



## Remembering Cicely Berry



### About Cicely Berry

Cicely Berry was perhaps the most influential voice teacher of the last 50 years. From her ground-breaking books on voice and text to her radical work with theatre companies, schools, and communities around the world, her contribution to voice culture has been incalculable.

Born Cicely Frances Berry on May 17, 1926 in Berkhamsted, Hertfordshire, she was one of five children. She revealed her independent spirit and passion for poetry at a young age when, as a child of seven, she would lock herself in the bathroom and recite from memory Longfellow's "Hiawatha" or Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" in order to escape her siblings.

She attended Eothen School for Girls in Caterham, Surrey, which she describes in *Text in Action* as "a minor public school [...] where one was not forced to be academic, and where poetry was spoken aloud in class" (Berry 2001, 33). She also recollects taking elocution classes which "awakened my ear to the music of language, to the subtleties of rhythms and cadence, and gave me the chance to practice all this out loud" (Berry 2001, 33).

After leaving school, she attended the Central School of Speech and Drama in London, where she trained under Gwynneth Thurburn. Thurburn's teaching and socialist philosophy were to greatly influence Cicely; and Thurburn must have quickly realized Berry's potential as a teacher, for soon after Cis graduated in 1946 she was back at Central teaching voice and diction on the acting course. (At that time, "diction" work centered on the speaking of verse of different styles and periods.)

In 1951, Cicely married Harry Moore, an American actor who had trained in "the Method" school of acting in New York. He was also a teacher, and later became a producer at the BBC. They had three children: Aaron, Sara, and Simeon. Harry Moore died in 1978.

During their life together in London, Cis had her own studio in Drury Lane for actors, including Peter Finch, Sean Connery, and Anne Bancroft. Then, in 1969, Cicely was hired by Trevor Nunn as voice director for the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC).

The following year she was appointed as Head of Voice, making the RSC the first theatre company “to have a permanent full-time voice department,” according to Greg Doran, the RSC current artistic director, speaking at her funeral (personal communication, November 2018). She served the company continuously until 2014, when she became advisory voice director.

Cicely Berry died peacefully in her sleep on October 15, 2018 at her Cornish care home. She is survived by her three children, four grandchildren, and two great-grandchildren. Her funeral was held at Oakley Wood Crematorium in Warwickshire on November 13, 2018.

## The Work

Working with the RSC in the early 1970s brought Cis into contact with three remarkably different directors of classical work: Trevor Nunn, John Barton, and Terry Hands. In *Text in Action* (2001), she writes about the methods she used to help actors develop their vocal potential while working with each director’s process. This prepared her to work with Peter Brook on productions such as his famous *A Midsummer’s Night’s Dream*. Brook validated her approach, encouraging her to go further. As her work developed, she documented its progression through a sequence of highly influential books, beginning in 1973 with *Voice and the Actor*, which was the first British book to provide a modern approach to voice. As Peter Brook observes in his foreword to the book, “Cicely Berry never departs from the fundamental recognition that speaking is part of the whole: an expression of inner life [...] She would never try to separate the sound of words from their living context” (Berry 1973, 3). Her pedagogy, rooted in both physiological function and imaginative intention, emphasized the expressivity of the voice and muscularity of language in service of both character development and theatrical performance.

*Your Voice and How to Use It Successfully* followed in 1975 and developed the approach for a wider audience, addressing the anxieties many people feel about their voice and speech. At the same time, Cis’s work for the RSC was expanding beyond its primary focus on the actors into the educational sphere. She worked particularly with secondary school teachers and students, as well as youth theatres in many parts of the United Kingdom. And she developed a long-standing commitment to working with high security prisoners at Long Lartin prison in Worcestershire. This sat comfortably with her political beliefs. A lifelong Marxist—apparently, she declared herself to be a communist while still at primary school—she devoted much of her work outside the RSC to social justice projects. In addition to her work in prisons and with schools, she worked with the underprivileged across the world, notably the Nós do Morro youth theatre in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro and the Cardboard Citizens theatre company of homeless people in London.

In parallel with this work, she continued to document her developing approach to text. *The Actor and the Text*, which was first published in 1987 and revised in 1992, broke new ground by providing a method of working on text that removed it from a primarily intellectual approach and, instead, emphasized the physical roots of language and the power of words to effect change in both the speaker and the listener. *Text in Action* followed in 2001, taking as one of its themes a line from Thomas Kyd’s *The*

*Spanish Tragedy*: “Where words prevail not, violence prevails.” *From Word to Play* appeared in 2008, offering workshops, strategies, and exercises for directors to use at different stages of the rehearsal process. The stimulus for the book came partly from workshops for directors that Cis had been leading for several years under the aegis of Theatre for a New Audience in New York, but it also brought together much of what she had practiced in her own directing experience. Starting in 1985 with a production of *Hamlet* for the National Theatre’s education program, Cicely directed a number of Shakespeare’s plays, perhaps most notably *King Lear*, which she liked to describe as Shakespeare’s most Marxist play.

Among her many other achievements, Cis received honorary doctorates from Birmingham University in 1999 and the Open University in 2001. She was honored by the British government in 1985 and in 2009 for her contributions to the arts and society, and she was awarded both the Sam Wanamaker prize in 2000 for pioneering work in Shakespearean theatre and the 2007 Samuel H. Scripps award for her extraordinary commitment to promoting the power of language in contemporary and classical theatre.

## Personal Reflection

In 1982, the RSC invited applications for an Assistant Voice Director to support and work alongside Cicely Berry in her work with the company. I was lucky enough to be appointed, and so was able over the next four years to observe at first hand not only the vocal work that Cis (as she quickly became in my mind) undertook with the actors, but also her work on Shakespeare’s language and other texts.

I quickly learned what a passionate, rigorous, and at times even fierce teacher she was. She was also warm and generous, putting me up on two separate occasions in her home, a converted school house with an extensive garden that was her pride and delight. Fun and funny, she was a loving mother and doting grandmother and great-grandmother. A humanist, Marxist, and challenging “no-bullshitter,” she also knew the art of the well-placed profanity and the shock of the lewd.

I owe so much to Cicely Berry both personally and professionally, but perhaps the most important thing I learned from her is that being a voice teacher is about the work. She was utterly selfless and tireless in her commitment to passing on her passion for language and for artistic vocal expressivity of the highest order. She sought no accolades and hated to be called a voice guru, for it was always about the work.

## The Legacy

She leaves an immense legacy, both in her written work and in the hearts and minds of all the actors, teachers, children, and directors who came in contact with her. If you were not fortunate enough to know her personally, you may still catch her spirit and her work through *The Working Shakespeare Library* of DVDs and workbooks that Applause Books published in 2003. This captures a set of workshops that Cis undertook in New York in the late 1990s with a group of British and American actors led by Blythe Danner, Samuel L. Jackson, Toby Stephens, and Emily Watson. In it you may discover the complete woman that is Cicely Berry. “In my end is my beginning” (Eliot 1963, 196).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor



*David Carey* is currently Resident Voice and Text Director at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. A voice teacher for over 40 years, David worked as assistant to Cicely Berry at the Royal Shakespeare Company for four years during the 1980s. David and his wife, Rebecca Clark Carey, have published three books with Bloomsbury Methuen: *Vocal Arts Workbook and DVD* (2008); *The Verbal Arts Workbook* (2010); and *The Shakespeare Workbook and Video* (2015).

## References

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