

# **ACTING WITH AN ACCENT**

**STANDARD BRITISH**

(Second Edition)

by

**DAVID ALAN STERN, Ph.D.**

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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

DAVID ALAN STERN is the founder and president of DIALECT ACCENT SPECIALISTS publishing, and has worked in Hollywood since 1980 as an accent and dialect coach for the motion picture and television industries. After receiving a Ph.D. in speech from Temple University, he served on the faculties of both Wichita State and Penn State Universities. He has taught thousands of actors and broadcasters to put on (or take off) foreign accents and regional dialects. Among the students he has coached are:

**Mike Farrell, Jack Klugman, Edward James Olmos, Bronson Pinchot, Lynn Redgrave, Forest Whitaker, and Michael York as well as OSCAR WINNERS Geena Davis, Olympia Dukakis, and Sally Field.**

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## SOME PRELIMINARY CONCERNS

### When should I use dialects & accents?

Here are a few guidelines I've put together after years of performing and coaching dialects.

(1) If there are characters in the script who come from a different speech group than the rest of the cast, consider differentiating them with appropriate dialect(s). (2) If the entire script is set in a country or region where a specific dialect of English is spoken, determine whether the whole cast can use that pattern while still creating complete, believable characters. (3) Avoid using foreign accents for translations of foreign scripts. For example, don't play Chekhov with a Russian accent or Moliere with a French accent. For such "classics," try using **ELEVATED AMERICAN DICTION** (see the final tape in the **SPEAKING WITHOUT AN ACCENT** series). (4) "Elevated diction" is also appropriate when American casts are doing Shakespeare, especially those of his plays which are not set in England. (5) Finally, **DON'T USE ACCENTS UNLESS THEY ARE GOING TO BE PERFORMED WELL!**

### What techniques lead to good dialects?

Perhaps as few as twenty per cent of actors have the "good ear" that leads to skillful imitation of speech patterns. Other actors must use a systematic approach in order to create authentic-sounding accents and dialects. Here is a brief discussion of the most important factors.

**PRONUNCIATION:** Creating correct pronunciation changes is a "necessary, but not sufficient" condition for generating dialect authenticity. Most teachers, texts, and recorded programs drill their students almost exclusively with the appropriate vowel and consonant substitutions needed for the target pattern. Although I believe that correct pronunciation is absolutely necessary, these changes will not sound authentic unless you combine them with several other important vocal features that I'll discuss in the next few paragraphs.

**PITCH CHARACTERISTICS:** "Pitch" can refer to any of several vocal traits--from how high or low a voice is to how much intonation or pitch variety is used. But for many of the dialects which actors must study, the most important of these traits is a unique lilt or pitch change that takes place inside vowels, especially (but not exclusively) during the sounding of stressed syllables. In many accent patterns, this trait (which I call **INNER-VOWEL LILT**) helps to generate an authentic-sounding dialect.

**STRESS PATTERNS:** American English has a complex pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables. Some other dialects and accents have few, if any unstressed syllables. Still others have rather intricate staccato rhythms which must be mastered before the dialects can possibly sound authentic.

**RESONANCE or MUSCULAR SPEECH IMPULSE:** Much of my research, teaching, and performing experience has taught me that the most important part of a dialect's authentic essence comes from a characteristic shaping of the throat, nose, mouth, tongue and soft palate. The many available configurations, in turn, give many different resonances or "timbres" to the overall sound. Such a specific "tone focus" is very noticeable throughout a dialect, regardless of whether actual pronunciation changes are occurring on certain words. In fact, once an actor has mastered the new muscularity and tone focus for a given dialect, many of the important pronunciation changes can be made much more easily and convincingly. Most of the tapes in this series begin with a detailed lesson on resonance. Subsequent pronunciation drills then grow from the new muscularity. So now your new pronunciations have an "organic core." They need no longer be isolated memory exercises.

### **What is the best way to practice?**

Begin by drilling the mechanics of the new dialect--the resonance, lilt, rhythm, and pronunciations. Go on to integrate the changes into phrases, sentences, and passages. Then try improvising and actually generating your own speech while using the new dialect. Don't limit your new accent to the target script. If you do, you are apt to be very mechanical and never create the sense that you are a real person who actually talks this way.

