

# THE KING'S SPEECH – A WRITER'S SIXTY YEAR PASSION THAT COULD HAVE BEEN WRECKED BY A LOST ARCHIVE.

An article (2325 words)

by Michael Pearcy

As they waited for the ceremony to begin, the great and mighty of the British Empire must have looked with envy at the two figures eating sandwiches in a box directly above the Royal Box at the coronation of King George VI. But the King's inner circle would not have been surprised; they would have recognised Lionel Logue and his wife Myrtle and known that this 'colonial commoner' occupied a place of unique importance to the British Monarchy.

In the same year, in London, a baby boy was born to the Seidler family. They named him David and drank a toast to the male heir who was expected to follow his father into the family business.

But David Seidler became a screenwriter on film and television projects that involved Elizabeth Taylor, Francis Ford Coppola, Jeff Bridges and many others. At age seventy-three he joined the elite band of Oscar winners for a very personal project: *The King's Speech*.

The story begins in 1926 when George V required his second son, then the Duke of York – Bertie to his family - to represent him in Australia on a six month tour involving many engagements and speeches.

It was well known that Bertie suffered a debilitating stammer imprinted on him in childhood when his knocked knees and left-handedness were ruthlessly drilled out of the child. His public appearances were punctuated with embarrassing silences and moments where his mouth would struggle urgently but produce no words.

David Seidler also developed a stammer in his early years: "At the age of three I was evacuated to America with my parents. Off we went in a convoy of three ships; two filled with families and one with Italian prisoners of war. U-boats followed us and sunk one of the ships – it was the Italian prisoners of war who were locked in the holds. And all of them were lost. I didn't see that but there was certainly a hubbub, a nervousness, a tension on the boat.

"By the time I got to New York I had developed a stammer. My first childhood memory was the sinking and my second was the Statue of Liberty."

His parents used the example of the stammering king to help him overcome his own problem. Seidler developed a bond of suffering with the King. He read everything he could about that British monarch and one name that kept cropping up, as a mere footnote in history, was that of Lionel Logue.

Logue was a self-taught speech therapist who moved to London from Australia in 1924 with his wife Myrtle and three sons. His background was in teaching elocution and drama but in doing this he developed a good knowledge of the human voice. He was able to apply this to help servicemen returning from the First World War.

By 1926 Lionel had a struggling practice in rented rooms in Harley Street. The book offers several versions of how the Duke of York came to attend those consulting rooms and in the film this scene provides one of the iconic images. We see the Duchess of York in her limousine being guided

through a London fog by a footman. She wipes condensation from the glass and peers out at the unfamiliar London streets. She enters a lift in Logue's building and fumbles to make it work (has she left her *lady of the lift* at the palace?). She enters Lionel's shabby consulting rooms to be greeted by one of Lionel's sons.

In reality there was no car, no fog and no lift. According to the book based on the Logue family archive, the most colourful version of the first contact involves a singer called Evelyn 'Boo' Laye, a friend of the royal couple, who recommended Logue to the Duchess. An equerry wrote on behalf of the Duke to enquire if Lionel would see Bertie.

All very regal and proper but the writer's imagination makes far better cinema. Even with full access to the archive collected by Logue during 26 years of treating the King, it is likely Seidler would have preferred the fog and the lift.

Seidler first put his story together as a screenplay based on biographies of George VI. The Lionel Logue character was developed from a few slight references. But the writer needed more. His instinct told him that the key to telling the King's heroic story was Bertie's relationship with his speech therapist.

In 1981 David Seidler finally made contact with Valentine Logue, Lionel's second son who had possession of the archive. Valentine offered to let Seidler use the archive on condition he had permission from Bertie's wife, The Queen Mother – Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon.

David Seidler explains. "Being a good Brit I wrote to the Queen Mum and she said, please not in my lifetime. She felt that being forced to become king had caused her husband's premature death.

"I thought, well, how long am I going to have to wait? She's a very old lady already – a year, two years?" He paused for dramatic effect. "Twenty-one years later she finally left us. That was my first contact with the royal family, haven't had any since."

Seidler didn't pick up the project again until the mid-eighties when his wife suggested trying out the idea as a two-handed play. This focussed the story down to the Bertie/Logue relationship and Seidler knew he had found the way to tell the King's story.

David Seidler explained how he works. "I use 3x5 cards and there can be hundreds of them. And then I start spreading them over the walls and the floors and post them to the ceiling.

"Each card has a plot point, a line of dialogue or a possible sub-plot – anything related to the project that may prove useful. Gradually the cards fall into a shape for the script, many are discarded. Then I like to sit down and have a very detailed outline. I take longer to write the treatment than I take to write the script."

The script was always going to be an intimate portrait of the two men but the big problem the writer faced was that there was little to base his characters on.

"There was no record of what was said in that room, there were no witnesses, there were two men alone in a room – a private consultation," David Seidler explained. "I had to use informed imagination to build the dialogues. I could never prove that Lionel Logue read Sigmund Freud but I

know pretty much that he was using the talking cure. And later I was able to prove it in a very surprising way.”

The talking cure is widely seen as the basis of psychoanalysis. The patients talk about themselves and are able to release repressed emotions, often from childhood, which are thought to be the source of many psychosomatic conditions.

The proof Seidler mentioned came to light when he was staying with an uncle in London turning the play back into a screenplay for Tom Hooper the director. Seidler was amazed to find this relative had actually been a patient of the enigmatic Logue.

