

The King's Speech

A review by Tim Mackesey, CCC-SLP, BRSFD

The *King's Speech* is a must see movie. King George VI, with a severe stammer, was forced to make an abrupt ascension to the throne. It is a story of the king gaining fluency with the help of a speech therapist. With England going to war to stop Hitler, functional fluency was critical for radio announcements heard around the world.

The movie is up for 7 Golden Globes and Oscar Awards may follow. The acting and star-studded cast is superb. Geoffrey Rush plays the speech therapist, Lionel Logue, and Colin Firth plays King George VI.

Once of the most revolutionary aspects of this movie is that it is the first major motion picture to portray stuttering (aka stammering) with honesty and compassion. Mel Tillis, in his autobiography *Stutterin' Boy*, stated that when he did not stutter in *Smoky and the Bandit*, the director would yell "cut" and they would film until he stuttered; his stutter was the punch line. In *A Fish Called Wanda* Michael Palin- whose character stuttered- was tormented and mocked by Kevin Kline. Following the fallout from that movie Michael Palin started the Michael Palin Stammering Centre in London.

Stammering is the story

When interviewed about stammering Colin Firth had this to say: "It's one of the last legitimately pastiched disabilities," Firth began. "You don't really get away with poking fun at people who are in wheelchairs, you know, or who are blind. I'm not saying we have to be po-faced about tragedy or hardship, but it's pretty rare, I think, that the issue's been dealt with as an issue." Not only does Firth learn to imitate a silent, choking speech block, King George VI had an articulation disorder. After listening to the original recording from BBC archives (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/ww2outbreak/7918.shtml>) I sat in awe at Firth's mastery of the two simultaneous speech impediments.

The inspiration for The King's Speech

The screen writer for *The King's Speech*, David Seidler, grew up with a severe stammer. He had to wait a very long time to tell this story.

As a child, Seidler had been evacuated to the United States before the Blitz. The voyage—in which a convoy ship had been sunk by a U-boat—traumatized Seidler. "I was quite a profound stutterer," he says. He followed the war's progress on the radio, listening to King George, who by then could manage his stammer. "I heard these wonderful, moving speeches, and had heard that he had been a terrible stutterer," Seidler says. "If he could cure himself, it gave me hope."

Seidler went on to overcome his stutter and become a screenwriter but never forgot about the king. He was particularly interested in how the king was treated by Logue, an Australian who earlier had counseled World War I soldiers suffering from shell shock, a version of what is now known as post-traumatic stress disorder. Logue, who was not a trained speech

pathologist, would briefly surface in biographies—"Blips on the radar screen," Seidler says—but details of his treatments remained secret. "The royal family does not like talking about the royal stutterer," Seidler says. "It was swept under the carpet."

In the mid-1970s, Seidler wrote the king's widow, Queen Elizabeth, asking permission to tell the story. She wrote back saying that "The memory of these events are still too painful" and that she wouldn't accede in her lifetime. "I thought, 'How long am I going to have to wait? One or two years?' She wasn't that young," Seidler says. But the Queen Mother famously lived until age 101, 28 years after Seidler had made his inquiry.



Colin Firth (left) with Geoffrey Rush practicing for radio address

Was Lionel Logue unorthodox?

Lionel Logue helped King George IV become an effective communicator and leader. I have been asked my opinion of his techniques countless times. After seeing the movie many of my patients noted the use of "phrasing," marking written text into smaller chunks, employed by Logue for George to read his famous war time address. Phrasing is a time tested, valuable tool that can generalize from oral reading to dialogue (James Earl Jones). Trauma from childhood stuttering, anticipatory anxiety, and specific phoneme phobia was accurately portrayed. George feared words starting with /p/, for example. Three items I do not recommend as an SLP are: 1) inserting the schwa vowel when anticipating a stuttering (i.e., "uhpeople"), 2) taking a deep breath before a stutter, 3) an SLP sending an anxious, stammering child to approach an adult without immediate supervision and close proximity.

Anyone who likes great film making will want to see this movie. I regret that one scene with profanity provoked the R-rating. Aware he does not stammer when he curses, George prances around uttering the f-word in a somewhat playful manner. I hope many adolescents and teens see this with parental supervision and discussion. King George VI's transformation gave screenwriter David Seidler inspiration for a life time.

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