YOU CAN GO HOME AGAIN

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INTRODUCTION

In the late 1970's, I was studying to be an actor at the American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco. Edith Skinner was one of the many remarkable faculty members of the professional actor-training program at that time. Edith's classes were rigorous and challenging: we learned the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) and "narrow transcription," we investigated the relationship between sound lengths and text clarity, and we had to speak "correctly" at all times. We were drilled in the sounds and rules that made up what she called "Standard Speech for the Stage." In every production that we rehearsed and performed, we were required to use this Standard. All other speech patterns were considered sub-standard or lowly regional sub-types.

I grew up in Chicago. My mother's folks were Swedish immigrants who had come to the Windy City when she was a child. My dad's parents were from German and Czech farm families who lived in rural Wisconsin. Although they both were determined not to sound like their linguistic roots, my speech patterns were a true Chicago blend of these influences. I remember not being able to "accurately" pronounce my name in Edith's class: I simply could not correctly make the vowel "a" to Edith's satisfaction. My initial written evaluation on file said, "Some regionalisms, but progressing nicely." With a good ear, lots of drive and hours of practice, I was slowly able to succeed in Edith's class.

However, when I started working as a professional actor, I found that Edith's formal speech patterns sounded dated. In the late 1970's and early 1980's, more and more plays were being written in specific vernaculars and more and more directors were taking advantage of the multiplicity of actors' speech patterns. This celebration of diversity has flowered in the intervening decades. I needed to change how I had been trained by Edith to think about speaking. I didn't want to lose the clarity, precision and richness that she had offered, but I did want to sound like a contemporary American actor.

I had also begun teaching speech. It quickly became obvious that my pedagogy had to be much more nuanced than simply drilling correct sounds to eliminate those "bothersome" regional, genealogical, cultural, educational, generational, gendered, professional and social identifiers embedded in our speech patterns. I could hear how each character in every play has his or her specific rhythms, melodies and sound shifts. I began to understand that every dialect or accent is a valuable form. It was also clear to me that the speech patterns that create the inclusive qualities of local or cultural dialects might also limit casting possibilities, allowing the actor to be seen only as one kind of character in a narrow range of plays.

I became curious how to teach a useful contemporary neutral American speech pattern. I also began to see how limiting it might be to learn the symbols in the International Phonetic Alphabet that only pertain to this dialect. I was eager to find a way

to inspire students to embrace the *whole* phonetic alphabet, including diacritical marks beyond Skinner's "narrow transcription." I wanted my students to be aware of the huge variety of possibilities in tongue, lips, palate and jaw movement in dialects and accents worldwide. And I wanted them to understand how vocal placement, melody, rhythm, and the cultural attitude of the speaker affect the specific sounds as well as the gestalt of communication.

PEDOGOGICAL PROCESS

I view speech training as the initial stage of dialect training. In my first meetings with our Institute students, I lay out the plan for our two years together. My goal, I tell them, is to give them the capability to become transformational artists, able to shift from character to character at the very core of their expression: how they speak. We will begin, I say, by training the musculature of the face, finding out how the lips, jaw, tongue, soft palate and the muscles of the neck and throat work together to make speech. We will view these muscles like any other muscles of the body that need a variety of exercises for relaxation, flexibility, strength, and precision. We will learn the International Phonetic Alphabet, including symbols and diacritical marks that will help with understanding the global scope of speech analysis. We will spend most of the first year examining how to create what I call a Non-regional American Dialect.[1] I stress that this is a dialect for stage, film, television and commercials that is useful to learn. It is a neutral, baseline pattern that is expected of many actors. I talk about the notion of "code-switching" that is a basic tenet of linguistic study: we already use a variety of speech patterns in our daily lives based on the context of our conversations. We are simply going to add another dialect to our repertoire of "code-switching" resources.

As we progress with an examination of the International Phonetic Alphabet sounds, I hear comments like, "oh, that's the kind of L everybody in my family uses," or "now I get why I always sound like I'm from Southern California." The symbols that we study are discussed in relationship to their regional and cultural variations. The students begin to understand which sounds are characteristic of their own dialects. They become more flexible physically, finding out what combinations of movements make which variations. "Boy, that's a workout," "Now I really feel what my tongue is doing," or "I didn't know I could sound like that," are phrases that start popping out.

During the second year of training, the focus shifts from the Non-regional American Dialect to a number of regional and cultural sounds. Second year acting classes typically begin with a study of Tennessee Williams and August Wilson's plays. After each student is assigned a scene, we begin research of given circumstances to determine exactly which specific Southern or African American dialect is appropriate for each character. The students are introduced to the idea that there is no "standard" dialect for these authors, but a range of possibilities.

