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A Keynote Conversation with Tré Cotten

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Introduction

This interview took place July 31, 2021 at 12:00 pm ET as part of the Voice and Speech Trainers Association's (VASTA) 2021 virtual conference *Rising Voices: Listening to the Past, Dismantling the Present, Cultivating a New Future*. The following has been edited for clarity and readability.

Interview

Tré Cotten (TC): I am so deeply honored to be with the VASTA community this year for your virtual conference. When Joe first approached me about this, I immediately thought of the first time VASTA came to my knowledge through my former instructor and now dear friend Judy Shan at the University of Washington School of Drama and now, here we are today in this this virtual space. Thank you, Joe, for joining me in this conversation.

Joe Hetterly (JH): You are welcome! When you and I first chatted back in the summer of 2020, we initially had the intention of bringing you in as an individual keynote speaker, but as we prepared, we often spent more time in conversation talking about the state of the world, the industry, and our personal journeys instead of conference logistics. I was so excited when you suggested that we should frame this as a conversation instead of a lecture because there is something unique about having a conversation in this moment that felt so right. What was it about a conversation versus a lecture that spoke to you as a device to frame this chat?

TC: A conversation starts with listening to another person's perspective. I couldn't find it any more fitting than to have a conversation because it is within the conversation where another person's perspective is seen. When we talked, you gave my experiences and my struggles, of being a Black man in drama programs and the pursuit of giving grace to my authentic voice, room for frustration through listening and I wanted to honor that. That's the work people need to see. They need to witness a white man and a Black man having a productive conversation with the goal of working things out. So I said, "Let's lean into that and have this keynote conversation." I was kind of nervous; I didn't know if you would be on board, but you said, "Yes." That's where the work is, within the conversation. For example, the film *One Night in Miami*, which I worked on, did this so beautifully because the story gives audiences a fly on the wall perspective of what those conversations were like.

JH: Many conversations begin with a story, a sharing of an experience that frames the conversation. Where does your story begin?

TC: My story begins with the brilliant Black women in my family. I will begin by speaking their names: Regent Louise Everett, Clayvon Lucy Lynch, Mamie Cotten, and Christin Cotten: my grandmothers, my mother, and sister. I've been blessed for having this perspective. For example, my mother has been a teacher with North Carolina Public Schools for over 35 years. My journey was impacted by seeing her teach teachers and witnessing her bravery as a Black woman. My journey is shaped by my father who, like my mother, is a proud graduate of a Historical Black college. To my sister, a lieutenant commander in the US Navy Reserve JAG Corps, who also has an MBA degree. I grew up with that brilliance across the hall, literally. When I think of the journey of my voice, I have to think of the house in which I grew up in. I've been told stories of my grandmothers speaking up in rooms that had a different temperature than the one we are in today. Their bravery is the root of my journey with my voice.

JH: When you talk about listening to the past, a component of our conference theme, and passing down stories generation to generation, how does that inspire you as you begin to develop your methodology and find your own unique voice in this field?

TC: When I think of listening to the past, I immediately think of the sounds within the household I grew up in. The sounds of what a Sunday morning was like for me. The sounds of what it was like hanging out with my cousins. I also think of the music that I listened to like Take 6. They were taking hymnals and spirituals from the past and making them current, arranging the chords and harmonies in such a way to inspire other groups such as Boyz II Men. I was also listening to the music that my sister and my cousins were listening to. From A Tribe Called Quest to OutKast, both storytellers who were speaking about something that was fruitful for the mind of a young Black man. They spoke to something different than what I saw presented of myself on television, and, at the same time, those storytellers were comparing themselves to Shakespeare and having Shakespeare in their raps. They were introducing a new level of what it was to be Black, conscious, and tell your story. I started to look deeper into the stories they were telling; these artists were raiding their parents' record collections as a sounding board of inspiration. So, I looked into the household I grew up in and my own musical identity and saw that these artists I've been given so much stimuli of, went looking for answers in the past which still influences a lot of what I do. That is where I found the hint of hope in the future, by looking into the past.

My grandmother was a huge Sam Cooke fan; a lot of my knowledge with Sam Cooke was growing up in the church with him and The Soul Stirrers, and my grandmother talking about him at that time. Without that perspective and gained knowledge, I wouldn't have had the tools to work on *One Night in Miami*. I've been fortunate to look to my elders; I think there's something beautiful about their perspective.

