

The power of the voice

J Abitbol

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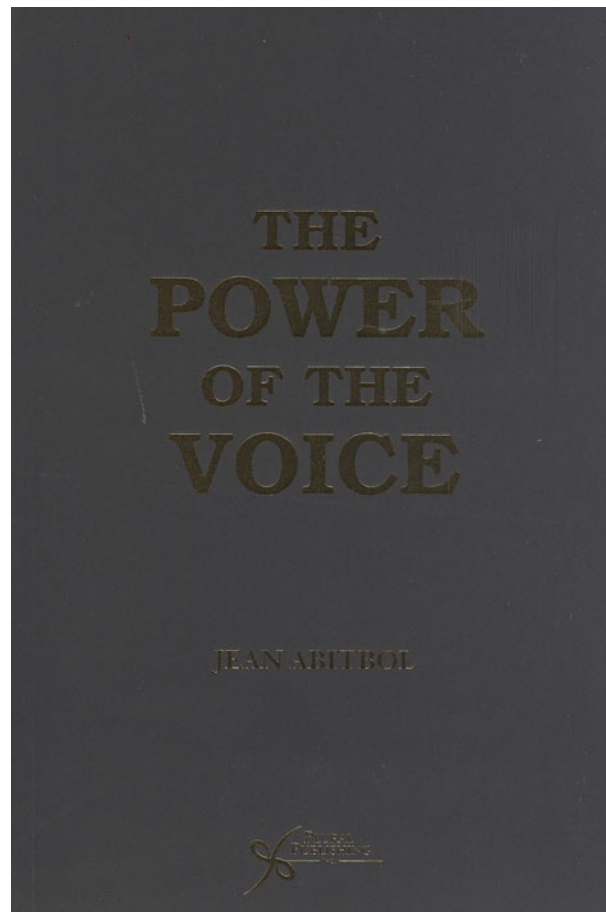
Jean Abitbol is fondly remembered in that cradle of Western civilisation, Middlesbrough, UK. As a pioneer of laser surgery and its application to laryngology, he was, for many years, a contributor to our annual laser training course. He brought to it a certain 'style' and, somehow, the ladies all vied to sit next to him at the course dinner.

He shows that same talent here, in a book that will appeal to anyone with an interest in the professional voice, and not just those who wish to blast the vocal folds with photons. This is a book of science, philosophy and humour, with many an amusing anecdote. The black cover does not scan too well and the resulting image looks more like the monolith from Kubrick's film, '2001: A Space Odyssey'. As that was a gateway to a higher plane, that may be appropriate here, too.

His opening account of his first tracheostomy, solo and with no prior experience, will be familiar to those of us who trained in those times. The story of Frederick II and his experiments with social isolation in children certainly caught my attention early in this text. There are so many marvellous vignettes and snippets of wisdom. It is encouraging to read that, whilst champagne, white or rosé wine dry the vocal folds, the prospects improve on a plane or high-speed train. Now the advice is 'you drink water frequently, speak little and avoid alcohol, unless it is red wine'. This is the wisdom of the ages, truly.

In this book, you will read why Lauren Bacall's voice was so alluring, why Orson Welles' report of Martian invasion was so convincing or, in a televised debate, how the quality of the voice and delivery can prove more decisive than the content of the speech. There is a fascinating analysis of the voices of such greats as Gandhi, John F Kennedy and Bill Clinton, according to 'major instincts' (A1-4) and 'behavioural criteria' (B1-4). You need six of these to succeed, it seems, but I will not spoil it by telling more. That is worth reading.

This proves to be a very perceptive analysis of just how important the voice is for those in the public eye, especially if seeking to convince or recruit to one's cause. The art of the ventriloquist or the mimic is something I have never seen covered before, in any laryngology book. The sacrifices of the castrati are, mercifully, now of historical interest only, but there is thorough coverage of the resulting voice.



Curiously, the most thought-provoking is the last chapter, 'The Voices of Silence'. It is the art of pausing in speech, the moments of silence, that conveys gravitas and musicality, or, as in some classical examples, proves ill-timed and discordant. Our own television pundit Robert Peston surely comes to mind as a UK example.

The preface tells us this will appeal to anyone who is a regular voice user, whether singer, actor, teacher, politician, lawyer etc. Certainly, its appeal goes way beyond those who practice laryngology, and it deserves to be very successful and appeal to a general readership.

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