## **ACTING WITH AN ACCENT STANDARD BRITISH**

(Second Edition)

### **LESSON ONE:**

#### **BRITISH RESONANCE or MUSCULAR SPEECH IMPULSE**

The first step in creating a British dialect is to make an overall change in the resonance features of the voice. As I explain on the tape, Standard British speech focuses its tone or resonance in the front part of the mouth--between the lips and in front of the teeth. Contributing drastically to this new resonance is a distinctly different speech muscularity. Standard American speech centers most of its muscle work in the middle part of the tongue. British Standard, by contrast, requires much more work in the muscle groups of the lips and front face.

Follow the tape through the series of exercises for generating the new resonance away from the mid-mouth focus of American speech and toward the more frontal British muscularity by:

1. visualizing the change in tone focus and feeling a change in the tissue vibration,
2. gliding the tongue-tip and lips forward at the onset of each new sound, and
3. activating the front-face muscles through a dilation of the nostrils.

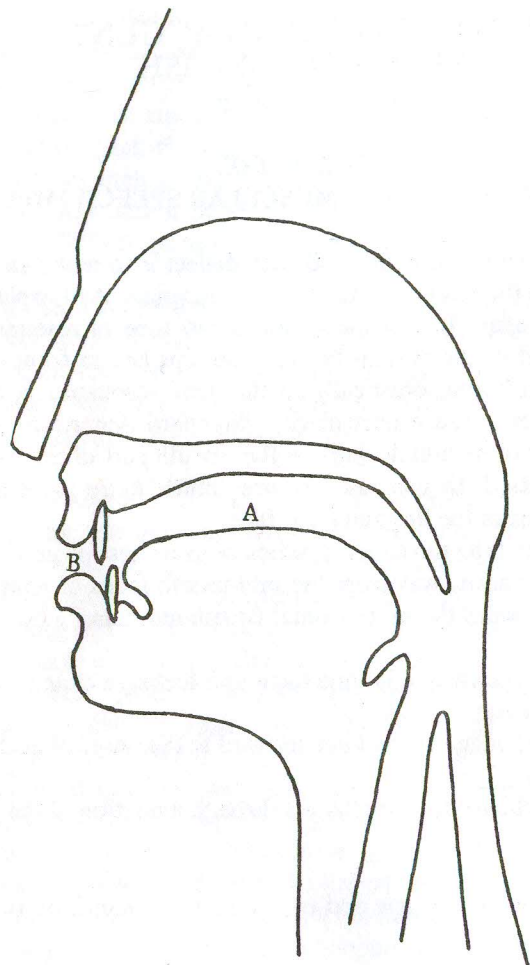
Finally, follow the tape and try the new resonance on the following sentence:

*THE CAT IS IN THE HOUSE.*

### **LESSON TWO:**

#### **PRONUNCIATION CHANGES RELATED TO RESONANCE**

The following vowel substitutions are extensions of the resonance shift you just learned. Repeat the words and sentences after hearing them on the tape. Don't just imitate the new pronunciations. Create the new muscularity, and let the British vowels grow naturally out of that change in speech impulse.



Points of Resonance  
Focus for Standard  
American and Standard  
British Dialects

A -- Standard American

B -- Standard British

ə

### A. THE "LONG-O" as in GROW

IPA: [oʊ] becomes [əoʊ].  
LESSAC: #21 becomes N<sup>4</sup> followed by #21.

- no, go, home, alone, grow, solo, notion, explode*  
 - *Slowly the ocean rolled home.*  
 - *I wrote to Joe, hoping he would grow up.*  
 - *The rowboat slowly floated over the ocean.*  
 - *The oboe and cello sat alone, woefully echoing tone for tone.*

Now here are a few additional drills for the "LONG-O" vowel which aren't recorded on the tape.

- \* *Long ago people slept on the cold earth.*  
 \* *He was bloated from eating a roasted tomato.*  
 \* *Of all the folks I know, he is the most hopeful.*  
 \* *I told Joan that the snow is flown in from Ohio.*  
 \* *Smoke rolled out the open end of the hotel window.*

ɒ

### B. THE "SHORT-O" as in KNOWLEDGE

IPA: [ɑ] becomes [ɒ].  
LESSAC: #5 becomes #4.

- hot, got, honor, common, orange, shop, lopsided, Bobby, contest*  
 - *Bob had the option of sleeping on the cot.*  
 - *Sir Lancelot traveled nonstop to Camelot.*  
 - *The obstinate opera singer was preoccupied.*

- coffee, lofty, cloth, moth, lost, moss, wrong, song*  
 - *Lost boys often sell cloth.*  
 - *The dog was wrong to kill the moth.*  
 - *The loft smelled of strong coffee.*

And, some "SHORT-O" words are spelled with the letter "A."

