

# BACKSTAGE

THE ACTOR'S RESOURCE

> Section A

SPOTLIGHT  
on

## SPEECH Diction voiceover

PHOTOS BY BLAKE GARDNER



Actor Vanessa Marshall in a voiceover session for *The Grim Adventures of Billy & Mandy*

### In this special section:

- Getting specific with accents and dialects
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Vanessa Marshall voices Irwin, left, on *The Grim Adventures of Billy & Mandy*

# CHARACTER VOICES

SOUND ADVICE ON SOUND BITES FOR ANIMATION, COMMERCIALS, PROMOS, AND VIDEO GAMES

BY DAVID SHEWARD

**V**anessa Marshall is a 30-ish white actor. If you were casting her for a commercial, you would immediately type her as a soccer mom. There's no way she would ever get to play a nerdy little African-American boy. But that's an apt description of one of her current gigs: Irwin, the character she provides the voice for on Cartoon Network's *The Grim Adventures of Billy & Mandy*.

"He's kind of a geeky little boy," explains Marshall, who also has worked on such animated fare as *The Simpsons*, *Justice League*, and *Ben 10*. "When they first presented the drawing to me, he had big, fat glasses. In the black-and-white drawing, I couldn't tell that he was African-American. So essentially, I did a geeky little boy's voice. About two weeks into the production, they said, 'The reason we hired you is you didn't go the stereotypical route and do some sort of urban voice for Irwin. We really appreciated your cutting-edge, politically correct voice without any sort of urban affectation. We respect you for that.' And I said, 'What are you talking about?' Then I watched the cartoon and saw that he was African-American."

Marshall's ironic anecdote is typical of the kind of opportunities that exist in the world of voice casting. Because the public will only hear the character, it doesn't matter what the actor looks like. But how do you create a character like Irwin—or Homer Simpson or Batman or Daffy Duck—with only your voice? And how do you create a character for a 60- or 30-second commercial spot? Back Stage spoke with six leading voice actors about creating flesh and blood out of sound bites.

Marshall explains the genesis of Irwin: "I had a friend who constantly played computer games. He was about 6-foot-7. Despite his size, he was very gentle and quiet. I thought, 'I'll do this guy as a little boy.' The creators thought that was perfect.

"When I do other auditions, I mold people that I know with celebrities, like Ethel Merman or Florence Henderson," she continues. "The wackier the combination, usually the more unique the characters are, rather than stereotypical creations, like the 'Valley Girl' or 'Southern Girl.' They're a little bit more specific that way. Once I combined Marlon Brando with Johnny Carson. Even if you don't book the job, they will absolutely commend you on the originality of your wacky characters."

Actor Dave Walds, whose voiceover credits include Hyundai, AT&T Yellow Pages, NBC's *The Biggest Loser*, and documentaries for VH1 and The History Channel, is also a fan of combining voices. "You should be like a sponge and absorb every voice you hear," he says. "You can create hybrids of animated characters. Have fun with it; play with it. Unlike on-camera, when you're playing an actual person, in animation you can really let go."

Actor Carlos Alazraqui explains his mix-and-match creation for the voice of Mr. Crocker, the mean-spirited teacher on Nickelodeon's *The Fairly OddParents*: "It's got a little Gene Wilder and a little Montgomery Burns, Homer's boss on *The Simpsons*. You should listen to voices around that are interesting to you and emulate them. Pay attention to what turns you on—either a comedy sketch on *SNL* or your neighbor who's Armenian."

"Once you've got the job, be consistent within the character," continues Alazraqui, who has created characters on *Rocko's Modern Life*, *Camp Lazlo*, and *The Life & Times of Juniper Lee*. "You should be comfortable with the director enough to ask, 'Hey, can you play back that character?' if you haven't done it in a while. Be comfortable asking questions."

The creator of the character is usually the best person to offer insights into how it should sound. Joe Murray, the cre-

ator and executive producer of *Rocko's Modern Life* and *Camp Lazlo*, collaborated with Alazraqui on the sound needed for the title characters. "Joe knew that Lazlo had to have a sort of innocence about him like Rocko had," says Alazraqui. "If you watch the cartoon, you'll notice that Lazlo is a little bit sweeter than Rocko. But it's basically Rocko's voice in the same octave without the Australian accent."

For Marshall, too, it's about getting to the core of the character. "I go with the essence of what Irwin is," she says. "I don't think about his parents or what he ate for lunch. I get in the room with these lunatics who are on the show with me, and then we all weave this ridiculous episode. We all laugh a lot. It's a wonderful job."

Marshall also works extensively on TV promos and commercials, as well as movie trailers. Her voice has sold such products as Washington Mutual, Propel Fitness Water, American Express cards, and Dial soap. "With movie trailers it's sort of like the voice is a heat-seeking missile or submarine just beneath the surface," she explains. "It plows along quietly beneath the story that's being told with the images. I need to tell the story of the film while allowing the images to do their job, but have a subtle influence on the viewer. With promos, one has to find a way to authentically have enthusiasm for whatever programs they're promoting and yet not have it sound too sell-y. In a world where we're at war with Iraq, I think the last thing people want to hear is some idiot yelling at them from the television, telling them what to watch. It's sort of selling without selling and locating the genuine enthusiasm within myself for whatever that program is. The same is true of commercials."

