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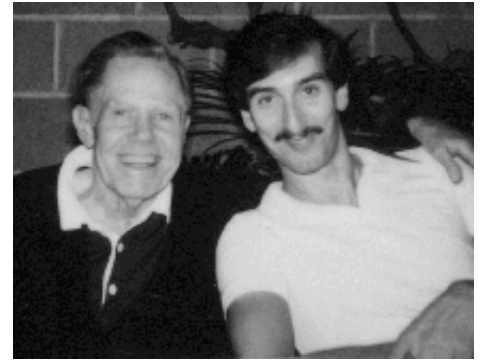
## Voice Acting 101

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So you want to be a voice actor? Looks easy, right? Getting paid to act silly is actually very serious and difficult work. I've been a voice actor since the age of 12, worked in New York radio theater from age 22, studied voice acting with the great Daws Butler for 12 years, and I'm here to tell you some of what you need to know. To assist me, I have solicited the comments of some of my talented colleagues: Joe Alaskey, Bob Bergen, Greg Burson, Corey Burton, Nancy Cartwright, June Foray, Lee Richard Harris, David Kaye, Stephanie Morganstern, and Phil Proctor.

### Real Acting

Most of the actors quoted in this article also trained with Daws Butler, and they all learned from him first and foremost that voice acting is *real* acting, not just "doing funny voices." This is very important to keep in mind. Characters should be real, no matter how cartoony the style is. In my radio cartoon series, for example, *Willoughby and the Professor*, I played all the roles, sometimes a dozen or more per show--from a one year-old baby named Bub and a 12 year-old boy named Willoughby, to the 60 year old Professor. None of these characters were just "voices"; they were flesh and blood people, fully realized in the script, in my head, and in the final performance.



Joe Bevilacqua (right), with mentor Daws Butler.

Bob Bergen, the present day voice of Porky Pig, comments that, "The call that I get most often is, 'I want to work in cartoons but I'm not an actor,' or 'I don't want to be an actor.' A person with this perspective will never work. In this business, they could care less if you can do great voices. It's the acting that gets the job, it is definitely a skill and a craft that takes time to cultivate." he adds.



David Kaye with the characters he voices.

David Kaye, the voice of Megatron, has similar sentiments. He says, "The first thing you've got to do if you want to get into cartoons or animation or voice work is take some acting classes.' Study the classics, because that is where everything comes from." Kaye recalls that, "I didn't start getting a lot of animation [work] until I started doing theater. I went to the four-year program at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts in Los Angeles. It wasn't until then that I could really go into an audition and create a character."

### Getting Started

Recalling his start in voice-overs, Bob Bergen states that, "I wanted to be Porky Pig since I was about five years old. That's what I told my parents I wanted to be when I grew up. I called Hanna-Barbera and I said, 'How do I do it?' At that time, they didn't hire kids, like they do now. Hanna-Barbera sent me to Bob Lloyd, who's got a company called The Voice Casters, one of the biggest voice casting companies in Los Angeles. Bob referred me to teachers, and I studied with everyone."

Nancy Cartwright is one of Daws Butler's most talented and successful students. She plays Bart Simpson on *The Simpsons*, and many other roles in cartoons, as well as on stage and on camera; these range from *The Snorks* and *Cheers* in the 1980s to recent TV movies and a one-woman stage show, *In Search of Fellini*. "My training," says Nancy, "started when I was a kid and I performed in theater. I got my confidence, and recognized an ability I had to make people laugh. I was learning by doing it." Anyone who thinks cartoon voice actors can't act, should see Nancy in her superb one-woman show.

### Practice Makes Perfect

Veteran actor, writer and producer, Phil Proctor recalls the transition from stage to voice overs, in his case from *Firesign Theater* to *Rugrats*. "I had to learn how to accommodate my own eccentric skills to the rather restricted demand of a particular vision, or often lack of vision, in order to create whatever it was that the client ultimately wanted to hear."

Joe Alaskey, one of several actors who now voices many of the Warner Bros. characters, recalls one of his early lessons, when "Friz Freleng scouted me from my stand-up act in the late 70s. He critiqued my work over the phone, telling me to keep working at it, and to prepare for the future. I started saturating myself in Warner Bros. cartoons, listening like never before, practicing every day to improve their unique sounds and the myriad of nuances in personality. I'm still at it today."

### Agents & Demos

To get work as a voice actor, you must have an agent. Casting directors will not even consider you if you are not represented. (In the US, you can get a list of agent from AFTRA and SAG, the two actors' unions.) Equally important is that you really should live where the jobs are; in North America, this means Los Angeles, where most of the cartoon voice work is cast and recorded. Some actors such as David Kaye and Stephanie Morganstern are based in Canada, but they are exceptions. No one will hire you if you live in New Jersey or Texas, no matter how talented you are. When a casting call comes, you need to be there, sometimes within the hour.

In order to get a good agent, you need a great demo tape. Bob Bergen feels, "As far as the demo tape process goes, I don't believe in telling a story. Each segment should sound like it's a clip from a cartoon, where your character is involved and doing some kind of action. You should never repeat a voice on your demo tape. Each clip should have a totally different scene; perhaps one is jet fighter pilot, another a nerdy kid trying to ask a girl out, but scenes that contrast. You want to leave the listener asking for more. The average length of a demo tape is two-and-a-half minutes. I recommend one-and-a-half, because you are asking someone to take one-and-a-half minutes of their life for your life. And chances are you are one of 20 or 30 tapes they have to listen to that day."

### How To Audition

Auditioning is perhaps the most difficult part of an actor's life. You will be rejected most of the time, and will need to get used to this. You should learn to enjoy the process, because you will be auditioning much more than you will be working. There are a few ways to make this experience a fruitful one.

David Kaye points out the importance of showing your unique skills. "When I went in to audition for the Megatron voice," he notes, "I had just finished a Shakespeare workshop, and I pulled from some of what I had been studying. I learned the Laban method, and used it a lot when I auditioned for cartoons. It is based on different 'weights' you give a line reading. For example, instead of screaming, 'Don't ever do that to me again!', you can use a light weight, and softly, but powerfully say the line, which is more menacing than just outright shouting."

"I do full-bodied performances," Joe Alaskey says, "with expressions to match, just like Mel [Blanc]. I'm not just concentrating on my voice, though that's where the performance is concentrated; I try to become a cartoon--body, soul, mind and voice (not always in that order)--and then make my selections for the readings, of which there is usually only one 'right' one."



Nancy Cartwright.



Phil Proctor.

June Foray, best known as the voices of Rocky the Flying Squirrel and Granny in the *Sylvester & Tweety* cartoons, feels that you must always observe your surroundings, and draw from what you see and hear in your life when auditioning. "When I as working for Chuck [Jones] on *The Curiosity Shop*, I was the aardvark, and that was easy. For the giraffe, I did a very haughty type woman, and then came the elephant; I thought, 'What can I do for the elephant that would be almost incongruous and yet acceptable?' Well, my husband and I were at a party, and there was a very heavysset lady chatting, and her voice was just a tiny, sweet little voice with very high tones. I listened to her and thought, 'That is the elephant!' It was a contradiction in terms, but the voice was just perfect."

"When I landed the part of Bart Simpson," explains Nancy Cartwright, "I wasn't even called in for that part. I was originally called in for Lisa, but I couldn't get a hook on her. 'I can't do her,' I said. But I had taken the time out in the lobby to look at Bart's audition and I said, 'Aha, I can do that!' I only gave them one voice, one concept, and I was hired on the spot."

### Developing A Voice

Voice actors today are faced with a number of stumbling blocks to creating truly original character voices. The studios want the familiar, not the new. Most of the great voices actors, such as Mel Blanc, Daws Butler, and Paul Frees are gone now, and the studios need sound-alikes to keep their cartoon franchises going.

Joe Alaskey explains that, "Revivifying the classic Warner Bros. voices is tremendous fun, but it isn't easy. The responsibility of doing all the voices for *Marvin The Martian in the Third Dimension* was a white-knuckler, the sessions were ongoing for over a year (but worth it!). But doing a more or less original voice such as Stinkie on *Casper* is no less intense an experience."

Greg Burson, who voices many classic characters such as Yogi the Bear and Bugs Bunny, studies those who did the original voices and how they spoke normally. "People leave road maps," he says. "It depends on the configuration in the voice box. Yogi came pretty quickly to me. I do the early Yogi, because that's the one I grew up with and love. Bugs is much harder. To get Bugs right took me a year. I do the Bugs of the 1950s, as the people at Warner Bros. felt that that was when Mel was in his prime."

### Not Just a Voice

When creating original character voices, it is important to put yourself into it entirely. The physical aspects of a character are as important as the voice. When I perform my characters for my *Willoughby and the Professor* radio cartoon show, I don't just stand still in front of the microphone and speak. I put my full body into the performance just as I would on stage. People who watch me perform find it as enjoyable as hearing the finished recording. For example, I flail my arms a lot when speaking since I find that this movement gives my performance an extra "hmmph". For naïve 12-year old Willoughby, I raise my eyebrows up, open my eye as wide as I can and stand very straight. This gives me a brighter young alert sound for Willoughby. My Professor character has very large jowls but I have a thin face with no jowls, so to get a "hollow" jowl sound for him I hold the sides of my face with my thumb and forefinger and pull my cheeks out as far as I can and hold them there everytime I speak as the Professor. All good voice actors work from the physical.

"I found that when I did the voice of Witch Hazel," says June Foray, "that I would come home with a crick in my neck, because I was bending over to play the character."

"I had an innate talent and I practiced it," explains Nancy Cartwright. "I found ways to become different characters with just the subtle change of a lift of an eyebrow or the curl of your lip; those nuances can affect your voice and help mold and shape a character."

June Foray notes that, "We all have greed; we have anger; we have charity; we love; we have all sorts of emotions. Being an actor, you have to capture your own feelings, and with your proclivities for voice-changing, you can insert that wonderful human quality that you have into that character with that particular voice that you're using."

### The Recording Session

There are many types of recording sessions. Sometimes, every character is recorded separately, then edited and mixed together later by a sound engineer. This can be a very difficult way to perform, as the actor does not have the opportunity to hear how the other actors say their lines and respond naturally. Most of Mel Blanc's work on the Warner Bros. cartoons was done this way.

Another type of recording session is done by dubbing the voices during post-production, when the animation is already completed. This is perhaps the most difficult of all for an actor. Most cartoons imported from Japan are recorded this way for the English market. Stephanie Morganstern, who plays Sailor Venus on *Sailor Moon*, is an expert at this type of work.

"We use the rhythm-band technique," she explains, "which allows for a lot of precision in dubbing, especially when you're doing live action and need to match realistic lip flaps. The words you have to speak are written by hand on a transparent strip (of something like acetate) which is rolled, fast-forwarded or rewound in synch with the playing, fast-forwarding or rewinding of the videotape, and projected on a long horizontal screen above the video monitor. When the videotape is played, you can watch the images on the monitor, but your focus is on the screen above it where the words are projected, flying across from right to left at precisely the speed at which they have to be spoken. You voice each sound, gasp, scream or breath as it hits the 'speak' line to the far left of the screen. This is why the words have to be handwritten: if the character speaks fast, they are written scrunched up so they take less time to say; and if you have to stretch a sound like 'Sco-o-o-out Po-o-o- w-e-e-r!', it's written elongated so that it takes as much time to say it as it does to travel across the screen. It's very confining, as it takes one of the most important parts of expression, timing, out of your control altogether."

The best recording sessions usually are the ones in which all the actors are in the same room performing together as if it were a radio play. All of Jay Ward's cartoons, such as *Rocky and Bullwinkle*, were done this way. Mark Evanier, who wrote and voice-directed *Garfield*, also works this way. I remember sitting in on many recording sessions of *The Jetsons*, when Daws Butler, Penny Singleton, Mel Blanc, Howard Morris, and the whole cast sat in a circle and worked off each other. They encouraged, prodded, and provoked one another into great performances.