JH: I love that idea of listening to the musical identity of one's culture. So, speaking of voices of the past, you mentioned Sam Cooke and your work on *One Night in Miami*. I know as an educator and coach you frequently bring in idiolect work into your practice; can you share a bit about how you use idiolect work in your practice?

TC: Oh, yes! When I found out that I'd be working with the character of Sam Cooke, we had two weeks to prepare, so we didn't have the normal process. That's where trust comes in. I had to trust that the storyteller was going to do their part and I was going to do mine. I started with, "What is the story asking?" Circumstantially, with any idiolect, we're working with the sound of another person from another place. Sam Cooke is a Black man, and we had to accurately approach his sound as a Black man in 1964. We had to take into consideration how he would sound in certain rooms, not only with Sam Cooke, but with all the characters. I had to approach Cassius Clay, soon to be Muhammad Ali, as a Black man from Louisville, Kentucky. Southerners, we take great pride in the beauty of our melodic sound. Sam Cooke's family is also from the South, so now we had to tap into his household. What was his household like? What were the sounds of his parents? What sounds did he grow up listening to? I had to take all of those things into consideration, as well as his body of work that we're blessed to have. It was beautiful and moving to listen to Sam Cooke for work. We discovered a different side to Sam recorded in his 1963 album, *Live at the Harlem Square Club*, which was close to the timeline of the story. So, if we're getting this specific slice of life, how do we find accuracy within the sound for that moment in time? That album showed Sam Cooke for a Black audience, so that gave us a way to discover: who could he have possibly been with that night? The beautiful thing about this whole story, *One Night in Miami*, is it actually happened; therefore, approaching it with idiolects is very necessary. How do we become as specific as possible to tell the whole story? The actor Leslie Odom Jr. expressed that one of his goals was to grow closer to Sam's sound, so with that I started with different warmups that weren't in the European frame of music, to start tuning his ear away from the actor's idiolect. That was really important and there were discoveries along the way. There was music that was recorded that he would be singing for the movie, so we discovered and explained that this is the same voice, whether Sam is singing or speaking. We discovered the need to speak. We also identified which metaphorical instrument each character embodied throughout score of the text and identified where each character "solo'd." I've been a fan of *One Night in Miami*, beautifully written by Kemp Powers, since its origins, because of how the playwright captures the language. I liken that to a score. I discovered that the text of the four main characters reflects a quintet in alignment with Terence Blanchard's piano inspired underscoring. Establishing a foundation of Sam Cooke's sound began with identifying his instrument as not only a violin, but approaching Cooke's idiolect through harmonization as a healthy gateway from Leslie Odom Jr. to Sam Cooke. It helps to get to the sound of Sam Cooke by harmonizing with Sam Cooke. I discovered through listening to the timbre of family members to a moment listening to "Chain Gang" that through the harmony of Cliff (Sam's band member) with Sam in his *Live at the Harlem Square Club*, 1963 album, a healthy approach to this idiolect could be consistently obtained. Capturing the DNA and sound bites that Sam left us with definitely benefitted to where the actor can have that in his ear to serve as a tool for preparation. We know it's all about hearing it, but now it's also important to know why each character finds the need to speak. Working with idiolects definitely helped me discover so many different things that can be done with representing an authentic human being.

JH: That is such a revolutionary, ground-breaking, and creative approach to the work. I really resonated with the aspect of understanding the formality of the room you are speaking to. In that moment, how does one's idiolect shift? It is not just one target but

a target that is frequently moving depending on someone's mood, who they are interacting with, or if they are in front of a large crowd versus being on the phone. How someone captures all of that throughout the arc of a narrative is imperative so that the work doesn't just become target sounds that you are replicating with robotic perfection. Nuance is key. Beyond your role as a coach, you are also an educator; do you bring this same mentality of play and curiosity into the classroom? Can you talk about how you dismantle the present moment through idiolect work in the classroom?

