**In memory of a radical: Cicely Berry**

When I trained as a voice teacher at the Royal Central School of Drama in 1986, it was common knowledge that Cicely Berry (born 17th May 1926, died 15th October 2018), known widely as Cis, was the most influential voice practitioner in the UK and beyond. Her writing and practice remain the stuff of legend as does her presence in the training studio, often described as electric and provocative. A characteristic gesture involved throwing down a sheaf of photocopied Shakespearean texts followed by an invitation for participants to reach out and voice them by means of physical action. It had the effect of shrugging off convention. Those loose- leaf sheets, un-bound and shaken free by Cis, symbolised the importance she gave to embodied voice work. It was a signal that voicing the text should never be ‘received’ or second hand. Under her guidance, there was the insistence that voice should be a vital part of the essential support systems of not only theatre but also life.

At the crematorium service celebration for the life of Cis, on November 13th, 2018, one of the poems listed and printed in full was one of her favourites, *Musee des Beaux Arts* by WH Auden. The poem evokes the human preoccupation with the ordinary act of living juxtaposed against the tragic and often overlooked event that occurs right in front of our eyes: … ‘how it takes place/While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along;’(Auden).

As one of Cis’s favourite poems, it in part explains a remark she made after a workshop with my MA voice students in the Arden Street Rehearsal rooms on May 31st, 2014: “Shakespeare: a great absurdist because there is no answer”. It struck an existential chord and stood out as emblematic of Cis’s reach beyond the technique of voice and the purely theatrical, towards the wider philosophical meanings invoked by theatre. Her statement seems to suggest that the works of Shakespeare contain the answer to everything– and nothing– at one and the same time; that it is only the process of investigation into their infinite impossibilities that can hold the promise of meaning.

It is no surprise that throughout her career, Cis engaged in work that extended to communities across the globe who shared in a common experience of disenfranchisement. At the VASTA conference in London in August 2014, she remarked, “sentimentality is the provenance of the rich”. It gave a message to all assembled about the importance of integrity in public communication, and particularly in theatre. It indicated that theatre was no mere ornamental feature of life but was a site where it was essential to speak with the muscle of both mind and body in order to champion equality over exploitation.

Her philosophy chimed with political theatre work in countries such as Colombia, Argentina and Brazil, wherever the dictatorships and the generals had imposed their fascist will on the people. In Bogota on November 25th, 2018, in dialogue with members of the faculty of Teatro Libre de Bogota, part of the Universidad Central, about to celebrate their forty-five years as a theatre school, it was immediately clear that Cis’s work has been seminal in the formation of their own unique South American acting and voice method born out of left-wing struggle in the 1950’s. Based on the fact that their Head of voice, Livia Esther Jimenez, was alive to and fluent in her published work and had also sought out one to one practice with Cis, it was no surprise when in discussion about her passing, she gave a big sweep of hands above her head and said, “She was the Big Mama of us all”.

It is a passionate remark that reflects not only the level of respect for Cis’s voice legacy across the world but also the depth of feeling evoked in all those who mourn her passing.

Jane Boston

Leader MA/MFA Voice Studies

Chair of the International Network of Voice

The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama