



A time to learn

American actors, north England accents. The Ahmanson's 'History' boys head to class.

By Diane Haithman, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
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ONSTAGE, the actors who portray the students in Alan Bennett's "The History Boys" learn the heady poetry of Philip Larkin, W.H. Auden and Walt Whitman. Offstage, they recite a different sort of poetry, more like Dr. Seuss gone mad:

My heart is part of the far part of the yard.

The way May made that cake is fake, Dave.

Mike likes to ride his bike inside, wining and dining all the time.

These rhyming exercises, each focusing on a different vowel sound, come to the actors courtesy of their dialect coach, JB Blanc, whose task is to ensure that, after about five weeks of rehearsal, these, like, totally American guys will sound as if they were born and bred in Sheffield, Yorkshire County, in northern England.

Along with the exercises -- which Blanc recorded on a CD for easy practice -- the young performers watched the movie "The Full Monty," which is set in Sheffield, and the Monty Python sketch "The Four Yorkshiremen," in which four men of the region try to top each other as to who had the most hellish childhood.

The actors, ages 18 to mid-20s, who play "The History Boys" hail from across the U.S.: Houston, Milwaukee, Minneapolis, upstate New York, Los Angeles. The one place none can call home is Sheffield, the industrial town that serves as the setting for Bennett's Tony Award-winning drama about bright students preparing for admission to the elite Oxford and Cambridge universities. It opens Wednesday at the Ahmanson Theatre.

"History Boys" premiered in 2004 at London's National Theatre with an English cast; the actors went on to reprise their roles on Broadway and in the 2005 movie. But, due to complicated actors' union rules and immigration laws that sometimes limit which roles young British actors are able to take in U.S. productions, the available actor pool for the Ahmanson production's student roles included mostly Americans -- although some British actors with the proper papers also auditioned.

In the end, the play's director, Englishman Paul Miller, cast American actors as the students. And the first lesson burned into their brains in early October when rehearsals began was this: By the time the show opens in November, those Houston-Milwaukee-Minneapolis-New-York-L.A. accents must be history, boys.

And it wouldn't do to just drop a few Rs to concoct generic English speech, wandering from Queen Elizabeth to Ringo to Posh Spice. These American kids would be called upon to capture the highly individual inflections of this particular end of Yorkshire County. "An accent involves not only the sounds one has to make, but the geography, the history," Blanc says.

Miller, who also staged a revival of the National Theatre production (directed by Nicholas Hytner) for a tour of the United Kingdom and a West End production that opens in December, said it's usually easier to teach the Sheffield dialect to American actors than to actors bringing their regional accents from all over the U.K. With accents, he says, it can be easier to go all the way across the pond than to go across the street.

At work on those vowels

THE first script reading with the full cast took place Oct. 9, in a rehearsal space at a Music Center annex building -- but the weekend before, Blanc was already in the house, handing out copies of his CD and a printed version of the vocal exercises. For this play, not only do the boys have to master the Yorkshire accent; there's a whole scene to be played entirely in French.

Blanc was planning to be around for the first two weeks of rehearsal; that period extended to three weeks -- and, by the fourth week, Blanc was still there, and planning to be on hand for the dress rehearsals "just for the last little tweaks," he said, almost sheepishly.

Blanc, 38, an actor and director who often serves as a dialect coach, was born in France but raised in Yorkshire, so he knows whereof he speaks. "I grew up in a very rural village in north Yorkshire, but if you traveled 10 miles down the road, to Harrogate or York or Leeds, they each have a unique dialect," he says. "Americans don't really have to think that way, because the accents don't change radically over even much longer distances. There's a trick I do at parties, where I do a tour of the whole British Isles."

As Blanc describes it, essaying an American accent is like driving a flat freeway on cruise control, fast and easy. To create the sound of Yorkshire, the mouth must take its time and work harder, reflecting the ups and downs of the rolling countryside of the region -- its mud, woolly weather and cobblestones.

"The problem that they have is, this accent involves them using muscles they've never had to use," Blanc says. "The American accent is lateral, flat; the back of the mouth doesn't have to work hard. Yorkshire is more vertical, rounded at the back of the throat.

As an example of how hard the mouth has to work, Blanc cites the stretchy lips of the popular British clay animation characters Wallace and Gromit.