Phil Proctor remembers that, "When I did *The Smurfs* at Hanna-Barbera, it was so much fun. I went into my first session there, with Daws Butler, Alan Young, Paul Winchell, and Jack Riley; Gordon Hunt was directing. They would say, 'Oh, Phil does a wonderful English accent. Let's create a part for him.' And they would massage parts for you. It was wonderful, like the old movie studio days. It was like being part of a repertory company."

### Changing Trends

One of the current trends in the American animation industry is to cast major movie stars to voice animated characters. From Robin Williams in *Aladdin*, Tom Hanks in *Toy Story*, even *Woody Allen* in the upcoming DreamWorks feature *Antz*, these stars not only demand huge salaries, they take work away from the core group of voice actors.

"A lot had changed since I was last in it," Lee Harris states. "The casting of celebrities promotes the cartoon to adults more than it does kids. A kid watching a cartoon isn't going to jump up and down and say, 'Oh boy! It's Danny Devito doing the voice!' I read a quote from a casting person at one of the big companies that said that the days of the Mel Blancs and the Daws Butlers are gone, and that they cast well-known celebrities because they want 'real' actors as if Mel and Daws were not 'real' actors, which of course they were."

"The greatest actor I ever knew was Daws Butler," insists Greg Burson.

"They gravitate towards celebrities," said Corey Burton, "so that they have actors who have already developed a persona they can draw from to fill out the character, whereas a multi-voiced person is waiting for their idea to produce the particular voice. So they get somebody like Don Rickles coming in to *Toy Story*, and say, 'OK, Don, you're Mr. Potatohead,' and they are able to use his personality. Plus, they see it as a big marketing plus. That way they get little bits on *Entertainment Tonight* and other 'behind the scenes' TV shows. That's not bad, but it's just insulting when they completely ignore the regular voice people."

Phil Proctor talks about the difficulties of keeping up with the ever-changing business: "I've been doing it for about 25 years now, and I have gone through all the different kinds of fads of what is 'in' and what is 'out'. It's rather difficult sometimes when you just have found a niche for yourself, and then they say they don't want that anymore."



Joe Alaskey.



June Foray.

Lee Harris states that, "My goal is to have an original character on a TV series. Our generation of TV babies are making the decisions in casting, writing and directing, and we seem to have a large case of nostalgia. I'd like to be known for an original character that people would remember. I've never lost sight of that, even though everything else in the industry has changed. The way that Daws used to describe things for animation or commercials, with somebody just picking up the phone and saying, 'Hey Daws, hey Frees, hey June Foray, come over, we're doin' a cartoon.' I don't expect things to be like that again, but the 'celebrity curse', combined with 'playing it safe' with just very few established voice actors--those are the battles to be fought and we just have to keep fighting."

### **Just Do It**

Show business is a very tough business. Once you decide to join the ranks of unemployed actors, you must resign yourself to the possibility that you may never make it. Only those who stick it out for the long haul ever succeed. You should not set time limits on yourself. This is very stressful and restricting. I know plenty of actors who have said to me, "If I don't make it in five years I'm going back to Kansas." I say, "If that's the case, you should have stayed in Kansas to begin with." To me, acting is a life, not a career. You either live it or you don't. If you do live it, you will be willing to pursue it for the rest of your life and enjoy every minute of it. The process of learning, growing, improving, auditioning, creating--that should be your primary focus, not becoming rich and famous.

There you have it. Study long and hard, learn to act, make a short but stunning demo tape, get an agent, audition, audition, audition, study some more, audition some more, and somewhere along the line you may just find yourself the next Bart Simpson or Yogi Bear.

So now you know the real story, not a sugarcoated, Hollywood glamour version of life as a voice actor. Still want to be one? I have the number of a good therapist.

*Joe Bevilacqua* ([joebev@ibm.net](mailto:joebev@ibm.net)) is a Los Angeles-based voice actor, writer, producer, and director. His radio plays have been aired on public radio stations throughout the United States. He is currently working on a comedy Web site, featuring his original online animated cartoon, "Barnaby and Max, Radio Repairmen", which will soon appear on the Internet. voices can be heard at the following Web site: <http://www.cybergraphix-anim.com/staff/joebev>

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