

Lester: David thank you for coming, joining us tonight and thank you for making this film. Um, it is something, as a gay man, as an actor and as a voice and speech teacher that I have been interested in for years, and my journey in trying to discover what is a gay voice has been somewhat limited. Um, I can't find, I couldn't find a lot of the information that you discovered, so I'm really, really grateful to you for that. Um so, off the top I want to say that, um, I want to free anybody from any PC concerns, um, we should feel free to use words like "sissy" and "faggot" and "pansy" and all of those terms. They come up in the film and they certainly are the terms that I was addressed growing up and starting out as an actor and being too, "Mm, you sound like a sissy." Right? "You sound too gay." So even with my deep voice I still sounded gay and we're going to talk about what that thing is. I'd also like to separate out at the beginning, the value judgments that you talk about later on whether sounding gay is a good thing or a bad thing or whether it's something to be encouraged or embraced or um, shied away from, we'll talk about that more towards the end. And I also want to say right at the beginning we saw Chris and Matt, so we get very clearly that this thing that we call a gay voice is simply a stereotypical icon that has nothing to do necessarily with genuine gender preference. Right? There's a thing, and we know what that thing is when we hear it, whether the guy is gay or not. Right? Um and in, in the film, you have these sort of, these, these uber gay stereotypes of Paul Lynde and Charles Nelson Reilly and um, Liberace. Right, I think of the, the sort of trinity of queens that you have as these, these models. So what do you think it is, in your research now, that makes those guys sound so quintessentially like gay men? Hello?

David: Sorry, was that a question for me, Lester?

Lester: Yeah, yeah.

David: Sorry, I didn't. What it is in my research, that makes someone sound quintessentially gay?

Lester: Right, right, those guys. I mean, I think in the movie you talk about nasality and pitch and upspeak and hanging on to sounds, and so forth, hyperarticulation and then we'll get to a couple of others. So talk about, we can talk about them individually or if you have something that you could like thumbnail and say ah, the real key to the gay voice that particular stereotypical gay voice is...?

David: Right. I do think it's important to emphasize, as you did that there is no such thing as a "gay voice" that phrase is just shorthand for the stereotype of the gay voice. Um, there's no voice that every gay man has, or that only gay men use. So you know, I'm happy to say things like "the gay voice," I say it all the time, but um, I think it's good to bear in mind that it's shorthand. You know there are men who, um, whether or not they are gay sound more or less stereotypically gay and that stereotype by and large is um, an effeminate sounding man. And uh, what the, the main characteristics that kind of add up to a man sounding effeminate whether or not women actually sound this way are the hissy s, so a sibilant s (models this), is the kind of signature um sound, and it is true that women have longer, higher s's, um, hyperarticulating or overarticulating, um so consonants at the end of words, like continent (modeling aspirated t) instead of continent (modeling unaspirated t). So like, a really clear l, and like a precise p, uh and I forget what they're called, maybe fricatives? You guys might know better than me, um, it's

been a while since I did my science homework on it, for the film. Um, and then another big one is a voice that is more melodious, um so a voice that has more variations in pitch, which actually is, um, not particularly true of women, uh, I mean the research is sort of split on this question but that tends to be a more culturally learned stereotype, and it's that "Ooh, I'm so happy to see you," sort of a camp voice, and certainly again that a gay sounding voice is a higher voice. So what David Sedaris talks about in the film, getting mistaken for a woman on the phone, um, but of course, gay men don't have higher voices than straight men, uh, but you know that's one of those things where it may be culturally learned, it may be a stereotype, but women do talk higher than men. So those are the main things, and then on a slightly less linguistic or different linguistic um, marker is that, as you guys know, language is constantly changing and there's constantly innovations in sound and young women tend to drive those innovations and some research has shown that gay, people who sound gay, tend to be adopting, um, this kind of linguistic innovation. So for example, upspeak, the tendency to go up at the end of your sentences (he models this) might be an innovation that would be adopted uh, faster than, uh you know by men who sound gay, potentially faster than, uh men who don't. Um, or in that case it might actually be men who are gay. Um, so anyway, I think that answers your question.

