

Kate Godfrey Q & A session VCN Annual Study meeting 3.9.16, led by Yvonne Morley.

Kate Godfrey, Head of Voice, Text and Actor Support at the Royal Shakespeare Company, very kindly gave her time to talk to us at the VCN Annual Study meeting on Saturday 3rd September. That same evening, I attended a performance of Cymbeline at the Waterside theatre in Stratford, and had further opportunity to ponder on the remarkable challenges of her work as that performance unfolded. There was a cast of 19 actors performing to a packed house (capacity 1018) seated on three sides and on three levels. As Kate explained to us, her work involves not only supporting each individual actor in getting the best out of his or her own voice whilst maintaining optimum vocal health, but also ensuring that the performance overall is audible and clear, and that the playwright's intentions are conveyed truthfully and effectively.

Kate told us that her parents were both actors and she in turn worked as an actress for ten years before going on to train at the Central School of Speech and Drama. Her experience, she says, has given her valuable insight into the varied demands placed on actors, and the kinds of concerns they may have. Before taking up her current post with the RSC in 2015, Kate taught at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, and was at the same time an associate of the voice department at the National Theatre.

At the beginning of a rehearsal process, Kate explained that her main role is generally just to listen, for maybe a week or more. It is interesting for her to see different directors at work; she quoted an instance of a first read-through in which cast members were asked to read a part other than their own. So, for example, you might have a spear-carrier reading the main part of Lear and vice versa! This approach, she felt, was exciting, as it opened up new possibilities for the first read-through proper, offering an actor a glimpse into someone else's interpretation of the text and his/her role.

Once Kate has listened to the actors at work, she will initially select a few to see on a one-to-one basis outside of the rehearsal. Being used for a long time to working as a tutor with students, she is very conscious of the change in dynamics in engaging with professional actors whom she views as colleagues. Nevertheless, she expressed an awareness of how daunting it can be for actors to work on a one to one basis with a voice coach they have never met before, and how care must be taken to establish trust and a positive working relationship. Kate will also run company warmups and be present at rehearsal, offering support and feedback right through to the preview and sometimes beyond.

Kate agreed that work on breath support, resonance and articulation are key areas of work. However, with regard to the breath, she noted that sometimes when an actor devoices or fades away at the end of a line it may not be an issue of poor breath management, but rather that the actor is not clear in his/her objective in speaking that line, or has not fully understood it and is therefore unable to commit to it.

When asked if there was anything related to her work that she would change, if she had the power, Kate responded by saying that it was important for children to be given more

opportunities and encouragement to access and appreciate good writing, especially poetry, and the confidence and skills to speak it out loud.