



So You Want To Be A Voice Actor?

Advice and Personal Opinions from Michael McConnohie

What you see gathered below are my opinions; other actors may (some certainly will) disagree with me. That's the nature of opinions. Opinions are not facts, no matter how loud someone says them. However, *informed* opinions have a good likelihood of having some factual basis behind them, and I've come to mine after 30-plus years in the business.

Whenever a working voice actor appears at a convention, the question is always asked by multiple fans: *How can I get into voice acting? What's your advice for someone who wants to?*

My advice is very simple. **DON'T DO IT.** It's a really bad idea. If you go there, you'll come back different. Fuhgeddaboudit. Put it out of your mind. Consider it a non-option. Not in this lifetime, baby. Ain't gonna happen. No way, José (or Josefina).

Do something – *anything* – else. Design golf courses, write newspaper columns, sell shoes, build bridges, teach kindergarten. Just *don't* get into acting, and especially not into *voice* acting. Clear? Got it? Catch my drift? Good! Glad we got that settled. So now you're not going to waste a second's thought on it.

...UNLESS:

- *It's all you can think about.*
- *You're determined to do it no matter what anybody says or does.*
- *There is literally nothing else in your life as important as doing it.*

If all those things are the case, you're a prime candidate for a life of eternal optimism and depression, accomplishment and abuse, and a love-hate relationship with yourself. You're on a collision course with a schizophrenic lifestyle which will quite likely chew you up and spit you out like a prune pit ... but you're going to go for it anyway.

Okay. You've been warned. Now here are some of the questions I get asked, and my answers:

Q: What tools do I need to become a successful voice actor?

A: On the personal level, you'll need very thick skin, immense strength of will and utter self-belief. The ability to be rejected over and over – and over – without taking it personally. Unlimited amounts of time to spend selling yourself. A small fortune to help you get by when there's no work. (A voice actor who isn't working at any given moment is a voice actor who is *looking* for work.)

Look, being a voice actor is an expensive proposition. There are endless versions of your voice demo and promotional materials to work on and send out. (More on this later.) If you're also pursuing on-camera work, the expense increases exponentially with pictures, postcards, casting workshops and the like. And let's not forget those pesky day-to-day bills like rent and groceries and car payments and gas.

Q: How does a voice actor get work?

A: Basically, by doing auditions. Sometimes by going to studios and recording, sometimes by going to the agent's office and recording there, and increasingly by recording at home and sending MP3s to casting people. Good computer skills are becoming incredibly important to voice actors.

Your biggest promotional gun is your demo reel, both on CD and accessible somewhere on the web. A cassette tape is bad news -- many people no longer even have tape players. The cool thing about CDs is there's no moving parts, and they mail great.

As to where to send them, you can (and should) do lots of research. Where are the advertising agencies in your area? What about radio stations? Any place with radio has commercial recording, and outside of the Big Three of L.A., Chicago and New York, that's where the majority of voice work will be found -- in local commercials.

...The biggest thing you need is luck. Lots and lots of it. After enough time it's possible to start making your own luck through contacts and referrals, but until you reach that point, you're playing the odds, shotgunning demos and waiting for lightning to strike. Having an agent or manager marks you as being more pro than not., but that's not easy either.

Q: How do I get an agent?

A: See the paragraph above about "luck." You have to audition for an agent even more than you would for a casting person or a producer. You need a good demo to get you in the door, and then you sell yourself. Selling an agent is usually harder than selling a producer; they can't afford to spend time on clients who won't produce income immediately.

Getting an agent is a crapshoot. There are good ones and bad ones, and you'll never know which is which until you've invested a lot of time. And there's a big difference in how things are done in different markets around the country. In L.A. you usually have a different agent for voice, for commercials, and for TV and film -- and there's a contract that details how the relationship works. By that contract, an agent takes a 10% commission on your work.

In New York the setup is different; while I haven't actually worked there, friends who have tell me that an actor doesn't have to sign a contract with an agent. And it is possible to have multiple agents representing you. While that may sound good in theory, it could get dicey in a situation where you have several agents submitting you for the same job. If you do get it, morally and legally you could owe all of them a commission, which could severely impact your bottom line. Then again, half a loaf is better than none.

Understand carefully, *an agent does not get you work*. But a good agent *will* get you *auditions*. Actually getting the job is *your* responsibility. Your agent will represent you to potential buyers, communicate with casting people, and (hopefully) set up deals for you. A really good agent knows your strengths and weaknesses, and will try to sell casting people on you. A bad agent will answer the phone ... if someone calls for you. A *really* bad agent just lets the answering machine do it.

Like everything else, there are good ones, bad ones, and some really, really ugly ones.

Q: How does a voice actor actually work?

A: The short answer is, FAST. On a professional level you need to be an excellent actor, period, before you can be a good voice actor. "Cute voices" by themselves are not enough. You need to be able to bring a character alive in a matter of seconds. There's no time for deep exploration of nuance and motivation. You've got to get it right, right off the bat, and this is especially true of dubbing. (By definition, any anime with an English soundtrack is dubbed.) Of all the different kinds of voicework there are, dubbing is by far the hardest. So of course, it pays the least.