For advertising work, Marshall feels that standup comedy helps develop a strong viewpoint and attitude, a quality that comes through in the voice. "Standup comedy's influence on advertising is pretty massive," she maintains. "The standup comic is the court jester. In a weird way, the comic has the courage to tell the truth about what he or she sees. In that way, they lead the culture. I have found many of my friends who do standup comedy have a succinct point of view. Whenever they bring that point of view to voiceover copy, it stands out and the product information is communicated. But it's wrapped in a package that commands respect from the listener."

"It's simply the comic giving their opinion, laying it at the feet of the listener, and they can take it or leave it," she continues. "That's opposed to the 1950s, when people wanted to hear their father tell them—in a very melodic way—what they should be buying. [Now] they want a friend to tell them what they've observed in a funny way."

Marshall calls this a "shrug read": "What I mean by that is, I kind of shrug my shoulders and say, 'Diet Coke.' It's like I'm saying, 'Look, I'm not telling you to go out and buy Diet Coke, but this is what I've noticed. You can take it or leave it; I don't really care. But I've found the good news about Diet Coke, and I'm having a great time over here.' It's not selling. I got that direction once. The director said, 'I don't believe you. Just shrug your shoulders when you say it.' I did that and he said, 'That's it!' and I booked the job."

## PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

Wendy Braun's voice has touted the wonders of Sea World, the convenience of Home Depot, and the tastiness of Aunt



Wendy Braun

Jemima's pancake products, among many other jobs. She explains reading the commercial script in terms of an acting exercise: "In every piece of commercial copy, there's a problem and a solution," she asserts. "That's what advertising is. You have to look at that way. The problem is usually right up front: It's usually you're not using their product. It's knowing that and setting that up with your voice. A lot of times now it's not about selling the product. It's not a hard sell. For me, it's about selling emotions. We buy something because it makes us feel a certain way. If buying an iPod makes you feel hip and sexy, they want that to come across in the ads, not just the low price."

"You have to feel the emotion," she continues. "You have to go on the ride of the copy. Nowadays, commercials are 30-second movies, and voiceover copy is the same way. It's much more sophisticated and subtle. They're not just making a hard sell. Even on radio, you're creating images, not selling price points. I create emotions by making images in my mind. When I'm doing Sea World and I have to talk about Shamu and the roller coaster, I have to be in the park. It will help my read if I can visualize everything I'm talking about."

Braun emphasizes the importance of comprehending the copy in detail: "I want to understand every single word I'm reading. If there is some line that the copywriter wrote and I'm thinking, 'I know this is a joke, but I don't get it,' I will ask what they mean. I also try to find out from the copywriter what are the main points they wanted hit. I will always do a read and say to them, 'If there are certain areas we need to



drive home, let me know.' Sometimes you are hearing the director and the copywriter just on the phone, in which case you really have to listen. A lot of actors will hear a direction and then read the line the exact same way without taking in the direction and adjusting accordingly. Some actors get offended by directors giving them a line reading. I never get offended by that. It's their client. They know what they want. They've been working on it for much longer than you've been on it.

"Voiceover is the actor's best-kept secret," she says. "Not only because you can do it in your pajamas, but it doesn't matter what you look like, and you can do it for life. It's something an actor can do no matter what's going on theatrically. You can do it quickly, and you can do it anywhere. I was working on an episode of *Lost* in Hawaii, and Dell was able to get me a studio. On my one day off, I was able to do a Dell job. I worked on-camera in *Big Momma's House II* in New Orleans, and I had jobs that, I was able to work at night doing jobs. It can travel anywhere with you. With the technology today, you don't lose out on the job because you're not there."

Braun opines that, aside from getting technologically up to date, the key to success in the commercial world is being uniquely and strongly yourself. "It's not about being anyone else," she elaborates. "It's about being the most you, so no one else can be you. Actors are always reading the copy and going, 'What do they want? I wonder what they're looking for.' What they're looking for is the person who is the most themselves and is confident in that. And if they like you, they like you; if they don't, they don't. But at least you went in with your strongest take. There are various levels of that, whether it's the funniest you or the sciest you. I'm also the voice of Spice on Demand [an adult pay-per-view channel]. I made sure I was wearing heels when I did that job. One thing you can do is to bring right the shoes. I find that when I'm in heels and I stand a certain way, I definitely will physically become the character. They want you to come in and be the character. They don't want you to 'act' it. They're hiring the person who just exudes the most of the quality they want. It's not who you become to play a character, it's who the character becomes because you play it."

