

Chat Room

For many young actors, the creativity and flexibility of voice-over work can't be beat

By Beverly Gray

Inside a recording booth, three adults giggle, snicker and otherwise sound like school kids at recess. They're taping background voices for "Me, Eloise," Film Roman's upcoming DVD movie about the fabled 6-year-old who rules the roost at New York's Plaza Hotel. In this animated version, longtime voice actors play Eloise's classmates. But the precocious young miss is voiced by a petite 9-year-old, Mary Mouser, who's every bit as professional as the grown-ups surrounding her.

When "Eloise" was cast, adults vied with young girls for the plum title role. But director Charlie Adler insisted that only a child could bring off a part he calls "myopically childlike." Mouser, who attends taping sessions in pink jumpers, bobby socks and hair bows to better connect with her character, suggests it's a no-brainer:

"Who could play a kid better than a kid?"

Many production companies agree. The Walt Disney Co., which has used children's voices in its animated features since 1942's "Bambi," continues to push for the casting of youngsters in major roles. Sarah Noonan, director of animation casting and talent at Nickelodeon, maintains that young performers convey a sense of "kidness" that adults can only approximate. Although child actors add to production costs because they require on-set teachers and shortened work days,

Noonan is convinced that Nickelodeon's target audience will accept nothing less than the real thing: "If I can tell the difference, I believe kids can tell the difference."

Young actors enjoy voice-over work because it's creative and fun. Many love not having to fuss with makeup, hair and wardrobe. Their parents are fans, too. They find recording studios far more kid-friendly than the average high-pressure movie set. Joyce Bryan, whose son, Benjamin, voices Linus in ABC's "He's a Bully, Charlie Brown" (set to air in the spring), notes that "it doesn't really interfere with most of your daily schedule. Voice-over work is very quick, and it can be lucrative." Eileen Mundy, whose daughter, Liliana, juggles key voice-over roles on Nickelodeon's "CatScratch," Disney Channel's multicultural "Higglytown Heroes" and several of Disney's "Lilo & Stitch" spinoffs, appreciates that her 11-year-old can hold onto her privacy in a way that eludes young on-camera stars.

No one in the industry expects children to have the full tool kit of voices and accents that adult voice actors possess. Kids win roles when their normal voices suit the characters they're asked to play. But acting chops also are essential: Voice-over artists need emotional range and the

ability to bring scenes to life. They also should be focused and flexible because changes often arise during recording sessions. An ability to speak fluent Spanish is a plus, as it has been for Jake Toranzo-Szymanski, the lead in Nickelodeon's new bilingual preschool series "Go, Diego, Go!" But above all, they should love to experiment. Melissa Berger, an agent in the young talent division at Cunningham Escott Slevin Doherty, explains that "the performers who do well are the ones who are fearless. They don't care what they look like (when they're voicing a crazy character). They just go with the moment."

Normally, dialogue is recorded before animation is complete. But young actors must summon technical skills when adding their voices via ADR to preexisting footage. This can happen when foreign films, such as Hayao Miyazaki's anime classics, are released in English-language versions. When a young actor's performance in Screen Gems' February horror pic "Boogeyman" didn't pass muster, producers tapped 16-year-old Cody Linley to replace the character's entire vocal track.

At Disney, it's Ned Lott's job to find young voices matching those of classic characters such as Bambi (Alexander Gould stars in a new sequel) and Baby Roo (currently played by Jimmy Bennett). For a 2003 DVD follow-up to "The Jungle Book," Disney opted for star power, hiring Haley Joel Osment to play Mowgli in "The Jungle Book 2." Although not a perfect match, Osment came close enough to be deemed acceptable. But during the lengthy production period, his voice changed, necessitating major rerecording.

The onset of puberty is, of course, a challenge for every young male voice actor. Casting directors love scratchy prepubescent voices, but a teenage boy can't sustain that sound indefinitely. Still, creative executives are reluctant to recast. On Nickelodeon's futuristic animated series "Avatar: The Last Airbender," producers have chosen to take teen actor Jack De Sena's new lower voice in stride. Another "Avatar"

star, Mae Whitman, need not worry about her voice plunging to a new register.

But at 17, she's well aware that she's entering the ranks of adult voice artists. That's why she's branching out, specializing in babies and very young children, while also impersonating elderly women when the opportunity arises.

For talented youngsters, voice-over work can be a steppingstone to on-camera roles. But some are reluctant to leave a field in which looks and ethnicity don't count. Says Maria Estrada, who directs "Heroes": "That's the beauty of animation. It's very colorblind. It comes down to who's best for the role."



Mary Mouser



Jake Toranzo-Szymanski



Liliana Mundy



Mae Whitman