Letter to America
By Lise Olson

The day I left for England to take up my place on the Central School of Speech and Drama postgraduate voice course I bought a new notebook—narrow lined, as I preferred to cram as many thoughts as possible onto a single page. I meant to write, as travel journalists do, of unusual characters, places of interest, restaurants and museums to pass on to others, ephemera collected and dispersed. Eleven years down the line I wish that I had kept up that book as I have travelled throughout the UK’s various compass points, living and working as an itinerant voice teacher and dialect coach.

For those of you who aspire to work abroad—it is possible. Difficult, yes, but possible.

Here have been many steps to my own working life here in the UK. I began as a student, giving up a tenure track post in the USA (it’s a long story), leaving a lovely townhouse to move into an international student hostel. For those of you that have visited, you are aware that London is one of the most expensive cities in the world. I will not disabuse you of this fact.

After completing the course at Central, I was lucky enough to be asked to stay on and teach on the course. Additionally, I picked up sessional (part-time) work at other drama schools. I was fortunate enough to pick up some dialect coaching at several regional Repertory Theatres before I landed a full-time post as Head of Voice, Welsh College of Music and Drama.

To get a full-time post teaching at a British drama school, you must be in possession of a work permit. It may be possible for the school to get one for you, but you cannot be employed without one. I cannot speak for universities, as all of my experience has been in drama schools. The school that is applying for your permit must be able to prove that there is no one else in the European Union (not just the UK) who can do the job.

UK drama schools have very few full-time posts. The remainder of the work is done by sessional (adjuncts), who get paid by the hour.

Most voice teachers in Britain (although not all) are graduates of the Central School’s excellent postgraduate (now MA) voice programme, led by David Carey. With the exception of one London Linklater teacher and a few ‘Vanguard Licensee’ Estill teachers, UK voice tutors are not trained in any one specific methodology. They usu-
-ally are free-lance and supplement their teaching income by coaching for film, theatre and corporate clients. Only the Royal Shakespeare Company and the National Theatre employ company voice coaches. There are others who earn a substantial crust by being dialect coaches for films. My UK voice colleagues are talented, generous souls. I want to bring VASTAns over to meet them.

Few US voice teachers remain long-term. Although there are many drama schools, there is still the ‘RP stigma’. If you are not a ‘native’ RP speaker it is difficult to get the top jobs in London—people who are hiring may disagree with me, but this is the harsh reality. My major full-time teaching posts have all been outside of London. I have worked as a dialect coach in the West End, but have been flatly told that because I am not British, I will not be hired to coach non-American shows. They still do many American plays here, but the British dialect coaches are hired for most of those as well (go figure). However, I am currently doing South African shows at the Royal Exchange in Manchester. Fellow American, Rick Lipton, phonetics and dialect teacher extraordinaire is pursuing his craft in London.

For the past 6 years I have been part of the team (and the sole voice tutor) at the new and innovative Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts, a BA degree. . This year we initiate a one-year postgraduate acting course. We are bringing some voice sessionals on board to help with our increased numbers and free me up for teaching more acting classes and directing. Indeed, the basis of my work permit application for LIPA was that they could not find a ‘master teacher of voice’ who was also a ‘master teacher of acting’ and a professional director within the entire EU. I now have permanent residency, which means I no longer have to apply for work permits.

The positive aspects of living abroad are many: as a lifelong anglophile I have gotten the opportunity to indulge my love of magnificent architecture. I have had the occasion to travel extensively in Europe—low-budget airlines abound. I feel I have become more of a ‘citizen of the world’ and broadened my political outlook immeasurably.

However, travelling from the UK during school holidays is expensive (why I don’t make it to VASTA every year!) There is quite a lot of America bashing in the media, a cultural snobbery which is often difficult to listen to, and which seems to have gotten worse since 9/11.

I am proud to be an American working abroad. By the way, Thanksgiving’s at my place this year.

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