

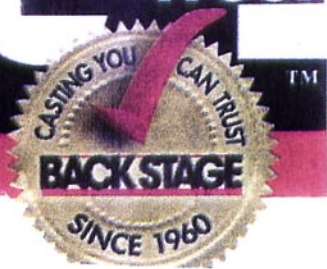
BACK

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STAGE

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THE ACTOR'S RESOURCE



Good Speech Is Colorblind

I have taught voice, speech, and dialects at the conservatory level for the past two decades, and every two or three years I invariably experience a scenario similar to this: In class one crisp autumn morning, I surveyed my graduate students to find out if any of them saw any interesting theatre or films, or if anything noteworthy happened over the weekend, to which a young African-American student replied, "I called home this weekend, and my sister answered the phone. We spoke for a while, and then she remarked that I sounded 'white.'"

A hush fell over the classroom, jaws dropped. She was one of only a handful of students of color, so I appreciated that she was comfortable enough to share. What person of color has not been confronted with the issue of being a "sellout" or sounding "white"? Back in my day the term was "Oreo," as in the cookie: black on the outside and white on the inside.

My question is, why is good speech still associated with being "white"? Does that imply that everyone who isn't white has bad speech? Does a Texas drawl make one a Republican? Does a Brooklyn dialect make you a member of the mob? Come on, people. These are regionalisms and culturalisms, not "racialisms." Why must we

Talk Back

BY DENISE WOODS

attach a stigma? Additionally, not everyone who hails from the same region or shares the same cultural background sounds the same. That's what gives America its wonderfully unique mosaic quality.

Today, in an effort to be more politically correct, casting directors and industry professionals often ask actors of color—particularly African Americans—to "make it more ethnic" or "sound more urban." We're Americans, living in a country comprising myri-

ad rich and fascinating ethnicities and cultures. So the response to casting directors should be, "Which ethnicity would you like?" Furthermore, can someone please tell me what "urban" sounds like? I was born in the heart of New York City, and I sound nothing like my friends who were born on the South Side of Chicago or my friends from Los Angeles; Oakland, Calif.; and Atlanta.

So what is "good" speech? I studied with the grande dame of classical American stage speech, Edith W. Skinner, at the Juilliard School in the 1970s. As an African-American girl from the

Lower East Side with Southern Baptist roots, my sense of speech was all over the U.S. map. I often felt a *Sybil*-like split in personality when studying classical stage speech. Duke Ellington may have felt the same way while studying classical music. Not once did I ever feel a cultural shift or a need to be anything other than who I was. I wanted to tell stories—my stories, the stories of my ancestors, Greek tragedy, Shakespeare, Molière, Lorraine Hansberry, and now August Wilson and Tupac Shakur.

I knew at an early age—thanks to my mother—the power of the spoken word. Good speech is a combination of connection to breath, clear and concise articulation, and well-organized thoughts. If dialectic rhythm in any way compromises the ability to clearly convey a thought or express an idea, then the speaker should seek help. That is not to say one cultural group requires more help than another. Good speech comes in all colors, cultures, rhythms, and regions. It's up to us to dispel these archaic, racist notions that unfortunately keep us stuck in the past.

Denise Woods is the founder of Denise Woods Studios, a state-of-the-art voice, speech, dialect, and accent-reduction studio in West Hollywood, Calif. Her past clients include Will Smith, Laurence Fishburne, Ellen Burstyn, Ken Watanabe, Rachel Weisz, Taye Diggs, and Jeffrey Wright. Woods and her vocal technique have been featured in *The New Yorker*, the *Chicago Tribune*, and *The Baltimore Sun*. For more information, visit www.speakitclearly.com.



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