

Teaching an Actor to Stutter

Tim Mackesey, CCC-SLP, BRSFD

My phone rang recently and I was asked if I wanted to teach a professional actress to stutter for a role in a play. I said yes! I felt a sense of responsibility to the stuttering community to do this right. I immediately started planning how I would portray an authentic stutter and a stuttering experience in which the audience would feel compassion and respect for the actress stuttering.

The play is called *Carapace*. David Mitchell Robinson's screen play for *Carapace* won the 2010 Keneda Graduate Playwright Contest. The prize for winning the Keneda is that David's script becomes a play that features professional actors and Hollywood veteran actress, Judith Ivey, as the director. This is a first-class presentation. A carapace is a tortoise shell. A shell could be a powerful metaphor for stuttering, right?

I personally took great offense to the portrayal of stuttering in *A Fish Called Wanda*, *Smoky and the Bandit*, and *My Cousin Vinny*. These movies suggested that it is alright to mock, tease, and laugh at someone who stutters. Mel Tillis, in his autobiography *Stutterin' Boy* stated that if he did not stutter in a scene, the director would yell "cut!" and they would film again to get this stutter- the punch line. Cringe!

I stuttered severely for 25 years and I am now a speech language pathologist (SLP) who treats stuttering full time. Public perception of stuttering is very important to me. It is the children who stutter that suffer when bullying is tolerated in our society. I have seen *The King's Speech* and recommend it highly. I sincerely hope that this proves to be an era of positive transformation for people who stutter (pws).

The character Margo in *Carapace* is a young adult with a severe stutter. Her father is a recovering alcoholic with his idiosyncrasies. Communication can be very hard between Margo and Jeff. Jeff thinks Margo could speak better if she used her techniques better. Margo had marginal speech therapy as a child.

In teaching Margo (actress Bethany Anne Lind) to stutter we met at my office for 90 minutes. I showed her a palate of repetitions, blocks, secondary symptoms (chin down during tense stutters), eye contact aversion to display shame, and breathing discoordination. It was like I had to reverse engineer stuttering. Bethany Anne felt uncomfortable with tense laryngeal blocking. She gravitated toward a hard contact repetition that was followed by quick inhalation and a push into the word. We reviewed multiple styles of stuttering on video and picked one. I have been to the theater once and at Emory University for more coaching. With no microphones in the theater production we need the audience to be able to understand the script. So we carefully use proper tensing of her tongue, lips, and larynx to achieve the severe stutter and let the audience follow to lines.

Last night I was at Emory University in Atlanta for a sneak preview of *Carapace*. Audience discussion occurred after each of three scenes acted. The Atlanta Journal and Constitution was on site to take pictures and interview us. I arrived between the first and second scene in anonymity. The discussion of the stuttering was riveting. Prior to my introduction I sat with a Cheshire grin as people who did not stutter expressed such fascination and compassion for Margo.

People were vividly describing the impact Margo's stutter had on them. Some brought up people they know who stutter. Others felt Jeff the alcoholic was partially to blame. Another person asked: "I wonder what it would be like to be a person who stutters in the audience." After one person asked Margo, "How did you learn that realistic and powerful stutter?" I was introduced to the audience.

I took this opportunity to explain how we tested styles of stuttering with her gender, age, and character dynamics in mind. The audience was in agreement that Margo has an authentic and compelling stutter. I also addressed the question of how a pws would feel in the audience. I feel a pws will have a visceral compassion for Margo; a woman with a severe stutter and a distant and impatient father. There is also a possibility that a pws may project his own latent feelings onto Margo. The stronger a pws harbors sentiment about his own stuttering will increase the chance it could translate into an emotional, and perhaps cathartic, experience. We know many pws avoid stuttering support groups if watching others stutter ignites this inner turmoil.

In several monologues Jeff's character (actor David DeVries) lacks sensitivity toward Margo's stutter. When face to face exchanging lines he never overtly disrespects, mimicks, or corrects Margo. That was a litmus test for my involvement in this play. We have to feel compassion for Margo and respect pws when we leave *Carapace*.

The audience at the preview asked many pertinent questions about how impatient listening, Jeff's glib alcoholic attitude, and shallow emotional support would affect a pws. It was so heartwarming that the non-stuttering general public gravitated toward that dynamic between Jeff and Margo.

Carapace premiers in Atlanta at the Alliance Theater on February 11 and runs until March 6, 2011. The marketing department is going to select a special night for SLPs and pws to enjoy a discount. I appreciate very much that the Alliance Theater considered the proper portrayal of stuttering so important that they found a stuttering coach. Please support them and go to www.alliancetheatre.org for tickets.

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