

AudiOpinion

The Case for Multi-Voice Recordings

by Sue Zizza

➤ When I walk past the rows of audiobooks at my favorite local bookseller, trying to decide what to listen to next, there is something printed on the package that is sure to grab me—even before I consider author or title. What is it that would cause me to stop in my tracks? It is: *“This production features multi-voice casting.”*

As soon as I see the words “multi-voice” on an audiobook, I’m hooked, because as a lover of contemporary audio drama, I really enjoy hearing many voices bring a story and its characters to life.

Don’t get me wrong: Solo performances that feature narration and characters created by the same actor can be wonderful. It’s just that I prefer the harmony of diverse voices that only multiple actors can bring to a work. In my view, whether the production is fiction or nonfiction, having many voices on an audio palette to paint with helps bring the author’s words to life in the listener’s ear.

First, let’s clear up confusion that can result from the different terms used to describe audio productions featuring multiple actors. Sometimes I see the phrase “featuring a multi-cast” or “full cast production” on the box. To me, both are misnomers. In theater, “multi-cast” means that more than one actor is being used to play the *same* part. For example, three actresses, at different performances during the week, all play the wicked witch in one production of the hit play *Wicked*. Similarly, smaller regional theaters may sometimes create “multi-cast” productions in order to accommodate busy actors’ schedules. As for “full cast production,” while I understand that this phrase is used on an audiobook to signal this is not a solo performance, it seems redundant—would there ever be a time when there was less than a full cast? That’s why I prefer the term “multi-voice casting.” It says clearly that multiple actors have been used to play specific roles throughout the

work—and while the actors may actually be responsible for more than one character—indeed they sometimes handle three or four—no one else in the cast will perform these roles.

Producing and directing an audiobook with a multi-voice cast is very similar to producing an audio drama. In both, the actors’ voices create the characters whose stories are being told. How do audio directors and actors rise to the challenge of working in the multi-voice mode?

Casting is the key to success

It takes a finely tuned ear as well as a large enough production budget to create a cast of audio actors who can keep an audience entranced for many hours. Directors know that to meet that challenge, they must prepare well, choose actors who are sufficiently different from one another, and enable the actors to work well together. Casting a multi-voice production is like putting together an audio puzzle, says the Audie and Grammy Award-winning producer/director Charles Potter. “You need to make sure that the characters the actors are creating are unique and instantly recognizable to the listener.”

Having many voices on an audio palette . . . brings the author’s words to life.

Since budget dictates how many actors can be hired for any given book, the producer/director first needs to break out which sections a narrator will do and which sections will fall to the characters. “Then through the casting process,” says Potter, “you decide who the best actors are for the material.”

Potter has found over the years that a work of fiction is sometimes easier to produce with a solo performer than nonfiction, yet nonfiction often benefits from multi-voice casting. Think of radio documentaries, he explains. “If

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you listen to a well-produced audio documentary, you will hear many people telling their part of a larger story; nonfiction can, and I think should, be approached in this same way.”

In *The Greatest Generation Speaks*, Potter used a group of actors who each read four to five letters from the book. “Editing back and forth between the voices made it possible for each letter to stand out from the rest,” he says, “and gave the listener a sense of this larger community.”

Good audio directors take the time to get to know their characters’ personalities and stories along with the world they inhabit *before* listening to an actor read the part. Even very experienced actors appreciate that kind of meticulous preparation on the part of the director.

“I can always tell when a director has a clear vision for the work,” says Audie winner Barbara Rosenblat, who has worked on several multi-voice audiobook productions, including *The August Coup*, *A Year and a Day*, and *Too Dead to Swing*. “As an actor it helps me greatly when a director first gives me the room to interpret a character, and then, working together, we fine-tune the performance.”


Potter says that he makes himself a little chart to help him listen better when casting many voices. “It includes things like Pitch, Age, Timbre, Resonance, and Language Skill. As the casting session goes on, I evaluate the actors in these areas to see how well their voices and the characters they are creating will fit into the larger work. I never want to hear two characters who sound so much like each other that the audience doesn’t know who is talking in any given moment.”

Potter looks for actors who are “flexible” and can follow his direction. “Can they try to do something different with the characters if asked? Can they vary the speed of their performance? Age their voice more or less? These skills are all important to me.”

