reproducing words, notes, rhythms and harmonies with no more value than had they been left as dots on a page of music.”

“What of the gesture that is without movement? Can mood be projected in silence? Yes, of course it can and gesture is no different. The held breath is expressively important in many ways. It indicates suspense or emphasis--it is the eloquent moment of any gesture when at its culmination the attitude is sustained and the breath is held. As we move from the mood at the end of a verse into an entirely new theme in the chorus of a song, there is frequently the opportunity to sustain one and anticipate the other. The pause, if there is one, immediately following the climax of a song is another place where planned absence of movement allows us to feel the carry over of emotion contained in the previous phrase. The next line to follow is thereby given a powerful value as our audience fully absorbs the first thought and is ready for the next.”

Francois Delsarte, **Law of Sequence**

There is no communication without gesture. Every song we sing has it and every thought we wish to convey demands it. Note that the term “gesture” is not restricted to movements of the limbs. In fact, it is quite the contrary. Gesture is our very body posture, facial expression, angle of the head, tilt of the torso, position of the feet and so on. Delsarte identifies the completeness of expression with his Law of Sequence:

**The thought comes first, then the expression of the face and attitude of the body, and the gesture is a result of this and only *last* does speech come.** Yes, the gesture precedes the speech.

## **Larry Ajer's Coaching/Evaluation Quotes:**

### **Entertainment:**

“Can you sing, make good music, and be both physically and vocally expressive at the same time? Not only can you, but you must. Anything less is to restrict the art form to a purely vocal exercise. It is no such thing. Once our founding fathers put this music on stage, it became a total entertainment event and must be treated as such.”

“Once consistency is achieved, artistry has a chance.”

### **Artistry:**

- A. Commitment to artistry requires the absence of conflict, total compulsion, and absolute intensity.
- B. Fear is destructive: nervousness is the simple awareness of the size and scope of the event in which we are about to participate.

### **The Face:**

- A. Have a face.
- B. Have a pleasant expression.
- C. Maintain facial mobility, always.

### **Breathing:**

There are three types of breath:

- A. Singer's breath, start of a song.
- B. Thought breath—major change of mood.
- C. Hook breath, propels action. This breath is the choreography of the ballad.

### **General:**

“Leads always sing on the front edge of the downbeat! The downbeat is not accelerated, it is anticipated, and the song takes on a forward motion.”

“Every vowel of half-note value or greater requires a dynamic expression. The absence of dynamics is static and static is boring, flat, and dull.”

“The value of a planned ‘nothing’ can be effective in time and space: sound is to silence as light is to dark, and motion is to calm.”

“By way of expression of voice and body, up tunes are sung as if we are trying to hold the attention of a five-year-old. The larger-than-life result is effective from the stage.”

“Practice makes permanent. Perfect practice makes perfect.”

“Luck occurs when preparation meets opportunity.”

“The will to win is equal among all contestants. The winner is willing to prepare to win.”

“Every moment on stage must either develop character or propel action. Every moment!”