
Antonio Ocampo-Guzmán: Actor, Director, Professor and Linklater Voice Teacher

An interview by Carlos Manuel

Antonio Ocampo-Guzmán is an actor, director and teacher, originally from Bogotá, Colombia where he trained as an actor with the Teatro Libre. He came to the US in 1993 to train at Shakespeare & Company and with renowned voice teacher Kristin Linklater — “Freeing the Natural Voice.” Antonio was the first Spanish-speaker to become a Designated Linklater Teacher and has adapted the practice into Spanish. He serves as a consultant for the Center for Voice Studies (CEUVOZ) in Mexico City and teaches annually at the *Estudio Corazza para el Actor* in Madrid, Spain. Antonio is a member of VASTA (Voice & Speech Trainers Association). He earned his Masters of Fine Arts in Directing at York University in Toronto, Ontario in 2003 and currently serves on the faculty of the Department of Theatre at Northeastern University, Boston.

When did you start to get involved in voice training, ¿cómo comenzó todo?

When I was a student-actor at Teatro Libre in Bogotá, my teacher took a workshop with Kristin Linklater at Shakespeare & Company in Lenox, Massachusetts, and then began to use some of the voice exercises in class. En esa época my teacher asked me if I could translate the introduction of the book so other students could read it. She also asked me to be her apprentice.

Were you always interested in voice?

Yes. I always have loved singing and music. I love the physical sensation of sound. In 1993 I came to Shakespeare & Company, and what I learned was that even though I had trained as an actor for four years in Bogotá, I had never felt that the characters or the plays had anything to do with

me. They were something always in front of me; I was always behind my characters. When I went to S&C and discovered this voice training process, suddenly everything became clear. It was *me* who was expressing *myself* through these different characters. I wasn't inventing a character, putting on a character. It was me expressing myself, all my stories, my thoughts, feelings, memories, my imagination through my voice, through the speaking of the words. That was an incredible shift in my understanding of what theatre is. I used to think theatre was me pretending to be somebody else but through the Linklater voice practice I learned that theatre can be a vehicle of my personal self-expression through the characters I play and the words I speak. The Linklater voice practice is based on freeing the person that speaks and not just about making a beautiful perfect sound. It's about finding who you are and how you can fully express yourself through your voice. That made perfect sense to me, to my intellect, my emotional life, and to my desire to be an actor. At the end of that workshop I decided that I wanted to learn how to teach the Linklater practice and I ended up staying with Shakespeare & Company for three years.

How does a person become a Designated Linklater Teacher?

In order to teach this work, people must first do a lot of work to free their own voice: spend at least one year observing one of the Master Teachers teaching, while taking private lessons. After that you are invited to take a workshop with Kristin Linklater — we call that the “Designation Workshop” — where you work very intensively for five weeks, teaching and training and getting feedback on your teaching. Eventually Kristin decides if you're good enough to become a Designated Linklater Teacher. During the time I was with S&C working as an actor, once in a while I would take a workshop with Kristin in Boston. I also took private lessons with a master teacher twice a week for those three years. Then I began to teach at S&C. Later, Kristin invited me to move to Boston to focus more consistently on my training. She was teaching at Emerson College. I began to observe her classes and eventually I was hired to teach there. It took me five years from the moment I arrived at Shakespeare & Company to the moment I was designated as a Linklater Voice Teacher.

How and when did you start to teach the Linklater Practice in Spanish?

It was 1996 and I was in Colombia on vacation. A friend asked me if I wanted to teach a workshop on what I was teaching in the “States,” espe-

cially voice. I was happy to do so but it was a challenge: all my training and my teaching had been in English and I had never spoken any of it in Spanish. When it became clear to me that I needed to get a Masters Degree in order to continue teaching, I ended up going to York University in Toronto. A friend of mine knew David Smukler, who runs their Graduate Diploma in Voice, and who in fact, had also trained with Kristin in the 1960s. I got an MFA in Directing as well as a certificate in teaching voice. While in graduate school, I taught voice classes for non-majors. 80% of them were non native English speakers; they were immigrants from all over the world — Africa, Latin America, Europe, Asia. That's when I realized how interesting it was to find ways to teach voice to people whose first language was not English.

Where did you start to teach the Linklater Practice in Spanish?

After grad school, my first academic appointment was at Florida State University in Tallahassee; there I had several bilingual Latino theatre students. We created *LinguaFranca*, a small theatre group where we started to do bilingual scenes. There I began to teach and direct in both languages, and started to learn more about Latino theatre. At Florida State I directed a bilingual version of "Romeo & Juliet" and I realized that I could make theatre in both languages.

Was that your "Aha" moment?

Yes, I became conscious that I could potentially teach voice in Spanish. In 2004 Florida State sent me to Panama to teach, making me more comfortable with my approach to teaching the Linklater practice in Spanish. In 2005 I left Florida State and moved to Arizona State, where I met you and worked with you on your play. It was clear that there was in fact a group of Latino actors in the United States who could receive voice training in Spanish. Shortly after starting at ASU, I was invited to Spain to teach at the *Estudio Corazza para el Actor* and that was the very first time where I taught the Linklater practice entirely in Spanish.

