ONWARD AND UPWARD WITH THE ARTS

TALK THIS WAY

The man who makes Hollywood sound right.

BY ALEC WILKINSON

Tim Monich taught Brad Pitt to talk as if he were from somewhere deep in the mountains of Tennessee. He taught Matt Damon to speak as if he were South African, and Hilary Swank to speak like Amelia Earhart, who was from Kansas but had gone to boarding school near Philadelphia, and so had elements of a period upper-class accent—"Kind of high-falutin," Swank told me. In early September, having nearly finished teaching Gerard Butler, who is Scottish, to speak as if he were from New York, for "The Bounty," Monich began teaching Shia LaBeouf, who is from Southern California, to speak as if he'd grown up on Long Island, for "Wall Street 2." Much of Monich's movie work involves getting Northerners to speak like Southerners, and much of his theatre work involves teaching Americans to deliver lines from Shakespeare or Shaw.

When people ask Monich what he does for a living, he usually makes something up, or says that he works on film crews. He's not shy, but he doesn't like being asked to do accents any more than a magician likes being handed a pack of cards and asked to do a trick. Nor does he enjoy the game of listening to a person he meets and guessing where he was raised. Pedagogically, he is descended from Henry Sweet, the nineteenth-century philologist who was the model for Henry Higgins in "Pygmalion." One of Sweet's students was William Tilly, an Australian who taught at Columbia, and one of Tilly's pupils was Edith Skinner, who was the preëminent dialect and speech teacher for the stage during the middle and later part of the twentieth century. Skinner taught Monich at Carnegie Mellon, and Monich helped revise her classic text, "Speak with Distinction," which was originally published in 1942.

Monich (the name "rhymes with gin-and-tonic," he says) is fifty-nine years old, tall, with thin reddish-blond hair and a rolling gait, from pain in an arthritic hip. For one of his first movies, "Cookie," in 1989, he taught Emily Lloyd, an English actress, to speak like a girl from Brooklyn, and he has since worked on more than a hundred and thirty movies—from "The Age of Innocence" to "X-Men"—and more than a hundred plays. Brad Pitt, who also worked with Monich for "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button," said, "He's the maestro." Damon, who first had Monich's help on "The Talented Mr. Ripley," told me, "You don't do anything without seeing what he thinks." He added, "He would go off and invent ways to try to help me."

Donald Sutherland, who is Canadian and has been coached by or has consulted with Monich on dozens of projects—learning to speak like a South African in "A Dry White Season," then like an Englishman, a wealthy New Yorker, a New Englander, a Kansan, a Georgian, an Oregonian, a North Carolinian, a Mississippian, a Michigander, a Minnesotan, and a member of the Polish politburo—told me, "He's not a mechanic, and he doesn't impose. He comes in from underneath and supports your instincts; he doesn't try to define them. There are many people who do what he does, and by and large they offer constraints. He offers liberation."

One day in August, I took the train to Westport, Connecticut, to see Monich, who lives with his wife, the dance writer Linda Szmyd, and their two daughters in an old house that was once partly a barn. Off the kitchen, Monich has an office in which there are shelves of books with such titles as "Swearing," "Americanisms," "More Stage Dialects," and "City of Slang." In the center of the shelves are boxes of CDs—recordings of talkers whose speech represents a particular place, period, or social station. Monich's archive, assembled over thirty years, is almost surely the largest private one of its kind

freckles, a round face, and glasses. He has

with approximately six thousand entries.

To listen to it in its entirety would take fifty-three days. Monich began recording people when he was a student in Pittsburgh—he thinks the first entry was either an Englishman or a Southerner. Edith Skinner also kept an archive, but the recordings were on reel-to-reel tape, and so it was unwieldy and haphazardly organized; Monich's is meticulously catalogued. The first box has a label that reads "USA A-H." When I asked what the letters stood for, Monich rose from his chair, examined the box, and said, "Alabama to Hawaii." The next box contained Illinois to Louisiana. There are also boxes for Central and South America, Asia, Europe, England, the Middle East, and Africa, with countries from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe. He keeps one copy of the archive on a hard drive and another in a safe-deposit box in Westport.

