

For those willing to do the work, says Broadway star Betty Buckley, a powerful performance is well within focus

by Catherine Mallette  
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James Worley is hard at work getting out of his head.

Betty Buckley, poised in the front row of the theater at Fort Worth's Museum of Modern Art, is making the 25-year-old from Euless get up and move.

"Tennis!" she shouts. Then about 10 seconds later: "Basketball!" Puffing and trying to catch his breath, Worley pantomimes one sport and then another -- "Karate master! Swimmer! Ballet dancer!" -- running, leaping, punching, and all the while singing a song, accompanied by Stephen Dubberly at the grand piano.

It's late on a Thursday in January, and Buckley -- who grew up in Fort Worth and went on to become a Broadway sensation as well as a TV and movie star -- is teaching one of her song interpretation and monologue workshops. While most folks know of her work in front of a camera or on stage, she has been teaching, or perhaps more accurately, coaching for more than 30 years. In this particular class are a handful of students, from a college freshman to a university professor. They've finished their half-hour warm-up of meditation. They've sat in a circle and talked with Buckley about how to maintain their focus and about what particular challenges each of them is facing this week. And then the students have gotten up and, one by one, worked with Buckley on a selection of their choice.

What happens is that students learn to build a relationship with a song, which Buckley explains is just like building a relationship with a person.

Sure, Buckley fusses at her students for slurring and for not standing correctly, but what she's really doing is teaching principles she has learned and embraced through the years. She is teaching focus, something that sounds kind of New Age-y and vague but that she insists is extremely definable, practical and translatable far beyond the realm of music.

She asks students to play, to imagine, to stop thinking about "me, me, me."

And what happens, somehow, is no less than magic.

## Shifting accents

Poor James.

Worley is a good singer, but something is missing in his first run-through of a new work by Christopher Dimond and Michael Kooman.

It's a sad song about a guy who feels miserable. And, truth be told, it's a little dull.

Buckley's honeyed voice floats across the stage: "If you sing from this self-pitying place," she says, "It's going to be really boring." She encourages Worley to reach for a

scene of beauty, to reach for ecstasy instead of accenting despair, which she explains is called "playing an opposite." There's a phrase in the lyrics, for example, to the effect of "the birds sing sweetly but their notes are wrong," which Buckley points out is kind of silly -- "They could never be wrong -- they're birds!"

She has Worley think about the lyrics as if he is laughing at himself -- to think more along the lines of: Look how silly this is that I'm so sad that I actually could think birds have the wrong notes.

And then she has him imagine something beautiful.

"Picture the most beautiful place you've ever seen," she says, directing him to look to the back of the audience. "Be sure you see it, be specific and tell me what you see."

"Betty," he says, "I see a sunrise, I see trees, I see birds."

The room has gotten very still. Everyone is mentally involved in what has become a very intense exercise. There is no question that Worley is seeing something amazing, something we all want to see, too.

"Now sing the line," says Buckley, and he does, and then he sings the song, and the connection with the audience is almost electric.

The whole tone has changed, and we are captivated.

Magic.

## Focus first

The word "magic" comes up almost, well, magically, when talking about Buckley's classes. So do words like "soul" and "spiritual."

Talking about that particular Thursday class, Worley says it "was an incredible experience to go through." He says Buckley's classes have taught him not to "act" something but to "be" something.

"You don't have to tell people the truth," he says. "You just have to know that it's true and people will feel that truth." He says she has helped him develop "that spiritual connection" with the materials he works with.

Angela Davis, 36, is another student in the class -- and, in fact, took similar workshops with Buckley in New York City about seven or eight years ago.

"I felt as a performer that something was missing. There was some point of frustration for me, and I couldn't really articulate what that was," Davis says. "About 20 minutes into my first class with Betty, I suddenly understood. It wasn't a matter of I wasn't talented enough, it was just that my focus was in the wrong place. That's why I keep going back. This is literally one of the best things that has ever happened to me."

A grad student in acting at SMU, she says that what she learns from Buckley -- that focus thing -- is something that could help anyone with anything.

"Your voice follows what your focus is," she says, "and it's really applicable to every aspect of your life. It makes me a better athlete if I'm playing a sport. I can be more present if I'm just having a conversation with someone."

"She's a magician -- when you watch her perform it looks like magic. But she's able to teach you to do that, too. That's what's fascinating to me. She can make a high school student able to do it."

## Practical magic

"You're a good singer, Betty, but you can focus better than anyone I've ever met."

It's a Tuesday afternoon and Buckley is sipping coffee in a kitchen, playing with a mischievous cat and remembering her own teachers. The teachers in Fort Worth who prepared her so well that she got the first role she tried out for on Broadway on her first day in New York. And, of course, Paul Gavert, who was her voice teacher and mentor for nearly 20 years in New York, and who, Buckley says, once said the statement she has just repeated.

"He recognized the potential in me and was able to impart his vision for me," Buckley says, "and he held that vision in space with me until I was ready to step into it."

Gavert, she says, "helped me find how to interpret Memory," she says, referring to the song from Cats that she made famous.

She says she has had many great spiritual teachers in life and considers it her responsibility to pass what she has learned along to others.

She also says that adding meditation in a conscious way into her work is what finally allowed her to take her work to another level -- "It's a shortcut to the focus every great acting technique is trying to achieve."

Meditation and focus are what she teaches, and what she continues to work on every day.

"It's fail-proof," she says, explaining that with the practice of meditation, a capacity for "one-pointed focus" comes first, and "then the voice follows -- it follows who you are and what you feel about life and how you take care of yourself."

"It's magical but it's also completely practical," says Buckley, describing her teaching methods and principles. "It requires a lot of commitment and practice."

It's a mistake to perform solely for the need to win the approval of the audience, she says.

"Singers think it's about 'me, me, me.'" That narcissism, she says, keeps performers from connecting with the audience. Instead, it needs to be about sharing humanity with the audience -- and about trusting the process by jumping in and getting to work.

And Buckley continues to practice what she is preaching.

When she is in New York, she still works with voice teacher Joan Lader, and when she is in Fort Worth, where she bought a ranch soon after 9-11, she is on the phone with Lader.

"You just persevere," says Buckley, who notes that she is about to give a series of classes in New York and Chicago before she comes back to Texas to start yet another series. This is in addition to giving frequent concerts across the country and completing a new CD, produced by childhood friend T Bone Burnett, that will come out in the spring.

So where, one wonders, does she get the energy for all this focus?

Buckley gives a warm, self-deprecating smile as she studies a cat perched on the refrigerator.

"I'm just a working girl."