TC: Yes, as an educator I must listen to each student as a storyteller. It starts with that, and then they must listen to their own sound. That's a huge part of my journey. In order to even approach another person's sound, I had to first become proud of my Southern sound and really love the sound I was blessed to be given. That has taken a lot of decolonization and a lot of work with myself, asking what loving my own sound is like. That was the most rewarding thing I learned in graduate school. In going through that, I found a beneficial way to translate that as an educator. With idiolects, in thinking of a canvas, it's necessary to include detailed strokes instead of broad strokes, and to include the community. With idiolects, we're working with actual real people. Either hire them for the positions or teach students the necessary tools to be able to learn to represent the communities authentically and genuinely. If we're thinking of authenticity, I can't think of any more bare bones than that. There's something beautiful about having each story and storyteller understand why this community makes this sound. It was beautiful as a coach and educator to see the actors speak on the importance of idiolect and dialect coaching after *One Night in Miami* and to see that they learned the importance of the sound of Louisville, Kentucky. We, as listeners and as the audience, take pride in our sound. We want to not only see ourselves but hear ourselves. Through idiolects, it proves that those of the Global Majority are more than an idea; it reveals the truth that we have been, will be and still are here. For Black and Indigenous folks around the world, our stories given to us by our elders automatically hold accountability by paying attention to the detailed strokes on the canvas of our stories. I think *One Night in Miami* has used idiolects as a good example of an accurate way to give a thumbprint of perspective.

JH: There was a time in my career where I rejected teaching or doing any form of accent or dialect work. I felt that someone should always speak from a place of authenticity and that doing an accent or dialect could be a form of cultural appropriation. Unless it was essential to the story, in which you might want to actually engage with and cast someone from a specific community, maybe it should not be recreated on stage. When does an accent or dialect become cultural appropriation? How far removed can an actor get from their authentic self and experience? I have observed that line is complicated, and there is no singular answer. People can be born in one place and live in another, be raised by someone outside of their family who speaks a different language than them, or attend a boarding school where their linguistic traits may be decided for them. As I have evolved as a coach and a teacher, specific idiolect work has been a way back in for me to accent and dialect work. Because when you go through the specific journey of finding a real person to base your work off of—even if it is a fictional character—the actor suddenly has something to latch on to. They are able to bring the fullness of that person into the work to help further the narrative and production's vision. When every breath, inflection, speech pattern, note is examined it can be inspirational. I believe that when you bring

that fullness to the stage, there are so many other colors that come out. An audience might not understand every word of an accent or dialect, but when you paint with the nuance of idiolect work, so much more than the accent or dialect is communicated. There is a musicality that can commune with the audience.

TC: Yes, and those mirror neurons kick in, and we feel and see ourselves. It can be presented as a springboard for the imagination, so we can start from some place of truth instead of starting from a place of stereotypes and assumptions. I think, when speaking of dismantling the future, that's an appropriate parallel.

JH: When these conversations come up, I often find myself caught between addressing the socio-political moment that we are currently in and the future that we want to live in. People will often dream about jumping to a place of perceived equality in some future utopia and use that as an argument for actors to be able to do anything: that they can transform into any role regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, etc. The issue with that mentality is that it does not address the history of inequality that shapes the inequality of opportunity in this present moment and the harm done: equity versus equality versus justice. When teaching the next generation, I am often torn between training my students for the realities of this present moment and wanting to train them for a future that we hope they will inherit. This future may not be realized yet, but it is important to encourage them to manifest something new into existence. How do we take these lessons into the future? How do we draw a line between honoring the past while continuing to move forward into a more equitable future?

TC: I think it is an ongoing conversation that must stay consistent and that must be continued. I also think we need to examine history and shift the gaze. When we look at history, whose history? When we look at the future, whose story are we telling? Joe, to be honest, seeing the injustices of George Floyd, somebody who had roots in Fayetteville, North Carolina, not far from where I'm from, that was a wake-up call. It has had me asking myself, "What can I do? What can I do with what I have?" That's where I found that idiolects as a form of activism can be one of the options. How do we represent the voices of not only Sam Cooke and Cassius Clay and Malcolm X, but also the voiceless? How can we represent those people? How do they live on as we consider a better future? How can we continue to advocate for those voices so they're no longer an anecdote? How can we continue a conversation but also examine who is talking? I've been inspired by the collaboration and the artists that I've met since this time of reckoning. We are becoming irritated with complacency. I'm finding myself truly inspired by the young artists and storytellers, but also by the people who've watered me and inspired me to water others. I've also been inspired by the people who've been speaking up for the necessity of accent and dialect coaching: that we do exist and how our field is a necessary part of the creative process when we go toward the future of authentic storytelling.