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[1] I have modified Edith Skinner's Standard Speech for the Stage to be a more accessible, contemporary sound. Specific changes are 1.The elimination of the use of "middle a" for words like ask, dance, path, 2. The substitution of the schwa for short "i" in most prefixes and suffixes, 3. Disregard for shortening the penultimate syllable in words ending in "ery, ory, ony," 3. Softening the medial "t" requirement, 4. Losing the rigorous differentiation between voiced and voiceless "w," and 4. Retaining the possible use of "liquid u", "middle o", "medial t", and lingual alveolar fricative "r" for use in some classical texts, but not necessarily in contemporary speech.

The next dialect we approach is Received Pronunciation (RP) the formal British standard. However, the analysis of this dialect includes variations of class, education, profession, and generation, as well as the time period of both the writing and the setting of the play. This allows us to examine a range of dialects from formal aristocratic speech to the contemporary "Estuary" dialect. Again, the fundamental question is, "What dialect is most specific for the given circumstances of the play and character?"

The third dialect unit is typically Cockney.[2] Again, we look for the variations which are much more finite in this dialect and may change from street corner to street corner (much like the shadings of our New York city dialects and accents.) We also examine what happens when an immigrant culture fuses with a local dialect. What becomes fascinating to the actors at this point is that it's not just the dialect that is changing. The rhetorical forms, grammatical structures, and language use of playwrights writing in Cockney are radically different from those of writers whose characters speak in RP.

THE "HOME DIALECT" EXERCISE

Then we move to my favorite section of dialect training -- the "Home Dialect" -- the culmination of our M.F.A. candidates' two and half years of voice, speech, and dialect training. I ask each actor to identify a dialect or accent that is one source of his or her vocal production. This can be a challenge. In my own case, I would be asked to choose one of the following: the basic North Chicago dialect I grew up speaking, my Swedish grandmother's sounds, the Wisconsin variation of the Upper Heartland dialect of my father, the Czech accent of his father, or the German accent of his mother. All of these affect my vocal patterns. I encourage each student to examine the source dialect that interests her or him most, or perhaps is the most frightening and/or difficult to approach.

Research begins. Each student must find out as much as possible about the culture, history and sources of the home dialect or source accent they are studying. If a student is basing his or her exploration on someone living who speaks the dialect or accent, I encourage audio recording. If the dialect is generationally, culturally or regionally distant, the student must find an accurate audio or video source.

The next step is analysis of the dialect or accent. Each student fills out a detailed template.[3] The students become deeply invested in the accuracy of their personal dialect, and as a result, the quality of listening, analysis and sound/symbol recognition increases radically. All of a sudden, questions arise: "Is there a symbol for this sound?" "How do I notate this more accurately?" "Is there a different diacritical marking for this?" "What kind of R is this?" Since a new individualized hunger now propels their learning, the

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[2] I have also explored South African speech during this section. The range of dialects and accents emerging from the native nations, colonizing groups, cultural influences, class structures and time periods, as well as the differences in playwrights' interests, are deeply rewarding for the actors.

[3] Jane Guyer Fujita, M.F.A.'10 created a template for her fellow students with columns for changes in initial, medial and final positions of vowels, diphthongs and consonants, followed by a series of questions regarding placement and vocal production. It has become an essential part of the research packet.

students are eager for more detailed information on diacritical marks and non-English IPA symbols. The IPA shifts from being a required topic to becoming a precise personal research tool.

The student must then find a piece of text to be spoken in the dialect or accent. Since so much of our Institute training is based on published theatrical texts, I encourage a broader view of performance material for this exercise. I only require that the chosen text be created for the specific dialect or accent. Of course, it could be from a play. A monologue could also be transcribed from the initial recorded source interview. It could be something from a prose text or a piece of poetry written for the home dialect. It could be from a television or radio interview. It may be devised from historical research (letters, diaries, storytelling.) The actor could write a piece in the dialect or accent.

But the work isn't just about learning the chosen text and acting it. Each student is required to create a half hour presentation of his or her research, with a packet of printed information to go along with it. The actor is required to speak in the chosen dialect or accent while giving the presentation. In addition to talking about the history and development of the vocal pattern, she or he must be able to "teach" the rest of us the dialect, sometimes using original recorded samples. The piece itself must be fully memorized and rehearsed. The student must also have chosen a "kinesthetic trigger," a short phrase that brings the whole dialect or accent into play by its simple repetition. Every member of the class will be exposed to the culture, analysis and text of each dialect, making it a true ensemble experience.

