

Title:

Ethnicity and regionalism in voice over, is your race or culture a burden?

Word Count:

3901

Summary:

We all know how quickly an article about race, color or culture can spin out of control, so allow me to make a preemptive strike and announce right here that this is not an article about righting wrongs or correcting the world's problems. If you suffer from hypersensitivity to racial issues, you may not want to read any further. Just understand that this article was derived from a collection of observations of race and ethnicity as they apply to the business of commercial voice over and nothing more. After 10 years performing voice over and coaching talent from all walks of life, these are some of the things I have seen and my opinions about how they effect multicultural actors attempting to succeed in this cross-pollinated society we call America.

Keywords:

voice acting, actors, auditions, voice over, home studio design

Article Body:

This article has been on the shelves in the back of my mind for a while. I was waiting for the time to write it as much as I was waiting for the right words and phraseology to come to the forefront. This is and always will be a sensitive subject so I will attempt to treat it as such. I was further inspired to get it on paper now, by the recent departure of Isaac Hayes from the hit comedy cartoon South Park. Though the story of his departure includes religion and politics, neither one applies to this article. Isaac Hayes was the voice of the character Chef on Comedy Central's animated series because of who he was and what he sounded like when he spoke. Why he left the show has nothing to do with this article, but his situation while working for the show may have some correlation. It seemed now was just as good a time to write it as any other, with a little national attention being given to a topic in the same family.

So ok already, enough with the justification for writing it. Get on with it...

In several years of learning the ins and outs of the voice over business, I have always wondered if voice over might someday become a great pillar of equality. Something that leveled the playing field for the diverse multicultural society we call America; a business with open doors for all, regardless of where we came

from or what color our skin happened to be. As I continue to ponder the possibilities of such a level playing field, the answer to the overall question is a resounding no. It will not be a playing field of equality anytime soon, but maybe not for all of the same old reasons you might suspect.

In no other business would it be acceptable, or for that matter legal, to post a job opportunity or listing with criteria or parameters such as "Wanted, African American male or female." or "looking for north American Caucasian male for this job."; job postings that in their limits not so subtly say, "No others need apply."

But in the voice over industry, the ability to pick and choose between male or female, black, white or Hispanic is not only an every day occurrence, it is the way business is done. Producers and casting directors are at liberty to be as finite as they like in their pursuit of the perfect match for their part. Does this make them evil, horrible people? No. But there is no shortage of talking points when it comes to how equally opportunities are spread among performers in the movie and television industry. Imagine the front doors of a large American corporation covered in posters to this effect: "wanted, computer programmer must be black female with a slight urban tinge to her voice." The idea should be so far from the realm of possibility as to be laughable, at least in this day and age. But in the voice over industry there are daily postings that don't imply or infer this. They come right out and say it.

No one will ever be able to tell the true intentions behind the people hiring for the project, and for our own sanity we might as well assume their intentions are good and with merit. With all of the attention and criticism Mel Gibson received for his hand in The Passion of the Christ, I don't think the thought of a black male lead ever crossed the minds of the people in the casting department, and oh what a ruckus there would have been had that been the direction they decided to take that movie in. Did they cast a white male lead actor for the part of Jesus in order to preserve the accuracy of the story? If so, there are many in this country and the rest of the world that question that accuracy.

Wait a minute... I can feel this article spiraling... Apply breaks, return to original intention, and get back to the topic...

Ok, I think I got it.

Suffice it to say, that people's true intent is generally buried so deep it is pointless to begin looking for it. If we want to move beyond the possibilities of prejudice and exception in this business, we will have to find a way to fool

the directors and casting people. A way to beat the system that may or may not be in place. A way to overcome, so to speak, an obstacle that to this point remains faceless and so illusive it may never be tackled. We wont know what we are fighting, or if we are fighting anything at all. Not a very bright prospect.

Breaking Down Barriers.