Monich's desire for new speech is keen. "He goes around the world collecting voices like they're coins," Leonardo DiCaprio, who first worked with Monich on "Gangs of New York," told me. If Monich overheard someone on the street and liked the way he talked, he used to ask to record him, but he rarely does that anymore: "You get people who don't know what you're doing, and they don't speak naturally." Initially, he would ask the person to read a text, but "people read aloud haltingly," he said. "They put the emphasis on the wrong words, they get a singsong voice, and they don't pass over weak words—'of,' 'the,' and 'have.'" Still, he said, "I never use the word 'accent' or 'dialect,'" because they make speakers self-conscious. "I say I love to collect stories, and if they press me I say I love voices, and if they push me farther I say that I sometimes help actors do voices." A

the way he talked.' They all come out of the trailer, and I realize they've been Tim Moniched."

Monich also collects accents from television. He recorded snippets of snake handlers and people who speak in tongues from a PBS documentary, but he prefers shows like "Book TV," where people speak at some length. Charlie Rose, Tavis Smiley, and "Meet the Press" are good for foreign accents, especially those of diplomats, lawyers, and politicians.

Tim Monich coached Brad Pitt for his role in "Inglourious Basterds."

The archive also includes Gertrude Stein reading "An Early Portrait of Henri Matisse"; Ernest Hemingway reading his Nobel Prize acceptance speech in a pinched, slightly tinny voice; J. R. R. Tolkien reciting a poem in Elvish (it sounds like a blend of Hebrew and Middle English); and Edwin Booth, in a hotel room

where she grew up. "Nobody ever had breakfast in bed in those days," she says. "I never remember *anyone* having breakfast in bed. Ever." Her accent is the cultivated one of the period—partly British, partly an ancestor of Long Island lockjaw. Monich interviews a Southern man who talks about a bridge that was built near his home: "They wanted it to look just like God set it in. . . . Right off the top of my head, I don't know the millions it cost." Another time, Monich asks an Irish actor how he got his start, and the man says, "Do you want the truth, Tim?"

> I slugged two cops one night. I was out drinking one night, and I *smacked* two cops. . . . They sent me up to see a probation officer, a fine, lovely young girl. . . . She said to me, "You're looking at two and a half years here for beating up police officers, and I'll send you up to do, p'yaint the props on a drama project we're doing, and I'll get you off with suspended sentence." I went up to p'yaint the props, walked in through the door, done the first theatre, came and went, "I *want* to do this."

We listened to a tape of a man in Cut Off, Louisiana, who said he fished for frimps. I looked at Monich. "Shrimps," he said.

Actors don't need dialect coaches, characters do. Some actors enjoy learning accents—"It's fun when you hear someone else's voice. Your voice can change, your delivery changes," Matt Damon told me—but mostly, Monich says, they would prefer to speak the way they speak. He begins by talking with the director about how a character should sound. Then he talks to the actor about the character—where he might have gone to school, what he does for a living—and decides which voices from his archive might provide a model. (The interaction with the director can be as important as the one with the actor. "He's my first

FINN GRAFF

sometimes help actors do voices. A number of entries were made on movie sets. Gerard Butler told me, "Someone will come to the set, and Tim will say, 'Gerry, do you mind if I speak to your friend? I heard something interesting in that each has a different temperament and way of working.") He usually gives an actor four or five choices, and the actor selects one, from which Monich makes tapes distilling the vowel and consonant sounds that typify the dialect. For "Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull," Steven Spielberg wanted Cate Blanchett to have a broad Russian accent that evoked classic espionage films, and while women usually select the accents of women and men choose men, Blanchett chose the accent of a Russian general that Monich had heard delivering a speech on C-SPAN.

Monich and the actor then "play a word, listen to it, and say it," he said—do language lab, that is. "I'm listening for something slightly off," he said. "It could be the actual vowel, it could be the placement or emphasis, the vocal quality—too nasal, too throaty, too gravelly. It could be too long. Sometimes somebody will say something perfectly, but I hear the effort; it's not easy yet." They also do lip and tongue drills. "The movement inside the mouth is the very core of what's done," Monich said. "'You're putting the tip of the tongue correctly toward the upper front teeth, but you're letting the front of the tongue touch the back of the teeth, and you should let it lie flat' is the kind of thing you say. 'Round the lips, drop the jaw,' or 'You're rounding your lips when you should be relaxing them,' or vice versa. At the beginning, much of the work is literal and physical. I make drawings, and I even have a half denture I bring out."

