

## ***African Accents: A Workbook For Actors* by Beth McGuire**

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Reviewed by Jane Guyer Fujita

*African Accents: A Workbook For Actors* by Beth McGuire is a comprehensive guide written for professional actors, dialect coaches, theatre students and professors. Accents from eleven African countries are broken down for the actor in this book: Uganda (Luganda), Kenya (Dholuo), Zimbabwe (Shona), South Africa (Zulu), South Africa (Afrikaans), Rwanda (Kinyarwanda), Democratic Republic of Congo (Lingala), Senegal (Wolof), Nigeria (Igbo), Ghana (Akan: Twi and Fante), and Liberia (English). The book is intended to help actors play roles that require that they speak English with an accent derived from one of the languages listed above. McGuire includes a run down of the vocal posture, pathways of resonance, sound shifts, and rhythm and intonations of each accent with useful tips on how to embody them.

McGuire anticipates that readers may use the book to learn one rather than all of the accents, and each is described in its own chapter that can be used as a freestanding resource. However, as rushed as actors and practitioners can be to learn an accent, and as tempting as it may be to jump to the chapter that contains the breakdown of a particular accent, it's important to read the enriching first chapter, which takes the reader through all the steps of the process for learning an accent with important tips for success. McGuire's approach is unique in merging the detail of precise phonetic study with the sense of play and transformation that leads to good acting. This chapter includes exercises that encourage actors to open their minds and bodies to the ways languages and accents affect identity and world views and how to use their discoveries to serve the project they're working on. There is a template for each chapter that takes learners through the process of acquiring the accent. Each accent chapter begins with an introduction that provides historical context to the development of how the language has directly interfaced with English through Colonialism.

McGuire gives specific examples of documentaries, films, television productions, music, radio, and personalities to further study the target accent and culture. She also includes a list of plays that use the accent featured in that chapter. Each chapter contains a "Down and Dirty Warm Up and Quick Look" that serves as both an introduction to the sounds of the accent and a review. McGuire's vast experience working with actors and as an actor herself shines here, contributing to the practicality and efficiency of the overviews. She invites learners to warm up their muscles, find their vocal postures and open up their resonators to source and find the pathways of resonance. She then moves onto the major sound changes of the accent. It is in this section that the framework and foundation are laid down.

Each element touched upon in the “Down and Dirty Warm Up” is deeply deconstructed. It is here that actors can get out their tweezers, so to speak, and put every tiny detail in place. When examining melody, lilt, pitch, and rhythm, McGuire uses her own effective system of pitch notation. It is loosely based in music notation, but simplified enough to be intuitive for anyone to follow. She uses small circles (higher circles for higher pitch, lower circles for lower pitch) right above the word to notate how the speaker has used pitch. Empty circles notate a longer vowel or sound, and filled in circles notate a shorter sound. It is possible for learners to listen to the materials from the website and hear what is notated in order to work visually and aurally simultaneously. This notation is vital for all of these accents, but even more so for tonal languages such as Luganda, which is the dialect used in the recent blockbuster movie, *Queen of Katwe*.

From melody, McGuire goes on to give concise cues to help readers find the vocal posture of the accent. Next, she gets into the detailed plan of phonetics and sound changes of the target accent, including a guide for International and Non-International Phonetic Alphabet users. It's not necessary to know phonetics to use this book effectively; however, when beginners really get into the accent learning process, they may be inspired to learn. McGuire is uniquely imaginative when it comes to the guidance she gives readers to make the accent her or his own. Her years of expertise as a vocal and dialect coach come through with a personal touch that reaches readers. She has anticipated struggles and blocks for her readers and has written in suggestions for overcoming them.

Accompanying the book is a website that contains Beth McGuire's original recordings of native speakers to be used in the process of learning the accent. There are accent and dialect samples of each of the eleven accents explored in the book, including both male and female native speakers for each. Most of the recordings feature the speaker speaking a diagnostic passage or sentences and ends with an extemporaneous personal anecdote. These resources encourage students to get specific and obliterate the “generic African accent” that too often creeps its way into classrooms and productions.

Beth McGuire's book offers theatre students a pathway of study into the rich linguistic heritages of Africa. In a university setting, it provides an opportunity for students to learn more about some of the languages of Africa and the people who speak them. This book can be used to lift standards of accent accuracy, as well as honor and respect the people and cultures being portrayed onstage. During the twentieth century, the vast majority of speech training for theater included learning a standard American accent followed by Standard British, and possibly Cockney or Irish. I use *African Accents: A Workbook For Actors* at New York University's Graduate Acting Program in a classroom of students from diverse races, backgrounds and

experiences. I think it is good for everyone in my classroom to study these accents and their contributions to the linguistic heritage of the United States, as well as to work on the plays and projects that use them. As a dialect coach, I've found this book to be an invaluable resource. To research accents as Beth McGuire has done here takes a lot of time and resources. When using this book and the online materials the author has compiled, I don't need to look any further for my research on any of these eleven accents. My time can be used training the actor in front of me, and that is a precious gift.