In the Fall of 2000, I had the experience of both dialect coaching and performing in *The Madness of George III* at Virginia Commonwealth University. After much discussion, the director, Christopher Shorr, and I decided to incorporate six different dialects into the eighteen speaking roles in the show; standard British, Lincolnshire, Newcastle, Cockney, Scottish, and German. Merely coaching a show of this size and complexity, let alone performing in it as well, is quite a task. The methodology I discovered during this process combines a clear definition of my participation in the production at any given time, a unique note taking process and the use of what I call “dialect captains.”

Having a double role in a production both as an actor and a staff member who has the license to make decisions about the show as a whole, was a tenuous line to walk with regard to the other actors’ attitude towards me as both actor and coach. This was best addressed by being extremely clear with the other actors in the production which task I was undertaking at any particular moment. In *George* I delineated these role changes by the use of a note pad. I told the other actors that when I had the note pad I was acting as dialect coach. This “prop”, if you will, became a signal to the cast of what to expect of me throughout the process.

I knew that in order to make this distinction clear to the cast I must explicitly define for myself the task that needed to be accomplished at a particular moment. An ability to change hats, so to speak, was essential because the needs of the production were constantly changing. In addition to this, I found it helpful to develop a routine. Setting cue lines for myself in the script to signal when I needed to switch from coach to actor allowed me the freedom not to be worried about when I needed to be “on”. Consequently, I could keep my attention on coaching. This clear definition not only helped me focus but also aided in my relationships with fellow cast members.

I rehearsed six days a week, four of which were actual rehearsals with the director present and the remaining two sessions were dedicated solely to dialect work. Each cast member would set up half-hour, individual appointments with me. These meetings were continued, as necessary, until the week of performance. The bulk of the dialect work was done during these private “tutorials”. The remainder of the work took place during rehearsal using a style of note taking that I learned from Kate Ufema, one of my mentors. An actor would receive one 4”x3” piece of paper with one dialect note on it. The actors were to keep these notes until they had incorporated them into their performances. They were then free to discard the note. In addition to this, I would also keep a tally of how many notes each actor had received during the previous rehearsal.

Having an assistant in this process was essential, not only to help monitor the actors but also to serve as my coach. Phil Timberlake, a fellow graduate student in Voice and Speech at VCU, filled this position for me. Phil was not as deeply involved with the show or dialects as I was and I found this to be beneficial. Since he would usually attend rehearsal once per week at my request, he could then provide input as observed from a certain distance from the production. He gave me the “big picture” so to speak. But, he was also well versed in the dialect I was using, and would let me know when I wasn’t quite hitting the mark.

Even with the luxury of an assistant coach the task at hand was quite formidable. With eighteen other actors to listen to in six different dialects, not to mention trying to act myself, I often found myself saying, “What have I done?” This is when I believe I had a truly inspired revelation. The idea struck me as I remembered my days at the Illinois Shakespeare Festival, another time when I was entrusted with the dual duties of coaching and acting, although to a much lesser degree. One of my roommates at the festival was the fight captain, in charge of ensuring that the fights were practiced and retained their integrity after the fight choreographer had gone. “Well,” I thought to myself, “if it is possible to have an actor be ‘quality control’ for the fight choreography, then wouldn’t it be possible to have an actor serve as ‘dialect captain’?”

The dialect captains did not serve as a substitute for a coach, rather, they were an augmentation to the realm of coaching. They drilled their particular dialect group in exercises selected by me, the coach, and they answered general sound substitution questions as directed by the coach, but they were not responsible for the teaching and decision processes of the dialect work. That remained the responsibility of the coach. Their purpose was to use the coach’s time more effectively by serving as an “expert” for that particular dialect in the show.

With two weeks of rehearsal left I decided to implement this idea, with the director’s approval. My first task was to choose the dialect captain. I chose the actor in the cast who had the best understanding of the dialect. In practice I found that the captain aided not only in answering some of the simple dialect questions, but also proved invaluable when it came to do warm up vocal exercises before rehearsal and performance. The captain’s responsibility during warm-ups was to go over specific sound changes using words and sentences selected by me to drill the other actors using the same dialect as themselves. This cut in half the time required for warming the cast up vocally.

In retrospect, if someone were to ask me if I would coach a show and act in it again I would definitely accept the challenge. I believe by employing good time management, delegating responsibility and using creative problem solving I could streamline the process for myself even further.

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