- what, want, wash, watch*  
 - *What do you want to watch while doing the washing up?*

Now here are a few additional drills for the "SHORT-O" which aren't recorded on the tape.

- \* *He occupied the gondola of the golf cart.*
- \* *The rocket shot toward the opposite air lock.*
- \* *Oxygen is commonly found in air pockets.*
- \* *Becket was positive about the honor of God.*
- \* *Move the fox from the rocks to the bog.*

### C. THE "BROAD-AW" as in BROUGHT

IPA: [ɔ] becomes [ɔ:].  
 LESSAC: #3 rounds tightly.

*Paul, autumn, awful, flawless, call, wall, walk, talk, thought, brought*

- *The tall author walked awkwardly.*
- *He stalked the ball, then vaulted.*
- *He thought he saw the autumn leaves falling.*
- *The awful sauce made Paul pause.*
- *He bought a shawl and brought it home from the mall.*

And now here are a few more drills for the "Broad-AW" vowel.

- \* *The awkward, awful, tall man walked home.*
- \* *He stalked the ball and then vaulted down the hall.*
- \* *The cat crawled over the lawn with its hurt paw.*
- \* *You taught me to vault flawlessly without falling.*

### LESSON THREE: BRITISH PITCH GLIDES

Follow the instructions on the tape for properly using upward pitch glides on the following sentences. Of course, the underlined words need not always be stressed. They serve as examples of possible pitch glides in these sentences.

- *I just don't know.*
- *I am not going to argue with you.*
- *Don't lose your heads in the Tower of London.*
- *He gave an incredible speech at Hyde Park Corner.*

Now follow the instructions on the tape for using downward glides on some of the words of the National Anthem of the United Kingdom.

*God save our gracious Queen.  
 Long live our noble Queen.  
 God save the Queen.  
 Send her victorious,  
 Happy and glorious.  
 Long to Reign over us.  
 God save the Queen.*

### LESSON FOUR: MORE CHANGES IN VOWEL PRONUNCIATION

#### A. "SHORT-I" ENDINGS as in EVERY<sup>I</sup>

IPA: [i] becomes [ɪ]  
 LESSAC: y becomes N<sup>2</sup>

When English words end in the letters "Y" or "LY," standard American speakers use a "LONG-E" sound. Standard British speakers, however, use a "SHORT-I."

- Mary, mostly, pretty, twenty, thirty, foggy, lovely*
- *Everybody has the ability to be mighty.*
  - *Frankly, that's a thorny path.*
  - *Generally, Mr. Hornsby's parties are lovely.*

If the final "Y" runs right into a word beginning with a vowel, you won't be able to soften the sound quite as much. Follow the samples on the tape:

- *Mary is here.*
- *He's very active.*
- *some lovely apples*

And now a few extra sentences with the "Y" and "LY" endings:

- \* *Mary moved the heavy copy of Shakespeare.*

- \* *Money earned faithfully should be given to the needy.*
- \* *I worry about cloudy weather and stormy skies.*
- \* *He told a scary fairy story that was set in another country.*

## B. "SHORT-ARY" as in NECESS<sup>I</sup>ARY

IPA: [ɛri] and [ɔri] occasionally become [rɪ].  
 LESSAC: N<sup>3</sup>+R+y and #3+R+y become R+N<sup>2</sup>

In American speech, words ending in "ARY" and "ORY" stress the "A" or "O" vowel and end in a "LONG-E." In standard British speech, the "A" or "O" syllable all but disappears, and the final vowel softens to "SHORT-I."

- necessary, commissary, secretary, ordinary*
- *Was that revolutionary statement necessary?*
  - *Many missionaries come from Salisbury Cathedral.*
  - *The commissary has extraordinary food categories.*

And a few more drills:

- \* *She was a very satisfactory apothecary.*
- \* *Is it ordinary for him to be so contrary?*
- \* *Ordinary pay is not satisfactory for good secretaries.*
- \* *The revolutionary leader said some extraordinary things.*

## C. The "SHORT-A" SHIFT as in GLASS<sup>α</sup>

IPA: [æ] occasionally becomes [ɑ].  
 LESSAC: #6 becomes #5.

As discussed on the tape, this change takes place only when the vowel comes immediately before a limited number of consonants or consonant clusters.