“My uncle became very intimate with the project and one day started talking about Logue: ‘Absolute rubbish, nonsense’, said my uncle. ‘The man was an Australian gangster you know. He didn’t know anything, just wanted to talk about his parents and his childhood and he wanted to get me talking about my parents and my childhood.’”

That information gave support to David Seidler’s theory that Logue was using psychoanalysis and in particular the talking cure to help patients overcome their speech problems.

“So if you know the therapist is using the talking cure and you know the patient is someone specific - in this case King George VI – it’s pretty easy to understand what they’re gonna be talking about. So I think writing the dialogue was informed guesses.”

In 2006 the script arrived on the desk of Joan Lane, a well connected London theatre producer. Lane’s website mentions she had previously trained as a speech therapist and was born in Australia so Seidler’s script had special meaning for her. She worked hard to promote the project and after a lot of rejections gave the script to Simon Egan of Bedlam Productions who agreed to film a reading of the play at the Pleasance Theatre in Islington.

Amongst the invited audience was fellow Australian ex-pat Meredith Hooper, an historian, author and Antarctic traveller. Famously, as the movie’s director Tom Hooper acknowledged when he collected his Oscar, it was his mother Meredith who spotted what would become his next project.

Having got the attention of a Hollywood director, Lane set her sights on the one man everybody wanted to play Lionel Logue, actor Geoffrey Rush.

Unable to get to Rush through his agent, Lane took the unusual step of approaching the actor directly. She asked a friend who lived near Rush in Melbourne to deliver a synopsis of the stage play. Since it would not fit through the letterbox the friend left the package on the doorstep. Geoffrey Rush read it and immediately told his agent to attach his name to the project – something that was vital in attracting finance for the film.

After sixty years, David Seidler’s obsession with telling the story of a stammering king who had inspired him to overcome his own stammer had reached the screen. But so far he had not had access to the Lionel Logue archive.

During his days as a part-time Shakespearean actor in Melbourne, Lionel Logue made a habit of collecting reviews and press cuttings. It was natural for him to keep a diary, newspaper cuttings about Bertie’s public appearances, letters and scrapbooks. On his death the archive passed to his son Valentine and then eventually his grandson Mark Logue, a film maker living in London.

As Mark grew up in Brussels he had been aware of his grandfather's royal connections and remembered seeing lavishly framed pictures of King George VI with personal inscriptions. But it was an enquiry from the producers of the film in 2009 that made Mark realise how significant that box of old papers in the loft could be.

Mark explained: "They were seeking anything that might help them in the art direction of the film. I said yes, I've got the whole archive. Then Iain Canning the producer got back to me saying 'Oh my God, this is the Holy Grail'."

Although the movie was ready to shoot everybody was excited to suddenly have available this rich source of original material. There were several important dialogue changes.

Director Tom Hooper talked about one of the lines in the film which came from the archive concerning Bertie continuing to stammer on the letter w: "The King says, 'well I had to turn a few so they knew it was me'. Those lines were actually written by King George VI and Lionel Logue. A man who can say that is funny and self deprecating and smart. This confirmed David's hunch about this humorous witty relationship between these two men."

According to Mark Logue, the only man with reservations was the film's writer: "David Seidler was worried his script was about to be proved wrong by the archive material. But through true serendipity and good luck, what came from his imagination wasn't altogether wrong. By and large he got the portrayal of Lionel right."

The film focuses on a small slice of a relationship that lasted 26 years and the screenplay skilfully telescopes some major historical events. Mark realised that a fuller picture of his grandfather's life and work could be of world-wide interest. Although he had a thorough understanding of the archive, he knew he needed the help of an experienced writer as co-author.

"With Peter Conradi I couldn't have found a better person," he said.

The sixty-thousand word manuscript was written in just three months during the summer of 2010 – "mainly in the evenings because I had the day job," said Conradi - and rushed into print to coincide with the release of the film.

Sunday Times Journalist Peter Conradi continued: "There was a huge gap in the original material particularly around the coronation in 1937 – very frustrating. But with a few weeks to go before the deadline, Mark's cousin in Rutland, Alex Marshal, came up with all the missing stuff, saying, 'this may not be of any use but...' Crucially she had the King's letters to Logue at this time. Too late for the film but all there in the book."

There is no doubt that David Seidler would have loved to use the Logue archive but he never had access to it in the early days. As a result some of the characterisation suffered.

Mark Logue gave his view: "Unfortunately, the Myrtle character was the one thing that David Seidler got wrong. Myrtle wasn't the meek and humble wife of the film who was homesick and sat quietly subordinate to her husband.

"In reality she was a very headstrong person and was probably the driving force behind their original decision to move to London in 1924. She loved England, loved her husband's job and absolutely adored the accolade."

Watching the film it is fair to say it does not need another strong character. On the screen Myrtle is a supporting character in a film about George VI the reluctant king, and not Logue the rogue speech therapist.

The book is about Logue, and Myrtle is featured here exactly as she should be. There is an ongoing debate about books and their screen equivalents. In this case the book was spurred into life by the film and the only common ground is the front cover photograph of Firth and Rush in costume. But once you get past the cover, the book is a fascinating look at a piece of royal history through the eyes of a 'colonial commoner' who earned a front row seat at a king's coronation.