

Newfound Respect for the Performing Arts

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Every week I tape a short commentary on engineering at our local public radio station, WILL-AM, which then distributes it across the state via the Illinois Public Radio Network. In these short spots I open my culture - engineering - to outsiders; I share the human stories behind all of this stuff around us - coffee makers, screws, Spam and plastic pop bottles to violin making and the Hammond invention of the Hammond organ. To open my culture to others, I've had to immerse myself in a wholly different culture: the performing arts.

Such a culture wasn't completely foreign to me.; my father was a theater professor and I'd spent a childhood hanging around his rehearsals, playing in the prop room, and even acting in some of his plays. In sharing my engineering culture with the public, though, the only acting I needed to do was being myself. Would this be an easy task? I had already learned the answer from my father when I was ten.

We were watching a Cary Grant movie on television; it was one of his typical light comedies. My father watched the screen carefully for a long time, then, turned to me and said "now that" - he meant Cary Grant's acting - "isn't easy." "What!" I said. "He's just being himself." My father smiled and replied "that's the hard part."

All of us, he told me, can find the emotions inside for tragedy or see the outrageousness of a farce, but how many of us can summon the elegance and nonchalance of a Cary Grant? "If we could," he reasoned, "wouldn't we use it all the time?" To drive the lesson home he compared Grant to James Garner, whose television show *The Rockford Files*, I watched religiously. "Grant and Garner", he said, "are always themselves in any role; they haven't great range, but don't underestimate how hard it is to be yourself."

And here I was, some 30 years later, prepared to be myself in front of thousands of listeners. So before I even stepped into a recording booth I got professional help. I took voice lessons. Not singing lessons, but speaking lessons. At the time I taught engineering in Pittsburgh at a university with one of the nation's best drama departments. So I hightailed it over to their building and found a voice teacher, not fully realizing that I was also entering a whole new culture.

I wanted to learn how to sound as conversational and natural as possible. This may sound odd, but think of where I tape my radio spots. I stand in a studio which looks like no room in any house. No two surfaces are parallel: the walls zig and zag and the ceiling looks like a set of steps. And it is dead silent. Until you stand in a recording studio you don't realize how much noise echoes from wooden floors and plaster walls. The only human contact I have is when my producer gives an order



over the two huge loud speakers behind me; he sits with the sound engineer in a separate room behind a glass window. And in this environment I'm to sound as natural as if I were chatting with you over a cup of coffee!

One aspect of the voice lessons I enjoyed was observing the culture differences between teaching engineering and teaching voice. Engineering programs have a

reputation as "hard" sciences; they've even been called boot camps. Yet, in comparison to voice work I find engineering classes cushy and gentle: we allow our students to make their errors in private, we don't show exams to the whole class, and we rarely have students come to the board and make mistakes in front of everyone.

As an engineer I was most comfortable with the technical aspects of voice work - exactly where should the tongue go to make an "ee" or an "I" sound - but had the greatest trouble with sounding conversational. My teacher's method wasn't technical; it was, to me, "touchy feely."

As I read aloud my teacher commanded me to "visualize the meaning of the words." I was to have pictures in my head. In one reading the phrase "dead people" appeared, and she implored, put into those two words all the meaning of James Joyce's short story "The Dead." When I said "Crete" I was to picture the movie heroine Shirley Valentine stepping onto a beach. Often, in the middle of a piece she'd stop me, shake her head and say "You've losing the meaning, you sound like a Presbyterian minister." I don't know what she had against Presbyterian ministers, but their "sing-song delivery", as she called it, was a cardinal sin to her.

After many months I began to get the hang of it. Not only did I survive these lessons, I was enriched by them. I now have a new respect for the talents, techniques, and dedication needed to succeed in the performing arts.

Bill Hammack is a University of Illinois Associate Professor in the Department of Chemical Engineering. You can enjoy his weekly commentaries on engineering and life on WILL-AM 580's Morning Edition on Tuesdays at 7:25 am and 9:25 a.m., as well as occasionally on The Afternoon Magazine.

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