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Moving beyond listen-and-repeat, Kelly Reiter discusses building an American vocal identity

I knew a wonderful actor from Appalachia who could never manage to hide his super-thick regional dialect. When an Okie, hick, Texan, or other Southern-country type was called for, he was your man. The last I heard, he returned to Kentucky (hi, Ronnie Dee!).

On the other hand, I have a relative from Bavaria who emigrated to Los Angeles about 20 years ago, took acting classes and worked hard to sound American, even Americanizing her name (hi, Ricki!), and who now has only the tiniest trace of German in her speech. And my neighborhood jeweler, who came here from Hungary 40 years ago, has an accent so thick he's barely comprehensible (yo, Tibor!). Everyone's different when it comes to changing speech habits, but of course the desire to change an accent, and the amount of practice you put in, are key.

These days it's not considered necessary to lose your regional dialect or foreign accent. After all, we live in a country in which cultural differences are celebrated and ancestries are cherished. Your Noo Yawk tawk would work well for NYPD Blue, your Chicago/Midwest accent for David Mamet, your Southern drawl for a Tennessee Williams or Beth Henley play, and so on. If you're British, the stage and screen opportunities are wide open – or you could advertise Jag-yu-ahs. On ER, the doctors and nurses have a range of regional and foreign accents. But you want to be able to handle what's called Standard American if you aim to play a large variety of roles. By the way, Northern California dialect coach John Rustan, who has a Ph.D. in theatre with a specialty in voice and dialect, says that Standard American, just like Standard British, is really just a received pronunciation – an accent that a group of people decided was standard.

I listened to a CD and browsed its accompanying workbook to brief myself on Bob and Claire Corff's method of "Achieving the Standard American Accent." They make a point of saying you can "keep the essence of you" and simply acquire a vocal pattern for use as needed in meetings, auditions, and roles, then go home and talk however you want to your husband and the cat. They explain that American vocal placement calls for sounds to come from the back of the mouth and very openly – as opposed to French, in which sounds come from the forward part of the mouth – pout and say "Oooh-la-la!" In German, sounds come from the back but are closed – "Achtung!"

In addition to sound placement, the Corffs also discuss two other important elements of Standard American speech: melody (down the scale, putting the weight on the bottom of each word and at the bottom of each sentence); and pronunciation (which has to do with shaping vowels and consonants, a tricky business involving mysterious things like fricatives and diphthongs and the way air passes through various parts of your mouth). Newscasters are a good example of Standard American speakers.

Bill Dearth, a Hollywood actor since 1971, who's been teaching accents for the past 20 years, tailors his coaching sessions to meet individual needs. Some people need to work on their vowel sounds, others on their consonants. "I have an Indian actress with excellent diction, but her vowels are all Indian," he says. Conversely someone from the Midwest, with Standard American vowels, might need her consonants corrected.

Dearth points out that you may be speaking accurate American English but working so hard at it that you're distorting your mouth, and the camera will pick that up. "I work with someone

finds that a lot of her clients – the majority of whom are Latino – come from a listen-and-repeat experience, which emphasizes articulating and pronouncing each sound, so that they tend to give each word equal emphasis, rather than putting the energy at the end of the phrase. That makes them sound abrupt. Others may speak too rapidly; Standard American is fairly slow. “I call Standard American a two-finger language,” she says. “Put your index and middle finger between your teeth and say hi – it’s a friendly, open sound. It’s important how open the mouth is.”

What is the most difficult aspect of Standard American to learn? Rustan says it depends. For example, if you have a Spanish accent, you might find it difficult to switch the long e and short i sounds. But, he says, intonation--what the Corffs call melody--is often the hardest. The tendency is to be working so hard on correct pronunciation that you sound very deliberate and unnatural. It can be challenging to learn how to group words, when to run them together, where to let your pitch rise and fall.

Rustan observes that some people learn best visually, others best by ear. Those who naturally favor visual learning will have a harder time, he says. For a French-Canadian visual learner who was struggling, he respelled all the words in her script so that when memorizing, she'd be reading them correctly. Indeed he has found that French speakers have the hardest time learning Standard American. He also notes that Chinese dialects are hard to cover up; because Chinese dialects don't have a lot of multisyllabic words, Chinese speakers tend to break up English multisyllabic words and thus sound choppy.

Is there any particular regional accent that especially limits you as an actor because it calls up negative stereotypes? Dearth thinks it's a New York dialect ("sounds angry"), and, after that, the Okie/Panhandle accent ("makes you sound kind of stupid") and general Southern ("can sound racist"). "These stereotypes are fading, though," he adds. Rustan mentioned the Valley-girl accent, in which the melody goes up instead of down at the end of a sentence ("people may associate that with being airheaded").

Can you learn Standard American from a recording or workbook? I think so, and Rustan agrees, although he points out that

what's missing is someone correcting your mistakes. You might be missing one subtle sound and not be able to hear it yourself when listening to your own recorded voice.

How do you know if you need to acquire a more standardized speech? Simple enough: If a casting director or producer hasn't told you so (if they regularly ask, "Where are you from?" that's a clue) but you're not getting called back regularly, you might need to work on your accent--or if casting people keep telling you, "We need someone with a different type of dialect."

I can't resist: I ask my experts if I have the hint of an accent (without telling them of my formative years in New York). They say no. Dearth says I'm a little nasal. He asks if I'm tall or short, beautiful or cute (short, definitely a character type), pointing out that it's important for your voice to match your physicality--but that's a whole other topic, involving pitch and timbre.

Reiter says her clients, many of them young actors, tend to feel bad when told they need to work on their speech. She assures them there's no need to feel insulted. She says, "I believe in accent addition, not reduction. It's empowering; it's about embracing. I don't use the words 'accent problem.'" She observes, though, that you'll want to use your Standard American speech not just at the audition but also when talking to an assistant at an agency.

Here is Reiter's approach to her clients: "Is your question, 'Can I really get rid of my accent?' I hope not. Your goal should be to play the character...."

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