

Wizard of Oz never mumbled

Bill Hall/Lewiston Tribune

A person watching a movie set in the future would ordinarily expect state-of-the-art sound, most especially including dialogue that is crisp and clear and easy for the audience to understand.

Such a movie was pretty much perfected half a century ago. To this day, if you watch a video of "The Wizard of Oz," every word of every character is as easy to understand as any other sound, song, laugh or witch burp.

Not only can you follow every word but you can follow whole sentences uttered by each and every character. The clarity of that movie's sound lets you follow the yellow brick road to understanding what is happening inside that film in word and song.

That movie was made in 1939, two years after I was born and I'm older than a wicked witch.

The same degree of easy listening did not apply the other night to what might have been a better-than-average flick were it not for mumbled dialogue. The movie was "Interstellar," a futuristic sci-fi story. Technically, it could have been far easier to hear and understand if today's better sound equipment could have been used in reasonable ways, But no. Not only did the soundtrack and the sound effects frequently drown out what the actors were saying, but some of the actors overestimated how much they could mumble and still be understood.

The leading man, for instance - Mathew McConaughey. He couldn't help his incoherence. He was born with a Texas mouth. Every time he got weary in a scene, he would let his Texas lips relax completely.

However, a ventriloquist could do something like that and still be understood. Like McConaughey, a ventriloquist had better learn how to be understood with sluggish lips if he wants to thrive in show business.

I think the actor may have been trying to get real and create the impression for us that he was exhausted and therefore would talk to us like we were all lying on that bed with him as he virtually whispered his troubles to us.

Nice try. But that left us unable to understand much more of what passed his Texas lips when he seemed to be saying something like "Merfle, merfle, merfle, arvindaffle spotsanada."

Apparently when your name begins with two capitalized Ms, it's difficult not to attach that letter to every word and force your mouth into M gear.

And then there was Michael Caine, a highly trained British actor who must have had years of enunciation lessons. Even he turned his dying scene into a mushy mass of inarticulated words. He sounded like he was dying in another language and doing the audience a favor to rid itself of

another mumbler. Movie patrons shouldn't have to work so hard straining to hear what is sort of being said.

If that's what English sounds like when you're dying, I'm canceling that gig. I'm not leaving this numbly world until Texas talking is cured.

In truth, Caine and McConaughey have long since proven they can carry a movie, if whole conversations aren't lost to the audience. I don't know who you blame for letting something so sloppy occur as denying the customers their full ration of intelligible words. When people go to the movies, words are more important than popcorn, especially if actors like Caine and McConaughey don't stuff their mouths with popcorn before mumbling their soliloquies.

If directors could produce an easily understood movie in 1939, they should be able to do the same in 2014 - or as some Texas actors might say, "Gaftonable fluster narda."

If you have been experiencing bouts of mumbled movies, there is a remedy. It's an imperfect remedy because it involves staying home instead of going to a movie theater. Some movies, especially sci-fi movies, are more dazzling in a theater than the same movie on a large flat screen at home.

But a movie you can understand is better than a movie mumbled. And movies at home, both on DVDs and services like Netflix, come with subtitles (which you can quickly get used to).

Best of all, you rule your own home theater. And that offers several advantages, not the least of which is handy bathroom breaks when required.

Or as McConaughey would say, "Merfle tinkle."

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