### 1. Before the F sound as in:

*after, laugh, half, calf*

MAJOR EXCEPTIONS: *caffeine, saffron, sapphire*

### 2. Before the S sound as in:

*fast, last, rascal, repast, pass*

MAJOR EXCEPTIONS: *gastric, hassle, tassel* (although "castle" does change)

### 3. Before the voiceless TH as in:

*bath, pathway, wrath*

MAJOR EXCEPTIONS: *catholic, mathematics, catheter, cathode*

### 4. Before the NS sound combination as in:

*dance, chancellor, Lancelot, France*

MAJOR EXCEPTIONS: *fancy, cancer, romance*

### 5. Before the NT sound combination as in:

*advantage, plant, chant, can't*

MAJOR EXCEPTIONS: *banter, fantasy, fantastic, tantalize, ranting*

### 6. Occasionally before the ND sound combination as in:

*commander, demand, slander*

MAJOR EXCEPTIONS: (Remember, most of the ND words do not make the change.) *grand, stand, hand, land, etc.*

### 7. And in these isolated words:

*banana, example, sample, soprano, ranch & branch (both optional)*

Try these sentences where most of the "SHORT-A" vowels do broaden to "AH."

- *The rascal chancellor demanded the castle.*
- *At last, the commander's repast is half ready.*
- *I just can't ask her to dance.*

Now here are some words and sentences where the vowel does not change into the "AH."

- *can, hand, bat, admire, sandwich, stand, grand*
- *My batting hand soaks in a vat of apple cider.*
- *Stan and Joanne sat in back of the bank instead of standing.*

In the next group, the "SHORT-A" shifts are underlined.

- That man is dancing divinely.
- Last night the cat transferred the kittens to the back room.
- He comes from a class of radical rascals.
- Ask any bashful man to dance and accept his answer.

And now here are a few more sentences which are not recorded on the tape. Again, the vowels which are underlined are the ones which do change to the "AH."

- \* The soprano laughed as she shattered the glass.
- \* The passengers and baggage were trapped in the alcove.
- \* Pam made an ample snack of the wax apples.
- \* Lady Astor handed the annual to the commanding admiral.
- \* Ask any bashful man in Alabama and accept his answer.
- \* The huddled masses sang the National Anthem.
- \* Let's have a lamb and ham sandwich.
- \* Sam rammed the flag into the anthill.
- \* During the disaster the master commanded the castle.
- \* The staff has a rash of bad habits.

#### D. THE "Y-OO" GLIDE as in TUESDAY

IPA: [ u ] occasionally becomes [ ju ].  
 LESSAC: #1 can become Y + #1.

As happens in some elevated American dialects, the English insert a gliding "y" sound before the "HARD-OO" vowel after certain consonants and when the vowel is not spelled with a "Double-O."

duke, duel, due, neutral, nuclear, news, Tuesday, tune, tunic, lubricate, ludicrous, lunatic

#### LESSON FIVE: THE R-DROP as in MOTHER

When "R" follows a vowel, the English drop off the actual glide sound of the "R," leaving only the vowel or diphthong stem. Listen carefully to the tape for the proper style of "R-dropping."

runner, player, helper, sweeter, heavier  
 - The runner staggered over the hill and became a walker.  
 - My mother, father, sister, and brother thank you

earth, word, work, curse, thirsty, burn  
 - Ernest was very dirty and thirsty.  
 - Searching for the curse words was hard work.

star, car, alarm, hard, march  
 - He parked the car down in the yard by the barn.  
 - Arthur played cards in the cardinal's garden.

four, door, chores, more, important  
 - The exhaust that poured forth caused sore throats.  
 - At a quarter to four the sportsmen adorned the shore.

clear, beer, here, tears, career  
 - Never fear; the wheel to steer is near the gear box.  
 - I'm sincere about wanting the deer to appear next year.

hair, pair, barely, everywhere, sacred  
 - Where did the rare polar bear go?  
 - He carefully prepared to go upstairs.

sure, cure, endure, secure  
 - Are you sure you can endure the long tour?  
 - Can you insure that the poor man can cure his headache?

Now try these additional sentences for the dropping of the "R-shading."

- \* The burglar and his helper stirred up such a clamor
- \* This summer went faster and further than last.
- \* Herman was the first to win thirty games.
- \* He searched the world for a perfect curve.
- \* He disembarked from the sparkling new car.
- \* Father Charles argues about the guard's identity card.
- \* Fourteen bored sportsmen adorned the shore.
- \* More and more support came forth for the orphans' party.
- \* Pay your fare, then tell the driver where to stop.
- \* If you're scared, be prepared to run downstairs.