The day of presentation arrives with final touches to their handout packages and last minute trips to the copy machine. Typical materials in these packets include maps of the country, timelines of history, language groups, links to various useful websites, and phrases unique to the culture. They are required to present their analysis chart and the IPA transcription of their text. Often, students bring in a food sample, a costume piece, or photographs of their ancestors.

At the end of each class, we stand in a circle. The students who have presented that day speak their kinesthetic trigger phrase, which we all repeat. Since the whole presentation process takes several weeks, the first classes have one or two, then four, then as we progress, more and more triggers. By the end of the whole section of study, we have created a circle of phrases celebrating the depth of cultural, language, and personal diversity in the ensemble.

MOMENTS OF BEAUTY: RETURNING TO THE SOURCE

The following are moments of learning, depth, transformational beauty, humor, or sweetness that have stayed with me over the years:

One year, three students were from Minnesota. They decided to work as a team. One of them spoke about the history, one about the culture, and the third presented the dialect analysis. After delightfully funny stories about the butter sculptures at the state fair, the "hot dish" potlucks, the focus on family and eating coming from the predominantly Scandinavian immigrants, we were treated to homemade "lemon bars" from a grandmother's recipe.

Another year, several students were of Latin American based heritage. One was actually from Peru, one's parents were Chilean, while the family of the third was from Puerto Rico and now living in New York City. Not only were we able to compare the

accented English coming from these countries, we were exposed to how Spanish itself shifts from culture to culture. This opened up a wonderful discussion and demonstration of the differences between the accent patterns of Latin American, European, New York, Texan and Californian spoken Spanish.

Last year, three students were interested in examining their Italian heritage. One had Sicilian ancestors, one Genovese, and the family of the third was from Naples. Although none of these three students spoke Italian themselves, they were excited to help the group understand the differences between the historical influences on the Italian language of these three areas.

The Sicilian presentation prompted a great discussion about Robert DeNiro's language use in *The Godfather* (he was the first actor to win an Academy Award for a role performed in a language not his own.) The student whose heritage was Northern Italian was a beautiful blond from Texas. It was only after seeing how she resembled a photograph of her grandfather, an Italian nobleman, that the class realized how rigidly we stereotype each other. At the end of her presentation, the third student whose mother, father, and grandmother speak Italian at home said, "I've never wanted to learn Italian before; now I can't wait to get started."[4]

One student broke into tears when returning to the muffled consonants of her native Philadelphia dialect. She had done a brilliantly detailed analysis of the dialect, but was virtually unable to return to speaking it. She told us how hard she had worked to separate herself from that dialect, which she now considered to be ugly. She had trained and trained to give herself more clarity and crispness; speaking in it brought her back to her roots. With encouragement, she performed a monologue from *The Sixth Sense* by M. Night Shyamalan, the role of Lynn. In her native Philadelphia dialect, it had a level of vulnerability and authenticity missing from the film. It also empowered her to embrace this part of her speech as a viable, useful and effective entre into a performance that had previously intimidated her.

Another actress had a Russian mother and Ethiopian father. Her day-to-day precise non-regional American dialect revealed nothing of her heritage. She had grown up with her mother and thus spoke Russian fluently in addition to English. She could also adopt perfect Russian-accented English. She had been estranged from her father for years, yet chose to research and present his Ethiopian accent. She wasn't able to record him as a source. Instead, she found and befriended a young woman working at the counter of a popular lunch spot in Harvard Square, who was happy and proud to share the culture and language patterns of her homeland. Her research, analysis, presentation and monologue brought her to a deeper understanding of who her father was.

A young man from Egypt was concerned that he wouldn't be able to find any material written for Egyptian accented English. With a little encouragement, he decided to write a piece himself. He wrote an exquisitely pointed humorous piece about a frazzled, well-meaning high school teacher attempting to teach sex education to his puzzled Egyptian students.

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[4] All three students of Italian heritage also had revelatory moments about the nasality of their vowel production, particularly preceding nasal continuants, when speaking in a non-regional American dialect. This habit was directly related to their "home dialect" influences.

For the previous two years, this student had struggled with second guessing himself, losing his lines as well as his focus, because he was worried he was doing something wrong. He also had difficulty releasing his jaw, making his articulation somewhat muffled. He had always seemed a little formal and reserved, not allowing himself to use the text spontaneously. All of sudden, he was funny and free, playing with the language, playing with his audience, working moment to moment with ease.

I asked him to do a bit of an Iago monologue in this accent. Instantly, Shakespeare's language came alive. The actor wasn't worried about trying to fill a concept of the role. He was Iago, speaking personally and truthfully to us, the audience. He surprised himself at how easily the classical text came pouring out of him, the scansion and text work falling into place without thinking when he spoke in his own cultural language pattern.

