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Speech in America: Tracking the Evolution of Speech Pedagogy in Theatre Training

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts  
at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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## Abstract

### SPEECH IN AMERICA: TRACKING THE EVOLUTION OF SPEECH PEDAGOGY IN THEATRE TRAINING

By Zachary Champion BFA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Speech work, as it relates to actor training, has undergone many important changes since its formal introduction to the field over a century ago by Edith Skinner. Unfortunately, there are many who hold on to antiquated, misinformed and often harmful approaches to this kind of training. This thesis questioned the traditional models of speech pedagogy by creating a narrative for its development, questioning its efficacy, and exploring the alternatives that have developed over the years. I looked at the texts and approaches of Edith Skinner, Patricia Fletcher, Louis Coliaini, and Dudley Knight/Phil Thompson. I acknowledge that each practitioner has made a substantial contribution to the field. In this thesis I question what place each has in the future of speech pedagogy in America. I gathered opinions from both critics and proponents of each work in the hopes of creating a more cohesive understanding of how speech pedagogy should be handled in the future according to those who will be teaching it. This thesis includes considerable usage of phonetic symbols found on the International Phonetic Alphabet established by the International Phonetic Association

## Introduction

*“Mend your speech a little,*

*Lest it may mar your fortunes.” -King Lear Act 1, Scene 1*

It seems only fitting that we begin with words from the Bard himself. No single playwright has been cited more than Shakespeare as justification for a standardized way of speaking on stage. Speech, in Western theatre, has been under much scrutiny for quite some time, but nowhere is it more prevalent than in the rehearsal rooms, training halls, and stages of the theatre. The thought process behind the creation of a standard dialect for stage elocution is to maximize the understandability of the actor to their audience. It makes sense that a professional communicator (the actor) would want to be understood by the largest portion of their audience as possible, and there are a large number of people who would offer themselves up as facilitators of understandability. I am one of those facilitators. I have made it my job to assist actors in their pursuit of effective communication with large numbers of people. It is also my job to discover and master the techniques that allow me to facilitate that communication as efficiently as I can.

I have studied Voice and Speech for approximately eight years now and have been teaching that same work for almost four of those. It is safe to say that I am a relative newcomer to the field, but it offers me the unique opportunity to choose from the numerous approaches to speechwork available to the actor today. The four approaches examined in the body of this thesis are only a handful of those to which I have been exposed, but are representative of the major changes that have developed in speech pedagogy since its inception. I should note that I am concerned almost exclusively with speech work as it pertains to the actor and stage performance despite its apparent greater application to any voice user. The implications of this

work to non-theatre professionals are interesting, but well outside the scope of what I can focus on here.

I had the great fortune of studying speech work under Melissa Grogan at Texas State University in San Marcos, Texas. Melissa, a relatively young teacher herself, had the arduous task of changing the direction of her speech classwork after being introduced to the work of Dudley Knight and Phil Thompson. The first speech class I took with Melissa consisted of tongue twisters, enunciation exercises, and long lists of consonant clarity drills. She would teach us the sounds of the International Phonetic Alphabet using key words and lists that didn't quite explain what those sounds were or how to actually create them. We were essentially drilled until our mouths created the sound we were looking for. I can't recall how many times I , "papapapa" or "kakakaka" 'ed, but I can guarantee it was enough to drive a person mad. I felt that my ability to crisply create the [p] sound and [k] sound was mastered, but it was unclear how that would aid me in learning dialects. I doubt many actors/students would describe their experience of that kind of work as particularly clear either. The reality for speech training courses in many universities and conservatories around the country is similar to mine, but it doesn't have to be as Melissa would soon prove.

Melissa asked me if I would be willing to work individually with her to pilot a new way of teaching speechwork in her classrooms. I eagerly obliged and what followed has dictated my approach to speech training ever since. I imagine Melissa has no plans to return to the way she used to teach it either. She introduced me to the material compiled by Dudley Knight and Phil Thompson that would later be published (in a much more polished format) as *Speaking with Skill*. That semester of exploration opened the doors to a level of specificity and accuracy in speech notation that I could not have even imagined.



The work of Dudley Knight and Phil Thompson marks a leap forward in the pedagogy of speech training for the American actor, but this leap wouldn't have been possible without the contributions of other voice and speech pioneers. The approaches and texts of Edith Skinner, Patricia Fletcher, and Louis Coliaini have all had a substantial impact on the way practitioners view and transmit speechwork. In the following chapters I will be establishing a narrative for the evolution of speechwork in America beginning with William Tilly (Edith Skinner's teacher) and ending with the state of speech work today. I'll look at the formation of the International Phonetic Association (whose product, the International Phonetic Alphabet, inconveniently shares the same acronym) and its function in speechwork. I aim to create a context for each practitioner's pedagogy within the social and cultural climate in which they were teaching. Additionally, I will review, compare, and contrast each of their texts to share with you what my colleagues and I view to be their strengths and weaknesses. I will conclude by comparing each practitioner's approach to a few very specific issues in speechwork that will shed some light on the effectiveness of their work.

## Chapter 1: The Evolution of Speechwork

It might surprise the reader to learn that modern ideas of Good American Speech were, for the most part, influenced by an Australian linguist and phonetician by the name of William Henry Tilley. Tilley was born in Petersham, Sydney in 1860 and would later go on to train Edith Warman Skinner near the end of his career. Tilley's path to America was a complicated one indeed.

Tilley spent the first thirty years of his life in Australia where he began assistant teaching at the age of sixteen. In 1888 his wife, Frances Rachel Sanders, and the mother of his three children died. The following year he would marry Mary Jane Bathune Shand who was the mistress of Dubbo infants' school where Tilley also taught. Thomson writes that Tilley was, "... a disciplinarian, he was censured and warned to run his school with less caning." (ADB) Apparently the roots of Tilley's extreme disciplinary demands began very early. He would carry those demands half way across the world to Germany where he established and ran the Tilly Institute in the 1890s.

Tilley would study for twelve years under the famed Wilhelm Viëtor at the University of Marburg in Marburg, Germany where he served as an English speaking subject for Viëtor's phonetic experiments. During this time Tilley changed the spelling of his name when he, "discovered that "ey" ending was confusing to German postal employees when he went to collect his mail at the post office and told them his name" (Knight-Standard Speech 157) Apparently Tilly's focus on the sounds of language coupled with his admiration for German culture made the name change imperative.

Tilly can also be counted as one of the founding members of the International Phonetic Association which was formed in Paris in 1886. Two years later the world would have the first International Phonetic Alphabet. Of course, the alphabet would go through a multitude of changes over the next 125 years of its existence with the latest update taking place in 2005. (langsci.ucl.ac.uk) The chart marked a giant step forward for the fields of phonetics, the study of human speech sounds, and phonology, the study of human language. Phonologists, linguists, and phoneticians finally had a common set of symbols they could use to express sounds to be analyzed and studied.