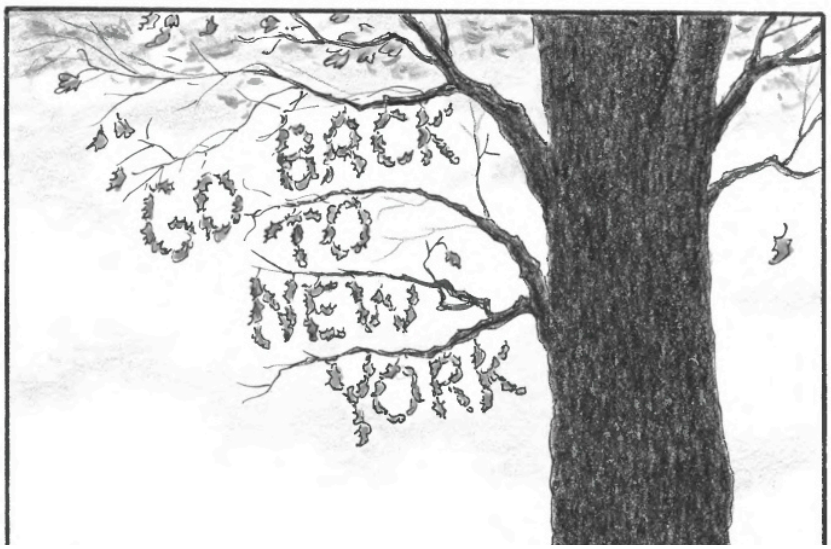
Monich invents rhymes and sentences using words from the script—what he calls random acting. "If the actor has to say 'payback,' I might have him say, 'She's got it on playback. You've got a little bit of a swayback,'" he said. "Then say it when you're laughing, say it crying, say it angry. Now do one with 'payback' where you're accusing someone. Now your two-year-old has turned over her bowl of oatmeal and you're saying, 'I guess that's payback.'" The point of whispering the words or shouting them, speaking them slowly or quickly, is to make the actor aware of how the words feel in all circumstances, so that when he eventually delivers a line he won't have to reflect on how to pronounce the words.

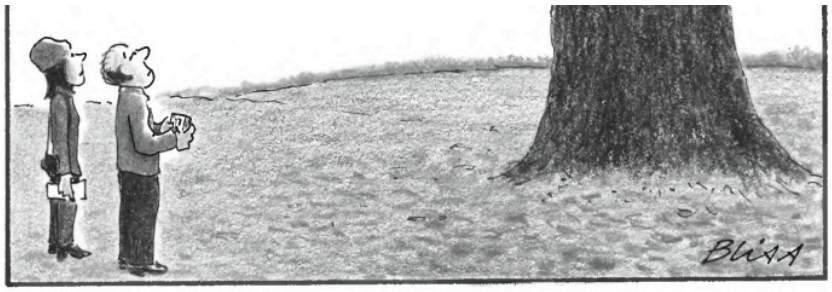
We listened to a tape of a British actor—Monich was helping him to play an American priest. The script called for him to recite Psalm 23. "He needs to sound more or less like a guy from California," Monich said. The actor spoke slowly, as if weary. "Can you hear 'Lord' sounds almost like 'lowered'?" Monich said. "Also, 'waters' is sounding too round for California, so I told him to make it rhyme with 'fodder' and 'totter.'"

Monich has offerings for the eye as well as the ear. He writes an actor's lines in a faux-phonetic style he made up by combining elements of actual phonetics with approximations of sounds. To help Brad Pitt say, in "Inglourious Basterds," "My name is Lieutenant Aldo Raine, and I'm putting together a special team, and I need me eight soldiers," Monich wrote, "Mah name is loo-tinnunt Al-do raine, an ahm puut'n together a spatial team. An ah need me eight soldiers." (Normally, Pitt, who's from Missouri, would say, "My name uz loo-tennunt al-doh raine, un I'm pudding da-gether a spesh'll teem un I need me ayt sohl-jerz.") To teach Matt Damon to sound like an Afrikaner for "Invictus," Monich had him say, "It's a military university," which he wrote as "It's a mull a tree Una verse a tea." (Being from Boston, Damon would say, "It's a mill-a-tairee yoona-versa-dee.") For Butler, in "The Bounty," to say, as a New Yorker, "Not as miserable as I made her, believe you me," Monich wrote, "Nah-duz mizra-b'l uz ahi mehid h'rr, buh-leev yoo me." (Butler, being Scottish, would have said, "Naw' uz mizzarabull uz eye^{ee} may^{ee} d er, b'll eev yew me.")

