

## NO BAD VOICE DAYS! Exploring the Perspectives of Actors and Singers

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Performance requirements for actors and singers are often widely different, and an actor's perspective on voice may differ markedly from that of a singer. Obviously, there are performers who do it all, but far fewer than one might imagine.

Several months ago, I spoke with two experienced voice researchers about the possibility of collaborating on a project focusing on professional actors doing classical material without microphones in outdoor theatre. An individual pre-performance warmup is integral to this kind of athletic vocal activity, both for the sound required and for the health of the actor. Yet, the colleagues I approached discouraged including a warmup in the research design saying, "Singers have good voice days and bad voice days. A warmup is insignificant," and, "Just clear your throat and you're ready to go." My immediate response was, "This study is with actors, not singers"—though many actors do indeed sing!

While voice is essential to an actor's work, it is not the main event. So, a "good voice day," does not necessarily ensure a good performance. And though performers in any area may choose not to warm up, discarding the practice altogether, or simply clearing one's throat, seemed contrary to my experience in both theatre and music. So I decided to ask working professionals from several countries and performance genres for their views on the subject.

Below are highlights from a recorded discussion June 2019, after a five-day workshop in New York. Sincere thanks, in order of appearance, to Tyler McKenzie, US, Kristen Calgaro, US, Adriana Gandarias, Spain/US, Petra Valman, Sweden, Zac Bradford, Australia, Jessica Lee, Korea, Nick Salamone, US, Clay Storseth, US.

**Tyler** (music theatre performer): The point of a warmup is to integrate all of the technique that you're going to end up using when you perform. You warm up to get that technique going, to get the engine running.

**Kristen** (actor, dancer/singer and yoga practitioner): For me, it's about waking everything up and making it feel alive, and that doesn't just mean one part of my body. If you think of it like a yoga person would, with Chakras, some might be open and some might be closed off. And if you don't have an open channel from your root all the way to your head, then there's going to be a blockage somewhere. So warming up is a kind of undoing the blockages, physically, vocally and energetically--and for me, too, getting the endorphins going. If I don't feel passionate about whatever it is I'm going out to do, it doesn't matter how good my technique is.

**Adriana** (singer/songwriter): Warming up gives you more confidence, so you don't have to doubt whether I'm going to hit that note or not. You can just focus on what you're saying because you already hit that note, you warmed it up.

**Petra** (opera singer/speech therapist): I stretch before I sing and I do stretching together with my voice exercises. I think you have to warm up. For sure, some days just five minutes, and other days for about one hour! If you are a sports person, you have to make muscles warm before you do your thing...

**Zac** (gig singer/music theatre performer and teacher): Re the sports analogy, when Olympic swimmers are asked about their success, they regularly credit the training, and the consistency of training. So it's about developing reliable tools and being diligent.

**Jessica** (classical singer/PhD candidate in vocal pedagogy): There is this huge backup in exercise physiology proving with scientific evidence that a warmup actually helps with performance outcome. But in voice, unfortunately, there is only a thin layer of research backing a positive theory that warming up tends to give you a better acoustic outcome.

**Nick** (actor/playwright): Sounds a little humble bragging saying I don't have to warm up. Yes, you have good days and bad days. But when you have a bad day, if you don't warm up... You have a responsibility to Shakespeare, to Ibsen or to Chekhov. I've got responsibilities, and for me, two things happen: Number one, warming up is an opportunity to get looser and freer. There's an element of depth. I'm going to do this particular trapeze act and I want to be sure I have the trapeze act. But there's almost this opposite as well: I want to make sure that I'm open, and that I'm not going to be trying to do anything because I'm already open enough to do it. A warmup is a clearing away so that I can meet the text completely open as an artist, not as a technician.

**Tyler**: Not warming up for a singer would be like a doctor not washing his hands before surgery. It's a service to the audience. They're paying money, so you don't want to give them a bad service.

**Kristen**: There's a great book called *Peak Performance* about high achievers—artists, athletes, people in business—and one of the things it talks about is this warmup. If your body is used to doing a routine, that does something to the nervous system. It focuses your mind so that you can do your work.

**Clay** (actor): When I go through the day, I adopt the character that is Clay. It's probably very intricate how that guy was created. He holds himself a certain way and he walks through the world a certain way. But if I'm trying to create a character I need to go to some warmed-up, neutral place so that I can take on the character. And if I'm not able to do that sometimes, my mind is on that and I'm not really doing my job. I'm not really doing that character, I'm doing Clay trying to catch up the entire time.

**Petra:** Often when I have a concert in the evening, I observe myself the same day and I feel the mental preparation, I have to. I'm there with both my body and my mind.

**Clay:** In a way it's a ritual. We all have rituals. The warmup can change, and that can be the ritual for the character too. I had a teacher who worked with Alexander Technique, and we were usually doing an animal or something, and he would make us physically go into that, do our work, and then physically go out. So it goes both ways.

I don't mean to be "hippy-dippy" about it, but it is a spiritual thing. It's a sacred thing to create a character and to allow the audience to see the character, to be relaxed and prepared enough for the audience to see it. And just as the audience claps at the end, there's an end to it, too, and you have to have a life.

**Jessica:** My dissertation is about cooldowns for singers.

**Zac:** Another ritual...At the beginning of the year I was doing *Les Mis* and two nights before opening I got really sick. And I think because I had been consistent with my physical and vocal warmup when I was well, I was able to make adjustments to help me focus, and to help free my vocalization and physicality throughout the run of the show.

**Clay:** This week has taught me something...my warmup is usually the same. It's been created by me through every single person who taught me, so everything that's in my warmup is from probably five plus different teachers over a period of time, and some of it's just my own. But when we've been working this week, and you've said, "Why don't you try this?" or "Why don't we try this?" it's made me think, "Well if I really want to grow, then I need to put some more stuff in my basket to give myself more range."

**Joan:** I, too, do the same warmup every day, but often change details. I think it's good to look at our process occasionally and say, "Is that doing anything? Do I really need that?" or "It would be great to put that exercise here."

**Petra:** Yes, when you go to singing teachers, it can be an opportunity for you to get new, good vocal exercises. But then, after you've been doing them for a while, you have adjusted, and if you keep doing them too long, it can be bad for you.

**Joan:** Like taking medicine too long!

**Clay:** One teacher said, "Check in with yourself before you start to see where you are. Don't move anything, don't change anything, check in, then do a bit. Now check in again..." I think that was to teach us, or me, that I am the person who gets to figure this out. I'm not just trying to learn a lesson or do the right thing or the right warmup. I'm trying to figure out if I'm there, if I need something else, because it can be overwhelming if you're thinking, "I've got to do all these things," and you don't know why those things affect you. You don't know why you're actually doing them.

**Petra:** And time is precious. We have so many things to do during the day. I myself want to have more gigs, I want to do booking, I have paperwork to do, and repertoire. So It's important that you have the right things in that warmup.

**Joan:** I got the impression from the researchers I approached, that their definition of warming up was going through a certain number of vocalises, usually in a standing position. However, for an actor, and for many singers as well, it may involve other activities. Warming up is different from one profession to another—from swimming to dancing to singing to acting—and from one individual to another within and across professions.

To date, very little voice research has focused on actors, or even on singers across multiple genres. So if we want to be useful to a larger performance community, perhaps now is the time to “put some more stuff” in our basket to give us more range!

## **References**

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