



Leon Conrad

Giles Abbott

THE ART OF RHETORIC - A COURSE

One of the stated aims of the UK Speechwriters' Guild is to 'repopularise rhetoric'. The trouble is that this makes for a dry mantra. Few people could give a simple definition of what rhetoric is and the whole concept reeks of Latin and obscure grammatical rules.

Tom Hodgkinson is the founder of *The Idler* magazine and the author of several books on living well. He has extended the franchise further and created The Idler Academy on Westbourne Park Road in London.

Browsing his website, I noticed he offered a class in The Art of Rhetoric. Even more surprising was that the course was being taught by a company called The Academy of Oratory. How could a company that sounds 2500 years out of date persuade corporates to engage their services? That would indeed be a formidable exercise in rhetorical skills.

I dropped in on the class. The trainers, Giles Abbott and Leon Conrad, exude the confidence of top actors. They both wear musketeer-like beards and they both speak beautifully.

As soon as introductions were over we were taking part in interactive exercises. As if we were in drama school, we were given a task to bring us into 'the moment'. We had to prowl round the room pointing at objects and calling them the wrong name.

Giles urged us to think of a simple anecdote from our lives. A story we had told that week. He then illustrated three styles of opening a story: direct, indirect and gear change.

I think I grasped that direct involved a formal beginning 'once upon a time' – indirect involved a rambling introduction and 'gear change' – was like the opening of *Paradise Lost* – a dive into the 'middle of things'. It didn't really matter, the point was made that there were different ways to start a story.

The background of both trainers has been voice coaching; breathing exercises also featured in the lesson. The blend of different dimensions of speech-giving kept our attention and gave the course a 'holistic' feel.

Leon explained there were five levels of gesture. From waving your hands in the air like a mad scientist to keeping them behind your back like a Royal. This was a curious exercise for me because I occasionally do something similar for wedding speeches when I'm stuck for inspiration. There's an insight here – gesture can help to generate text.

Most of the exercises involved working with a partner. We had to find a beginning, a middle and an end for our anecdote by oral experimentation. Our partner would fire imperatives at us to change the tone of the story: Action! Description! Feeling!

150 minutes passed rapidly. Without weighing us down with figures of speech, they shared some of the joy of using effective storytelling techniques. At the end of the session every delegate stepped up to the podium to deliver the bare bones of their story. Nerves had disappeared and everyone remembered their lines. I went home eager to polish up some of my other anecdotes to give them a wider audience.

Giles and Leon (<http://www.academyoforatory.co.uk>) are running another course on 20 September at the Idler Academy 020 7221 5908, £40