

TEST DRIVE : VOICE MEDICINE

Deep Throat

Sachin Rao limbers up and says 'Aaaah!'



"Pataka, pitiki, peteke," I tell Dr Sadhana Nayak. "Patakpitikipeteke." The ENT surgeon and medical voice specialist keeps a straight face as I run through flack-mack, lips-sips, feh-sma, gudda-budda, peachy-weachy and their joint families, to some Robert Barton tongue-twisters on the lines of 'Pulchritudinous Paula provided poor parched Paul a passionate passage through puberty'.

And they Pulled out a rudder, haif an our and a flipper from Sachin's maw

Dr Nayak runs Aaroha, a voice clinic in central Mumbai, and this series of articulation exercises is part of my crash course in her 48-point voice enhancement program. By the time I'd settled in across her table a couple of hours ago, the 'voice-oriented laryngologist', as she calls herself, had already diagnosed from my speech that I smoke, have acidity (oh?), don't drink enough water, and am sort of stressed.

I suppose a specialisation in Care of the Professional Voice and 15-odd years of working with wannabe and pro singers, actors and RJs, as well as assorted breathy, croaky, hoarse, squeaky and trembly-voiced patients, gives you the ability to read voices like tea leaves or pig guts. She's even remote-diagnosed Michael Bolton as having nodules on his vocal cords (and not, as I'd assumed, a bout of constipation).

The program begins with me reading out a passage about rainbows into a mic, while a computer makes a spiky-graphed analysis. Now I don't think I have a voice that makes women swoon, but I've never really thought about the way it sounds. The computer playback, though, is someone else's voice. Do I really sound like that? "That's how everyone hears you," explains the doc, "You hear it differently because most of the vocal vibrations reach your ears through your skull, not through the air." Eeks, no wonder the shower dries up when I sing Pearl Jam in the bath...

A few more catcalls, and she concludes that my voice is "normal, but there's scope for improvement." So I'm going to get a run-through of voice enhancement techniques-relaxation, posture, breathing, resonance and articulation exercises.

But first, an up-close peep at my vocal cords (or more properly, folds), which involves spraying some brackish anaesthesia into the back of my throat, flattening my tongue with a depressor and peering at my voice box through a rod optic telescope. I gag about till Dr Nayak finally retreats from my throat, having observed that I have "posterior tongue tension".

Then she whips out a fibre-optic laryngoscope; this one goes anteater-like through my nostril down to my larynx. I fight a massive sneeze as the flexible rubber tube spelunks my nasal caverns, but end up letting out a demonic a-choo right at poor Dr Nayak's face. At the end of this mutually aggravating session, I'm given the a-ok-no growths, lesions, nodules, polyps, blips or bleeps.

A reiki-like lie-down-close-your-eyes-feel-the-positive-energy-flow-through-you progressive relaxation exercise follows, with various muscle clenchings and unclenchings, during which I nearly fall asleep. Then comes a drill of spinal alignment instructions and exercises, including shoulder shrugs, neck flops, figure-of-eights with the tip of my nose and so on. Next up, I re-learn breathing. Apparently I'm doing it all wrong and using my chest, instead of my abdomen like those gun-throated infants do. To Dr Nayak's in-out-in-outs, I take deep belly breaths, letting them out with hisses, oohs and aahs. All very Monty Python, somehow.

Of course, it's not like doing any of this will immediately give me the ability to stay underwater for three minutes or have me sounding like Rick Astley tomorrow-like yoga or tai chi, one has to keep practising, absorbing each technique before integrating the next in. And in the meantime, must remember to drink lots of water, quit smoking, eat right and save the world from the asteroid about to crash into it. The usual time frame, says Dr Nayak, is anything from four to 15 weeks.

On to the next leg of my marathon, which is a whole bunch of resonance exercises for my jaw, tongue, throat and palate. Dr Nayak gives me a demo for each one, like a kindergarten teacher, or maybe a Whose Line Is It Anyway? participant. So we sit and pout at each other, make motorbike/machine-gun sounds (lip trilling, it's called), drop our jaws moron-like and push them back up, stick our tongues out towards Atlanta and Adelaide, yawn vigorously (a process which stimulates real yawns, which then get contagious). Each of these is interspersed with sounds, which I classify from Hooting Owl to Yikes I Sat On A Pin. I'm sure some of these would make great party tricks at a five-year-old's birthday bash; paired with the articulation exercises, one'd have the little tots in splits.

There's lots more on the Doc's agenda, from voice projection and vocal dynamics ('The voice of confidence and passion') to eliminating stage fright and developing physical presence, but there are patients waiting in the reception. I bid Dr Nayak goodbye, promising to practise all the exercises regularly. I can already taste the George Clooney-esque baritone hiding in my throat. Oh wait, that's just the anaesthesia.