JH: There is a push to redefine accent or dialect coaches as designers, similar to a costume designer or a set designer. This word recognizes the effort of designing or creating something specific for a production that creatively furthers the narrative. I think it is interesting that this word is being used because it captures the process of design that responds to a specific moment, a specific audience, and a specific location. Elisa Gonzales, the co-conference director, and I initially thought of the conference theme as a linear trajectory from past to present to future, something that someone was moving through. Throughout the entire process, we have come to terms with the fact that these things are

all at play simultaneously. For example, when you are doing Shakespeare, although it is a play written in the past, it is being performed in the present moment with a direction that may challenge the audience toward a future world yet to exist. You mentioned to me in an earlier conversation the production of *A Raisin in the Sun* that happened at Seattle Rep which is a perfect example of this interplay between the past, present, and future. Can you talk a bit about that?

TC: I played George Murchison in a production of *A Raisin in the Sun*, directed by brilliant Timothy McCuen Piggee. We received permission from the Hansberry Estate to take the five drafts by Lorraine Hansberry and have our own particular production based all of the drafts. That was such a beautiful experience: to meet the people from the Hansberry Estate, to be able to experience the history the repertoire theatre has, to experience a director who was well versed in all of the drafts, and to be able to explore all of the versions of the character. The estate agreed upon us combining all five drafts to create one specifically for this cast. I even liken that process to jazz. To have this structure on record and have many options is like a melody that is within another melody or like that of overtones where something bigger than itself occurs through the right gathering of frequencies.

JH: I was listening to “How ‘Pass Over’ is Making ‘Precedent-Level Changes’ to Broadway,” a Stagecraft with Gordon Cox podcast that featured playwright-producer Antoinette Nwandu and Director Danya Taymor about the Broadway production of *Pass Over*. The playwright, Antoinette Nwandu mentioned that the play has had five important productions done. Each production has gone through a rewriting process to respond to the realities and demands of that moment. They describe the Broadway version as the most perfect form for this moment, “we have always presented the play that is its most perfect form for the moment we are presenting in.” Nwandu mentioned that she is in conversations to publish acting editions of *Pass Over 2017*, *Pass Over 2018*, and *Pass Over 2021* so that each community can produce the version of they play that they need in that moment. I think that is one of the most theatrical things. When we codify theater, we forget that it is a live art form meant for a specific audience at a specific moment in time and by publishing three versions, each person must engage in the work and choose which version is right for their community, making the piece not just something to memorize and recite, but a living breathing piece of art.

TC: They have to identify who their audience is. I think that’s the piece of the process that’s so necessary, not just having one or two shows out of a season for a specific audience—which we see too often—but looking toward the future by examining the pattern of the past that did not work. Albert Einstein says “we can’t solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them.” So, what do we do now? We have representation in the room. That’s something I’ve been seeing more of as I meet the few other coaches of color. I feel the joy and the passion that we all have, and it’s about shifting that gaze. Looking back to the journey of my voice, my mother had my sister and I reading the works of Alice Walker and Toni Morrison. When I look toward the foundation of who I am and where my journey began, I make sure I know what my gaze is and always remember that. My responsibility is to focus that specific energy with intention. When I bring that as an educator, I think it will give everyone permission to remember their gaze as well.

JH: When we first started talking, you told me about the work you are doing combining jazz, hip-hop, and heightened text. I think that is a perfect example and culmination of this conversation as it highlights how you are embodying so many of these ideas. Would you mind sharing a bit about this fascinating work you are doing, its history, and what you find it brings out in people?

TC: Yeah! A bit of the history has come from, and I'll quote one of my favorite groups, A Tribe Called Quest. Q-Tip says (and when I heard Q-Tip say this it hit me), "the abstract poetic prominent like Shakespeare or Edgar Allan Poe."

I started listening to more of their songs and I started hearing them talk about *Of Mice and Men*, and I thought to myself, "Whoa, okay, these are some cats whose genius, lyricism, and storytelling skills are out of this world, but they're bravery and boldness to be honest about the truth within a world surrounding them, while comparing themselves to Shakespeare against a backdrop of a society that mutes their words and displays a skewed image of them. I feel seen." Parallel to Paul Robeson's putting the hymnals and spirituals or a people directly next to Johann Sebastian Bach simply because as he says, "they belong there."

