

BRITISH DIALECT FOR THE AMERICAN STAGE

Thesis Supervisor:

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Melissa Grogan, M.F.A.  
Department of Theatre and Dance

Approved:

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Heather C. Galloway, Ph.D.  
Director of the University Honors Program

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HONORS THESIS

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by

Allison M. Gregory

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HONORS THESIS ABSTRACT

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Allison M. Gregory

Texas State University-San Marcos

Supervising Professor: MELISSA GROGAN

Analysis of the differences between the three categories of British dialect for the stage: Received Pronunciation, Cockney, and Estuary. This involves the exploration of the oral posture, resonance point, sound changes, rhythm and melody, and grammatical and lexical changes of each. This also includes the application of the dialect to a monologue.

Accompanying sound clip is of a monologue selection from *The Cocktail Party* by T.S. Eliot performed by Allison Gregory, beginning with Received Pronunciation, transitioning to Cockney, and then to Estuary.

## I. Introduction to British Dialect

There are so many outstanding British playwrights that have made their way to the American stage. Noel Coward, Caryl Churchill, Tom Stoppard, and Harold Pinter are just some of the many great British playwrights of the twentieth century. If an American actor wants to give the roles these playwrights have created full justice, they must have the versatility to be able to play a convincing British dialect. This does not mean that these plays cannot be performed otherwise, however British plays are written in British culture, and the dialect is part of that culture. It is the job of the playwright to have a good ear for capturing the way people really speak (“Playwright”). As each of these playwrights wrote their extraordinary works, they were thinking in their own dialect.

A second reason why it is important for American Actors to learn a British dialect is that there are so many British actors doing American dialects. *A Steady Rain* is a play currently on Broadway about two Chicago policemen. One of these policemen is played by Daniel Craig, the British actor who most recently played James Bond. The British invasion is not only on the stage. In television right now there is Hugh Laurie in *House*, Dominic West in *The Wire*, Natascha McElhone in *Californication*, and many others. If all of these British actors can do an American dialect, then, in order to remain competitive, an American actor should be able to do both dialects as well.

It is also important, as an actor, to be able to teach yourself the dialect. Often a dialect coach or a director will inform the actor of the decisions that should be made, but this is not always the case. Sometimes because of budget, there is no dialect coach.

There are also circumstances such as auditioning for a role when an actor must be able to do his own research. The first step is deciding which of the British dialects to use. For my purposes, I will examine three of the most common subdivisions for stage: Received Pronunciation, Cockney, and Estuary. Choosing which of these dialects to use for a performance is guided by the background of the play and character. In order to make an educated choice, it is necessary to know some history to the dialect.

### Received Pronunciation

Received Pronunciation (RP) is not a sound you would hear on the streets in England today or from a British exchange student. In everyday speaking, it has become almost obsolete, only being found in members of the upper class born before 1950 (*Standard British* 2). In theatre, it is mostly used in period pieces and high comedy. Audiences will perceive this sound as upper-class.

### Cockney

Cockney is also an older sound, but there are still examples of it that can be found today. “A true Cockney is supposed to be someone born within the sound of Bow Bells<sup>1</sup>” (Wells 301-302). “To some ears this extends to anyone who comes from the South East of England” (Martin). For the stage, Cockney is the sound of the lower class. This is the accent of chimney sweeps and flower maids such as Eliza Doolittle in *My Fair Lady*.

### Estuary

In 1984 David Rosewarne published an article discussing recently observed pronunciation tendencies, which he inclusively labeled “Estuary English”. He coined the term, proposing that “the heartland of this variety lies by the banks of the Thames and its estuary” (Rosewarne ). “If one imagines a continuum with RP and [cockney] at either

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<sup>1</sup> *Bow Bells are the bells of the church of St. Mary-le-Bow, Cheapside, London* (Martin).