This student has continued to write, creating a one-person show for himself sharing his great love of the people of Egypt.

The parents of another actress were from Poland. She was familiar with their accented English, having heard it all her life, yet had never analyzed it before. After going through the "home dialect" process, she felt extremely confident with this accent. Shortly after graduation, she was cast in her first role in New York as a young Polish woman, since she not only looked the part, but also sounded the part. She gained another role for the same reason, and now has a recurring role on a successful television show using her "home dialect."

A Chinese-American student worked very hard to get her Chinese accent analyzed precisely. She had grown up in the U.S., had never learned Chinese, had no trace of an accent, and hadn't ever studied the accent before. She was very practical about her study, saying, "As an Asian-American actress, I'm sure I'll need to use this. It's insane for me to go to L.A. without this accent ready."

A young woman from Santo Domingo worked extremely hard during her whole training at the Institute to eliminate her Spanish accent. Her goal was to sound like she was from the U.S. After her showcase presentation in Los Angeles, she had a meeting with a prominent casting director. He questioned that she was actually a native Spanish speaker because her English was so precise. She was able to go right into her home dialect monologue. He was instantly convinced of his error.

One student had grown up in Northern California, where she had been adopted as a child from her native home in Haiti. She was deeply interested in exploring her Haitian roots, yet shy about how to go about this. She had denied herself the speech patterns of her homeland throughout her life, both from the cultural pressures of growing up in a white community and the necessity of speaking "correctly" as a theater artist.

The day of her presentation, she brought in an audio recording that her adoptive mother had made of her shortly after she had arrived from Haiti. On the recording, she is speaking in Haitian Creole, a language that she no longer knows. She proceeded to take us through the details of both the Creole language and an analysis of English spoken with the Haitian accent. Her performance piece was a poem written in Haitian Creole. She performed it in English first, with the accent in place, and then in Creole. Her vulnerability and presence in her native tongue was profound.

At the end of the whole process, she felt inspired to relearn the language that she had been pressured to discard many, many years ago. She is excited about returning to Haiti to immerse herself in the culture and sounds of her country.

A wonderful actress who had grown up in the Boston Irish community had the deeply ingrained habit of speaking too quickly in all of her texts. She presented her analysis of the dialect, with recordings of her parents and grandmother, along with photographs of the ancestral cottage near Galway. She launched into her monologue from *Playboy of the Western World*. We had the same difficulty understanding her as we did the recordings of her folks. She had a breakthrough comprehension of how deeply her rushing rate of speech was embedded in her dialect heritage.

An African-American student from Baltimore spoke with deep pride about the speech patterns of his community. After the final presentations were through, he said, "I've never actually listened to all the varieties of speech surrounding me – my ears have opened up."

I SPEAK, THEREFORE I AM

In the fall of 2010, I had the great pleasure of connecting with John Tiffany,[5] Associate Director of the National Theater of Scotland, who was then a Visiting Fellow at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University. John's proposed research while in residence was to study how language affects identity, how we change our identities, and how our original speech patterns are always with us. He and I began a spirited discussion of the "Home Dialect" exercise. John became interested in creating a theater piece inspired by his research using the home dialect study as a jumping off point. We were able to arrange for the whole M.F.A. class of 2011 to be a part of this ensemble piece as the final production of the 2010- 2011 A.R.T. Institute season.

During the yearlong developmental process, John gave the students many assignments. The first was to get a live present day recording of at least one family member. He asked them to create a monologue verbatim from that recording, using all the "um's," "ah's," hesitations, repetitions and idiosyncratic pronunciations and vocabularies that exist in their families' speech patterns. He also asked each of them to do research on an area of voice and speech that interested them. Additionally, the actors were encouraged to write or improvise scenes and monologues pertaining to any experience of speaking. These research projects and writings were presented in a "show and tell" format over the period of several months.

Brendan Shea,[6] M.F.A. Dramaturgy 2010, gathered all of the transcripts, research notes, and scenes to help John create the script. He edited the recorded pieces, created sketches based on the research, and helped the actors to shape the scenes. He and fellow dramaturge, Sara Bookin-Weiner, M.F.A. 2011 helped John to bring the various fragments into a unified collage called "I Speak Therefore I Am.[7]"

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[5] John Tiffany has since won a 2012 Tony Award for his direction of *Once* at the Bernard B. Jacobs Theater in New York City. This production originated at the American Repertory Theater in spring of 2012, with dialect coaching by Sarah Jessop, M.F.A. '12 and me.

