



# Backstage at the Debate

By Tony Beckwith

**As a freelance** interpreter, many of my assignments begin with a phone call. In this case, an agency in Miami called to ask if I was interested in being part of a team of interpreters needed for the Democratic presidential candidates' debate to be hosted by Univisión, the Spanish-language television channel, in early September 2007. Well, of course I was!

I did have to ask why they were calling me, in Austin, Texas, especially when there are scores of English-to-Spanish interpreters in Miami. The agent explained that Univisión was insisting that those selected should not only be qualified interpreters, but must also have broadcast quality voices. The agency had found my name in the Austin Area Translators and Interpreters Association directory, which led them to my website, where they saw my voice talent credentials. From there they were able to link to my agent's site, listen to my demos, and decide that I had the kind of voice they were looking for.

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**Our interpretation was being listened to by millions of Spanish-speakers in real time.**

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I found this interesting, as I am usually hired either as an interpreter or as a voice talent, but have never made the cut based on both qualifications. I mention this to underscore the importance of listing all of our talents on résumés and websites, since freelancers never know precisely what might catch the eye of a potential client.

## Audition

Next came the audition, which is a normal step for a recording gig, but not necessarily for an interpreting assignment. It was scheduled for the following day in Miami: could I be there? My mind raced and then my heart sank. I already had commitments. "Let me see what I can do,"

said the agent, and called back in a little while to ask if I could be at the Univisión affiliate's studios in Austin the following evening. I told him I could, and was thrilled to be back in the running.

The affiliate's technician set me up in front of a monitor showing footage of previous debates, which were the same videos being shown to the other interpreters auditioning at the Miami studio. After watching a few loops we were each given our assignment, and I was told to "do Richardson." The tapes ran again, this time with no sound, and every time Bill Richardson spoke I interpreted his words into Spanish over the phone. This exercise was repeated several times, and ➤

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each time we were told to “voice” a different candidate (Kucinich, Obama, etc.), except the women, who took turns voicing Hillary Clinton. After an hour or so, I was told, “Thank you very much, and we will let you know.” I went home, to pace the floor, and toss and turn, then pace some more, for several interminable days.

### **Getting the Call**

On Wednesday morning, an e-mail suddenly arrived announcing that I had been selected and would soon receive my ticket for a flight to Miami on Friday. Rates for the project had already been negotiated prior to the audition. The agreement was for a rehearsal on Friday night, a possible second rehearsal on Saturday, the actual event on Sunday evening, and the flight home on Monday. My wife does not usually accompany me on assignments, but this was no ordinary trip, so she agreed to come with me. (You would think that an airline would be so happy to fill an empty seat on a flight leaving in two days that they would sell it at a discount, but that is not the case. They actually charge somewhat more than an interpreter with a broadcast quality voice gets paid for a full day’s work!)

We landed in Miami on Friday afternoon, and as we approached the baggage carousels I saw a man in a dark suit holding up a sign with my name on it. Being picked up by a limousine at the airport can really make your day. (It can also do wonders for your wife’s opinion of your importance in the overall scheme of things.) We were whisked off to a hotel in Coral Gables that was conveniently located across the road from the University of Miami, where the debate was to take place. It was a gloriously sunny September day, under a perfectly blue Florida sky. Everywhere we looked we saw palm trees, which I

love because they make me feel as though I am on vacation. Of course, this was no vacation.

### **Preparations**

There was barely enough time to check in at the hotel, freshen up a

over a long table in the dark, each facing a small monitor on which we could follow the action on the stage far below us. The candidates were not there, of course, but the university had provided students to stand in for them while the anchors asked random questions and the

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little, then rendezvous at the university for the first rehearsal. The debate was to be held in the arena, and there was a small fleet of huge trucks parked outside, all with their engines running. This was to be a remote broadcast, so Univisión had tons of equipment standing by, both in the trucks and inside the building. A stage was in place at one end of the arena, and cameras and lights were positioned at the other end and on both sides. Folding chairs had been arranged in rows in the center facing the stage. There were cables everywhere, and I picked my way carefully over to a group of people standing beside a pile of electrical equipment. I asked where the interpreters were supposed to be and they pointed to the top of the bleachers, way up in the darkness at the other end of the vast auditorium.

It was up there that I finally met the agent who had hired me and the other five interpreters with whom I would be working on Sunday evening. Our team consisted of one woman and five men: one Venezuelan, two Cubans, one Chilean, one American, and me, an Anglo-Argentine who grew up in Uruguay. The rehearsal was mainly a technical one, and we sat hunched

techies tested microphones, feeds, and connections for hour after hour into the night.

To everyone’s amazement and delight, the Saturday rehearsal was cancelled, so my wife and I spent the day roaming around Little Havana and South Beach, exploring the lovely art deco area and dining at A Fish Called Avalon. As the sun went down, we sat on the terrace overlooking the ocean, toasting the varied and interesting life of a freelance interpreter and all that that entails.

### **The Main Event**

On Sunday, I arrived at the arena a little after noon for another rehearsal. Security was tight, since all the Democratic candidates would be there later on, and we had to file through an airport-style checkpoint, stepping through a metal detector gate one at a time, emptying our pockets and presenting bags and purses for inspection. As I stood in line with a group of very chatty catering staff, I began to really think about what lay ahead and felt a familiar dryness in my throat. When I joined my colleagues up at our station, I noticed that they too were just a shade more serious ➤

than we had all been on Friday night. Our big moment was almost upon us.