- \* *The earring fell clear of the nearby pool.*
- \* *Be sincere my dear; it's a queer world.*
- \* *The cure for polio makes Salk's name endure*
- \* *I'm secure that velour will endure.*

### R-GLIDES as in **THERE IS**

Between vowels, the "R" either returns to its full pronunciation or it becomes a quick "tap," much like the sound of a soft "D."

- very, sorry, miracle, carry, narrow*
- *sore at me*
  - *a pair of socks*
  - *I prefer it.*
  - *the year after*

### LESSON SIX: ISOLATED SOUND CHANGES

In most American dialects, speakers do not fully explode the sound of the letter "T." In particular, be careful not to substitute a "D" when the "T" falls between two vowels, as in **WRITER**.

- matter, later, sitting, better, after*
- *The beautiful British writer scattered the letters.*

Now let's look at some words which simply have pronunciations of their own within British dialect. These words don't follow any of the rules; they simply are what they are.

- *again & against* (usually pronounced with "LONG-A")
- *been* (usually pronounced like the word "bean")
- *clerk* (pronounced like the name "Clark" but with an "R-drop")
- *figure* (as if it were spelled "f-i-g-a")
- *garage* (tapping the "R" and stressing the first syllable)
- *either & neither* (usually pronounced with "LONG-I")
- *process* (with a "LONG-O")
- *hostile, missile, etc.* (pronounced with "LONG-I")
- *laboratory* (stressing the second syllable)

- *tomatoes* (with an AH instead of a "LONG-A")
- *weekend* (stressing the second syllable)

### LESSON SEVEN: COACHED DRILL

Here are the marked transcripts of the passages you'll hear in Lesson #7 of the tape. All of the important pronunciation changes are indicated using the same shorthand symbols I demonstrated earlier in the manual.

#### AN IMPORTANT MESSAGE FOR DIALECT ACTORS

<sup>a</sup>MOST ACTORS ~~FORGET~~ THE REST OF THEIR <sup>a</sup>CRAFT  
WHEN ATTEMPTING DIALECT ROLES. THEIR <sup>a</sup>PURPOSE  
BECOMES "PUTTING <sup>D</sup>ON THE ENGLISH ACCENT"  
RATHER THAN CREATING <sup>a</sup>MOMENT-TO-MOMENT AC-  
TIONS AND REACTIONS OF A REAL PERSON WHO HAS  
:  
ALWAYS <sup>a</sup>SPOKEN WITH ENGLISH MUSCLE IMPULSES,  
INTONATION, AND <sup>a</sup>WORD PRONUNCIATIONS. I FIND IT  
NECESSARY <sup>I</sup>TO REMIND EVEN THE FINEST ACTORS TO  
REMEMBER THE OTHER FUNDAMENTALS: TO DIS-  
COVER THE SAME ACTIONS, BEATS, UNITS (WHATEVER <sup>D</sup>  
TERMINOLOGY YOU'VE USED FOR IT) AND SIMPLY <sup>I</sup>  
PLAY THOSE <sup>a</sup>MOMENTS THROUGH THE NEW SPEECH <sup>j</sup>  
REFLEXES. IT'S PERFECTLY SATISFACTORY <sup>I</sup>TO RETURN  
WHENEVER <sup>I</sup>NECESSARY TO AN AMERICAN ACCENT TO



HELP YOU DISCOVER <sup>ə</sup> THOSE <sup>ə</sup> MOMENTS. THEN YOU SHOULD REDISCOVER <sup>ə</sup> THE SAME <sup>ə</sup> OR <sup>ə</sup> SIMILAR <sup>ə</sup> MOMENTS WITH THE NEW, PHYSICAL TRAITS OF ENGLISH SPEECH.

Now follow the tape and try the variations on the Standard British dialect which are demonstrated with the following lines from the Gilbert & Sullivan operetta PATIENCE.

WHEN I FIRST PUT THIS UNIFORM ON,  
 I SAID AS I LOOKED IN THE GLASS,  
 "IT'S ONE TO A MILLION  
 THAT ANY CIVILIAN  
 MY FIGURE AND FORM WILL SURPASS.  
 GOLD LACE HAS A CHARM FOR THE FAIR,  
 AND I'VE PLENTY OF THAT, AND TO SPAKE.  
 WHILE A LOVER'S PROFESSIONS,  
 WHEN UTTERED IN HESSLANS,  
 ARE ELOQUENT EVERYWHERE!"  
 A FACT THAT I COUNDED UPON,  
 WHEN I FIRST PUT THIS UNIFORM ON.

HAVE AT IT WITH YOUR  
 STANDARD BRITISH DIALECT!