end, ‘Estuary English’ speakers are to be found grouped in the middle ground” (Rosewarne). “What Rosewarne also suggests is that this variety reflects a set of changes leading the British society towards a more democratic system with blurred class barriers. Therefore, Estuary English can be used by those who hold power, as well as working-class members” (Ryfa 4). Estuary has many variations which can be placed on a scale ranging from Estuary that is more influenced by Received Pronunciation to Estuary that is more influenced by Cockney. Received Pronunciation influence will be perceived by the audience as being part of the upper-class. Estuary that is more influenced by Cockney will be perceived by the audience as being part of the lower-class. The three leading characters of the Warner Brothers’ Harry Potter films are an excellent example of the ranges in Estuary. The actress Emma Thompson speaks a form of Estuary ranging closer to R.P. This is suitable to her character, Hermione Granger, because she is the most educated of the three friends. Rupert Grint, the actor playing Ron Weasley, does a form of Estuary that is closer to Cockney. Ron’s family “occupies lower rungs of the class hierarchy...because of his family’s hierarchy”(Anatol 181). J.K. Rowling, the author of the Harry Potter novels, illustrated the perfect model for the middle class via Harry himself (Anatol 179). He is the relatable everyman in the middle of Ron and Hermione, and that is where the dialect of Daniel Radcliffe, the actor who plays Harry Potter, falls.

## **II. Components of Dialect**

When researching dialects, listening is an essential step. “Listening accurately is one of the most important factors in using the voice fully, for the accuracy with which we listen relates directly to how we respond vocally. It is something which we tend to take

for granted because it is such a basic simple thing” (Berry 123). Something fantastic about the availability of media today is that there are easily accessible examples of native speakers of almost any dialect that might be put on the stage. I was able to do all of my listening research through the internet.

In order to learn any dialect, oral posture, resonance point, sound changes, rhythm and melody, and grammatical and lexical changes need to be examined. A point of reference will be necessary for comparing the oral posture, resonance point, and sound changes in these dialects. Neutral American will be this point of reference. It is an American accent intended to be devoid of regionalisms, though it can be found in the Midland region (11 and 17 in Fig. 1) of America that serves as a transition zone between the accents of the north and south (Delaney). The accent’s capability to erase regional barriers and allow a speaker to communicate effectively with the most people makes it a popular accent for theatrical performances (“Neutral Accent”). Neutral American’s intermediate nature extends beyond its geographic location, which will be later affirmed, making it a useful point of reference when comparing dialects.

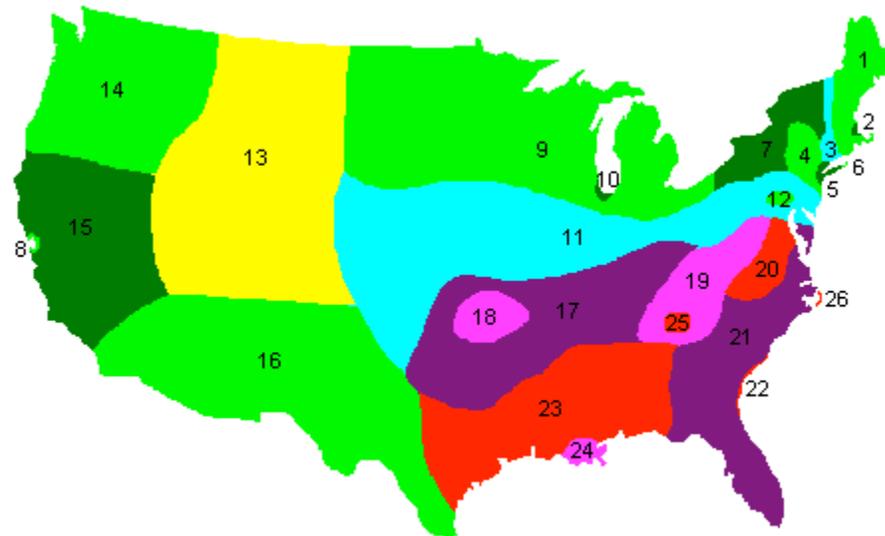


Figure 1: Robert Delaney, *American Dialects : Dialect map of American English*, 29 Nov. 2009, Web, 24 Apr. 2010.

### Oral Posture

Oral posture is the habitual holding of the articulators for a pattern of speech.

Articulators are the parts of the vocal tract that can move to vary the sound including the lips, cheeks, jaw, tongue, velum (soft palate), epiglottis and vocal folds (Knight 15).