We were supposed to rehearse for a couple of hours and then, after a break, return in the evening. But the security issue changed the plan, and we never left the arena. As the afternoon dragged on, I must have fallen asleep at one point, and was soon dreaming about a security checkpoint where I was challenged by syntax-sniffing dogs. One of them called to a security guard, saying, "Hey, over here, this one is carrying all kinds of false cognates and questionable synonyms!" I cried out and woke up, looking this way and that as one does when jolted unceremoniously from a nap.

As any actor knows, waiting around backstage before a performance can be difficult, since it gives one time to think, perchance to doubt. I now found myself thinking about my very early days as an interpreter, and I was suddenly transported back to my first professional assignment many years ago. My colleague on that occasion took the microphone first as I sat nervously by, trying to prepare myself to take my turn. I was nervous because I had not, at that point, had much hands-on experience with simultaneous interpreting other than the courses I had taken and the practice sessions in front of the television. When I finally took the microphone, the speaker's voice suddenly became an incomprehensible babble that roared in my headset like waves crashing on a distant beach. I completely froze. My head pounded and my eyes felt like live coals in their sockets. My shirt clung to my wet skin as sweat gushed from every pore. My mouth was as dry as sand and my tongue felt bloated and useless. I could not breathe. Seconds ticked by and I said nothing. Somewhere in the screaming recesses of my brain I con-

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templated the idea of bursting into tears and running from the room. Then a man in the audience turned and looked toward the booth, gesturing at his headset, indicating that he could not hear anything. I realized that he thought there was a technical problem, and that if I could start speaking immediately nobody would ever know that the problem was me. That thought somehow cut through the panic, and I was able to start interpreting. I know I did not do a good job that day, but I got through it and then, bit by bit, got better with each assignment. I have never forgotten that experience, which taught me that stage fright is a normal part of what we do. Panic, on the other hand, is an interpreter's worst enemy, but if we can control it, we can do anything.

As I sat in that darkened arena in Miami, I also thought about all that I have learned from the interpreters I have worked with over the years. There have been many, and they have all taught me something. Sitting with colleagues in a booth or on chairs at the back of a room has been a continuing education for me, and I knew that without them I would not be where I was on that day.

### Action!

When the time finally came, our team of interpreters settled into our chairs, adjusted our headsets, and gave each other the thumbs up. The seven candidates had arrived under heavy security a little earlier and had been

sequestered in private dressing rooms. They were now ushered onstage and did what candidates always do, which is smile and wave and shake every hand in sight. They were then shepherded to their podiums and shown how their headset worked. Then there was silence on the set, then three, two, one, and show time!

The debate, which was actually more of a forum, was to last 90 minutes, broken into three half-hour segments. The questions would be asked by Univisión's two anchors, who would speak Spanish throughout. The American interpreter's job was to transmute the Spanish questions into English ones that the candidates would listen to through their headsets. The rest of us were assigned to one or more candidates, and each time one of them spoke one of us interpreted their answer simultaneously into Spanish, which went out live to Univisión's audience. Initially, I was assigned to interpret for Senator Joe Biden and Senator Christopher Dodd, but as Biden did not make it to the event, I only voiced Dodd. The candidates could speak for up to a minute in response to each question, and they sometimes tried to cram into their 60-second answer everything they had ever wanted to say on that particular subject. At least it seemed that way at the time.

The questions had been submitted by Univisión viewers over recent weeks, and the interpreters were shown a rough draft of some of ➤

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them about an hour before the event began. This was helpful to the one working into English, but not particularly so to the rest of us, since the videos of previous debates that we had been studying had already given us some idea of the probable topics. What we would have liked to have seen, of course, was the text of the candidates' answers, but that was not an option.

The pressure was intense right from the start, mostly because we knew that our interpretation was being listened to by millions of Spanish-speakers in real time. My wife, who

was sitting off to one side on the bleachers, told me afterwards that it was fascinating to observe each interpreter's personal style. One waved his hands around like any self-respecting Latin American politician would have done. Another stood up and sat down and jabbed the air energetically with a finger. I curled up into a semi-fetal position and closed my eyes to keep all distractions to a minimum. At the end of each segment we stood and stretched and did the usual post-mortem of our performance. At the end of the program we leapt up and high-fived and embraced each other:

proud, exuberant, and relieved.

### Making History

I suppose something can always go wrong, but that night everything went smoothly and according to plan. Univisión kept referring to it as a "historic event," and indeed it was. This was the first time that presidential candidates of any party had ever "debated in Spanish" for the benefit of the U.S. Hispanic television audience. It was a memorable occasion in a number of ways. It was certainly one that I will never forget.

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## Do You Remember?

# ATA's 50th Anniversary History Project



**The year was 1959.** The race for space was seriously under way as the Soviet Union's Luna 3 sent back the first photos of the moon's dark side and the U.S. announced the selection of its first seven astronauts. The United Nations responded by establishing a committee for the Peaceful Use of Outer Space. And in New York City a small group of translators and interpreters founded the American Translators Association.

**Now, almost 50 years later,** ATA is putting together a history of member memories and photos as part of a yearlong celebration in 2009. Anyone can take part in this trip down memory lane. Just e-mail your "remember when" story or "way back" picture to the ATA History Project.

**For more information,** contact Mary David, member benefits and project development manager, at [mary@atanet.org](mailto:mary@atanet.org).