American Speech

Honoring the authentic voices of your students

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BY RENA COOK

AS MY PASSION for vocal training has evolved over the last decade, I have come to believe that one of the greatest gifts we can give our students is a strong, clear voice. The changing face of the American classroom has created new challenges to that commitment. U.S. Census statistics predict that by the year 2030, forty percent of our population will be composed of what we now call minority groups—African American, Hispanic, Native American, and Asian/Pacific Islander. This data prompts two fundamental questions: What does "a strong, clear voice" mean in today's multicultural world, and how does that alter pedagogy, in terms of expectations and an insistence that all students learn "good American speech"?

Voice is both a personal and a public expression. It is a vehicle of presentation and communication. It is also a metaphor of the self—the soundscape of our souls—reflecting, both inwardly and outwardly, who we are.

So an ethical question must be raised: how can we as drama teachers, who are invested in our students' sense of self as well as how they use their voices, insist that all students speak in a homogenized way? This sound is alternately called General American, Standard American, or Broadcast English. My father called it "the king's English" when he wanted me to speak properly (he never did see the geopolitical irony in that insistence). Over the years, well-meaning drama and voice/speech teachers have told students from diverse backgrounds that how they were speaking was wrong, and if they wanted to succeed they would have to "give up the way you sound and speak in clear, rich tones like… well, like myself." Today, that sort of approach is no longer acceptable. "Educated white speech" is not the only "good" speech.

I feel a sting of shame remembering some casting decisions I made early in my teaching career. During my days as a high school drama teacher, for instance, I did not cast a talented young African American actor in the role of Ambrose against a blonde Ermengarde in *Hello, Dolly!*, believing he might not be understood vocally and that our community was not yet ready to accept such a pairing. Even at the time, my decision felt wrong, and as I write about it now, I am pricked with guilt.

I realize now that I was making decisions about pedagogy and casting through what Beth McGee, writing in the *Voice and Speech Review*, described as a "a layer of cultural sound proofing." She also wrote, "Before we can help, we have to truly hear the voices of people of color…. We have to allow our students of color to be themselves, with their own racial identities, which may be very different from our own."

With McGee's wise words in my ears, I continue to revise my actions and curriculum, for two reasons. First, because I have come to understand that all voices and cultures are beautiful and worthy of celebration. Secondly, because I think it's our responsibility as theatre educators to help students who speak English with a dialect or accent to understand the realities of the world they are about to enter. For example, if they want to succeed in professional

Romare Bearden's "Of the Blues: Carolina Shout" (1974), collage and acrylic and lacquer on board, from the collection of the Mint Museum, Charlotte, North Carolina, purchased with support from the National Endowment for the Arts Matching Fund and Charlotte Debutante Club Fund.

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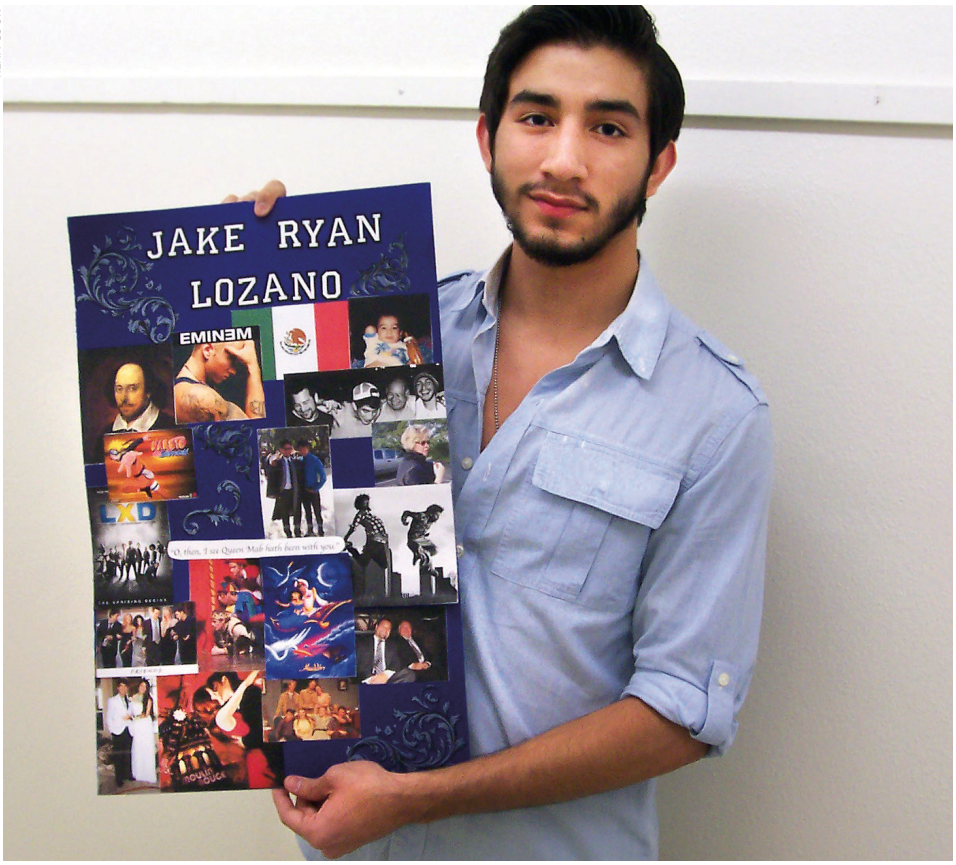

Jake Ryan Lozano, one of the author's students at the University of Oklahoma, displays his "personal voice house"—a collage of influences and ideas behind his unique sound.

theatre, they need to be capable of neutralizing a regional dialect or accent when called upon to do so. A student can retain what makes her unique and still be prepared to take on the speech required for the situation.