These articulators move towards points of articulation, fixed places in the vocal tract, in order to obstruct the flow. These include the teeth, alveolar ridge, hard palate, velum, uvula, and the pharynx (Knight 15). Learning this is the basic building block to learning a dialect. It affects the shaping of all sounds made. The oral posture of Neutral American has the jaw, tongue, lips, and cheeks relaxed and the soft palate raised (Knight 156). The oral posture of the Received Pronunciation dialect has the jaw raised up and moved forward. All the muscles of articulation, especially the lips, cheeks, and tongue, are tensed slightly. The tongue is raised, never retracted, and is flexible. Lip corners are

forward and buccinators<sup>2</sup> are tense (Knight 158). Through my own exploration, I found the oral posture of Cockney to have the jaw raised and forward. The root of the tongue is lowered, allowing space in the back of the mouth. The soft palate is also slightly lowered. There is no standard for the oral posture of Estuary. This may be because of the relative newness of the dialect, but it also could be because of the broad scope that it covers. Through my own exploration, I have found that as the dialect becomes more influenced by Received Pronunciation or Cockney, the oral posture tends to understandably shift towards the habitual holdings of each.

#### Resonance Point

Resonance point is a concept developed by David Allen Stern. He describes it as an “imaginary point of focus or point of maximum resonance” (Stern 9). Resonance point shapes the overall general quality of sound. It helps an actor know the resonance point because it gives a general focus. It is easier to think of a general focus point rather than the position of each articulator. It is a good basic point of reference if there is a problem in maintaining the dialect for the stage or if there are multiple dialects being used in one performance. The resonance point of Neutral American is in the middle of the mouth. Received Pronunciation resonance point lives between the front of the upper teeth and the top lip (see Fig 2). Cockney resonance point is found near the soft palate (see Fig 3). Once again, there is currently no recognized resonance point for Estuary. In my own examination, the more Estuary influence, the more forward the resonance point is and the more Cockney influence, the further back it shifts. With that being said, I never found that it ever shifts

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<sup>2</sup> *Buccinators are defined as the cheek muscle whose action flattens the cheek and retracts the angle of the mouth.* The American Heritage Medical Dictionary Copyright. 2007. Online.

beyond the front portion of the mouth. If it the point gets too centralized, it doesn't sound British, and if it falls in the back portion of the mouth, it sounds completely Cockney.