When I have the opportunity to coach voice over talent with ethnic backgrounds different from my own, my mind opens to the fascination of the unknown. I am peering into a crevasse so deep and different from my own, that my receptors are on high alert. Inside that crevasse are many things I haven't ever seen, culture I may have never witnessed, beliefs and experiences that I may have never considered. Many are portions of human existence that I have never encountered, and as they have shaped this person, might shape me a little as well. I must witness them, learn from them, feel them and hear them in order to better mold my approach to teaching this craft. That is usually much easier said than done. Many times I encounter actors or broadcast talent who have fought so hard to suppress their regionalism, ethnicity or nationality that getting them to lower the wall they have been at times forced to create, is not an easy task.

Much of my ability to break down these barriers is simply a developmental approach to building trust. You may ask why I would try to break these walls down at all; why not just leave them be and skim over them? Probably for the same reason when I speak to someone I want them to look me in the eye. As a coach, it is my job to dig as deep as I can to find the raw talent. Then I need to bring that talent to the surface where it can breathe, grow and flourish. This is a performance art, a human business, an art form that requires people be their true selves. I am trying to teach voice actors how to create characters, not teach one character how to become another. I need to be able to see the real person. It is there I will find the voice I am trying to coach. I cannot coach the person adorned with a shallow façade. I need to talk to the real person behind the wall.

Reality dictates that societal pressures and socioeconomic status along with cultural background will be the strongest influences governing how a person presents themselves to others. In the far from Utopian community of commercial voice over talent, producers, and companies that hire freelance talent outright, if the above mentioned factors lead you to speak anything but "The Kings English" (along with his accent) the world of opportunity in voice over will be forever very small for you. The way we speak, our intonation and the regional artifacts in our sound play a huge role in whether or not we see any success in this industry.

Becoming better versions of ourselves.

So many people pursuing voice over or broadcasting careers are forced by some unwritten word of law to mold their sound into something considered more user friendly. Who makes those laws or sets that policy is unknown to me, as well as the rest of us, but more often than not it dictates that: Urban accents and dialects are eliminated or suppressed. Culture is lost and regional flavor is buried. What is left over is a completely manufactured sound which in turn becomes the person's permanent public or professional voice. Many times it sounds forced, which in turn makes it sound fake. When it sounds forced or fake the announcer sound starts to creep through. Forced, fake announcer style reads are not at the top of the hit list in the voice over business.

Producers and even regular people who might be casting voice talent are looking for the voice and/or feeling of real people; the guy or girl from the coffee shop, a person they met at the bank, the people who provide their daycare services, the people at the deli's and small shops they frequent. In essence, people they choose to interact with during the normal course of business. When many voice over jobs are cast, it is the feeling we get when we see a familiar face or hear a familiar voice that producers and casting people are trying to recreate.

When we see a familiar face, or hear a familiar voice and it is one we want to see or hear, it is generally comforting. When something is foreign to us, or strange and unrecognized, we are usually anything but comfortable. That in a nutshell is why we don't want our voices to be strange, unrecognizable or foreign to the general audience. Our ability as voice actors to create the desired imagery with our voices is what gets us hired and lands us jobs. What gets us overlooked if not pigeon-holed completely is not being able to deliver these voices without some sort of regional, urban or ethnic affect. When a voice actor auditions with any of the above artifacts in their voice for a job that does not expressly require or request them, they most likely will not get the job, and the person hiring for that job, by making a discriminate judgment, will have in essence discriminated against them because of the sound of their voice.

Understanding the brisance of the word "discrimination" I ask that you please entertain all definitions of that word before going off the deep end over my use of the word. It is not at all meant to imply the producers in the world are directly discriminating against anyone who sounds as if they are anything but white. That was not the intention of the comment, but the reality of that idea, is we will never know if they are or not. The only way to remove it as a possibility is to subvert it by becoming a better, more versatile voice over talent and learning to speak with or without our regional or ethnic affect. Essentially through training and practice becoming better versions of ourselves.

Embracing our natural character.