Brad Pitt received a list of twenty-five phrases to drill on, including "Is innybuddy a-lahv own ahr sahd?" Damon got phrases such as "Go a hiddens mallet" ("Go ahead and smell it") and "Beck toosa Theffra ka" ("Back to South Africa").

With an actor who has no facility at all for accents, Monich tries to teach simple things to keep him from sounding ridiculous. "What you would do with anyone untalented," he said. "Try to protect them from mistakes. Give them some confidence."





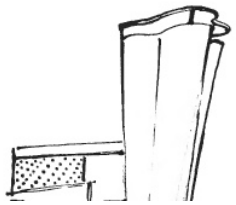
Resistance is most likely to come from actors in secondary roles. "You never hear it with the stars, because they want to be good," he said. "The kind of actors who do accents are the kind who treasure the transformation. They're very amenable." I asked Monich if he had ever encountered an actor who refused his help, and he said only once. "At the Public Theatre. The part required an upper-class English accent, and he sounded as if he were from Ohio, but he said he sounded fine and wasn't going to change anything. It was the only time I ever had an actor yell at me."

"Did you ever work with him again?"

"I never even ever heard of him again," Monich said.

The way a person talks is called his or her idiolect. A collection of idiolects form a dialect, which is an agreement, common to a place, about grammar and vocabulary and certain expressions. An accent is the way someone pronounces words in the dialect. In America, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, teaching dialects was twinned with the teaching of pronunciation—what was called "proper speech." The aspirational accent was that of New England, where people would drop their "r"s, and say "hoff" instead of "half," and "closs" instead of "class." Franklin Roosevelt spoke with this kind of accent, as did Nelson Rockefeller when he was young. Socially ambitious people newly come to wealth took lessons in elocution, and members of the new middle class, more than actors, bought books on how to speak a certain way. The practice waned in the nineteen-sixties, when agreements about proper speech were no longer universal.

To be persuasive, characters in a film should sound as if they lived in the same place or at least inhabited the same period. "Nobody's going to sound exactly alike," Carla Meyer, a highly regarded dialect coach, told me. "No two members of a family even sound alike. It's important to the film, though, that the accent fit like a wonderful piece of



Meyer asked me what Monich was working on, and when I told her that he was coaching Gerard Butler she said, "Good luck with that."

"Do you mean he doesn't like to work?"

"Oh, no, he's wonderful," she said. "I worked with him on 'Timeline.' It's just that he's *very* Scottish. It's hard to come that far. It's a tough accent to come to."

Andy Tennant, the director of "The Bounty," told Monich that he wanted an accent for Butler that suggested New York but not necessarily an ex-New York cop. (Monich is not coaching Butler's co-star, Jennifer Aniston, whose character doesn't require a particular accent.) "You know how they sometimes say, 'In this movie, the city of New York is as much a character as the actors'? Well, that's not this movie," Monich told me. "We're not doing an out-and-out New York accent."

He took my notebook and pencil and wrote "maa-ridge" and "mair-ridge." "In New York they say the first, and in California the second," he explained. Butler had selected from among five accents Monich gave him that of the writer Edward Conlon, who was born in the Bronx, went to Harvard, and became a New York policeman. Monich had recorded Conlon on "Book TV." (Among those Butler had decided against was that of a cookie distributor from Queens.)

During Hollywood's earlier days, movie studios had dialogue coaches, who mostly ran lines with actors and didn't much concern themselves with the accuracy of a character's accent. In "Gone with the Wind," Leslie Howard sounds English, which he was, and Vivien Leigh, who was born in India and educated mostly in England, sounds as if

wood. "He brought Edith Skinner's work in the theatre and phonetics to television and movies in a way that people could understand," she told me.