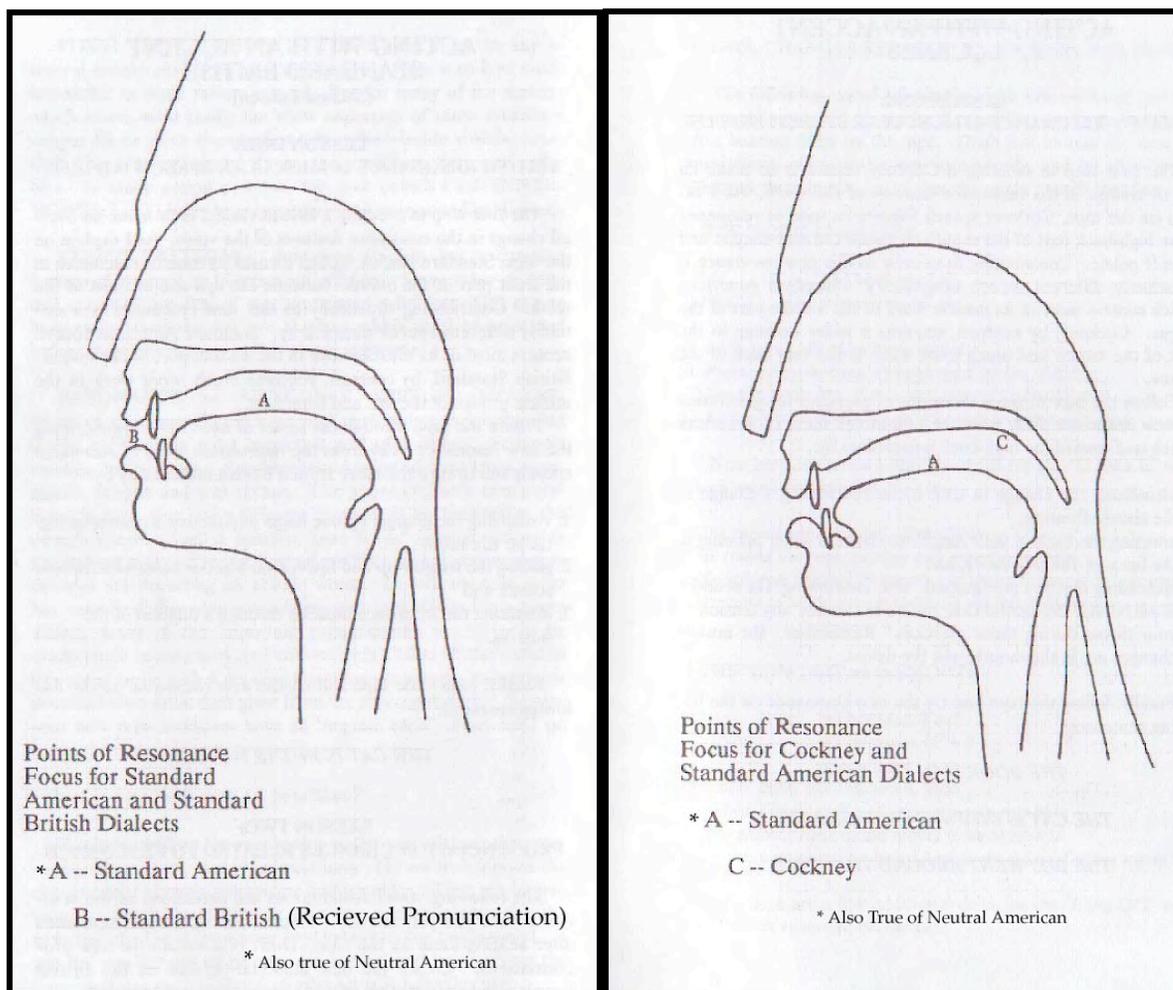


Figure 2

Figure 3

Figure 2: David Alan Stern, Ph.D. *Acting with an Accent: Standard British* (Dialect Accent Specialists, Inc. 1987) 6. Print.

Figure 3: David Alan Stern, Ph.D. *Acting with an Accent: Cockney* (Dialect Accent Specialists, Inc. 1979) 5. Print.

### Sound Changes

In order to discuss sound changes, it is important to first understand phonemes. A phoneme is basic distinctive unit of speech. They are the individual sounds that make up

a word. “P,” “eh,” and “n” are each a separate phoneme that make up the complete word “pen”. Changing a phoneme in a word can produce another word. For example, changing the middle phoneme in the word “pen” from “eh” to “ey” makes the word pain. A variant of a phoneme that will not change the meaning of the word is referred to as an allophone. If the middle phoneme of the word “pen” is changed from “eh” to “ih,” listeners understanding of the word would not be changed. Allophones that are found to be specific to a dialect are what are referred to as sound changes. When marking sound changes in a piece of text, The International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) is used. IPA is a code of symbols created by the International Phonetic Association which includes every known sound of every language throughout the world. The following chart is a compilation of some sound changes found in both Received Pronunciation and Cockney.

Word	Neutral American	Received Pronunciation	Cockney
sh <u>ow</u>	oʊ	əʊ, ɛoʊ, ɛəʊ	æʊ, æʌ, ə
l <u>ot</u>	ɑ	ɒ	ɒ, ɔ
<u>all</u>	ɔ	ɔ: (more rounded)	ɔ: (more rounded)
l <u>ea</u> ve	i	i	əi, i:
ver <u>y</u>	i (tongue lowered)	ɪ	əi, i
kn <u>ew</u>	u	ju	əʊ, əʌ
f <u>ac</u> e	eɪ	eɪ	æɪ
pr <u>ic</u> e	aɪ	aɪ	ɒɪ
mo <u>uth</u>	aʊ	aʊ, ʊʊ	æʊ, æə, a:
go <u>at</u>	oʊ	əʊ	æʊ
g <u>e</u> t	t	t	ʔ
th <u>in</u> k	θ	θ	f
w <u>it</u> h	ð	ð	v, or Omitted
be <u>in</u> g	ŋ	ŋ	n, ŋk
mil <u>k</u>	l	l	o
thr <u>ill</u>	ɹ	ɹ, ɾ	ɹ
<u>h</u> ere	h	h	Omitted

<sup>3</sup> Table 1

<sup>3</sup> Table 1 is my own compilation of the research of Eric Armstrong, Gillian Lane-Plescia, and Dudley Knight.