I can think of nothing more hurtful, insidious or nefarious than telling a person of any color, culture, race, nationality or creed that the way they were born into this world isn't good enough to participate in and prosper from its harvest. However, that is the message received daily by people of various cultures from directions and sources that are too many to name. There are some who may conclude by my simply writing this article, I have become one of those sources. I beg to differ, but at this time decline to argue. Once again, I will not allow this article to spin out of control. My only comment is this: The longer we go on without talking about these issues, the longer we will ultimately end up talking about them.

Our natural character, more than how we sound when we speak, is what makes us whole. Though some of us might not entirely like ourselves, when we are free to be ourselves we seem to be most at ease. When it comes to the business of voice over, being at ease is one of the main keys to success in front of the microphone. We want to be relaxed. We want to be able to focus and concentrate on the task at hand. Both of which are quite difficult when a portion of our energy is spent trying to be someone we are not. The best example would be the type of discomfort a singer experiences when they try to sing a piece that is out of their range. That experience is identical to the experience of the voice over talent who is trying to bury an accent or dialect, and sound like someone he or she is not.

However, if our natural character is one that speaks with a southern draw, an urban accent or foreign dialect, any time we speak as ourselves, we will be speaking in fashion not very well suited to performing voice over here in America. So what are talents of various regions and ethnicities to do? To answer that question we need to explore the implications of hiding or learning how to perform around who we really are. That brings forward the dilemma I alluded to a few columns back; how do you wake up, look in the mirror and accept that the way you were born into this world isn't good enough to participate in this business? It's a rather tough pill to swallow.

On every forefront, in every corner of our society forces are struggling to preserve their culture, and this industry in many more ways than one, asks that you abandon it. Not to say there aren't opportunities out there for people of different culture, color and dialect, but the majority of voice over jobs are going to the average Joe or Jane that speaks with a typical middle America type affect.

My first opportunity to coach an African American student came several years

ago. She was a young woman, very poised with a charming smile. She came to my studio with a fair amount of acting experience which was a true advantage for her. Due to some of her Shakespearian stage experience her regionalism and dialect were only very subtle attributes to her voice. I found her to be a very pleasant speaker, and after hearing her behind the microphone, thought that with a little tweaking, we could produce a demo reel that had no identifiable characteristics that would announce to the listener what she looked like, how tall she was, what kind of shoes she liked to wear, and yes, what color her skin was.

After some discussion about the concept of having her demo be ethnically neutral, she and I both agreed we would work to have it not be completely neutral, but instead trickle some of her natural flavor in with the more mundane, conservative reads on her reel. It was important to me that she was able to demonstrate her ability to turn her urban dialect on and off, and not have it lean more in one direction or the other. I didn't want to suppress or try to hide that fact that she was a young, dignified, intelligent black woman. I wanted her demo to show that she was a young, intelligent, dignified woman who by the way happened to be black.

We both wanted to embrace her culture. My overwhelming desire was that she got a fair shake when someone listened to her demo. I wanted them to get a few tracks in before they discovered that there were more layers to the product. My primary concern was that someone would pop in her demo reel, hear the first track and disregard it as an ethnic demo, or add it to the black pile if there was such a thing, or worse throw it out. We discussed all of these possibilities and took them into consideration when crafting her demo. I knew from the beginning I was treading in ethically unknown territory by bringing these issues to the forefront, just as much as I am by writing this article. But I felt as strongly then as I do now, that until society finds a conscience and some decency, or we can turn back the hands of time, it may do more harm than good by choosing to pretend the world isn't the way it is.

When it came time to select cover art for her demo reel, the question became whether or not she should put her headshot with her demo. My answer to that question was not to. After all, this business is called Voice-Over, not Face-over, or Where-Did-I-Come-From-Over, or What-Color-Am-I-Over. In this business, as with any other business, it should make absolutely no difference where you come from or what you look like. The only thing that should matter and often does is what you sound like.