Does this make the slightest sense? Absolutely not. But it's absolutely true. A dubbing actor works alone, non-stop, juggling artistic and technical considerations, and under intense time constraints. A dubbing actor works alone. You're not doing scenes with other actors – it's just you and the microphone in a room with a video screen, and the director and engineer in another room.

ADR ("audio dialogue replacement") is the process by which old dialogue is replaced with new dialogue, with the intention of looking like that's how it was from the start. "Looping" is replacing dialogue in the same language. This is usually to improve or clean up sound that was recorded when the picture was shot – like when a jet flies overhead in a western. You'd be amazed how much of the dialogue in your favorite films was looped in after the fact. "Dubbing" is replacing dialogue in a different language. Dubbing is harder than looping.

The technique in the US is to do a sentence or two at a time (or three or four if you're really good). You see the video on the screen, and hear three short beeps. Where there would be a *fourth* beep, you start saying the line. Sounds pretty simple, yes? Yeah, right... You need to match (or often, improve) the emotional tone of the original. You need to match the lip movements of your character on the screen. You need to hit all the hesitations, slips and accelerations. You need to make it a good acting performance. You need to make it believable. And you need to do it all accurate to 1/30 of a second, because there are 30 frames in every second of video. But no pain, no gain. (And no paycheck.)

Q: What about classes and workshops?

A: Sigh... This is going to sound like a broken record. –Wait a minute; it's the 21st century! I meant "like a digital loop." Can you guess what I'm going to say? Okay, everyone, all together now: "There are good ones and bad ones." I know a few of the former and far too many of the latter.

The bottom line is, if you feel like you're learning something – great! Keep at it! But if you have the nagging feeling something's missing, or you're bored, or your teacher is coaxing you to take ever more "advanced training" – GET OUT. I know one teacher who brags about having worked with some students for two or three years. *YEARS*. These aren't students, they're financial resources. After a couple of months, if you don't know for sure you're up to the challenge of working ... you're not. There's a finite limit to what classes can do; after that you have to *work*. The best training is doing, because no class is like the pressure of reality.

***Personal opinion alert:** I have a real problem with directors and casting people who fill in by teaching or "workshopping" between gigs. While some do have worthwhile skills and information to impart, most – in my personal opinion – are just leeching money out of actors. Actors live on their hopes and dreams, and will shell out hard-earned cash for the opportunity to impress a director or casting person with the hope they'll be called in for a job. But guess how often that actually happens? You won't need both hands to count.*

Q: What do you mean by demo reel?

A: Your demo reel is your calling card, the attention grabber, your entrée into auditions. (They're called reels because way back when, they were actually reels of tape. Not even cassettes, but reels.) Fashions change in demo approaches, and in the voice world that happens pretty fast. –And you need a different demo for different aspects of the work. A commercial demo is different than one for narrations of corporate promos, or for film trailers, or for animation. You do NOT want to mix them all together, and you do NOT want to give someone 10 or 15 minutes of stuff to sift and listen through. Because they won't. Your reel will go into the can, without ever being heard.

This is an expensive process, and it needs to be updated frequently. But there's hope! Progress to the rescue! Remember the note about computers above? With today's technology, and the ridiculously low prices on some computer systems, you have a functioning recording studio right there on your desk. You can do some amazingly good-sounding things that way – absolutely perfect for updating your demos.

However, packaging is another thing altogether. You have to look pro before anyone will be willing to listen to you sound pro. You do *not* want to print labels and CD inserts yourself, unless you are very, *very* good at it. A cheesy-looking demo will get tossed, no matter how stellar your performance may be.

Q: Well, all of that stuff is fine for people who live in L.A. or New York or Chicago. But what about where I live?

A: That... is a tough one. Although the Big Three are the major centers of voice work, to a lesser extent there's also work to be found in Miami/Orlando, Asheville NC, and Minneapolis. But for the rest of the country it's really tough. For anime work in particular, the centers are L.A., New York and Houston. (And Canada; but Canada has laws that really restrict non-Canadians from working there.)

I ABSOLUTELY DO NOT RECOMMEND MOVING TO ANY OF THE ANIME CITIES TO TRY AND FIND WORK. YOU'LL GO BROKE. PERIOD.

If you've got a support network where you live now, friends, family, a place to live, *don't throw it away*. Let's face it, times are tough, and they're not getting any better. Start small, start local; if you've got the chops, you'll know what you want to do. Take the time to make solid plans to bring it about. But just picking up and moving across the country to first try and get established? Recipe for disaster.

I truly hope this mixture of info and opinion is helpful to you. And remember again, these are my personal opinions based on my personal experience. You'll undoubtedly get a different picture from a different actor. Take all the information you can, weigh it out and balance it, and form your plans. But for heaven's sake, have a *plan* or you'll become another statistic.

Peace out...



Michael McConnohie