Several common sound changes found in these dialects cannot be easily placed in a chart. For both dialects, [æ] is changed to [ɑ] on many, but not all, words where the vowel is followed in the same syllable by [f],[s],[sp],[st],[sk],[θ],[ð],[nt],[nd], and [mpl] (Knight 162). British dialects are also non-rhotic, meaning that “there are no “R-Colorings” (Knight 159). The word “bird” would end up sounding like “buhd.” [ɹ] often shows up between a word ending in “a” or “ah” and a following word beginning with a vowel (*Standard British* 6). It is also helpful to remember that “the Cockney accent is characterized by a tendency to nasality in vowels. This and the tendency to lengthen vowels is where the Cockney whine is derived” (Lane-Plescia 4).

Estuary has all the sounds changes of Received Pronunciation and Cockney available to it, depending on where it falls on the scale between. There are a few exceptions to this. The “r” trill found in some Received Pronunciation is far too elevated to ever be used in Estuary (*Standard British* 5). In Cockney, the omission of “h” and the replacing of [θ] and [ð] with [f] and [v] are the sound changes excluded from Estuary (*Cockney* 10-11).

### Rhythm and Melody

Rhythm is the pacing of syllables and pausing in vocalization. It is the spoken cadence in delivery. The rhythm of Received Pronunciation has a clipped quality. Precision in consonants is critical. Non-operative words are eliminated from stress. The resulting rhythm is a “Rattle Rattle Bing” (*Standard British* 13). Cockney and Estuary also follow this stress pattern, but Cockney has a little more staccato quality because of

the glottals [ʔ] (*Cockney* 14). The melody is the change in pitch. There are more tones in a typical British RP or Estuary sentence than an American one where pitch is more even (see figure 5), and a Cockney sentence may have even more tonal variety (Blumenfeld 39, 58). This tonal difference can be for the most part accounted for by the fact that the British tend to emphasize with pitch, where as Americans tend to emphasize with volume. This pitch change takes place sharply and within individual syllables rather than slowly through out the phrase (Knight 157).

### Example of Intonation Pattern

*“Were you going there today, if I may ask?”*

#### (British Pattern)

Were you going /there to- day if I may ask?

#### (American Pattern)

Were you going there today if I may ask?

Figure 4: Robert Blumenfeld. *ACCENTS: a Manual for Actors: Revised and Expanded Edition*. (Proscenium Publishers, Inc. New York, NY. 2002) 40-41. Print

### Grammatical and Lexical Changes

Grammatical and lexical changes of a dialect are helpful to be familiar with in case they are encountered in a script. Otherwise, the true intention of the text may be lost. Grammatical changes are those having to do with sentence structure. Lexical