Earlier, Kamp said, most movie actors thought that the ability to speak in dialects was a talent that one either had or didn't have. Monich was among those who helped them realize that it could be taught. "From something entirely mysterious, it became a skill everyone could master," she said. "As word of his expertise grew, he'd get more work than he could do and he'd say, 'How about Carla Meyer, or Jessica Drake?' " Kamp estimates that there are twenty-five dialect coaches working regularly in movies and theatre in the United States, fifteen in Britain and Ireland, and ten in Canada. "They're like Steadicam operators," she said. "They do something very specific, and there aren't that many of them." The demand grew as the British and Australian film businesses declined and their actors came looking for work in America, and is now greater than ever before.

Monich grew up in Corona, California, east of Los Angeles. His father, who loved opera, ran heavy machinery for a company that built freeways, and his mother was a reporter for a small paper called the Riverside *Press-Enterprise*, where she covered school-board meetings and society news and sometimes wrote features. In high school, Monich was cast by the English department in two plays, and he liked acting and thought that he might study drama in college. At the University of California at Riverside, which he attended while living at home, a professor told him that "if I was serious about drama I should go to Carnegie Mellon," Monich said. "He also told me that I should major as a director. He may have realized before I did

wardrobe. How much of a challenge that is depends on the actors. "Some actors are trained to listen; they've been to drama school," she said. "If someone comes in with a fabulous ear—they're a great mimic—you start where they are and go backward, since they tend to be a little broad." Coaching is a matter of identifying what parts of an accent are central and converting them into forms that can be taught: "In the North we tend to say we have 'ten fingers,' but in the South they might say 'tin.' "

she thought Southerners were either Gypsies or Italians. According to Monich, as people became accustomed to hearing on television news the way people around the world actually talked, they began to expect actors to speak as if they came from the places their characters did.

Diane Kamp, an agent who represents sixteen dialect coaches and used to represent Monich (he now represents himself), says that Monich was a pioneering figure in establishing dialect coaches in Hollywood.

that I had no talent as an actor.

At Carnegie Mellon, he met Edith Skinner. "She was eccentric, impassioned, and charismatic, a large figure for anyone to encounter," he said. "The title of her class was Speech. Third year was dialects. From the first day, I could tell exactly what changes she was making; I could hear them and reproduce them. Most kids don't go around in drama school saying, 'I'm going to be a speech teacher,' so I didn't really have a model. But in my last year I went to the head of my department and said, 'Everybody's talking about going to New York and the roles they want to do and the projects they want to direct. I have no roles I want to play—I'm really at a loss.' He said, 'Do you want to work in theatre at all?' and I said, 'Absolutely.' 'Well, where is your interest?' "

"How much more would this be worth if something happened to you?"

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The head of the department arranged for a grant that allowed Monich to do graduate work with Skinner. After he was done, he was hired at Juilliard, where Skinner also spent part of the year, and where he taught from 1975 to 1987. By then, a kind of fatigue had settled over him: "My classes were very small, five, six people, and many became stars—Kevin Spacey, Val Kilmer, Kelly McGillis. But I couldn't cheerlead the ones who didn't seem to care. I started ignoring them. They'd do their work, and I'd say, 'That's good,' and turn away. It's unprofessional. You will do anything to have the actors sound good. Just for those very few students, I didn't have it in me. Better I get out now, I thought, when I still love it, than when I'm cynical and over it and unhappy. I was already turning down film work, because you can't leave teaching; Juilliard didn't have sabbaticals. I'd been coaching a lot of plays, and I thought that half of my year would be plays and half movies, but it hasn't turned out that way." Most of his time is spent on movies.

One night, after shooting all day in Manhattan, Monich and Butler met to work on the next day's scenes at Butler's loft, a big duplex with lots of dark wood and chandeliers. The first floor of the loft feels like a room in a castle. Butler sat on a couch, and Monich and I

thinking, I didn't do well. You lose your personality." ("Pairsonality" is how he pronounced it.) "It has never got to the stage where I go into a scene and forget about it," he went on. "It happens at times, but you're never quite as comfortable as you are in your own accent."

