

REVIEWS

Karin Helander

Kroppen som det skönaste musikaliska instrumentet: Om röstpedagogen Cecilia Berefelts arbete inom svensk teater och teaterutbildning

(The body as the most beautiful musical instrument: on the voice pedagogue Cecilia Berefelt's work within Swedish theatre and theatre education)

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Great personalities are not easily described in words. It is difficult to strike the right balance between admiration on the one hand and a matter-of-fact tone on the other without boring either the admirer or the more objective reader. Swedish voice and theatre pedagogue Cecilia Berefelt is one of those strong—even headstrong—teachers and coaches who have become something of a legend in their own lifetime. Opinions about Berefelt differ. Some consider her a guru-like pedagogue, possessed with profound knowledge in voice production, anatomy, theatre, philosophy and ancient Greek history, as well as an obsession with text and the ability to merge all of these things in a single lesson; while others also see her as a teacher whose convictions and method have sometimes caused conflicts with both colleagues and students. With this background knowledge, I started reading Karin Helander's *Kroppen som det skönaste musikaliska instrumentet* with great interest. I was pleased to find the tone nearly perfectly balanced between that of a critical researcher and a curious theatre connoisseur, and I admire Helander's serious attempt to understand and explain Berefelt's teaching philosophy and method, not least her courage in putting herself in the position of one of Berefelt's students.

The book is divided into six parts. In the first, Helander presents her commission from the Stockholm Academy of Dramatic Arts (*Stockholms dramatiska högskola*), which was simply to put together a text about Berefelt's pedagogical work from 1970 to 2005, both as a teacher at the school and as a coach at theatres all around Sweden. Helander explains why the book had to be written in close cooperation with Berefelt, requiring not only interviews with her and three actors but also participation in workshops. Helander uses a hermeneutic approach and also refers to director Olof Molander and others in the field of tacit knowledge, and I certainly agree with this approach. The introduction gives the necessary foundation for understanding the following chapters.

The second chapter is the most important and is divided into eleven parts. The first two describe Berefelt's personal background, her childhood and education, and present voice pedagogue Kerstin Forsmark and actors Sif Ruud and Ulla Sjöblom, who have had a great impact on Berefelt's development as a teacher and pedagogue. There then follows a rather complicated description of Berefelt's philosophy, method and obsession with text and words. Her philosophy is inspired by theatre artist Mirka Yemendzakis and grounded

in an ancient Greek tradition from 400 B.C. Its most central idea is the connection between life, voice and soul through the function of breathing. This thought is also central to Berefelt's physical exercises, whose goal is a relaxed jaw, which is essential to breathing, vocalizing and language. Tensions in the jaw prevent free breathing and close the connection between heart and brain. The chapter also describes Berefelt's deep engagement with phonetics and language, and how she works with the production of every consonant by pronouncing and listening to the sounds. Here, we also receive an explanation of the title of the book: it means not only the sounds that the body can produce, but also the signals we can send by resting the hand on different places of the body. This 'Method of the Hand' is an important tool for finding vibrations and central points for breath and tone production. Together, the 'Method of the Hand' and careful work with consonants and syllables give the dramatic text an instrumental value and prevent the actor from putting unnecessary meaning into the words, instead revealing deeper meaning in the text.

The third chapter describes Helander's workshops with Berefelt and other actors and dancers. The reader is guided through the most important physical exercises that aim to enhance consciousness and sensibility from the fontanel through the body, experience the centre of gravity, find the ultimate breath and wait for the signals from the body, which is a very time-consuming process. The exercises also work with small parts of texts extremely carefully, placing importance on every sound.

The last two chapters consist of interviews with several colleagues and students, who give similar accounts of Berefelt's teaching method and of her profound knowledge of anatomy. The book ends with a coda in which Helander points out the difficulty of fully grasping Berefelt's pedagogical philosophy.

As a singer myself, I have read many books by and about pedagogues and their methods and exercises, and after reading Helander's book I felt quite relieved. Her hermeneutic approach notwithstanding, I am glad that the researcher in Helander did not take over in a desperate attempt

to understand and interpret all of Berefelt's pedagogy; and also that she did not try to write an instruction book. Instead, Helander lets Berefelt speak with her own voice and also leaves some questions still hanging in the air. As Helander says in the introduction, much knowledge is transmitted from teacher to student as tacit knowledge, which has to be experienced because it cannot be described in words and text. To me this kind of pedagogy is an example of our dependence on the physical phenomenon known as mirroring, which is an immediate reaction by the brain when we see someone doing something: the brain recognizes behaviour and imitates action without any verbal instruction.

I am convinced that the Stockholm Academy of Dramatic Arts, as well as Berefelt's students and others interested in her teaching, will receive Helander's book with a feeling of gratitude, as it will serve not only as a documentation of a very special teacher but also as a reminder that achieving artistic knowledge and development needs time and close personal contact, and that such knowledge can neither be forced nor fully conveyed through written instructions.

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