The next decade or so leading up to World War I would have Tilly strongly advocating for the use of narrow transcription with the aid of the newly developed IPA chart. His aggressiveness was not necessarily shared by other users of the system. Dudley Knight writes, “Anthropologists and most linguists rejected narrow transcription, preferring the ‘broad’ or more general form because their needs did not require such specificity, and because they considered narrow transcription overly laden with detail.” (*Standard Speech* 158) Even now the debate between broad and narrow transcription is not necessarily as intense, but varying degrees of detail are often areas for disagreement between speech and dialect coaches. How much specificity in sound production is enough? Is there a reason to notate the difference between an [a] sound and its nasalized counterpart [ã]? The answer may be different from one coach to another, but Tilly would have likely argued that the difference matters a great deal. In this particular case, I would have to side with Tilly.

The outbreak of World War I would force Tilly to close the doors of his institute. His family, who was also serving as instructors at the school, would scatter. Knight includes a note that it was likely Emily and Edith, two of Tilly’s daughters, would go on to teach English in

Beijing. (Standard Speech 157) Tilly can be tracked across Europe for a short time before arriving in New York in 1917. He would continue to teach English and phonetics at Columbia University as a non-tenured lecturer until his death in 1935.

The time spent at Columbia from 1917-1934 is a point of focus for those interested in modern ideas about speech in America. Tilly influenced an entire generation of American students concerned with dialects, phonetics, and language. One of those young students was none other than Edith Warman Skinner. While Tilly may be responsible for the major leap forward in phonetics, Skinner is responsible for bringing those innovations to the theatre. This is precisely why most anyone involved in the theatre can give you at least a word or two about this complex, demanding, and highly influential voice and speech coach. Of course, the word or two is often as opinionated as Skinner was said to be about her students' speech.

Before we move on to his noteworthy pupil there are a few more things to be said about William Tilly. Had Tilly's promotion of narrow transcription ended at the objective notation of sounds then we would very likely not be talking about the impact his work has had on the theatre. Many fields have adopted narrow transcription as a way of specifically codifying the sounds of language, and speech coaches use that specificity to accurately transmit and reproduce the sounds of a given dialect. The key to Tilly's fame (or infamy) can be attributed to a speech pattern he called "World English". Skinner would use the slightly more revealing term "Good American Speech." The same or very slightly altered versions of the dialect have also been called: American Theater Standard, Theater Standard, Eastern Standard, American Stage Speech, Stage Standard, Standard American Pronunciation, Standard American Stage, Skinner Standard, Good Speech and a few others in the same vein. I'll be doing my best from here on forward to use the terms each practitioner used for their specific brand of the dialect.

Tilly's World English served to not only distinguish him in the field of phonetics, but also alienate him from his colleagues. The advocate for narrow transcription virtually subverts all of his efforts by prescribing World English as the speech pattern of English which should be spoken. World English, which sounds uncannily similar to the dialect of Southern England, was Tilly's attempt at standardizing the way English is spoken around the world by creating an arbitrary standard that must be met by the speaker. The theory behind World English neglects the fact that by creating a dialect that is intended to be a superior or "good" form of English relegates all other forms to a lesser place in society. This means that anyone who does not have access (whether it is for financial, educational, or geographical reasons) to speech training is seen as a lesser speaker than one who does. World English and its other forms inevitably then becomes a class identifier and little else. Often its teachers cite the deterioration of the English language as reason to promote World English and its derivatives despite our ever increasing understanding of what speech and language are and how they change over time. Language and pronunciation do not need saving. Language changes so quickly, in fact, that World English is much like preparing for a tsunami by grabbing a life vest. Euphonics, the study of the pleasantness of sounds, was being used by Tilly and his followers as just another way to reinforce class systems. I'll go into more detail about language change later on in this chapter.

Tilly cultivated a zealous body of teachers and students that helped spread World English all over the country, but there were certainly some that did not agree with Tilly's ideas of standardization. John S. Kenyon and Thomas Knott created a pronunciation dictionary, published in 1944, that aimed to catalogue the sounds and pronunciations of a "General American" dialect. This section of the preface is of particular interest,

As in all trustworthy dictionaries, the editors have endeavored to base the pronunciations on actual cultivated usage. No other standard has, in point of fact, ever finally settled pronunciation. This book can be taken as a safe guide to pronunciation only insofar as we have succeeded in doing this. According to this standard, no words are, as often said, “almost universally mispronounced,” for that is self-contradictory. For an editor the temptation is often strong to prefer what he thinks “ought to be” the right pronunciation; but that is to be resisted. For example, on etymological grounds the word *dahlia* “ought to be” [ˈdæljə] ; by traditional Anglicizing habits of English it should be [ˈdeɪljə] (as it is in England and often Canada); as a fact, in America it is prevailingly [dæljə]. In this case the variants are current enough to allow free choice; but in many cases the theoretically “right” pronunciation of a word is not even current. (Kenyon vi)

The very first line could easily be viewed as an affront to the Tilly camp. As stated before, World English was an arbitrary standard dialect engineered by its creator and users to give the impression of culture, cultivation, and refinement, but has virtually no basis in colloquial usage. Kenyon and Knott recognized this dissonance and aimed to capture the sounds of common or “general” American usage, rather than their ideas of what it “ought to be”. They are recognizing that the pronunciation they are capturing in the book have room for error, but are their best attempt at describing the pronunciation rather than prescribing it. We will revisit the distinction between prescriptive and descriptive methodologies later. Kenyon and Knott are making a conscious effort to represent the majority instead of cultivating an elite minority.

One versed in the International Phonetic Alphabet might also notice a broader transcription of “dahlia”. The reasoning behind this choice is not clearly delineated in Kenyon and Knott’s book, but it does serve the purpose of making the pronunciations more easily accessible than a narrow transcription. Broad transcription leaves room for variation in usage that would likely have put Tilly in a fit. The broad transcription used by Kenyon and Knott serves to create a reference material that is much more inclusive, and ultimately useful, than a dictionary dedicated to the pronunciation of World English (if one ever existed). The ambiguities of their broad transcription are also representative of the ambiguities of real speech.

Kenyon and Knott certainly rocked the proverbial boat, but even their ideas of a General American dialect were short lived. Unfortunately, General American has been applied as an alternative to World English or Standard American while neglecting that the sound patterns used by Kenyon and Knott were based on a select region of America. General American most closely represents a Midwesterner/Ohioan dialect, but has been widely adopted as an alternative, less stuffy version of Standard American. This reestablishes the false paradigm that there is a general or standard way of speaking English that must be met to speak properly.

A final updated version of *A Pronouncing Dictionary of American English* was released in 1953. Another pronunciation dictionary as popular would not come along until John C. Wells published the Longman Pronunciation Dictionary in 1990 which included American, Received Pronunciation (RP), and non-RP pronunciations. An interesting sidenote; Wells was the president of the World Esperanto Organization from 1989-1995 and the International Phonetic Association from 2003-2007. He was also the leading pioneer for the concept of lexical sets which are in wide usage by many voice and speech coaches.