There was nobody "more, dare I say it, well researched" than Monich, Butler said. "When I was doing an Irish accent in 'P.S. I Love You,' he said, 'Dublin? What part of Dublin, north or south?' Then, 'Here's a farm outside Dublin, and here's the farmer next door to it.' "

Speaking like an Irishman is difficult

called Cupid's Cabin. (" 'Nice to see you again, sir!' to your ninety-three-year-old deaf grandmother," Monich instructed him at one point.) When Butler spoke accurately, Monich said, "Good" or "That takes care of that line." When he didn't, Monich said, "That's a little far back—use the tip of your tongue" or "Watch the little diphthong in 'definitely.' " Butler sat on the edge of the couch. He gave the impression of a bright child who wanted to do well but was having trouble sitting still.

"I'd like to see Winnie the Pooh wear a tutu," Monich said. Then, to me, " 'Oo' is a big problem." To Butler, he said,

took chairs. Butler said that he had heard of Monich well before they began working together. "He's known as the granddaddy of dialect coaches," he said. " 'Speak with Distinction' is the Bible. It's like 'Ulysses'—it's a pretty full-on book. It's how I learned my American accent."

Speaking like an American was very important to him, Butler said. "From the early part of my career, I realized I was only going so far if I didn't know how to speak American. It used to horrify me not to have it down. I was very shy about going to auditions and having to worry about the accent as much as how to read for the part. I could neither master the accent nor the acting. You become robotic, and then you leave very depressed,

for a Scotsman, it turns out. "It's easy to sound like a leprechaun before you know it," Butler said. He found accents more challenging than acting. "Trying to do both together can really tip you over the edge," he said. "You don't want the accent to become a character, but it should inform the character, and it's lovely when you get it right and it's consistent. When that happens, you start to go from where you were to some other feeling for the part."

"Is that what you intend?" I asked Monich.

"I'm steering people toward a certain end," he said. Then he turned to Butler. "Let's do the lines, shall we?"

For an hour, they spoke and whispered and shouted lines from a scene at a motel

"Now give me ten random 'definitely's." Butler leaned back and put one hand on his head, and his feet on a table, and when he had done quizzical, assenting, emphatically assenting, weary, and aggressive "definitely"s, he said, "Are they sounding right?"

"Definitely," Monich said. "Now do five in a row."

Monich had given Butler thirty phrases, divided according to sounds. For the short "i" sound, he wrote, "Six really big bits of English lipstick in a tin cylinder." For the gruntlike sound that two "o"s sometimes make, he wrote, "A book I took from a good-looking hooker in the woods." For a long "i," "Ninety-nine nighties from a nice Irish ice princess,"

and for two "l"s, "Tell him Walter Lilly called," which was actually one of Butler's lines, and appeared in Monich's phonetic version of the script as "Tellum wawl-t'r lilly cawlld."

Early on, Monich made Butler a tape highlighting sounds in the script, leaving time for Butler to repeat his syllables and phrases. "Get in the car," Monich said. "Get.in.the.car. Or, getin the car. So you've got 'getting,' 'get.in,' 'getin'—they're all correct. Get in the car. I'm pettin' the cat, I'm settin' the type, it's whettin' my appetite." In a more imperative tone, he said, "Get in. Let in. Car . . . far . . . star . . . bar . . . Just kiddin', get in." Then, ironically, "Just kidding. Juuust kidding, Get in, Getin. I promise, I promise I won't do it again. . . . Prah muss. Muss . . . Thomas. I promise, I won't do it again. . . . I won't do it. . . . I won't brew it. . . . I won't misconstrue it. . . . I certainly won't poohpooh it. I can't believe you keep falling for the old get-in-the-car trick."

In their first week, they had a session in which they worked on "because." "You have a choice of saying 'becuz,' if it's unstressed," Monich said. "Yeah, becuz there's nothing wrong with it."

"Yeah, becuz there's nothing wrong with it," Butler said.

"But if it's stressed you say 'buhcaws.' Why? Buhcaws, I mean, I don't know, just buhcaws."

"I don't know, just buhcaws."

"When you say 'buhcaws,' " Butler asked a moment later, "is it '*buh*caws' or

"If I wrote 'seduce,' would it help 's-u-d' or 's-a-d'?"

"Saduce them," Butler said. "I didn't suhduce them. No, actually the 'uh' works better."