Do you have a specific approach on how to teach the Linklater practice in Spanish?

My approach to teaching doesn't change. I teach the way I was trained to teach. What changes is the language and how I communicate with that language. This is very important because I learned how to free my natural voice in English. When I taught the workshop entirely in Span-

ish in Madrid, I was able to experience the freedom and expressiveness of my own voice in my own language, not in my adopted language. That was a tremendous discovery because I had hardly spoken Spanish while training and working at S&C. I spoke so little that I didn't even recognize myself when speaking Spanish. I had somehow left my own Spanish speaking voice in the closet. In a sense I was a *vendido*, not on purpose but out of lack of awareness. But in Madrid I reclaimed my own language. The sensation of being free and expressive in my own language was amazing; it gave me not only an incredible amount of confidence but also an incredible amount of joy. This voice practice is, after all, called "Freeing the Natural Voice." I understood then how lucky I was at being able to express myself in two different languages, and being able to teach in two languages.

How did you end up going to CEUVOZ?

In 2006 I was invited to Mexico City for the inauguration of the *Centro de Estudios para el Uso de la Voz* (CEUVOZ), which has opened a lot of possibilities to teach in Latin America, where actor training is somewhat old-fashioned, especially when it comes to voice. There are no clear systematized methods for voice training for the actor. What is known as "vocal technique," *fonación*, is mostly taught by people who teach singing, which brings the speaking voice to a very "sing-y place," to an *impostación*, an *engolamiento*. Actors speak with a singing tone that has nothing to do with human emotions, thoughts, or feelings. The singing voice requires certain breath control and manipulation to maintain volume, pitch, and strength. Such training doesn't help actors because it disconnects them from their primary communication impulses. The Linklater practice tries to bring the actor to such primary impulses, the ones they had when they were children, when the voice was completely free, libre.

What are some of the projects you are working on right now or plan to work on later in regards to the Linklater?

CEUVOZ has grown a lot in the last two years. Its Director, Luisa Huertas, a famous Mexican actress, wants the Linklater Practice to be integral to the work of the center, to turn CEUVOZ into a Linklater Center for all Latin America. As such, I am now frequently traveling to Mexico to participate in conferences and workshops. We also started a teacher-training program entirely in Spanish. I was the first Spanish speaker to become a

Designated Linklater teacher and now, I'm training teachers, with Kristin's blessing. I've come full circle.

You're translating Kristin's book, "Freeing the Natural Voice." Can you talk about the process?

I'm not translating the book but adapting it. The book can't be literally translated: the practice was designed by Kristin — who is Scottish. She trained as an actress in England and her teaching career has been based in the USA. In other words, it is very much an Anglo technique and some of the instructions, if translated literally into Spanish, would make no sense. The spirit, the philosophy behind 'freeing the voice' is the same in any language and it is easy to transmit it. There are, however, many practical, precise things that I must adapt. For example, the basis of the Linklater practice is being able to free the energy of the breathing muscles. We call that a "sigh of relief," breathing without effort. What it is taught is the "release" of breath, the relaxation of the breathing muscles. So here you have three words: relaxation, release, and relief, a sigh of relief, *alivio*. But the word "alivio" has more to do with something shocking that happened and it is an "alivio" that is over. For other people the "alivio" is something like a lack of energy, like a break from something. The word, relaxation, *relajación*, is often misunderstood as a collapse not as an energy release. And the word 'release' doesn't exist in Spanish. We have *relajar*, *liberar*, *dejar de ser* but "release" doesn't exist. As you can see, there are many concepts in the Linklater practice that don't have a word equivalent in Spanish. I have to figure out a way to adapt those concepts and find the appropriate wording when teaching the technique.

Are there other obstacles you have encountered?

There are the issues of writing a sound on paper. We all can make the same sounds but we use different symbols to write them. There is also the issue of the Spanish language itself. Most Latin American countries use Spanish but the meaning of words differs from country to country. In Spain, for example, we don't say "español" but 'castellano'. The goal is to have a book that uses the most generic type of Spanish; that way, people in Spain, Mexico or Colombia can understand it the same way.

Sounds like a very complicated process.

I'm working on small parts of the book, one at the time. When I finish a section, I send it to my colleagues in Spain. They send it back with their comments, then I send it to my colleagues in Mexico and they send it back with their comments. Once their comments have come in, I work on that section again. As you can see, trying to adapt this book is a very interesting process because the book cannot simply be translated; it has to be culturally adapted using the most clearly generic Spanish I can use. It is challenging but very exciting and enjoyable.

What about the Latino actors residing in the USA?

That's a huge issue! Most Latino actors work hard at eliminating their accent, or in the best-case scenario, at neutralizing it. Few seem interested in developing their acting voices in both languages. Most Latino actors that go into acting training programs in the U.S. have to face their rigid Eurocentric values, such as their desire that everyone speaks this absurd Standard American English. Latino actors must seek other training options. In fact, I believe we need to take a very close look at the way Latino actors are trained. I am convinced that it is perfectly possible to have a free, natural, expressive voice in both languages, a voice that has an incredible flexibility of sounds, giving an actor the potential to play many different characters, not just a Standard. Who is a Standard American anyway?