It seems that the major contributing factor to the proliferation of World English has more to do with its followers than the scientific or practical grounds for its usage. It is imperative to keep in mind that language changes over time and space, and that these changes include shifts in both spelling and pronunciation. One could simply look at first folio printings of Shakespeare's plays, or the works of Chaucer to see that spellings (imperfect indicators of pronunciation) have dramatically changed. One could easily infer that the changes in spelling denote shifts in pronunciation as well. The bottom line here is that spoken language, like written language, can change dramatically, so establishing a standard dialect for any language is highly problematic from a completely practical standpoint. Nicole Mahoney of the National Science Foundation writes,

Languages change for a variety of reasons. Large-scale shifts often occur in response to social, economic and political pressures. History records many examples of language change fueled by invasions, colonization and migration. Even without these kinds of influences, a language can change dramatically if enough users alter the way they speak it.

Frequently, the needs of speakers drive language change. New technologies, industries, products and experiences simply require new words. Plastic, cell phones and the Internet didn't exist in Shakespeare's time, for example. By using new and emerging terms, we all drive language change. But the unique way that individuals speak also fuels language change. That's because no two individuals use a language in exactly the same way. The vocabulary and phrases people use depend on where they live, their age, education level, social status and other factors. Through our interactions, we pick up new words and



sayings and integrate them into our speech. Teens and young adults for example, often use different words and phrases from their parents. Some of them spread through the population and slowly change the language. (NSF)

Shifts in language happen because a community collectively agrees that the change should happen. Most often this change happens subtly and without much conscious thought to change it. There are forces that act to keep them the same as well. It reminds me of a popular children's story by Andrew Clements. *Frindle* tells the story of a young boy rebelling against his authoritarian language arts teacher by renaming his writing pen a Frindle. The word quickly takes hold of the imagination of his fellow middle school students who adopt and spread the word beyond the schools walls. Clements ends the book with the protagonist as an adult having reaped considerable rewards for his linguistic innovation which has been accepted by the rest of society. The teacher who gave the protagonist such a hard time finally concedes that her resistance is part and parcel the reason Frindle became so popular. Mrs. Granger recognizes that language is an active process that constantly changes and is shaped by its users. Clements' book captures language change with a faster paced reality than the one in which we live, but subtle changes in spelling and pronunciation do happen over time. One could simply compare early films to ones made today to notice a drastic shift in speech patterns. Were those actors utilizing a superior form of an American English dialect, or simply responding to the tastes and sensibilities of the times they worked in? One cannot account for the shifts in language with a speech pattern that does not evolve, and to attempt to do so is futile if not foolish.

Speech work is constantly in a state of change as new and exciting developments in the fields of linguistics and phonology are informing it. We are learning more and more about how language works and how people respond to sound. These discoveries influence and shape the

way coaches train their students. Although there have been no formal studies to identify the pedagogies to which speech coaches are subscribing, there has been a noticeable shift in theatre speech training. Audiences' sensibilities are informed by the culture in which they live. At no other time in human history have populations of people been connected the way they are now. Youtube has allowed its users to hear native speakers from all over the world. We get a much better idea of how people sound if we are able to go right to the source. This connectivity fosters an increased level of sensitivity to specific dialects. When speaking English in a non-American dialect/accent actors are tasked with a much greater level of specificity and a much narrower margin for error because they are portraying characters of another culture. For example, Morgan Freeman's portrayal of Nelson Mandela in the film *Invictus* received much critical attention for his attempt at a South African dialect. The pressure was on Freeman to accurately and respectfully represent a very important living figure in South Africa (and the world), and that pressure was, more than anything, focused on his dialect. Freeman's reviews were mixed indeed, but often the reviews had some mention of his or Matt Damon's dialect work. A South African reviewer wrote about Freeman's portrayal, "The fact that he does look like him helps a lot too. Soon, you forget that he gets the accent wrong and you get caught up in the magic that is Madiba [an endearing South African nickname for Mandela]. Suddenly, Morgan Freeman is Mandela." (Dlanga) In light of the scrutiny placed on Freeman's performance it is a great time to point out what a development that scrutiny is. One must think back to Charlton Heston as Mexican narcotics officer Mike Vargas in *Touch of Evil* or Mickey Rooney as Mr. Yunioshi in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* to realize how far audiences have come in their expectations for not only race-bending, but dialect-bending.

Regardless of World English's shortcomings or blind spots there is a place in the theatre history books to discuss its use and proliferation. Edith Skinner rebranded Tilly's World English (with just a few minor changes) as Good American Speech when she began sharing it with actors at Carnegie Mellon. She would later bring Good American speech to The Julliard School and The American Conservatory Theatre. Knight theorizes, "...Skinner was not the only speech teacher in America, and not all American speech teachers used the World English model. Why did Skinner's approach prevail? At least part of the answer lies in Skinner's embrace of the Tilly pedagogy in her own teaching. Like Tilly, Skinner ruled her classes with the proverbial rod of iron."(*Standard Speech* 156) One may recall mention of Tilly's use of the less proverbial rod of iron in his early years. It makes the oft recalled stories by her students about the first day of class with Skinner sound more grounded in reality. She would reportedly have each person speak their name before promptly correcting their pronunciation. Up to that point many of her students had been under the impression that they knew how to pronounce their own names, but Skinner would fiercely dispute the point using the standards of Good American Speech as grounds to correct.

Skinner is largely responsible for the proliferation of Good American Speech in American theatre which she accomplished by training an extraordinary number of actors and teachers. The tenets and pedagogy behind Good American Speech would prevail for nearly half a century. Hollywood was flooded with a who's who list of silver screen actors who subscribed to Skinner's work from her directly or from one of the many students who taught her method. Some of her most outspoken advocates include Kevin Kline and Kelsey Grammer who unmistakably use very accurate Good American speech. It has been only a fairly recent

development in Voice and Speech pedagogy to ask serious questions about the way in which we go about training the actor's speech.

Patricia Fletcher's book, *Classically Speaking*, includes three dialects that are intended to be the most useful for actors to know. The inclusion of Classical American (a slightly modified Good American) and Neutral American (a cousin of General American) as two options for speaking English texts is an indirect admission that Good American Speech is not suitable for every play or performance. Coliaini includes his criticism much more directly in *The Joy of Phonetics* with an introduction that espouses, "...the importance of working from one's own accent and not following the strictures of an imposed standard accent." (vi) Of course, the standard accent he is referring to is Good American Speech which is traditionally thrust upon the student as an alternative to their own speech patterns. Dudley Knight would soon give their subtle shifts a clear and well-articulated justification.

In 2000 Dudley Knight published an article in *The Vocal Vision: Views on Voice* entitled *Standard Speech* as part of a collection of essays aimed at discussing subjects in the field of voice and speech. This article ignited a debate within the community that put the traditional speech training model under a microscope and illuminated the often overlooked shortcomings and troubling realities of such a rigid approach to speechwork found in Skinner's model. He included a detailed history of William Tilly's influence on speech in America as well as a number of criticisms of Skinner and her followers' pedagogy. He concludes the essay with an early draft of what would become the eight principles of *Speaking with Skill* and its revolutionary approach to speechwork. There was a gap of nearly fifteen years between Knight's Standard Speech article and the publication of *Speaking with Skill*.