Isolating your abilities

One of my greatest concerns when a new talent comes to my studio is that they

understand the difficulty of achieving success. It takes a great deal of investment, time and energy to move forward in the industry, and informing a talent of what obstacles stand before them up front before they ever get started, or ever spend a penny on the business only seems fair to me. Most people have the same obstacles when getting started: Lack of experience, cold read ability, and audition technique, lack of technical knowledge when it comes to editing and uploading files to servers and configuring home studios. All of those obstacles are pretty general. But when a talent has a regional, ethnic, or cultural background that directly effects their delivery of voice over copy, it becomes much more of a challenge for them as a talent and me as a coach.

In my early days of coaching, commenting on someone's cultural background as a hindrance to their success felt a little like walking a tightrope. I wasn't exactly sure of what approach I should take and saying anything at all was a little uncomfortable. But when I considered the alternative of not telling the student and letting them go into their training only to have someone tell them later, I felt I might as well take the risk and tell them up front. Each time I have had to do it, there has been a mixture of responses, most of them non verbal so it is hard to tell exactly how the talent perceived what I was saying. I can think of no easy way of saying it. So up to this point I just come right out and tell people that their accent or way of speaking is going to have a negative impact on their success as a voice over talent.

I usually try to explain the process of installing a switch that rather than completely ridding them of their natural style of speaking, enables them to turn it on and off. Installing this switch takes time and effort, and time of course in the pursuit of coaching costs money. Money continues to be the one major prohibitive factor that keeps people from entering this business or continuing to pursue it for very long. When someone considers the prospect of spending some of their coaching budget on getting rid of something they never saw as a problem in the first place, it occasionally prompts them to throw in the towel early and decide this business isn't for them.

Though it may sound cruel or untoward, when most students decide to back out at this point I am elated. Turning tail and running at the first sign of difficulty is what keeps everyone and their brother from having a voice over demo on the market. But when a talent from an ethnically diverse background decides to back away upon being informed of this, it hits me a little closer to the core. I can't help but feel that I am just another in the long chain of people that has said throughout the course of their lives, "I am sorry, but because you are (place ethnicity here), this business isn't right for you." One, it is not at all what I am saying and two; it couldn't be further from the truth. Though on a human level, this is what it feels like I am saying and I never wanted to be a

person who said things like that.

I have known for a long time that the truth hurts and people's perception is their truth. How people perceive what I am saying can lead to it being be misconstrued. I have also known that in order to be a leader you sometimes have to make some very unpopular decisions. This is why I continue to follow a path of honesty, and provide assessments of how I see this business to all comers and how I feel they will fit into it. I find it an act near criminal to take a person's money, push them through training and launch them into the world with less than the appropriate tools and barriers standing in their way. I am afraid that not all in this industry share the same foundation of principal. This is certainly something I think voice over talent with ethnically diverse backgrounds should be aware of when entering this marketplace.

If you are a voice actor who feels some of the characteristics of your voice may have something to do with your lack of success in this business, then I try to offer you a hand of understanding. In such a detail oriented business where even the slightest variation in our voice can mean the difference between getting hired and not getting hired, it is of the utmost importance we are able to analyze our product and see if there is anything holding us back. If we lack the ability to self analyze, it is a process that can be learned through steady coaching. Also, don't feel as if your natural style is something that needs to be crushed, wiped away or stuffed into some deep dark corner because it doesn't. Look at it as a tool, another arrow in your quiver, and another voice with which to demonstrate your versatility. Try to look beyond it as your only voice and see it as one of the many things that make you unique, diversified and intriguing. It can be a very valuable piece of your portfolio, but as your only piece, may be a detriment to your success.

There are walls all around people of culture in this country, let alone the world. Some are made of granite; some are not so easy to see. Some have fallen in the last 25 years and some are still in the process of being constructed. Some are meant to keep people in, though many now are meant to keep people out. These are the realities of the world in which we live. They may continue to be realities for as long as we live. Though this doesn't mean we have to bow to them, or attempt to tunnel our way beneath them, we only have to imagine there are ways to rise above them and make them disappear. In the faceless world of voice over, a little training can go a long way toward creating a new reality. A reality where we are not judged buy the color of our skin or where we come from, but by the content of our demo tape.