

ALTERNATIVELY SPEAKING

Extend the body - and improve the vocal chords

THE room is littered with brightly coloured giant bouncy balls, balancing boards and mini-trampolines. At one end is a blue and yellow climbing frame, the floor below it cushioned with scarlet mats. A state-of-the-art children's playroom perhaps?

Only the walls give a hint of what this room is really for. Interspersed between mirrors are poster boards inscribed with poetry and songs. This is Angela Caine's Voice Workshop, and equipment is a clear indication that hers is no ordinary approach to voice training.

Once a professional singer, Angela battled for 15 years with a failing voice. 'My problems were entirely caused by the traditional training, emphasising voice and breath control that I received as a singer.

Then, when my voice began to slip out of tune, none of my old teachers was interested in helping me because, in their eyes, I couldn't sing any more.'

Her efforts at self-help included three years, studying anatomy and the Alexander Technique, a method of re-educating the body to reduce tension, and explorations of Yoga and physiotherapy. These, together with her own experience, now form the approach to voice training.

'When someone thinks about their voice, they usually concentrate solely on the sound being produced,' she says. In an attempt to control that sound, they automatically tense up, when what they should do is open up. The voice is a sound instrument and it needs a sound-box: the torso. Instead of pushing the voice forward out of the body, we should allow it to



Angela Caine with pupils Dave Wharin, designer, and aerobics teacher Karen Mason.

Poetry in motion at the new voice gymnasium

By Jodie Jones

drop into the body where it can resonate. This is the way our voices were designed to work.' In search of this lost resonance, classes struggle with a range of tasks last done at primary school.

Angela uses the gymnasium equipment to help pupils rediscover and extend their range of movements.

Balancing boards force people to reassess the daily balancing act of standing upright (Something most of us haven't thought about since we learned to walk). The giant bouncy balls used to impose a rhythm other than the rhythm of the poem or song being 'performed'.

Bouncing on a trampoline while reading poetry from the walls, or singing 'London Bridge is falling down' as a beanbag flies around the group leaves little time to be self-conscious about your voice, but can it improve the way you use it?

Aerobics teacher Karen Mason has no doubt. After Years bellowing encouragement over thumping music, her voice was continuously failing. When she arrived in Angela's workshop it was little more than a croak. Six weeks later she still has a slight huskiness but the improvement has, she says, been impressive. I don't just hear the difference, I can feel it. I no longer strain to make myself heard.'

The improvement comes, it seems, from ignoring all

those things we were told when we first piped up in public, says Angela. 'The first mistake people make is to stand up straight and stiff. This immediately makes it impossible for the body to resonate. The second is the notion that you should take a deep breath. In every other area of life, we naturally breathe quite effectively, why should speaking be any different?'

Her pupils include singers and actors and she has worked extensively with stammerers (she is a member of the Association for Stammerers), but most come simply to improve their daily speaking voice.

'If there is tension in your voice,' says Angela, 'that conveys itself to other people. If you are relaxed and comfortable with your voice, you concentrate on

getting your message across, and also appear generally more assured.'

In addition, since her method emphasises correct body alignment, many pupils find back problems are eradicated as well. Photographer Charles Edwards had a dual purpose when he came to Angela. 'I began giving a few lectures and that my voice wasn't holding out until the end of the talk. I also had nagging back pain and heard that Angela's method could help with that. I've only been to three sessions, but already there is a marked improvement with both problems.

I'm booked in on a six-week course, but I shall probably keep coming back after it has finished because, apart from anything else, it is just great fun.'