"It's closer phonetically," Monich said. "Like 'supper,' 'sup,' '*suh*duce.' 'Sudden.' "

"Sup, supper, suhduce. Sudden. Sup, supper, *suh*duce."

"Good," Monich said.

On movie sets, Monich sits by himself away from the camera, treating the scene as a radio play, and he restricts his exchanges. "For such a big man, he totally disappears," Liam Neeson told me. "You don't know he's there, but he's listening—absolutely attending and hearing every word. He knows exactly when to approach you and say, 'Watch this sound, watch this word.' He never bombards you." Neeson went on, "Nine times out of ten, when I see certain stars doing accents I can tell Tim's behind it, because it's effortless." He mentioned Leonardo DiCaprio speaking like a white Rhodesian in "Blood Diamond." DiCaprio told me that he flew to South Africa a month before the movie started filming. "If I didn't have Tim there, though, to tell me, 'I know what you're doing, you're trying, but you're going back to habits and things you've done before, and you're starting to sound like an Australian. Let's take it bit by bit, a syllable at a time

takes. "He's very close to us when we're figuring out how the scene is developing," Pitt said. "Meanwhile, the director is talking to you, you're trying to figure out the intention of the scene, something's wrong with the wardrobe, your shoelace is untied—that kind of stuff throws you, especially in the early years. The point I'm trying to make is that he's one of those guys who help you and is not in the way. He helps me with something deeper. I don't feel sure without him. I need him to show me the road map."

Eventually, the accent recedes as a concern. "When you're in the scene and you're thinking about the accent, you don't have it," Hilary Swank said. "At some point, though, it just clicks, and I can let go then of where my jaw goes and where my tongue should be."

One afternoon in September, Monich was expected in the city at the production office for "Wall Street 2," where he was meeting with Oliver Stone and Shia LaBeouf. Monich has been spending five days a week in New York with LaBeouf, and his days off in Boston with Cameron Diaz, who is learning to talk as if she were from the Northeast—she is from Southern California—for "Knight and Day." We took the train together, standing, because Monich's hip feels better when he stands. Somewhere around Mamaroneck, Monich's phone rang, and he said, "I'm on the train now." Then he

is it '*bee*caws?"

"Buh. *Buh*caws. Like Lauren Bacall."

"Buhcaws," Butler said. "Lauren Bacall."

"Buhcall."

"Lauren Bacall."

"Buhcaws she's a star."

"Buhcaws she's a buhcaw," Butler said. "Buhcaws, becuhz, becaws, no—*buh*caws."

"There's some places where it would be inappropriate to say 'buhcaws'—'I don't want you here, buhcaws it's too much,' " Monich said. "You would just say, 'I don't want you here, becuz it's too much.' "

"Thinking of it as an 'uh' or as an 'ah,' " Butler said, "it suddenly felt like the 'ah' worked better for me."

"If I spell them 'b-a'?" Monich said. (He meant in the phonetic script.)

"Right. Bahcaws."

and as slow as you can'—if I don't have that kind of specific basis, I'm a complete and utter failure," DiCaprio said. "They don't buy the performance unless I spend time with Tim and get verified."

An accent is one of the first things an actor takes up, and how it feels and sounds can influence the decisions he makes. "The accent starts to drive the character," Brad Pitt told me. "It can define the walk, the shoes you wear, the passivity or aggressiveness."

By the time the actor stands in front of the camera, Monich has done the bulk of his teaching work. He has brought in the music, as Pitt told me, meaning "the rhythm and sound of it, so that you hear the melody in the accent." He has worked intimately with the actor, and with sufficient delicacy that he has allowed him to improve without being anxious about his mis-

nodded a few times and hung up. "Oliver's running late," he said. "It will give me more time to work with Shia. I'm going to give him some guys from Long Island from my iPod."

When I called Monich a few days later, he was in a taxicab being driven up Tenth Avenue by a stuntman, following LaBeouf, who was riding a device on the back of a truck—in the movie he will appear to be riding a motorcycle. To record his lines, LaBeouf was wearing a microphone, through which Monich could listen. I asked him if Swank's remarks described what he meant to do, and he said they did, pretty much. "You want to reach the point where when the actors get in front of the camera they're not listening to themselves," he said.

"Because?"

"Because I'm listening for them." ♦