Knight shares his reasoning behind writing *Standard Speech* in a Los Angeles Times article by Mike Boehm, "She was a person of her time, sharing the concepts and, let's face it, the biases of her time," he says. "It's not a service to a teacher to simply freeze her teaching. I'm not trying to conduct a war with [Skinner partisans], I'm just trying to get them to open up a bit." (*In the Cause for Freer Speech*) Dudley Knight's approach offered an alternative for those speech coaches whose sensibilities did not mesh with those of Edith Skinner and her followers, but it is not to say that the work of Knight and Skinner are mutually exclusive.

Fortunately, there is room for multiple approaches to live alongside each other at the same time and students respond to those pedagogies in different ways. Some still respond to the structure and standards of Skinner, while others find value in a broader intelligibility and realistic portrayals of other culture's speech patterns. The need for speech coaches is now more apparent than ever, so there will doubtlessly be more innovations to come for the young field of speech work.

## Chapter 2: Edith Skinner and *Speak with Distinction*

### The Author:

Edith Skinner, who was briefly discussed in Chapter 1, is likely the most influential speech coach in Western theatre. Her numerous appointments to some of the best actor training institutions in the country and her book, *Speak with Distinction*, have guaranteed her legacy in the theatre community. Skinner's ruthless approach to speech work and her unyielding standards in teaching actors and speech coaches have influenced more than half of century of performance. It's difficult to hear a production of Shakespeare's plays without at least one actor using the easily identifiable Good American Speech. Her articulation warm-ups and the list upon list of diction drills are a staple of the working actor and roughly two generations of theatre practitioners know something about phonetics through her book.

Like many of the speech teachers we will look at in later chapters, there is relatively little biographical information available about Skinner's personal life. It was clear by how prolific her professional appointments were that she was unmatched in her field, but her modest obituary in the New York Times reads,

Edith Skinner, a speech coach and consultant to Broadway actors, died in her sleep last Saturday in Milwaukee.

Miss Skinner, who lived at 60 West 66th Street, had been conducting a speech program for the University of Wisconsin. She was also on the faculty of the Juilliard Theater Center here. Miss Skinner, who never revealed her age, was born New Brunswick, Canada, and was for many years a professor of drama at

Carnegie-Mellon University in Pittsburgh. She is survived by a sister, Margaret Hewes of Bermuda. ( 28 July 1981)

Edith Skinner died in 1981, but it's clear that the teachers and students of her work will be carrying the torch of Good Speech for generations to come. Jack O' Brien, artistic director for The Old Globe (1982-2007), includes this in the second edition of *Speak with Distinction*, "Her influence extends from coast to coast and even abroad, and the standard of excellence she both identified and represented remains as fixed today as anything in our theatrical cosmos." (iii) Wynne Decoma of The Milwaukee Journal puts a slightly more earthly spin on the fashionable master of speech, "She could have been an unapproachable figure, keeping her distance behind a screen of pointedly dropped names and anecdotes. Instead, she was a gracious, friendly woman and, students attested, a hard-working teacher."

### **The Text:**

Edith Skinner begins her book, *Speak with Distinction*, with a strongly worded mission for the theatre. "Obviously, training in voice and speech is imperative and fundamental. In search of the best, we look to the stage; for the theater has a responsibility too often neglected: to foster the finest sound of Spoken English." (iii) Skinner's attempt to solidify the primacy of the voice and speech component of theatre is certainly not something new as we've seen playwrights and directors advocate for the same thing. The text that follows her introduction is a remarkably detailed and complex collection of consonant and vowel drills, key words, sound changes, phonetic symbols, and sample passages with which to practice. For a number of speech coaches the book is the end all and be all of speech work for actors, but with the exception of an updated edition published roughly nine years after Skinner's death, the material has been relatively

unchanged. The static nature of the text has done little to deter the droves of teachers who continue to teach and reference *Good American Speech* as the standard for stage elocution. Initially, I struggled to determine what the appeal of such an approach would be, but the intricacy and detail of the text seems to be where the answer lies.

The first chapter of the book is dedicated to the introduction of phonetic concepts such as diphthongs, vowels, consonants, syllables, diacritics, the International Phonetic Alphabet, and so on. One would already begin to notice a distinct interest in accuracy and correct execution of sounds. A section on page 28 reads, “Thirty minutes on your “s” sound, for instance, and halfway through you may not be able to hear the difference between a poor “s” and a better one (in fact, it is likely that all your “s” sounds, even the improved ones, will drive you crazy).” At the very outset we can see that the reader/student is being diagnosed as having a less than good “s” without anyone being present to rate such a thing. The reader may already be questioning their proficiency with a basic unit of sound in American English, but rest assured that Skinner will guide you to the correct pronunciation.

Skinner gives the reader an explanation of how to produce the [s] and [z] consonant pair on page 271, “Keep your teeth close together, and the body of your tongue grooved, with the tip free and pointing toward the gum ridge... It is possible to produce these sounds with the tongue behind the bottom teeth, but the sound will probably be overly sibilant.” Shortly after she goes on to say, “The voiceless sound [s] is short and sharp, and the vibrated sound [z] is energized and buzzed. There are many deviations from the correct sound; all are called LISPS.”

The [s] sound has been a point of focus amongst speech coaches for quite some time, and Skinner’s focus is hardly a novelty, but it ignores some very important realities. According to



the guidelines quoted above, the [s] sound that many people produce (myself included) is technically a lisp. I produce my [s] and [z] sounds with the tip of my tongue behind my bottom teeth and I have never had the sounds assessed as sibilant or possessing the qualities of a lisp, but I have been instructed by speech coaches to modify my articulation to match the prescribed placement on multiple occasions. Oddly enough, for me the sibilance the instruction is trying to eliminate becomes more present than ever. My articulation of the [s] sound is not an anomaly either. There have not been any formal studies, but one could simply ask around to discover that my placement of the [s] sound is not unique to me. Where is the tip of your tongue when you make the [s] sound?

Chapters 2-4 cover the vowels, consonants, diphthongs, triphthongs, and diacritics of Good American Speech. Each symbol and sound is communicated to the reader through a brief description of the placement and guidelines for producing the sound in the way that most closely meets the standards of Good American. Additionally, the book takes extra care on sounds or combinations of sounds that are particularly difficult to articulate fully when speaking a full thought or sounds that are difficult to differentiate to an untrained ear. For example, the three back vowels [ɑ], [ɒ], and [ɔ] are relatively difficult to tell apart for most new students (Americans in particular) of phonetics. Skinner has provided long and detailed word lists to help identify which sounds are correct for each particular word. The lists are an excellent reference material, but don't quite exhaust every word that may include one of the three sounds. Skinner suggests some hints provided by the orthographic spelling of words, but makes no mention of the difficulty in discerning which sound belongs to which word outside of the list provided at the end of Chapter Two.