Directors need to plan in advance for actors who may double up on roles in a book. “While solo performers often jump from character to character,” says

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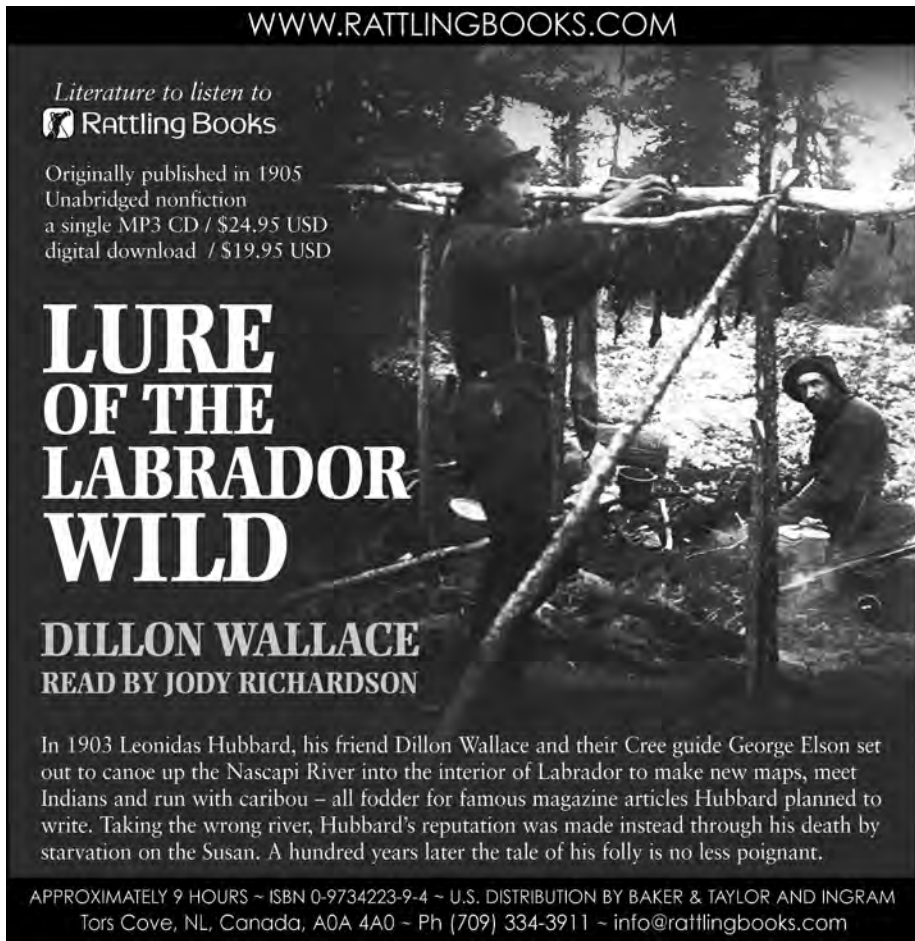
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Rosenblat, “directors who have the ability to work with a cast should use them wisely—so that actors don’t find themselves creating two characters who end up in the same moment together.”

Rosenblat really appreciates a director who understands that when you are working with more than one person at a time, the most important thing can be scheduling. “A good director will know which parts of a book can and should be recorded first,” she says, “to keep the work moving along and to keep the actors waiting around as little as possible. It helps my performances if I can show up at a studio and get right to work—keeps my energy high and my performance at its peak.”

A different kind of energy

For those who want to join a cast of audio actors, Rosenblat gives the following advice: “Listen carefully to what you and your cast members are doing together and individually. No one should upstage anyone else. Being part of a cast means being part of a family, a team.

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Several actors working together brings a special energy to an audio production, says Rosenblat. “While being a solo performer and being a member of a cast are equally joyous activities, each feels very different to the actor. In the solo performance, all ‘ears’ are on you. However, as a cast member you can relax a little and be part of a larger team who are all relying on each other. And when I am working with a really good director leading an excellent cast, I can actually relax a little and let my characters carry me away to their universe.”

Listeners, too, can sense this difference in energy. So the next time you find yourself standing in front of a long row of new audiobook titles, consider choosing a multi-voice production. You just might make a whole new set of audio friends.

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