Lester: Yeah, I, what I find - one of the many things I find interesting in this arena for lack of a better term those um, symptoms or those defining characteristics is that there are any number of other accents that have those qualities and yet are never considered gay sounding. Right, so you have upspeak, which, on the, if we're looking at it as a feminine thing we're thinking of valley girl, but if you think of all the Australian accents, right, they all kind of do that and no one every says "Oh, that rugby player sounds gay" right? Um, the nasality that you talk about, there are lots of, certainly, you know, you go to Buffalo, New York and everybody's got a nasal accent. The hyperarticulation, you listen to almost any of the super well-trained RP speakers, right, and they, I think that takes us, which will be the next area of those, that kind of model, right, of the hyperarticulate, I think you have the people imitating Patrick Dennison, and the cartoon characters that all happen to be British. Um, you know, whether it's Jeremy Irons or Captain Hook, or all of these characters who have the hyperarticulation that doesn't, that has I guess become culturally interpreted as "effete" and therefore has become feminine and there's something in that as well, I think that there's a difference and I'd like you'd to address what you think the difference is between a feminine sound, an effeminate sound and an effete sound.

David: (Laughs) Uh, well those are all really great points. I do think that when I talk about sounding gay it is important so bear in mind that I'm talking about strictly in the United States. Um, because, and you know, I have not studied Australian speech, but I've heard a number of times that, uh, it's more standard for people to go up at the end of their sentences, uh, in Australian English, um, but you know, there are men who, you know, uh, linguistics speculate that there are men who sound quote unquote "gay" in every language, because sounding gay just means sounding feminine or sounding effeminate so um you know.

Time marker: 26:25

Lester: And do you see there's a value difference between those - feminine and effeminate?

David: I mean, sure, you know I think it would be strange to call a woman effeminate, uh, I think effeminate is generally a word that is applied to people or things that evoke uh, femininity that might not supposed to be, um so I think feminine are traits generally ascribed to women, and

effeminate are, tend to be, feminine traits ascribed to men. I mean, it's not something I've thought a ton about in terms of distinction, but to me is the distinction.

Lester: So this um, attributing this to whether it's effeminate or feminine, attributing this to men brings on the negative status because it's a gay man or because of the societal status of making women less than.

David: Well the film, the film talks about this a bit and I mean, you know I think that it's certainly because women are considered second-class citizens, inferior and less powerful than men, that anytime a man, whether or not he's gay, uses speech patterns or micro-variations that are more typical of women or that are associated with women, um that tends to be viewed as a giving up of male power or giving up of the male pose, you know a broaching of the kind of gender norms, and of course it all depends on the context. But it's pretty rare, you know, that when men take on feminine qualities in speech or otherwise that they're lotted for it. We do have the rise of the metrosexual culture and to get razed or hassled for adopting anything that attaches to women, and this is kind of a classic gender studies sort of paradox of, where you know, a women putting on pants is seen as uh, taking on male power and it's comprehensible but a man putting on a dress, you know is shedding his male power and why would you want to give up your power. So I think there's just like - our general social dynamic is that we understand why a woman might want to take on some masculine characteristics but there is, it's more complicated or reflexively understood when a man adopts female behavior.

Lester: I want to talk a little bit about acquisition of the gay voice and the experts seem to talk about the gay female role models in some way is sort of the standard trope that comes up and that diagnostic has always bothered me because my mother does not sound like a gay man. Right? She sounds like a Jewish woman from Ohio, um and all of these, these boys around the country have a sound that is uniquely theirs from the time, you have that, that young boy that's bullied it's a sound that we've all heard and we go, "That boy is gay," and there's nobody in his family who models that, so where does that come from? I mean I know you have the, the effete model of those hyperarticulate guys but not that, that Nelly voice, that somehow, I've taught little kids, like David Sedaris said, he's in class with the future faggots of America.

David: Well, I think you said gay boys listen to their mothers, which is a common mistake, because it's really not about sexual orientation, it's about um, gender affiliation and identification. So um, it doesn't matter. You know, in the film we have a straight guy who sounds effeminate and uh, who was raised in an almost entirely female environment um, and you know, so the speculation is that he acquired language from females rather than males. Um, so I do think it's really, it's hard to retrain yourself to separate the ideas of you know, of sort of gender and sexual orientation, sexual orientation and gender expression, um, uh, so that's one thing I think you have to keep in mind, and I'm sorry I'm just trying to remember the...

Lester: Well, I'm just saying those models, to me, don't really seem to hold up as models.