For one versed in the symbols of the International Phonetic Alphabet it is likely a surprise to see the symbols used within the book. Transcriptions included in the book are handwritten and are very consistent throughout. The reasons are unclear, but the handwritten symbols are adapted to cursive symbols that are not present on the IPA chart. A review of earlier versions of the chart makes it clear that the cursive symbols used by Skinner were never representative of the sounds of the IPA. (Handbook) Altering the symbols is not something unique to Skinner's text, as we will see later, but *Speak with Distinction* has more alterations in transcribed symbols than any of the other texts reviewed here. These adaptations reduce the universality of a phonetic alphabet while still being easily understood by other Skinner trained phoneticians. It smacks of the same elitism for which *Good American Speech* is often criticized.

For the reader/speaker to practice their newly acquired dexterity in articulation the final section of the book includes a vast collection of monologues and famous passages from books. It includes writers from Christopher Marlowe to Ambrose Bierce and Oscar Wilde. There seems to be no distinction between American and British literature regardless of the time period in which they wrote.

*Speak with Distinction* is clearly a testament of its time. The American stage has gradually lost its reverence for the British stage and with that its desire to sound like it. The broadening of the American canon of plays and film has come to reflect the diversity of our culture and languages. The standards of *Good American Speech* become the vehicle for ignoring our differences for the sake of an elite group's idea of what is beautiful. Even more concerning is what Louis Coliaini suggests in an article by Daniel Mufson,

If pronunciations differing from the standard are constantly “corrected,” [the actor’s] efforts to shift them will almost certainly lead to vocal tension, and at the same time pull him out of the reality of the play... If speech is dealt with too early in the actor’s development, it becomes a veneer over muscular blockage... An open sound is achieved, but only through shifting a constricted vocal apparatus to one held rigidly open. It is this very rigidity that will rob the actor of the subtle nuance of thought and feeling. ( Mufson 4)

Of course, Coliaini seems to be neglecting that any use of a dialect in a performance will have its own unique holding patterns that put the actor at some risk of constriction. The important criticism is that of the impact a corrective approach to speech can have on the speakers understanding of right and wrong ways of speaking, thus limiting the full range of expression that should be available to the actor.

To conclude, it seems clear that Edith Skinner and her book are very important when considering the evolution of speech work in America, but its pedagogy is problematic when considering modern demands on the actor. Good American Speech does not seem to be the most efficient approach to dialect work as it is in itself an easily recognizable dialect. The book still offers actors an incredibly effective tool for honing their articulation skills, but as some have argued, at the expense of one’s individual speech patterns.

### **Chapter 3: Patricia Fletcher and *Classically Speaking: Dialects for Actors***

#### **The Author:**

Patricia Fletcher has built an impressive career both as a professional actor on and off-Broadway and as an extremely adept voice, speech, and dialect coach for professional and academic theatre. She currently teaches at the New School for Drama and The William Esper Acting Studio in New York City. Fletcher is a designated Linklater teacher and has built an impressive list of clients such as Harvey Keitel, Jean Reno, and Gina Gershon. Her book, *Classically Speaking*, is currently in the third edition.

#### **The Text:**

*Classically Speaking: Dialects for Actors* came along roughly half a century after Edith Skinner's first edition of *Speak with Distinction*, but it maintains many of the strict rules of refined speech that persisted in the time between the two books. Since *Classically Speaking* is structured in nearly an identical manner to Skinner's *Speak with Distinction* it is difficult to view it strictly as a dialect manual. 324 pages of the 499 page book are dedicated to learning the sounds and symbols of the Neutral American dialect. The Neutral American dialect has sound patterns that live somewhere between Kenyon's General American and a slightly more relaxed version of Skinner's Good American Speech, but Fletcher claims it is a variation of General American. The reader is walked through the prescribed sounds of Neutral American while simultaneously being instructed in the sounds and symbols of the IPA. The last 150 pages walk the reader through the Classical American, Mid-Atlantic, and Standard British Dialects. The book includes many of the devices such as key words, articulator drills, and selected text samples with which the actor may practice. In a book review for *Back Stage* magazine Deloss Brown

writes, “Patricia Fletcher has written a smart, comprehensive speech manual for actors. She demonstrates a real concern for giving actors an idea of the importance of good speech and useful methods to obtain it.” We will be looking closely at some of Fletcher’s innovations and adjustments to speech pedagogy that make the text a landmark in the development of modern speech work.

Fletcher begins the book with an often repeated acknowledgement that your own dialect is likely not the most useful for you. “...these same dialects can prove a liability when trying to accurately portray characters with backgrounds and life experiences uniquely different from one’s own. In order to play a *variety* of characters convincingly and believably, actors often need to train and expand their repertoire of skills.” (1) Even this indirect indictment of the actor’s personal dialect, or idiolect, is far less overt than Skinner’s attitude. The dialects included in the book are intended to expand the actor’s possibilities for speech.

Fletcher justifies the use of Neutral American as a foundational dialect at the very outset of the book. She claims, “Overall, Neutral American is very useful when attempting to increase one’s flexibility and marketability. Many agents prefer their clients to have this dialect in their ‘arsenal’, and see it as a sign of a well-trained actor. It is the standard against which most dialects and accents are compared in teaching materials for American-English speaking actors” (2) The argument of marketability as justification for standardizing speech is not a new one. Fortunately, the opponents of such an argument are just as many. Chloe Logan interviewed Steve Guthrie, a teacher in Georgia, about the contested Ebonics curriculum being proposed in Oakland California in 2007. Guthrie said,

Is Standard English indispensable for communication? Hardly. Two machinists or two chemists – or just two people waiting at the bus stop – who speak Ebonics and Appaltonics, or Brooklonics and New Mexiconics, can communicate perfectly well if they listen to one another, much better in fact than the Oakland School Board and the media (standard speakers all) have managed to do. Is Standard English still a badge of membership, like an old-school tie? (Standard American English)

Fletcher's point may be valid for the working actor, but she proposes that the book can be used for English as a Second Language speakers, as well. Accent reduction methodologies are often rife with class judgments and the usual approach that presupposes the speaker is doing something less than good at the outset. It's clear that the Neutral American dialect is intended to replace the student's own dialect, and it comes up against the same problems as Good American Speech in that regard.

The presentation of the various phonetic sounds and symbols is very similar to *Speak with Distinction*. Fletcher does, however, provide a much better discussion of the finer complications in phonetic work for the American speaker. Specifically the three back vowel sounds that often give the newcomer issues in differentiating the sounds gets a lengthy explanation. Fletcher explains the reasoning behind not including the [ɒ] sound when introducing Neutral American. She states, "I feel most Neutral American speakers do not use this sound, and teaching it as part of Neutral American Speech can be counter-productive..." (22) She does introduce the sound later when discussing the sound changes of Standard British and Classical American. Unfortunately, Fletcher falls prey to the same trap Skinner does when

describing when the sound should be used. She includes four fairly complex rules to determine which back vowel variation should be used, and includes two different explanations for how to form the sound itself. I have to admit that following the rules and descriptions is difficult even for me.

