



THE UNSUNG HEROINE: MARNI NIXON AND THE IMPACT OF VOICE-OVER ACTORS IN THEATRE AND CINEMA

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It's often stated that history is written by the winners. Be this true or false, it's absolutely certain that history is not written by the behind-the-scenes actors. Marni Nixon was the real-world example of the classic *Singin' in the Rain* trope in which a singer voice dubs—or records the vocals for—a different actress, who becomes the face of the character. Nixon dubbed the singing for hugely well-known roles in films like *The King and I*, *West Side Story*, and even parts of *My Fair Lady*. Though she was imperative to the legacy these films spurred, she was often ignored and usually uncredited for her vital roles. In an attempt to sing the song of this unsung heroine, this paper will examine the need for voice-over actors/actresses, the impact they have had on the industry, and the impact the industry has had on them and their careers—all through the lens of one of the world's best, Marni Nixon.

History of Voice-Over Acting

Voice-over work became increasingly popular after being employed by a few important figures: Reginald Fessenden established himself in 1900 as the official inventor of voice-over acting when he sang to ship wireless operators through their headphones. In inventing the “first transatlantic wireless telegraphic communication” (Serra), Fessenden became the pioneer of the unseen but clearly heard voice. Fessenden became famous for this invention, was hugely influential in the development of the radio, and worked closely with Thomas Edison. Although Fessenden was technically the original voice-over actor, the credit for this achievement usually goes to the well-known performance by Walt Disney in 1928 (Serra). Walt Disney became the voice for his character, Mickey Mouse, and his popularity catapulted voice-acting techniques to widespread fame. The first cinematic recognition of voice-over acting resulted from the popular 1952 film by Betty Camden and Adolph Green, *Singin' in the Rain*, in which the female lead secretly voice-dubs for a famous but tone-deaf actress. The plot of this musical accurately represents both the dramatic shift in cinema that occurred through the addition of sound and the prejudice against the voice actors who were forced to hide their talents. Although the storyline of this musical became a hit, the recognition for voice actors in real life did not improve. In subsequent years, many movie musicals that utilized the talents of voice actors were produced, but very few of the actors were even credited.

At some point in between the development of the necessary technology and today's cinematic excellence, a stigma arose surrounding voice-over acting. There was a fear among directors that the audience would find voice-overs to be “less authentic” and “jarring” (Koppejan). This reaction was expected in reference to the difficulty in achieving perfect synchrony between the lips of the actor and the voice being used, but also in reference to the facade of using the talents of a different actor to mask the weaknesses of an often more popular actor. The result of these fears was often the complete omission of the voice-actor's name in hope

that the very act of dubbing would remain a secret. The anonymity of the actors became so expected that audiences were shocked in 2017 when Rebecca Ferguson, an actress in the movie musical *The Greatest Showman*, publicly credited and thanked her voice-over actress, Loren Allred. Allred was credited in *The Greatest Showman*, but her popularity came from the support and vocalized gratitude of Rebecca Ferguson. With all the great voice-over actors throughout history, it comes as a shock to many that this kind of recognition is so rare. It's an even greater shock to learn that many of the audience's favorite voices from classic movie musicals are not sung by the actors and actresses portraying the roles.

Audiences are often surprised to discover that the late Christopher Plummer, in Rogers and Hammerstein's *The Sound of Music*, had a voice double, Bill Lee. Plummer explains in an interview with Scott Simon that he felt he just couldn't keep up with Julie Andrews in terms of singing. Disney was very particular about the way they did the voice dubbing, to the point that "the entrances and exits from the songs were [his] voice, and then they filled in..." (Simon). Although Plummer was quick to admit that Captain Von Trapp's voice was not his own, Disney was not so keen to tell the truth. Bill Lee remained Disney's hidden secret for as long as they could keep it that way.

Voice-dubbing technology has advanced to a point where it's often mixed with the actor's original voice in an attempt to cloak the transition. In *The Sound of Music*, this was done by recording Christopher Plummer singing the beginning and end of the song and then having Bill Lee fill in the middle parts (Simon). More modern films still utilize the talents of voice doubles, but often mix them very heavily to preserve the illusion. In Bryan Singer and Dexter Fletcher's 2018 musical drama, *Bohemian Rhapsody*, they found themselves faced with the difficult task of replicating the unique and exceptionally well-known voice of Freddy Mercury. The actor chosen to portray him, Rami Malek, had no hope of being able to replicate the groundbreaking voice, so the producer, Graham King, set out to find someone who could. In the end, they found Marc Martel, a Canadian singer who just so happened to have a profoundly similar voice to Freddy Mercury. To further the illusion of having the actual singer, "the solution was to take recordings from Queen master tapes" (Kielty) and combine them with Martel's recordings. By combining actual recordings of Freddy Mercury and Marc Martel, the team was able to develop a remarkable sound that had both authentic and modern elements.