Then I started seeing and considering their verse to be as such, because, well, why not include myself and my culture next to Shakespeare? Then that thought started to progress. I also learned that what has been beneficial for me as an educator, when working with actors, with any heightened text—not just Shakespeare, but the Greeks—is considering how they hear it first. We hear and read things in a different melody than we speak them. That has so much to do with somebody's culture: how are we taught, and how do we normally approach a sound. I started to become interested in the sounds around the world that weren't of the iambic pentameter, and I started to wonder, when this pentameter was being polished and fine-tuned, while Shakespeare had written these characters, what other sounds were going on around the world? What were the sounds of my cultures at that time? That was a natural question, as storytellers of color have very few options of seeing oneself in Shakespeare's works. For example, *Othello* is said to be one of the hardest roles to play. When portraying *Othello*, storytellers are asked as an actor to perform it in a European approach. We are tasked with the obstacle of embodying an African, while having to prove in many scholarly debates his Blackness and the sense of the word, but also encouraged to use Stanislavsky's approach while being given the image of him in blackface. It made sense to me why it was known as one of the hardest Shakespeare roles to play. Because of the many obstacles one must give to simply live truthfully in imagined circumstances. I began to wonder about growing up in church and seeing my father on Sundays speak texts older than that of Shakespeare. I witnessed my very culture take a language and religion not of their origin, where preachers on plantations weren't allowed to even speak from certain books like *The Book of Revelation* and other texts that spoke on the freeing of a people to help liberate a people through an unspeakable journey. I started saying, okay, well there is an issue here. Why do so many have difficulty in Shakespeare class? I have found that there's great inspiration through the improvisation of jazz and how we can figure out how to approach a moment that's never taken place before with all the tools we've been given. It's not only with jazz improvisation, but also through spoken word, Hip Hop's freestyling, with cyphers sessions and discovering your flow. I was at a place where I became curious with my text and started having conversations with Thelonious

Monk. I started having conversations with Shakespeare's texts, with that of Miles Davis' form of improvisation used in the film, *Ascenseur pour l'échafaud*, where he played the underscoring while simultaneously watching each take on the screen. This discovered form of improvisation inspired me to start asking, what other patterns of thought are there and how can I find myself within this work?

Duke Ellington considers jazz as our feelings. Every time I see the elders and jazz players, I see how jazz has touched the world. I've seen and heard how jazz is played in Haida Gwaii, Canada to New Orleans, Louisiana. It's gone from France and touched the world through the war. Jazz gives permission for everybody to bring themselves. I found that to be a very inclusive way of working with not only actors of color, but also storytellers on all different platforms, from singers to public speakers. It helps them to be able to listen and have a conversation. It's listening, but also identifying the dance between thought and the breath. It's like the chicken and the egg. As educators, we must give each storyteller the tools in the invisible space before they go to rehearsal, where the words aren't a thing, but it's about subtext. It's about how we find humanity in Shakespeare? I've had to ask myself real questions. What do we call this season of the pandemic, this time of reckoning? I've had to ask myself, why still do Shakespeare's work? If we do it, then how are we going to do it, and what is the audience? It's radical work, yes. It's necessary work. It's liberating work. Will it ruffle some feathers? Let's sure hope so.

JH: Thank you, thank you, thank you; thank you for having this conversation and for being part of VASTA's 2021 virtual conference Rising Voices: Listening to the Past, Dismantling the Present, Cultivating a New Future. It has been such an immense pleasure.

TC: I'm feeling hopeful, and I encourage everyone out there to continue to have the conversation, but also don't be afraid to ask questions. We're all just human, we all live under the same sky, we all breathe the same air. So, thank you Joe, for having me in the space. I'm truly honored.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors



Joe Hetterly (he/him/his) is a passionate arts administrator and teacher who is interested in cultivating spaces for other artists to create. As an educator, he is a self-reflective voice and speech practitioner who is focused on responding to the needs of the individual artist. He has taught at SUNY Purchase and NYCDA. His professional experience includes working in the nonprofit sector, in casting, as an actor, at a talent agency, and at a Broadway General Management company. Currently he works in the finance and operations department at Disney Theatrical Group. BFA acting: Marymount Manhattan College, MFA performing arts management: Brooklyn College.



Tré Cotten (he/him/his) is an internationally award-winning artist/educator from Clayton, NC. His degrees include a BA in theatre (performance) from UNC-Wilmington and an MFA (acting) from The University of Washington-School of Drama. He has been featured in *The New York Times* and *LA Times* for his work with Eli Goree's embodiment of Cassius Clay and Leslie Odom Jr.'s Academy Award Nominated performance as the legendary Sam Cooke in Regina King's, *One Night in Miami*. He is the dialect coach on CBC and BET's period drama *The Porter* (Canadian debut), Amazon's *The Peripheral*, and *The Exorcist* (upcoming) directed by David Gordon Green.

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