Fletcher does a magnificent job of including phonetic symbols that can be found on the International Phonetic Alphabet chart. The symbols she covers are, for the most part, unaltered with the exception of the often modified [ɹ] sound. Fletcher uses the [r] symbol which is technically representative of a voiced alveolar trill that is often described as a rolled R in Spanish words like “burro”. It could be argued that the adaption of the symbol is to make using it easier, but I can’t help but to wonder what happens to the deposed trilled [r]. Do you simply use the same symbol, or does it become something else? What do you do when you need to teach a Spanish dialect? Fletcher retires the written symbols for their typed counterparts which further increases the accuracy of transcription.

Fletcher’s use of charts and graphs is somewhat underwhelming, but some useful information is transmitted through a handful of them. Images of the vocal tract and a diagram of the articulators are particularly useful, while modified consonant and vowel charts are confusingly assembled. The consonant chart on page 17 includes all the information necessary to fully describe the action, placement, and voice/voicelessness of each sound, but lists them in a rather unorthodox assemblage. The vowel chart on page 25, after a lengthy description of front, mid, back, diphthong, and triphthong vowel sounds, presents a similarly confusing graph of the vowel symbols. The list flows in a way that gives the reader the full description of the placement and arch/cup of the tongue, but robs the reader of the spatial relationship offered to them by the

unaltered chart designed by the International Phonetic Association. It's even more troublesome that Fletcher would presume to redesign what seems to be so carefully composed.

To conclude, Fletcher has assembled a dialect training text that reads more like a phonetics training manual. It represents the modern sounds and symbols of American speech more accurately than Skinner, but the chart adaptations seem unnecessary and poorly designed. The inclusion of exclusively Eurocentric dialects as the most important for actors to learn further supports the class issues to which such a prescriptive approach succumbs. It seems that the book is trying to be too many things at one time, and the lack of a discernible scope means a scattershot of information and activities for practice. Most of the dialects are useful if you are trying to get everyone to sound the same, and, in my opinion, that is rarely a goal worth working toward.



## Chapter 4: Louis Coliaini and *The Joy of Phonetics and Accents*

### The Author:

Louis Coliaini is a fairly well known teacher of voice, speech, and dialect for film and stage. His most recent work includes coaching Bill Murray in *Hyde Park on Hudson* and Will Ferrell in the Broadway and HBO productions of *You're Welcome America*. Coliaini has coached productions at many of the major repertory theatres around the country including; Kansas City Repertory Theatre, Milwaukee Repertory Theatre, Trinity Repertory Theatre, and Seattle Repertory Theatre. He currently teaches Acting Classics at the Actors Studio Drama School at Pace University and Speech and Dialects at Syracuse University. In addition to *The Joy of Phonetics and Accents* he also wrote/co-wrote *Shakespeare's Names: A New Pronouncing Dictionary*, *How to Speak Shakespeare*, *Bringing Speech to Life* and various articles for *Voice and Speech Review*. (louiscoliaini.com)

Coliaini's prestigious appointments and international reputation are all largely a result of his innovative approach to phonetics involving pillows and his more inclusive approach to speech work. The pillows are a collection of the American symbols of the IPA crafted from various colored/textured fabrics with small weights placed in the stuffing to indicate how the symbol should be turned. Coliaini wrote *The Joy of Phonetics and Accents* to outline a new and innovative approach to the pedagogy of phonetics using the pillows to reinforce that approach. Coliaini, a designated Linklater teacher, explains his inspiration for the phonetic pillows on his website,

The inspiration for Phonetic Pillows is Kristin Linklater's Sound & Movement progression, which traces language from the most primitive impulse to

Shakespeare's heightened texts. Using various games, some borrowed from Linklater, I introduce students to the International Phonetic Alphabet, in the form of symbol-shaped pillows. Preliminarily, I propose that each pillow actually vibrates with the sound it represents, and further, that these sounds have the power to move the bodies of the students. With this initial, imaginative leap, students see, touch, and give expressive voice and physical gesture to each phoneme. The work is at once, emotive and precise, analytical and action-based. I don't ask students to model the shapes of the symbols with their bodies, but, rather, to allow their bodies to be moved by sound itself. You might say to abstract sounds in their bodies. But they don't merely splatter sound around the room; they use sound as a fuel to fulfill the desire to communicate.

The pillows are not enough to warrant dedicating a whole chapter to although they are an effective teaching aid. The text that accompanies the pillows is where we find a progressive voice for speech pedagogy.

**The Text:**

Kristin Linklater writes about *The Joy of Phonetics and Accents (Joy)*, "Louis Colaianni's book offers a refreshing approach to speech training for actors. He argues cogently for a reassessment of the automatic demand for Standard Speech made by training programs and directors, highlighting the very questionable grounds upon which rules of 'good speech' have been based." (*The Joy of Phonetics* Back Cover) As mentioned before, Colaianni's book treats the shortcomings of Good American Speech

much more directly than Fletcher. The Author's Note to the British Reader section (partially quoted in an earlier chapter) is rather important for any reader of the book,

This book can be used by actors in the US, the U.K., or any part of the English-speaking world. Although some examples of phonetic transcription are given in my native accent—New Jersey, U.S.—this is done to stress the importance of working from one's own accent and not following the strictures of an imposed standard accent. The process outlined in this book is a springboard into a profound understanding of the way you yourself speak, and the application of this understanding into the crafting of character accents. (vi)

He later goes on to write in his introduction, "I don't teach standard speech—explorations with phonetics help my students find maximum intelligibility, openness, and vocal freedom. They lose the limitations of regionalism without having the life's blood of individuality drained from their voices." (viii) Later in the book before introducing an excerpt of Dudley Knight's *Standard Speech* article Coliaini writes, "At the heart of this seemingly innocuous speech pattern are the values of Victorian imperialism. Good Speech for Classic Texts is modeled on the speech of upper-class white British men of eighty years ago. Although blindly (deafly) accepted as mere theatrical convention, it is inherently racist, sexist, and elitist, not to mention, antiquated." (52) He is certainly not mincing words. Coliaini has made it quite clear that he does not subscribe to Skinner's Good American speech, but what alternative does he propose?

Coliaini never uses the term, but what he's proposing is the beginning of a descriptive approach to speech work. He is not concerned with prescribing the sounds to which his students must be limited (Good American Speech), but rather which sounds they are already making

(idiolect) and how to transcribe them. The student is then encouraged to use their own speech patterns to make the adjustments necessary to recreate a specific dialect.