[6] Brendan Shea is currently the Education and Community Programs Associate of the A.R.T.

[7] "I Speak Therefore I Am" was performed May 25 – 28, 2011 in the Loeb Drama Center Experimental Theater, Harvard University, with the members of the Institute M.F.A. class of 2011. To see a few selected scenes, please go to http://vimeo.com/50336537

The research phase slowly transitioned into the rehearsal phase. John began with examining the "kinesthetic trigger" phrases that had come directly from the home dialect process. He asked the actors to imagine a huge map of the world on the rehearsal room floor. Their first task was to stand in a spot representing where they were at the moment: everyone gathered shoulder to shoulder in the Cambridge, Massachusetts, location. He then asked them to move to where they were born. The clump of actors began to open up. Then they were to move to where their mothers were born, then grandmothers, then great-grandmothers. The actors separated farther and farther apart to the corners of the floor: China, Trinidad, Australia, Poland, Italy, Ireland, etc. When they arrived at the source of their accent or dialect, they could speak the trigger phrase. This exercise ultimately became the opening scene of the production.

One day in rehearsal, John asked the students to choose partners. Each actor was tasked with teaching the speech pattern of their own family member in as detailed a way as a possible to their partner. An intensely personal ensemble exercise, this also produced some unlikely combinations. A small actress of Chinese heritage taught a tall muscular hirsute Caucasian male how to sound exactly like her grandmother. A young woman with African heritage taught this same Asian-American actress to speak with her father's strong voice and exact rhythms. An actor from a Boston neighborhood taught several others to speak like his siblings, whom he had recorded in phone messages over a span of time. Several of these cross gender, cross cultural, combinations became part of the production.

Monologues were also created out of the recordings' transcripts, then memorized and performed as closely to the source rhythms and patterns as possible by the original actors. A story of a father's experiences as a police officer; mother, aunt and grandmother talking about how they thought they sounded; a story of a wedding; all entered the script, sometimes with the actors playing their own family members, sometimes in conversation with the recordings.

The scope of the production expanded beyond the home dialect exercise as the actors became more and more interested in how we knowingly or helplessly shape our communication. A musical improvisation was made of the interjections and sounds we add into our speech. A movement piece became a study of the power of breath. As the play unfolded, not only were the actors changed by their experiences, but also the audience was moved to laughter, to tears, and to a deeper understanding of the sounds, words, and patterns in us and around us.

CONCLUSION

Every year, after days and weeks of home dialect study, the time comes for the final celebration, the Home Dialect Festival. Each actor has taken the feedback from their analysis and honed their dialect or accent. They have applied the notes from their IPA transcriptions. They have rehearsed the physicality of their accent. They have worked on deepening the acting, clarifying the given circumstances, objective, tactics and moment-to-moment experience of getting what they want.

One after another, they present their pieces. The transformation is astonishing. Actors who have been reserved and private in their work become lively, entertaining and present. Actors who have struggled with truthfulness all of a sudden seem deeply connected to their material. Actors whose speech patterns have held them back find an

organic rhythm in their vocal production. Actors who have seemed somewhat neutral find color and excitement in their text. The ensemble deepens as each actor learns more detail about the others, not just facts, but how their cultural speech patterns have made them who they are today.

Just as the theater world has been struggling with the concept of "color-blind" casting, there are very strict unspoken guidelines determining how actors' speech should sound. We would be doing our students a disservice to disregard the current necessities of the profession: we must continue to teach a non-regional American dialect. The training that I received from Edith Skinner gave me the skills to fulfill this approach, and I hope to pass along the detail and rigor that she instilled in me. However, the dominance of her traditional view that there is only one correct way to speak must change. With so many audio sources available online, and a true global culture emerging through our daily interactions, more and more regional and international accents are being used by English speaking actors, sounds and patterns that are outside of their own speaking experience. Every accent or dialect is viable and useful; the gift we can give our students is to have the ability to analyze, record, notate and repeat what they are hearing. We must continue to train our actors to be able to expand beyond their own sound patterns.

It has been my experience, though, that when an actor returns to his or her "home dialect," a certain kind of magic happens. When the actor really understands what makes the "home dialect" special, when he or she can analyze its components and investigate its origins, it becomes a source of deeper learning. It can be a source of pleasure or pain. It can be a source of freedom, presence, and power. It honors and respects the very heart of individual expression. Most importantly, it is a jumping off point to the honest, detailed, and specific acquisition of other dialects and accents. At the end of the unit I am often asked, "Why didn't we start with this?" My answer is, "You wouldn't have been ready." We have taken a long journey so that we can come home again.