"When the ad agency hears the voice of someone who knows who they are," Marshall echoes, "they are more likely to entrust the performer with a campaign that's costing them millions of dollars." To develop the most distinct point of view, Marshall and Braun also recommend performing standup. "Standup really helps to hone your comedic chops," says Braun. Agrees Marshall, "Friends of mine who start doing standup comedy, their booking ratio goes sky-high." Walsh concurs about establishing a clear viewpoint, advising performers to keep in mind, "We're all about brands. As the media world continues to splinter, the distribution platform is key—meaning your voice has to stand out amidst much chatter. You need a signature voice, a signature read. You have to think, 'What is it in my voice that is different? It's all in the intention, and it's about truth, particularly with a product.'"

For commercials, Walsh deconstructs copy to make it real for him. He explains, "You want to put yourself in the writer's seat, and every word in the copy has to carry the writer's intention. Take yourself to the meeting where the copy was developed. To quote a voiceover teacher of mine, Marice Tobins, 'Every word is delicate. Every word has a meaning.' You want to get the client message across in your own way. You want to get across that you love the fabric softener, or whatever it is. I always like to think I'm bringing people into the party."

Marshall takes a similar approach. "Usually when I get a piece of copy, I will look at it from an anthropological perspective," she says.

"I try to see what the client conversation is. If it's Philip Morris, I find out what Philip Morris is up against in the business world. Then I will look at what the advertising agency did to convince Philip Morris that their branding strategy would be the best one to go with. Then I'll look at what word they chose on the page and how they accomplished that goal. Then I will forget all of that and simply read the copy with all of that research

simply in the background and try to bring some sort of authenticity to why I would want to tell the listener about the product."

## DON'T FAST-FORWARD

Keeping up on commercial trends is important. "Listen to what's out there and be up on the current trends of the reads," Braun advises. "Don't fast-forward through the commercials on TiVo, but actually listen to them. Be up on technology. I have my own home studio. If it's pilot season and I can't get to my agent's office to audition for voiceover copy, then I can MP3 it from my house. You have to stay ahead of the game. I've heard there's a guy who lives on a yacht and travels the world while making a living doing voiceover."

Tom Kane doesn't live on a yacht, but he pursues his voiceover career from his home in Overland Park. From this suburb of Kansas City, he has voiced such characters as Professor Utonium on *The Powerpuff Girls*; Mr. Herriman, a giant rabbit, on *Foster's Home for Imaginary Friends*; and that diminutive Jedi master Yoda on the TV series *Star Wars: The Clone Wars*, as well as several *Star Wars* video games.

"Animators usually have a concrete idea of what they want the character to look like and sound like," Kane says. "They will actually have drawings and character descriptions which are very detailed before they will have people audition. For example, for the audition for Mr. Herriman on *Foster's Home*, they handed me a drawing and the description that said, 'A giant British bunny rabbit. Think British colonel at the peak of the Empire.' That was easy; you go back to your childhood memories of how that character would sound like from movies. Now very few people actually sound like that. But that's a specific description. The only times when you do have to create something new is when there is a character who is new, like an alien. At that point you just have to make something up. The acting challenges are different from on-camera. You don't have to worry about going too far or being too silly or extreme."

Sean Donnellan knows all about extreme voice work. In addition to commercials for Progressive Insurance, Holiday Inn Express, and Ikea, Donnellan has found work in "tons of video games." Providing the sounds for the violent world of interactive play can be demanding. "It's the closest thing to 'real' acting, because a lot of these games, even if they're very violent, they're very dramatic," Donnellan explains. "They play out more like an action or a fantasy picture than something goofy. We destroy our voices half the time, dying in these games multiple times. We get shot, stabbed, set on fire. Sometimes we can't even talk the next day because we extend ourselves so much. There is a lot of drama and emotion in the battle sequences, and you have to get yourself to an emotionally ugly place very quickly."

"From an acting standpoint," he continues, "you have to be ready when the director says, 'Your arm just got blown off,' and react accordingly, or you have to imagine what your emotional state might be like if you were in some outer-space scenario."

Donnellan explains how voice actors can get to that "emotionally ugly place" or any other place in a hurry: "A lot of times voiceover people have what they call 'pocket reads.' When in doubt, they go. 'This is my casual retail read, this is my selling read, this is my completely throw-away read, [my] dead-pan.' Within that, you build your body of pocket reads and even within that will come up with new things based on half of this idea or half of that idea. We're not re-creating the same thing every time, but if you've done a particular kind of job before, you think, 'This is what they want.' You also have to base it on how those people usually advertise—what is the style of their campaign? So it helps to pay attention to what they've done in the past. Like, Jack in the Box spots are edgier than McDonald's spots. Knowing something as far as how they advertise helps you out in your choices."

Whether for animation, commercials, trailers, or video games, strong choices are paramount. "It's not so much your voice, it's all about your read," concludes Paul Doherty of the Cunningham Escott Slevin Doherty Talent Agency, which specializes in voice work. "We all have a piano with our voices, but if you're going to have a career in voiceovers, you have to know how to play that piano in a way that fits the point of view that's being hired." <



Sean Donnellan



Tom Kane voices Yoda, left, on *Star Wars: The Clone Wars*