The section on Good Speech reads like a manifesto against the prescriptive approach to speech work. Coliaini explains in detail his feelings about Good American Speech, the disservice it does to minority groups, and the potential for long term complications as a result of its corrective nature. He states, “If pronunciations differing from the standard are constantly “corrected”, his efforts to shift them will almost certainly lead to vocal tension and at the same time pull him out of the reality of the play.” (57)

*Joy* is an attempt at achieving a very practical approach to speech work, and its structure reflects that. Part one of the book introduces the American phonetic symbols (as pillows) and encourages you to begin familiarizing yourself with the shapes and corresponding sounds. Coliaini provides the description of placement and then quickly moves on to the next sound. It can feel at times that the reader is being rushed along to the wealth of games provided in the next section. Notably, there is a lack of key word lists to use as reference points. Coliaini addresses this in the section on Good Speech, “The work on accents will be centered around the way that you, yourself speak. No ‘key word list’ of ‘correct’ pronunciations will be imposed on you. No ‘standard’ of speech will be offered for you to measure yourself against.” (51)

The third part of the book is dedicated to Coliaini’s philosophical struggle with standardized speech patterns and how he aims to address that. With the help of Dudley Knight he makes a compelling case for a descriptive approach and shares some interesting history about early speech methodologies. He ends this section by citing Original Pronunciation theories of Shakespeare’s plays which include ‘r-colorings’ and exclude the [a]/[æ] and [ɑ]/[ɒ] shifts.

Original Pronunciation evidence makes an argument for Good American Speech as the most effective dialect for spoken Shakespeare a pretty difficult one to make.

In the fourth section of the book Coliaini lays out his new approach to dialect work. Here he explains two novel concepts. The first is the idea of an accent donor. An accent donor is a person who speaks the dialect you are wishing to learn whom you can use as a model for learning. Ideally you would have them record themselves speaking and then use Coliaini's second device called word pairs. The word pairs aren't new, as linguistic anthropologists have used them for years, but their application for stage dialects is relatively new. Word pairs take the actor's personal pronunciation and compare it with the accent donor's pronunciation. The variation can be notated using phonetic symbols. After a considerable number of word pairs are compiled the patterns of change begin to coalesce into the guidelines for a dialect. Coliaini's method proves that a dialect can be discovered and recreated without ever touching the actors idiolect, but it's clear the approach is somewhat cumbersome. It would be unreasonably slow if every dialect a student must learn required them to compile huge lists of word pairs, and in some cases an accent donor is hard to come by. However, Coliaini opens up the doors to treating anyone's speech pattern as a dialect as long as they are even minutely different from the speaker's own speech patterns.

The final section includes original practice text written by Gale Nelson and is designed specifically to challenge the reader in certain elements of phonetics and transcription. The book and pillows take a very inclusive and non-threatening approach to speechwork, but it seems that the attempt to make the reader feel safe runs counter to what Coliaini is trying to accomplish. For example, he is encouraging a rather complex approach to dialect work, but shies away from the vocabulary to describe the sounds students are learning. After briefly introducing the

terminology for speech actions he writes, “It’s much more important for actors to know on an experiential level what’s going on in their mouths as they speak, than it is for them to know the clinical terms for each type of sound. Latin terms like ‘bi-labial’ create an academic distance between the expert and the artist—why not say ‘two-lipped’?” (33) and “When a simple little ‘r’ is called a ‘post alveolar-fricative continuant\*’ things are getting pretty complicated! (\**Speak with Distinction*, Applause Books, 1992)” (33) A similar avoidance of “clinical terms” is employed when diacritical markings are renamed “nuance markings” on page 69. Coliaini is throwing the baby out with the bathwater here. There doesn’t seem to be any logical reason why a student learning phonetics should avoid learning how to accurately and specifically describe the sounds they are using with the terms used by other scholars concerned with language and sound. Ignoring technical language serves only to isolate the reader’s knowledge to the text in front of them. This is likely the same justification for modifying the American [ɹ] symbol to the upright [r] sound, but there is no mention of the adaption in the book.

Overall, Coliaini’s book is an excellent introduction to phonetic work and a clear departure from the prescriptive approaches of those who have come before. He advocates the actor retain the speech patterns with which they are coming to the table, and gives a highly detailed approach to dialect work. The limited scope of the phonetic symbols taught and the somewhat over-complicated word pair/ accent donor approach to dialects is inefficient. The pillows are a great teaching tool, but it would be more useful for dialect work if there were pillows to represent all the sounds of the International Phonetic Alphabet. *The Joy of Phonetics and Accents* is a benchmark for the philosophy behind speech work, but lacks the technical elements of phonetic work that are necessary to meet his newly established standards for dialect work.

## Chapter 5: Dudley Knight/Phil Thompson and *Speaking with Skill*

### The Author:

*Speaking with Skill* was indeed written by a single person, Dudley Knight, but the information within its pages is the result of a long lasting collaboration he had with Phil Thompson. Knight and Thompson worked together with scores of actors in the MFA acting program at the University of California, Irvine and pioneered what they call Knight-Thompson Speechwork.

Dudley Knight was a very accomplished actor both on film and stage. His credits included work with the American Conservatory Theatre, Magic Theatre, Globe Theatre, La Jolla Playhouse, and multiple seasons at Shakespeare festivals all around the country. (ktspeechwork.com) Knight was a certified Master Fitzmaurice Voicework teacher and built a career over more than forty years as a voice, speech, and dialect coach. He passed away on June 27<sup>th</sup>, 2013 from a heart attack while preparing for the role of King Lear at UC Irvine. *Speak with Skill* was published only a few months before his death.

Phil Thompson is an associate Professor of Drama and head of the MFA Acting program at UC Irvine. He has served as a board member, Secretary, and President of the Voice and Speech Trainers Association (VASTA). He has extensive credits as voice, speech, and dialect director at Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park, South Coast Repertory, and Utah Shakespearean Festival. (ktspeechwork.com) Thompson currently leads Experiencing Speech and Experiencing Accents workshops that train students in Knight-Thompson Speechwork. Like Knight, Thompson is also a certified Master teacher of Fitzmaurice Voicework.

## The Text:

*Speaking with Skill* is the result of years of workshops, editing, experimentation, research, and sharing. I had the opportunity of experiencing the majority of the method outlined in the book as an undergraduate student in the form of a binder filled with various articles, pictures, and notes compiled by Dudley Knight and Phil Thompson. I currently teach the approach pioneered by Knight and Thompson therefore what follows will most certainly carry some bias. The published version of *Speaking with Skill* was highly anticipated and has caused quite a stir among the voice and speech community. Dudley Knight's articles about Standard Speech and other topics in voice and speech have been hotly debated by many teachers, but have solidified their place amongst landmark scholarship in the field. Knight's historiographic look at the roots of Good American Speech, Edith Skinner, and William Tilley were one of the first writings to clearly and strongly criticize the prescriptive approach to speech work.

I mentioned before that *Standard Speech* included a passage that would later be adapted in *Speaking with Skill* as its guiding principles. Those important principles are;

1. The work tries to respond to the genuine needs of the actor or vocal performer as related to speech.
2. This work is based on the observation that the vocal and speech needs of the actor within performance are constantly changing and are never fixed.
3. The work recognizes that biases about the beauty of the individual speech sounds are endemic and inevitable.
4. This work tries to place a firewall between these inevitable biases-including those of the actor – and the pedagogy itself.
5. The only “standard” that we can set for speech training is intelligibility.
6. This work is based on the development of useful skills that the actor can own.
7. This work embraces complexity in its content.