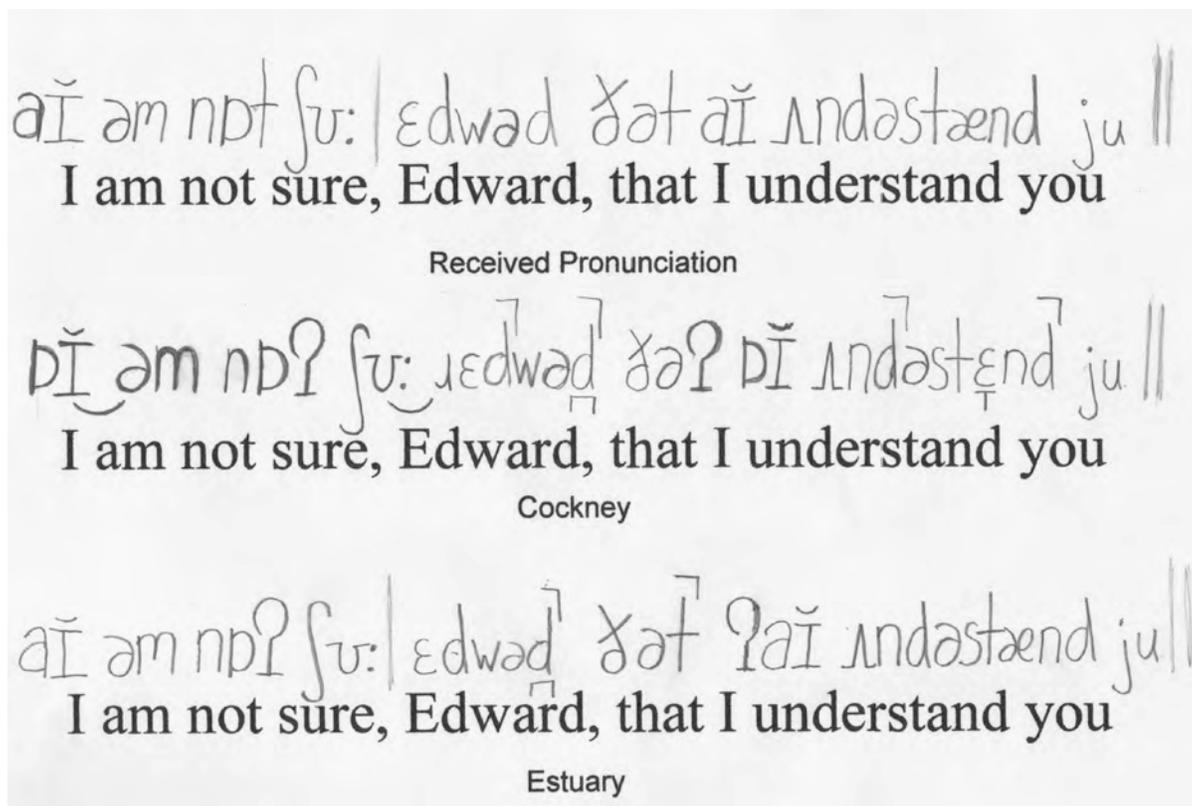
changes are those having to do with word choice. In British dialects, question tags are more frequently used (*Standard British* 8). Question tags, also known as tag questions, are a grammatical structure in which a declarative statement or an imperative is turned into a question by adding an interrogative fragment. There are entire books written of lists of lexical selections specific to the British dialect (Pei 9). “Although many, few of the grammatical [and lexical] differences between British and American are great enough to produce confusion, and most are not stable because the two varieties are constantly influencing each other, with borrowing both ways across the Atlantic and nowadays via the Internet”(Algeo 1). Cockney rhyming slang may be the most distinct of the changes for British dialect. “Rhyming slang is a type of slang in which words are replaced by words or phrases they rhyme with” (Martin). What gets confusing is that over time a lot of the phrases were cut down, and it always seems to be the word in the phrase that rhymed with the original word. “If a Londoner says, ‘I was so elephants at the rub-a-dub that I fell down the apples and landed on me bottle,’ what he means is that he was so drunk (‘elephant’s trunk’) at the pub (‘rub-a-dub-dub’) that he fell down the stairs (‘apples and pears’) on his backside (‘ass’/’bottle and glass’)” (Philologos).

### **III. Application of Dialects to a Monologue**

For my own research, I chose a single monologue from T.S. Eliot’s *The Cocktail Party* in order to experience each of these dialects for myself. In this monologue, Celia Coplestone has just been told by her lover that he is returning to his wife. This character would typically be staged with the cast doing Received Pronunciation because it is a play from the 1950s, but for my own comparative purposes, I wanted to do the same

monologue in all three dialects. Because Estuary covers such a broad spectrum, I chose to explore as close to middle of the road Estuary as I could manage for my monologue work.

### IPA Samples for Three Dialects



<sup>4</sup>Figure 5

### Conclusion

In the end, intelligibility is most important. It does not matter what work is put into designing and executing a dialect if the audience cannot understand what is being said. The mouth may have to be opened larger than what the actual oral posture is discovered to be. A sound change may have to be overlooked. It is a balance of being

<sup>4</sup> IPA pronunciation of one line of monologue for each dialect.

clear and sounding natural. One of the most important things I've learned through this research about keeping the dialect natural sounding is similar to what I've learned in all my acting classes. All the homework and research is done ahead of time, and, when performance day comes around, it has to be set aside. Thinking about the aspects of the dialect will leave no room for spontaneity. The resulting affect is robotic and artificial. The only thing to do is to go with confidence and have fun.

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