David: Yeah, so, I, you know, I think that, you know, what the gay voice is, is also a voice that's masculine and feminine, so uh it's, I don't think that it's, language acquisition is complicated and what I think is happening is that um, you know, men, who later go onto be gay or not, are picking up certain vocal patterns, um, that are more typical of women but they're not trying to imitate their mothers, they're not trying to imitate their every aspect of their role model's speech, nobody, there are certainly people in families who sound similar. Generally people don't sound

like carbon copies of their parents or their siblings, although obviously that can happen. So you know, I think, I think that we also can't discount the, I mean certainly with little boys who are sounding effeminate or acting effeminate, it's almost certainly coming from female influences. But you know, as you get older you also, your, your, chosen peer groups start to play a big role in how you act and how you speak and I think that, um, again, that's where this kind of mix I think that you're getting at, um, becomes it's own accent and it's own sort of language where gay men are sort of collectively creating a voice that is, you know, more typical of the gay community. Does that make sense?

Lester: Yeah that does, and I'll get to your question in the minute and I think there is a question that is really important for us as voice and speech teachers to address and that's...

David: I just wanted to add one thing. There was a paper that showed that sounding gay was a great predictor of um, childhood gender expression, that is to say, if someone sounds gay as an adult it's likely that like, their family would remember that as a child they would sort of act feminine, in some way or another. But sounding gay is not a great predictor of sexual orientation, so that is to say sounding gay doesn't have much connection to sexual orientation but it does have a strong connection to gender expression.

Lester: Perfect. Perfect. Um, I want to address something that is a big issue for us as teachers in that we're trying to help our students find their authentic voice on the one hand and on the other hand to give them the tools so that they can adopt any character they're going to play, and not get stuck with the "I'm sorry you sound like a sissy, so you can't play Stanley Kowalski," right? Um, so you, in your journey, right, you said that in middle school you sounded gay, and then you stopped that, and your family said you didn't sound gay anymore. And then at some point when you came out you reinvented your adult gay voice and sort of celebrated that and then you go into this movie and you know, try to explore what it would be like to change that. So where are you now know with what is the authentic David voice and what would you say that we should be encouraging our students to find in terms of their own authenticity?

David: Oh, it doesn't, you don't care about me. I'm just here to help better mentors. I'm happy to talk about myself, but correct me if I'm wrong, but a lot of people here, are, work with actors. Is it also just general voice improvement or uh, is it generally sort of tied to like sort of acting or media?

Lester: It depends. We have a whole range of teachers here. But a lot of us teach actors for the stage and for screen and so forth to improve the freedom of their voice to express text, and the ability to be free enough to not be inhibited or inhabited by bad habits.

David: You guys are in a fascinating, wonderful profession because the voice is obviously, you know, an amazing too, um, that often is underutilized, uh, you know on one level, um, you know, when you see the movie, I don't want to give away the ending, but um, for me you know working with voice coaches ends up really helping me physically reconnect to my physical voice, so you know, I'm someone who was always self-conscious about his voice because I always felt like it gave me away in situations where being identified as gay might make me vulnerable, um, and I think that I, um, emotionally always thought of my voice as a flaw, and I think that led to some physical disconnection from my voice as being in my body, and doing, working with voice coaches strengthened my vocal cords and gave me like, a sense of both um, you know, I really grasped the notion that my voice is in here, is physically apart of me. My eyes or my height or a

pain in my left knee because who we are derives so much from who we are physically. Um, but also you know, it's not just my vocal cords but it's my lips and my tongue and my um, my uh, what's it called, alveolar whatever...

(Laughter)

Lester: You're preaching to the choir here.

