

An Interview with

Dialect Coach

BEN FUREY



Ben Furey is the dialect coach of A Lesson from Aloes. His work has also been heard at Hartford Stage in A Christmas Carol, Heartbreak House and Cloud 9. He has worked on seventeen Broadway productions, including The Children, Michael Moore: The Terms of My Surrender, The Last Ship, The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time, Matilda and Billy Elliot.

Dialect coaching is an integral part of the theatre, but the term can mean several things. In general, what were your tasks as dialect coach on this production?

My tasks on this particular show are pretty much the same as they are on every show I do. I talk to the director about their thoughts concerning dialect, I communicate those ideas to the actors who then come back with their thoughts. I do research on the play and find recorded audio interviews or documentaries in which people speak with the target accent. I'll create an Accent Breakdown for each accent we are using in the show and then work with the actors on things like sound differences between their own accent and how the character speaks. I'll watch rehearsals to check in with how the actors are progressing with acquiring the new accent, working with them individually to make it organic as well as accurate. Finally, I will attend previews to listen to the actors and send them notes as necessary.

You've been a dialect, voice and text coach since your early thirties. What first excited you about this work?

When I was young, I always enjoyed playing with dialects and thought that finding new voices was "cool." When I started out as a coach, I was most concerned, as many coaches are, with the differences in speech sounds between

accents. However, as I did more teaching and coaching, I became fascinated by the other differences between dialects such as intonation (how pitch is used) and rhythm. I also became more committed to the concept that what I do is help an actor find the voice of their character, rather than merely learning new sounds. I work from the premise of accent and dialect being an organic part of the mise-en-scene of a production rather than being an add-on item to a show.

In South Africa, especially, one's dialect has incredible importance. What does language and dialect reveal about South African politics and history?

John Kani, one of South Africa's most-renowned actors and directors, speaking on the BBC's "The Routes of English" radio program, said that English was "a pure instrument of subjugating our people. The learning of English made you a better servant... which we turned around in the early fifties as the most powerful weapon of making the master understand, in his language, that no more, we are free Africans and this is our land." So language and accent have been highly charged in South Africa for many years, and are symbolic of the struggle of the Black and Coloured populations against their oppressors. In *A Lesson from Aloes*, the White South African English of the Afrikaaner, Piet, and of Gladys, who is of colonial British descent, contrasts with the Black South African English of Steve, whose accent of English contains elements of his own language, the British English of the Cape, and Afrikaans. In *Aloes*, the use of dialect proves to be a subtle microcosm of the larger world of the play.

Athol Fugard's *A Lesson from Aloes* takes place in South Africa in 1963. How did you immerse yourself in the aural world of the period in preparation for our production?

When doing a play set in a specific place and time, I'll research the period to put the play and its voices in a linguistic and historical context. In some plays, like those of Fugard, the use of accent can be a political statement by the playwright so it's important that I work with that perspective in mind. I'll watch films and documentaries about the period and/or the subject of the play. It can, however, be very difficult to find usable recordings of voices from the right period, and even if I do find them, they may not be useful for dramatic purposes. For example, for last season's production of *Heartbreak House*, using dialects from the time the play was written would have distanced the audiences from hearing the ideas of the play. Absolute authenticity in dialect sounds may not be the best way to go. However, in *Aloes*, there are a number of Afrikaans words, names, and phrases and, when dealing with language other than English, it is important to be accurate in pronunciation. I was lucky enough to be able to have an Afrikaans speaker – and the mother of a former student of mine – record the language sections for us.