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Creating a Community

By David Finkle

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"It's a design job—I normally get credited as dialect designer," says Amy Stoller about her work as a coach. She happens to have the unusual credit "dialects and dramaturgy" on the title page of the "Wife to James Whelan" program. That's the extremely well-reviewed Teresa Deevy play that indefatigable Mint Theater Company artistic director Jonathan Bank is presenting as his latest rediscovery.

Stoller has worked in tandem with Bank since 1996. ("Jonathan and I don't have to have lengthy discussions," she says.) This production was praised by Back Stage critic Erik Haagenen for the "believable consistency" of accents displayed by the eight-member cast throughout the drama, which takes place in Ireland's Midlands, specifically in the small town of Kilbeggan. How did she achieve it? Stoller relates the answer with humorous intensity while her rescue Maltese, Ricky, sits quietly on this visiting columnist's lap. It's part of her method: Ricky, she says, is a big help in putting nervous actors at ease.

Realistic Yet Pragmatic

"The first thing I did," Stoller recalls, "is research Kilbeggan online. I wanted to find oral histories, interviews. The sample was small, and it was two politicians actually from Kilbeggan. Then I broadened my research for the entire county, Westmeath, and the neighboring county Offaly. The accents don't change the minute you cross the border."

Stoller makes a point of explaining that within any community, accents can vary. "Even in your own family," she says, "I bet you have different accents. It also depends on who someone is talking to. You might talk differently to your priest, rabbi, imam than you would to another family member." In part, this explanation stems from a comment this reporter made about the different pronunciations of "Dublin" heard during the play's unfolding ("Doob-lin" being only one of them). "It's only important that nothing be said that wouldn't be heard within the community—or whatever community is created

within the show," Stoller emphasizes.

For "Wife to James Whelan," which had a "fairly short rehearsal period," in Stoller's estimation, "I purposely didn't work on individual accents," she says. "We had a group rehearsal the first day. I distributed my notes and CDs." Those contained sound bites she had turned up and provided an unmistakable indication of what she expected the players to replicate. "I gave them as much information as I could lay on them," she says.

Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, Stoller believes that most people know instinctively how to reproduce accents and realize as much "when they sit down to think of them. I'm there to give them an additional perspective on things they don't know." She reports that the entire company—an Irish actor and an English actor among the ensemble—arrived at the first rehearsal without having to be brought up to speed. She jokes, "Not bad for a bunch of Yanks: They all showed up on the right island."

Noting that in their preliminary discussions about whether the long-lost play would work for contemporary audiences, Stoller explains that she and Bank never thought in terms of presenting a documentary: "I walk what I feel is a very fine line. I consider pragmatic needs: What can the actors handle? What does the audience need?"

Learning by Doing

Stoller's inclination toward her current work started early. "I got interested at 3. My parents took me to see 'My Fair Lady' on Broadway, and I immediately was fascinated," she recalls. "I went home and started teaching myself Cockney and R.P.—received pronunciation. They took me again when I was 5. I believed I wanted to be an actor. At 15, I made up my mind I'm going to have a life in the theater."

She started out doing lots of Off-Broadway and regional theater because she was noticeably proficient at accents. Other actors began approaching her for help, which is how many dialect coaches get sidetracked into that line of work. "In those days," Stoller says, "you couldn't train," which is why she is largely self-taught, although there were periods of time spent at the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art and the British American Drama Academy.

Nevertheless, she continues to study and has just been to a conference where she and colleagues swapped tips. She relies on such opportunities for growth as a mentor, explaining that her peers have "information and war stories. They're fabulous people, and I'm the better coach for it." And she does give private lessons, with her students "running the gamut," she says.

Proud of her achievements, Stoller also includes in her "Wife to James Whelan" bio that she's the associate editor for New York City at the International Dialects of English Archive (she regards herself as concentrating on "American English and English English") and an officer of the Voice and Speech Trainers Association. In these capacities, she counts on broadening her coach's command even further.


To find out more about Stoller, visit www.stollersystem.com. "Wife to James Whelan" runs through Oct. 2. Info can be found at www.minttheater.org.

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