David: My you know the palate, you know it's a complicated machine that you can actually control was a real mind blowing realization for me because I think most people think their voices can't and shouldn't be changed. Although we go to the gym, although we dress a certain way, or that we comb our hair a certain way, I don't but other people do, um, that somehow your voice is something that can't change or shouldn't change, and for me realizing that hey it's just, you know it's almost like learning how to dunk a, dunk a basketball or um, you know swing at a softball, it's just another physical activity demystified it, and I think that's a great thing for anyone to be heard but I also know that because the movie talks about casting, and we did a special panel on casting when I was in LA and casting directors look for type because most people seem to be better at acting roles that they're not too far from or that's certainly maybe it's just easier for the casting directors. Sometimes, as you probably know, actors won't say anything in an audition until they do their sides or their monologue because if you have a Swedish accent you don't want to break the spell that you can play you know a Southern from the U.S. by chatting with your casting directors. So I think it's really tough and sometimes I think it's a failure of imagination on the part of the casting directors because (applause) this is the profession of acting which is transforming yourself into a different character and that includes voice, however, you know casting directors may know something that I don't which is that you know you can only be so far from a character and convincingly portray that person or maybe when you pitch someone to a director it's a little bit harder when you know, "He's great but he's Swedish." You know, when it comes to sexuality, generally casting directors have had a hard time considering gay people in non gay roles and there was always this myth that the public would never accept that, but that's already starting to be debunked with people like Neil Patrick Harris and Matt Bomer who play straight characters with no reaction from the public.

Lester: So we just have a couple of minutes and we have some questions from the floor, yeah.

Judy: My name is Judy, and I saw your film just a couple of weeks ago and I really, really loved and thank you so much for you know just bringing yourself out in front. And here's the one thing that really got me, because you dutifully did what the voice coach told you to do, speech coach and you practiced, and I heard you say that after doing all that you felt emotionally disconnected, I specifically remember you saying that. Our job is to transform people but we don't want them to transform in lieu of their emotional connection. So what happened for you there that in changing the way you spoke that your feelings got cut off?

David: Well I'm not, I think you might have misunderstood that moment because that was a moment where I felt that the physical work that I did with my coached reconnected me to my voice.

Judy: Okay, my bad.

David: And so for me that was the first time I could grasp the notion of having an authentic voice was because I really finally grasped the sense that it was all of these things working together that I had control of and that nobody could tell me necessarily how to use um, and that I didn't have to take on a mask or I didn't have to try to sound straight or that I didn't have to inhabit a gay stereotype, that my voice was really my own because it was physically part of me and no one else.

Judy: Great. Thank you for clarifying that.

David: Yeah, but I do think that, you know, certainly when you're dealing with students, you know, they may have - so many people don't like their voices and, you know, say, "I hate my voice when I hear it played back," but I can tell you that oh, like 10 out of 10 gay men who don't like their voices tell me that they sound so gay when they hear them played back. So if you have gay men who sound gay, or straight students that sound effeminate, this may be more of an emotional lift for them to get to know their voices and love their voices and try to go in there and try to explore every aspect of their physicality in their voice.

Judy: Right on. Thank you.

Lester: Great, we have time for one more question and then we have to wrap it up.

Time marker: 43:53

Woman: I haven't seen the film and I'm going to because it looks fantastic and I'm really excited about it. But I'm just curious, part of me, I haven't seen it, whether or not, do you look at women who sound gay? Is that something that you've looked at? And if not, I guess there are but what is that? Sounding more like the father than the mother?

David: Yeah, so the film does not talk about women who sound gay, i.e. women who sound more masculine. Of course that exists, whether straight or not, the reason I didn't go into in the film, is that, you know I talked to many, many women and many, many experts and the strong consensus is that voice is not a stigma for lesbians, so certainly there are lesbian who sound stereotypically male but um, it's not condemned and it's not provocative to homophobes in the way that sounding gay is for gay men. It tends to be much more visual, you know, a super butch haircut and you know, very masculine outfit or walk, these are all things that tend to provoke homophobia and the voice is not culturally stigmatized for women the way it is for men, whether or not these women are gay or not. Um, the film does talk about the misogyny behind the stigma uh, for men, um, and then uh, sorry what was the last part of your question?

Woman: I was just curious, I, I totally love what you just said, and I just think, just about the boy being the mother, and then the father and I'm sort of, it's just interesting to me...

David: So again, if I understand you correctly. When kids are young they um, there's input and intake, you guys may know, input is all the stuff you're hearing and intake is what you actually absorb and incorporate into your own speech. And so it's not that boys, or uh, want to sound, you tend to take these cues from people you trust um, and so you, uh, that's sort of what accounts for sort of boys perhaps picking up some of the more feminine speech patterns.

Lester: We are going to have to stop because people have other panels to get to. So I could go on talking about this for another hour or two or three or four, um but we have to stop, so thank you so much David for the film and your time tonight.