

THE ANATOMY OF THE KING'S SPEECH

by **Edwin D. Reilly, Jr.**
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“This devilish device [a BBC microphone] will change everything. In the past all a king had to do was look respectable in uniform and not fall off his horse. Now we must invade people’s houses and ingratiate ourselves with them. This family has been reduced to those lowest and basest of all creatures. We have become actors.”

-Michael Gambon, speaking as King George V in “The King’s Speech”

I have long expressed a similar sentiment—that of the opening quote—to friends and colleagues. Actor, politician, and teacher, are all one profession. Politicians must convince you that they feel your pain. Professors must “perform” every day they walk into their classrooms. And actors sometimes run for office and attain one, witness Ronald Reagan, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and Clint Eastwood.

I don’t subscribe to the part that actors are the “basest of all creatures.” Good actors, I have always sensed, are very intelligent people. And there are many good ones in the film that Jean and I caught a couple of Saturdays ago at BowTie, “The King’s Speech.” This is a splendid movie, one that has received 20 Academy Award nominations, the most of any of the ten nominated for Best Picture, and I hope it wins that award in particular.

Anyone seeing the movie is bound to wonder about the accuracy of its story, one that centers on how Australian speech therapist Lionel Logue helps the Duke of York, the future King George VI, overcome his stammering in time to deliver a key radio speech in 1939. He must tell the British people that England will go to war to keep its commitment to Poland upon its invasion by Hitler. One can find audio-visual of both the real King George’s speech and Colin Firth’s rendition of it on the Web, and though the voices are quite different, the words are identical.

There really was a Lionel Logue (1880–1953); all of the film’s actors play actual people. Logue is played, magnificently, by Geoffrey Rush, nominated for best supporting actor. I think he stole the picture. And fortunately for historical accuracy, Logue’s diaries were found shortly before completion of the screenplay.

Robert Logue and his sister Alex Marshall, Lionel’s grandchildren, attended the premier of “The King’s Speech.” Alex said she was mesmerized by Rush’s interpretation of her grandfather. Robert said “I don’t think he ever swore in front of the king and he certainly never called him Bertie; you’ve got to make a film and it all comes together.” (Bertie is the diminutive of Albert, the king’s actual first name.)

What Robert is referring to is a blistering sequence of epithets that Lionel insisted that the king utter in hopes that it would force suppression of the stutter. The marbles of Demosthenes hadn’t worked. But because one offensive word, uttered loudly and repeatedly, starting with a letter that comes after E and before G (I must be careful), the film received an R rating. Necessary, I suppose, but unfortunate. Perhaps “bloody” would have been sufficient for an Englishman.

At variance with history is the movie’s build-up to its climax, King George’s speech of 1939, making it seem as though Logue needed several years to prepare Bertie for his first public speech delivered without stuttering. In fact, he needed only one. Lionel began treating the future king in 1926, and just a year later, Prince Albert and his wife visited Australia as the Duke and Duchess of York. They were the royal representatives at the opening of the provisional Parliament House in Canberra on 9 May 1927, for which Bertie gave the keynote address “resonantly and without stuttering” (according to biographer Suzanne Edgar). I forgive the ahistoric change in time sequence as being necessary to the artistic success of a great movie; there would have been much less of a “story” without it.

The stars of this film are not all human actors. If there were an award for a quick visual effect, I would give it to the recreation of the BBC radio control room of the era. In his review, Roger Ebert said that the room had a strangely oblong shape, too long one way, too narrow the other. I thought it looked spectacular.

In casting a historic movie, verisimilitude is important. By that I mean that the casting director, Nina Gold in the case at hand, should have tried her best to recruit actors who have a reasonable resemblance to the real person whom they will play. How well did she succeed?

Well, by my judgment, Colin Firth looks very much like King George VI; Guy Pearce looks like his brother, King Edward VIII ("Edward the Abdicator"); and Eve Best is a live ringer for Wallis Simpson. Geoffrey Rush is passable for Lionel Logue, though he looks older than Logue was at the time in question. But, probably because it was deemed that the movie use one more star, preferably a woman, Helena Bonham Carter was cast as King George's wife, the former Lady Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon, even though the figure and facial match is poor.

Lady Elizabeth died in 2002 at age 101. Bonham Carter died during the movie, but nobody noticed. She's been nominated for best supporting actress despite a performance that she mailed in. I hope that 14-year-old Hailee Steinfeld of "True Grit" wins that award.

One should be very careful when casting a personage whose physiognomy is well-known to the general public, such as that of Winston Churchill. As a boy who followed every day of World War II very intently, the face of Churchill is embedded in my brain. And for younger folk, if you want to know what any of the historic figures in the movie looked like, just invoke google.com, click on "images," and type a name into the search box. For "Winston Churchill," you will gain access to four million images of Churchill, or images that relate to him, in six tenths of a second. You can do the same for the actor counterparts. So try the same search for Timothy Spall, and note that he looks no more like Churchill than I do.

In every photo of Churchill (and you needn't look at all four million), his mouth is either turned upward in a pixyish grin or turned down, along with a furrowed brow. The exception is when he keeps his omnipresent cigar clenched tightly between his teeth.

In doing my research for this piece, I discovered that, like King George VI, Churchill also started life with a speech impediment. Excitedly, I told Jean about this. Once again demonstrating that she is much more perspicacious than I am as we watch TV or a movie, she said "Of course, don't you remember that 'Churchill' tells us that in the movie?"

Well, I didn't, and wondered whether I'd have to wait until the movie comes to the Scotia Cinema to verify that. But then it struck me. Could the screenplay be on the Web? Yes it is! Just say to Google "David Seidler screenplay" and you will find it, complete with the relevant exchange. Search within the script for "speech defect."

Elsewhere on the Web, I found that Churchill's problem was more of a lisp than a stutter; he had trouble with words starting with 's.' In the movie, Logue tries to help the king by having him recite the tongue twister "I have a sieve full of sifted thistles and a sieve full of unsifted thistles, because I am a thistle sifter." Perhaps Churchill cured his lisp by practicing with "She sells seashells on the sea shore."

In addition to his career as Prime Minister, Churchill was a historian, painter, and a writer so talented that he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1953, principally for his four-volume work "History of the English Speaking People" and his six-volume work "The Second World War." He was a brilliant man, but prone to streaks of poor judgment that got him into one fix after another. But whenever he got to the end of his rope, he lit up another.

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