8. This work embraces contradiction as an essential tool of teaching. (ix-x)

I would like to focus in on the third and fifth principles as they are the most relevant to the discussion we have had so far. The third principle seems to be a pretty clear indictment of euphonics and its application to speech training. The job of the voice coach is to facilitate the actor's flexibility in speech while avoiding the imposition of their own ideals of beauty. Of course, to achieve complete objectivity when it comes to something so socially subjective is impossible, but one can limit their opinions in favor of helping their students exercise the power of choice.

The fifth principle is likely the most important innovation for the field of speech. Knight writes, "The only real test for the effectiveness of our individual speech patterns is represented by the somewhat clunky term *intelligibility*. It doesn't mean that we have to produce speech sounds that impress listeners as 'beautiful', or 'cultured', or 'cultivated'. It means that we have to be able to produce verbal sound actions that everybody who speaks our language can understand easily." (xiv) He later points out that, "The speaker who is locked into a highly formalized pattern may find that, just because of the excessive effort being made, she or he is sending messages to the listener that were not intended." (xv) Knight points out the phoniness that often accompanies the actor who uses Good American speech both onstage and off. If the most basic unit for communication is to be understood, then the possibilities for diversity and creativity in communicative vocal production are nearly endless.

Knight and Thompson have overhauled the pedagogy of speech work from the ground up. The very first chapter is dedicated to the actor finding silence. The purpose of finding silence is so, "we then can feel our own sounds moving through our bodies with the same alert

availability, we can feel subtle changes in vocal sound and action.” (7) Knight spends the first few chapters exploring the mechanisms (larynx, lungs, articulators, etc) of vocal production and requests the student forget that they know how to phonate. By taking the student to the very beginning, there is the potential to avoid building on the habits that may be present. The anatomical diagrams that are clearly labeled with their scientific terms are followed by rather intense, specific, and thorough muscle isolation warm-ups. Each warm-up is designed to address one particular facial or lingual muscle involved in producing speech sounds. One may notice a distinct lack of word lists and tongue twisters. A possible reason for such an omission is that practicing only in English will prepare a student for producing only English sounds accurately. Knight aims to prepare the student to create all the sounds found in human language.

After a considerable amount of preparatory work designed to familiarize the speaker with the language, actions, and flexibility necessary to approach phonetic work, Knight finally introduces the International Phonetic Alphabet chart for the first time in all the texts looked at in this thesis. (114) At this point, the student will have learned all the vocabulary used within the chart to describe the various symbols. Coliaini said this of the [ɒ] and [a] sounds, “For those of you who don’t use [ɒ] and [a] in your own accents, I can’t really teach them to you on paper, but I’ll try to steer you in their direction.” (*Joy* 36) A user of Knight-Thompson speechwork would be able to state clearly that the difference between the two is that [ɒ] is a “rounded open back vowel” sound while [a] is an “unrounded open/open-mid front vowel” and then proceed to physically form the two distinct sounds using the description. Knight demonstrates that the chart carries all the information one needs to accurately create the sound represented by the symbol. This approach makes key word lists and lexical sets completely unnecessary as the student can

simply navigate their articulators to the shape required instead of approximating based on their own pronunciation of other words.

The third section of the book deals with the intricacies of phonetic work as it relates to accurately transcribing the sounds one hears. Knight advocates that the student be able to read and write very narrow transcription, but without the prescription that we have seen in other pedagogies. Knight offers the diacritical markings as the modifications to sound that they are, and explains how to use them to denote the infinite variations possible for any given sound. There is even a section that discusses the comparative advantages and disadvantages to using both narrow and broad transcription. (227-231)

The final section of the book includes the various practice texts that seem mandatory for most speech texts. There is a noticeable and refreshing focus on more contemporary texts that are intended for three main types of practice. The usual articulation drills are part of the exploration, but the inclusion of non-American sounds aims to continue the student's endeavor to build flexibility beyond their own language set. There is also transcription practice intended to hone the writing skills of the user. Finally, the inclusion of passages that have been transcribed using narrow transcription are intended to give the reader practice speaking the symbols they read. This final skill is something not seen in earlier texts and is an incredibly useful skill for someone intending to learn dialects as they will likely be required to read sound changes with efficiency.

Knight Thompson speechwork does not make an enormous departure from the traditional model of speech training with regards to phonetic training, but simply accomplishes the task at hand more clearly and efficiently than does Skinner, Fletcher, or Coliaini. Students are still

learning phonetics, but are learning a much more complete and holistic approach. There seems to be no minor modifications to the phonetics a linguistic anthropologist or phonetician would learn, and therefore the interscholastic consideration is profound. One who learns Knight-Thompson speechwork will have cultivated a vocabulary for sound that is easily transferrable from one field to another, and more completely prepares that student for the demands of really any dialect. *Speaking with Skill* also happens to be the only text that does not attempt to serve as a dialect book. The focus on phonetics alone gives Knight the opportunity to teach an entire system in detail and avoid being bogged by the split focus many other texts fall prey to. There is a distinct lack of published review material for *Speaking with Skill* (it was published a mere 8 months before my writing this), but the harshest criticism my students have leveled at the book is that it is boring or overly technical. To that I can only respond that it is a far lesser crime to be boring than to leave the actor ill-prepared. *Speaking with Skill* will likely have as great an impact on speech work over the next fifty years as *Speak with Distinction* has over the last fifty. The book is a testament to one of the most brilliant voice and speech teachers from whom I have ever had the fortune to learn.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

At this point I hope I have provided the reader with at least a basic understanding of how speech work developed for the theatre and its current place within the actor training model. Each of the writer's achievements are well noted, but Dudley Knight and Phil Thompson's approach to speech work represent the pinnacle of the field right now. No other methodology treats the training of the actor more ethically, completely, and effectively than their work. Skinner and Fletcher's prescriptive approach to speech that preys on the fears and perceived inadequacies of the actor is something that is and should be falling to the wayside. Knight/Thompson and Coliaini are the faces of a new age for the sounds of the stage.

I am personally fascinated with the innovations that can be made possible when an approach like Knight-Thompson can integrate the diversity that is innate to our culture. The possibility of its application to non-traditional dialects and the inter-scholastic nature of the training mean a wide open door for collaboration with other fields. Theatre is a holistic art and as such can only benefit from greater accessibility and ease of communication that Knight-Thompson speechwork encourages. Skinner is not wrong when she said, "Obviously, training in voice and speech is imperative and fundamental." (iii), but we now have the tools to use that training to celebrate our differences and understand one another better rather than separating ourselves through speech. It is a source of great pride for me that I can be a part of the process of reshaping the way our society understands one another through language. I am even more proud that theatre can be the vehicle for this kind of social change.

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## **Vita**

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