The skepticism surrounding voice dubbing does not extend to the rest of the world. Voice dubbing is an extremely popular and well-recognized practice in other countries. Italy, for example, is known for being one of the world's best countries in terms of voice acting. Rather than use subtitles—as many translated movies tend to—Italians prefer to use their wide variety of voice actors to speak the dialogue in Italian. The Italian cinematic industry prides itself on not only being the front-runner in terms of voice dubbing quantity but quality as well. Audiences have come to expect popular voices dubbing over famous celebrities. Some specific actors portray each celebrity to provide continuity in the industry (Povoledo). Despite their renowned efforts, many Italian voice actors are afraid for their jobs. Because of the popularity of streaming services, a large quantity of lower-quality dubbed movies are "putting pressure on the Italian dubbing industry to keep up" (Povoledo). Efforts are being made at events and award ceremonies all over Italy to attempt to maintain the high-quality standard they've built up. It's a stark difference from the American voice actors that are so readily pushed into the shadows.

Biography of Marni Nixon

One of the most famously under-appreciated voice actresses of all time is Marni Nixon. She began developing her musical talents at a young age and was quickly recognized as a unique talent. She began to study voice and by age 11, “she won a vocal competition at the Los Angeles County Fair and found her true calling” (Fox). Although the name is unfamiliar to many, her voice-over roles are the classic favorites of movie musicals. Nixon was a classically-trained singer “who appeared as a soloist with the New York Philharmonic; a recitalist at Carnegie, Alice Tully and Town Halls in New York; and a featured singer on one of Leonard Bernstein’s televised young people’s concerts” (Fox). Even with a promising start to her musical career, Nixon quickly found herself hidden away from the spotlight for some of her most popular work.

Because of the shame and secrecy surrounding voice-over work, it was common for voice actors to be used only for certain notes in a song, or as a reference track for the start to sing along with. In an interview with Jasper Rees, Marni Nixon explained that this is what she was told her experience dubbing in *West Side Story* would be like. She explained that she was not given a contract, but was asked just to “help with the voice for Natalie Wood” (Nixon). Natalie Wood, who was extremely unhappy with the idea of needing a voice double, was told Marni Nixon would only dub a few high notes for her. In the end, in true *Singin’ in the Rain* fashion, all of Natalie Wood’s tracks were thrown out and Nixon was shocked to hear that the singing “ended up being totally [her] voice” (Nixon). One of the wildest moments in *West Side Story* emerged when the actress voice dubbing for Rita Moreno in the role of Anita got suddenly sick, and the directors insisted Marni Nixon dub for her too. Unfortunately, this illness came right at the time they were recording a quintet with Anita and Maria. Nixon explains that for that song she “had to do Anita’s voice too and did a duet with [herself].”

The secrecy surrounding voice-over actors was made especially clear in another of Marni Nixon’s famous roles, Anna from *The King and I*. Nixon had to sign a contract, promising that nothing about the voice work she did in this film would be revealed. She was even threatened that if it was revealed, she’d never work around there again (Fox). Nixon openly admitted that the secrecy she was sworn to took a toll on her mental state. Because of the secrecy, Nixon received very little praise, even after her singing in the films helped them become incredibly successful. She was forced to rely on the success of the movies as her success, even though she was not credited for her parts. She was given a strict script to follow in any interviews she did about the films. It wasn’t until after *West Side Story* and *My Fair Lady* that the public began to realize voice-dubbing may be more common than they thought (Rees). She felt under-appreciated and frightened for her job, should anyone find out about her work. The public eventually did find out, although it wasn’t Nixon’s fault. Deborah Kerr, who played Anna in *The King and I*, actually gave a bit of recognition to Marni Nixon. She did insist, however untruthfully, that Nixon only dubbed the high notes for her. Regardless of the subtle emissions of the whole truth, Deborah Kerr’s recognition helped propel Marni Nixon to the small taste of fame that she experienced during her life.

Marni Nixon’s career was not always metaphorically behind the curtain. She played Eliza Doolittle in *My Fair Lady* at City Center, appeared as a guest in TV shows, and even “supplied the singing voice of Grandmother Fa in Disney’s animated film ‘Mulan’” (Fox). After companies stopped threatening her if she exposed the secrets of her work, Marni Nixon became rather vocal

about her contributions. She gave several interviews, wrote a memoir, and even did a touring show in which she sang many of the songs that she had made popular. Marni Nixon's persistent anonymity was not for lack of effort. The public simply wasn't interested in hearing the story of a voice-over actress. Nixon, herself, admitted to feeling like she had "lent [her] voice to so many others that [she] felt it no longer belonged to [her]" (Fox). Like other great artists before her, Marni Nixon was only truly given the spotlight after her death in 2016. Several old interviews were then aired, in which she explained the intricacies, secrecy, and complex nature of the work she had done as a voice-over actress. Marni Nixon never became a household name in the same way that Julie Andrews and Audrey Hepburn did. She supplied so much of the talent that audiences have come to love in classic movie musicals, but no one knows who she was. She remains the singing, un-sung heroine to this day.

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