

SONGBIRD VS. RATTLESNAKE: CHARACTER VOICES

Objectives

- Students will be introduced to the idea of vocal placement in context of character.
- Students will explore their own vocal ranges and apply vocal placement technique.
- Students will obtain a greater understanding of the use of the human voice in storytelling.

Materials needed

- SONGBIRD CUE CARDS
- VOWEL CARDS (optional)
- HADESTOWN vocal casting breakdown
- (All referenced music can be accessed on various streaming platforms)

Activity

1. Invite students to stand in a circle shoulder-to-shoulder. Educator should stand in the center with SONGBIRD CUE CARDS (and optional vowel cards if using). As they circle up, play the clip of "Hey Little Songbird" from *Hadestown*. Once they are settled, choose a few students to offer one adjective to describe the voice of the character HADES based on listening (i.e. dark, evil, smooth, etc.). Explain to students that HADES is using this text to tempt EURYDICE to the Underworld.
2. Introduce PILLARS OF DARKNESS (fingers on either side of the mouth to lengthen vowels and bring them forward to the front of the face. Use the VOWEL CARDS to practice each vowel sound with maximum resonance, bringing lips forward and dropping the jaw. Students can repeat vowels after educator, cued by cards.
3. Moving clockwise around the circle, have students read SONGBIRD CUE CARDS one at a time (one card per each student), using PILLARS OF DARKNESS on either side of the mouth. Using proper enunciation and mouth shapes, students should aim for optimum resonance and projection, inspired by the vocal placement of the character HADES.
4. As students grow more comfortable, encourage them to start adding intention, characterization and inflection to the words on the cards, augmenting their use of placement and projection and bringing the text further into the realm of *Hadestown*.
5. If there are more students than CUE CARDS, start over once the last card is reached. If there are more cue cards than students, you can either choose to continue through the last card (there are 21) or stop once students have a grasp on the purpose of this activity.

Activity Extension

1. Students can remain in a standing circle. Play a short clip of "Epic II" from *Hadestown* and, as before, choose a few students to offer one adjective describing the voice of the character ORPHEUS based on listening (i.e. light, floating, soft, etc.).
2. Instruct students to touch their tongues to the roof of their mouths, specifically, the hard part just behind the teeth (HARD PALATE). Then, instruct them to touch their tongues to the SOFT PALATE, behind the bony HARD PALATE. The character of ORPHEUS uses SOFT PALATE to push vocal production up through the back of the mouth into HEAD VOICE/FALSETTO, the part of the human voice that sits higher than the speaking voice. Access this lighter part of the voice through a gentle "sighing" sound, gradually moving higher. An upward gesture with one hand can help access this higher region.
3. Play "Epic III" starting at 5:15, where ORPHEUS and HADES have a brief call and response. After listening, have ALL students try the "la la la la..." phrase that ORPHEUS sings, a cappella, as a group, activating SOFT PALATE. Students may speak the phrase in SOFT PALATE/HEAD VOICE/FALSETTO if uncomfortable singing a cappella.
4. In a clockwise motion, students should speak or sing the "la la la la..." phrase to one another. The first student speaks/sings as ORPHEUS with upwards gesture, then second student responds "la la la la" as HADES using PILLARS OF DARKNESS. Then, second student turns clockwise to the next and speaks/sings as ORPHEUS to the next student, and so on until the circle has been completed and each student takes the opportunity to speak/sing as both ORPHEUS and HADES.

Reflection/Discussion

- If students are unfamiliar with characters in the show past those introduced above, play them short clips of "Flowers" (for EURYDICE), "Livin' It Up On Top" (for PERSEPHONE) and "Way Down Hadestown" (for HERMES) to introduce remaining characters. Below are snippets from the vocal casting breakdown for HADESTOWN. Based on the way the character's voices are described below, can you tell who is who? (answers can be found on HADESTOWN vocal casting breakdown)
 - a) "a haunted bird." "both toughness and delicacy in her singing"
 - b) "mysterious, with a trickster-ish quality"
 - c) "not too feminine and lets her sharp edges show"
 - d) "there should be something special about his pipes"
 - e) "major power and authoritative presence", "tyrannical and menacing"

STUDENTS: while watching the matinee performance, listen carefully to the vocal performances of the actors. How do the characters use their voices to contrast to one another? How is the story told through vocal placement and character choices? How does the contrast between the voices raise the stakes?