One up and down to be studiously avoided, however, is the youthful American's habit of, you know, of making everything into a question? Like, even if it's not? Even if it's a statement, like "I went to the butcher and bought a ham?" When a Yorkshireman buys a ham, he's sure he bought a ham, and his voice lands at the end the sentence to prove the point.

Hence the aforementioned rhyming exercises, each sentence forcing the mouth to perfect a separate vowel sound with signature Yorkshire inflection. Another practice rhyme is less appropriate for a family newspaper, but ensures that with a little practice you'll be able to say any word that rhymes with "luck" like a dyed-in-the-wool Sheffielder (rhymes with the American "look"). Like a sort of profane mother hen, Blanc is not above using similar vernacular when scolding the boys for making the same mistake five times.

"Inappropriate is sort of a good way to describe JB," cracks Seth Numrich, 20, a Juilliard graduate originally from St. Paul, Minn., who plays the leading role of Dakin. Possibly because of his student's dialect training at Juilliard, Blanc reports that Numrich has taken to Yorkshire speech with Meryl Streep-ian skill, like a duck -- that is, "dook" -- to water.

Because these are educated schoolboys, Blanc says, they will go for a less broad accent than you hear in "The Full Monty." Still, it also cannot be too "posh" or "RP" -- short for "received pronunciation" -- the tea-party accents most Americans affect when trying to sound British. Sheffield students don't sound like Eliza Doolittle when she finally gets the hang of proper English speech: "The rain in Spain falls mainly in the plain." In gritty Sheffield, the rain falls everywhere.

"It's cold there, and there are a lot of wet roads; the surroundings will have an effect on you," says Cord Jackman, 18, of L.A., a recent Hamilton High grad who plays Rudge, an athlete pegged least likely to pass the "Oxbridge" exam. "I go to places where no one knows me and do that accent to see if someone says: 'Where are you from?' JB tells me I'd probably have the broadest accent all these guys," and Jackman, suddenly, *is* Rudge. "So it's slowin' down, takin' mah time, gettin' the heaviness of it."

Adds Jackman in his own voice: "This is amazing for me, right out of high school, where I do the musical, then the drama, then it's time for homework. I'm like, 'Wait a minute, dude, you have nothing else to do except this.' It hit me then: This is what I want to do for the rest of my life."

The rhythm and the melody

DEMOND ROBERTSON, 26, who lives in Los Angeles but was raised in Texas, wryly notes that "Houston to Sheffield is quite a journey." The actor, who plays the role of Crowther, can be found on public transportation going over his lines, oblivious to fellow passengers. "It happens a lot on the way home from rehearsal when the train is packed -- I'll get in my seat and sort of focus, and all of a sudden I'll bust out with: 'You're not supposed to 'it us, sir!' Just going over it in my mind, to retain it, I sort of blurt it out," Robertson says with a grin. One of the problems for an American, he adds, is when to drop an "h" and when to leave it in.

While some are adapting better than others, each young actor has his own set of natural tendencies to fight. Red-haired Adam Armstrong, 23, raised in Queensbury, N.Y., plays Lockwood. He has a hard time getting rid of the flat, nasal vowels of upstate New York. Twenty-three-year-old Brett Ryback of Milwaukee plays Scripps. He says it can be tough to hold on to the Yorkshire sound when rehearsing with the actors who portray their teachers and other school officials -- not to mention director Miller -- all of whom speak something closer to RP English. "Sometimes it's hard to concentrate on what we're supposed to sound like when we're in the room with, what, six Brits?" Ryback grumbles good-naturedly.

"My toughest sound is 'o,' like in 'I'd like to go 'ome,' " offers Alex Brightman, 20, a New York University student from San Jose, who portrays Posner. "The sounds that were tough for me were the ones that sound pretty close to American, and then right at the end, they clip off."

With all the work that has gone into authenticity, however, one has to wonder whether the subtleties of Yorkshire speech versus that of, say, London or Liverpool will be lost on the Ahmanson audience. But though they might not be familiar with the specifics, the boys say, they'll be able to feel the authenticity.

"The way they sound is part of who they are," says Numrich of the characters they all portray. "And even if an audience doesn't know that they're recognizing the differences between one sort of dialect and another, they *do*. The feeling of the rhythm and the melody will make an impact."

And who knows, Robertson says -- the dialect might just come in handy in Texas someday. "After this show, this accent will be part of my tool kit," he says. "If anybody needs me to pull out a north country Sheffield accent, or if I ever need to teach it, I'm going to have it."