Here are four exercises I have used with students which celebrate diversity and can be used to access deeper on-stage truth. Consider adapting one or more to the unique circumstances of your own theatre classes.

My personal voice house

The purpose of this activity is twofold:

1. To give students time to reflect on how they sound right now and an opportunity to examine what factors have shaped their "personal voice house."

2. To celebrate the diversity of your classes and the uniqueness of each individual voice. There is no good or bad voice, no right or wrong dialect.

The exercise: Create a collage of words and images that reveals, in picture form, how your voice has developed. What are the factors, people, and events that have shaped how you sound, what words you use, and your dialect? What are your vocal challenges and your vocal strengths?

Gather materials and artfully display them on poster board or cardboard. These can be family photos, pictures collected from magazines, even hand-drawn or computer-generated images. Each should depict some aspect of your vocal development, your "personal voice house." For example, if you have a dialect, show a picture from the region or country or a picture of the person (actual or symbolic representation) who has influenced your sound.

Other questions that might spark your imagination include: Where were you born? What type of family did you grow up in? What is your family birth order? What language was spoken in your home as you grew up? Do you, your parents, or your friends speak English with a dialect? Were you Daddy's girl, or did you have big brothers who inspired a "macho" sound? Did you grow up in a large city with a diverse ethnic population, or a rural countryside? Have you received consistent feedback on your voice? Did you wear braces or have an illness or injury that affected your voice? Do you now or have you ever smoked? What musical instrument do you sound like? What are your vocal goals?

You will have three minutes to share your collage with the class and discuss why you chose the pictures you did. Take the audience on a journey through your voice house. You will be graded based on detail and depth of your examination of how you sound and why, creativity of display, level of focus, and polish of presentation.

The "voice house" exercise has proven to be highly effective with my students for several reasons. It is usually the first opportunity I get to hear each one speak for a length of time; I hear what voice and speech issues we will be working with. I get to know things about them that might never come up in ordinary situations. They relax in front of their peers and tell their own unique stories. When the playing field is level and all stories are valued equally, each student feels pride in his personal history. When they share their own vocal challenges, they realize that everyone present has issues, that each has things they don't like, things they want to change, and challenges they want to take on through the training. It sets a tone for the entire class that I can reinforce as we progress through the curriculum.

Switching tongues

This exercise was shared with me by my colleague, Micha Espinoza.

The exercise: Create your own tongue-twister based in your first language to share with the rest of the class. If English is not your first language, you can have fun teaching a bit of your language to the rest of the class. If English is your first language, be creative and write out phrases that exercise all your articulators, both consonants and vowels, and teach them to the class.

"Switching tongues" gives your English as a Second Language (ESL) students a chance to be the experts, to show off a proficiency that not ev-

eryone in the class has. It also allows your General American speakers to feel what it is like to struggle a bit with words and sounds.

In my first language

This exercise was devised to help ESL students who find acting in English frustrating, making them feel self-conscious and not as good as others in the class. It is difficult to free the voice when the actor has to first translate thoughts into her native tongue in order to have a true understanding of and emotional connection to the meaning.

The exercise: Try speaking your monologue first in your native language. Don't worry if it does not translate exactly. Speak the essence in the language closest to your heart and speak with conviction. Own the thoughts, even if the words are not exactly right.

Alternately, I might ask them, as homework, to translate the monologue into their language and perform it for the class. If speaking in their native language gives them access to a freer, more connected voice, then victory! I have included some of these performances in final showings or recitals.

Cultural voice

I've taught a version of this exercise under the title of "heritage project," inspired by the work of DePaul University voice teacher Claudia Anderson. You can easily adapt "cultural voice" to suit the specific make-up of your class. It can be a whole unit where you work on their selections over several class periods, culminating in a final showing as the students add movement, costume, or music.

The exercise: Bring in one minute of text that you have found in a play, a poem, a song, or something you have written that is based on or reflects your culture of origin. This is a celebration of your roots and heritage. It can reflect your own family's values, a holiday tradition, a cultural event, national pride, or triumph over adversity, either personal or cultural.

"Cultural voice" can be developed into a more detailed exploration over a period of time. For example, the first assignment could be an original monologue, memorized and performed; the second a poem; the third a song; and the fourth, a cutting from a play. Or it could be expanded so that one piece is about a family tradition, one about national pride, one about a significant event in your family or nation. Each is worked, developed through coaching and rehearsing until a performance begins to take shape. The class' individual work is then organized together into a performance piece. This kind of project can generate a great deal of energy, excitement, ownership, and ensemble pride.

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THESE EXERCISES are only a beginning. Try coming up with your own that are most suitable to your student diversity and needs. We can all dream of an educational system that embraces diversity and resonates with the multitudes of beautiful voices in our world. Even if we can't change the whole system, we can at least shift the climate of our own classroom; we can make a difference in how our students feel about themselves and how they treat each other.

The exercises presented in this article can be found in Voice and the Young Actor*:* A guide to Vocal Freedom*, a workbook and DVD by Rena Cook, published by Methuen Drama, available in April.*

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