

Giving Voice to Racial Casting

“Can you do a *Latino* accent?”

“We are looking for an *Asian* sound.”

“Good, but can you sound more black?”

What does a race sound like? Stereotypes and assumptions not only influence casting decisions. They influence what happens after casting when we decide how the character speaks. For years actors have clearly distinguished the New York Jew in *Lost in Yonkers* from the New York Italian in *Savage in Limbo*. There is a distinct dialectical difference between the southern belle in *Streetcar named Desire* and the women in *Laundry and Bourbon*. So why have characters in plays about diverse cultures often been lumped into an “Asian sound” or “Latino sound?”

As a voice and dialect coach, I assist actors in capturing and creating sounds that are not habitually, genetically, or culturally their own. As a teacher, I give actors tools to capture the vocal essence of any person, particularly one not like themselves. I am a strong proponent of delving into character research. I stretch the artist as far as possible in training. Being a Latina voice coach, I also spend a significant amount of time working on dialects influenced by the Spanish language, such as Nuyorican, Tejano, and East LA. Race and casting have challenged me in many ways over the years. First as a classically trained actress, I was disappointed to learn that my brown skin and Mexican name meant I would have countless auditions for whores and maids in television and film. Now as a dialect coach and teacher, I work against stereotypes and misconceptions to bring out diverse voices on stage.

Dialect coaching is design work. Each production requires unique voice work. Authenticity is not necessarily the goal. An actress playing Eliza Doolittle with an authentic Cockney dialect on stage would be incomprehensible and frustrate an audience to no end. An actor with an “inconsistent sound” in rehearsal may be the character that audience members from that region say has the most authentic dialect. Some actors struggle with dialects no matter how hard they work. Sometimes an accurate dialect does not sound like what we expected and the director chooses to go another way. Many considerations factor into what sounds are appropriate for a particular production.

Race is one of those considerations. It is a consideration because decisions made for a character played by a Caucasian actor may not work for an actor of color. Preconceptions, stereotypes, and fighting the way things have always been done all affect what we see and hear. This is not to say one race does it correctly or better. My experience is that they are just different. These are a few examples of how racial casting has influenced my work as a voice coach.

One of the first shows I coached was Ted Tally's *Terra Nova* at Rice University. This challenging dialect piece requires various British and Norwegian dialects. The director cast a black actor in the role of Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen. Together the actor and I worked hard to perfect the sound changes for a Norwegian dialect. The actor listened to authentic recordings of native Norwegians, practiced diligently, and became excellent at the sound changes. After watching a documentary on the members of the actual expedition, the director commented how impressed she was with the accuracy of the actor's dialect. I felt proud and effective. That is until we went into preview.

The preview audience was engaged and moved by the production. However, some people couldn't figure out why the Amundsen character was played with a *Jamaican* accent. My initial reaction was, "Oh, of course, because he is black with an accent, that means he is Jamaican?!" I stood by the work and wanted to ignore the feedback. The comment by one or two members of the audience could have easily been dismissed. Unfortunately, several people made the comment and the director began to worry that the production would suffer because of the focus on the "Jamaican" character.

After discussing all of the options, we asked the actor to say some of his lines without the dialect. Because he had memorized the show in dialect, his lines were still influenced by the Norwegian speech pattern and sound placement. I recognized some of the similarities in the broad "a" sound and the changes to the "r" sound. I also recognized that a Norwegian dialect was unusual. We decided that the confusion was not worth the distraction and we pulled back on the dialect. The actor was, of course, devastated after working so hard to accomplish the sound changes. I sympathized completely. He had achieved clarity with accurate sounds that were true to the character. It was my first lesson in racial casting.

West Side Story holds a special place in musical theatre history. With challenging music and popular draw, it seemed to be an excellent unveiling of the new BFA in Musical Theatre program at the University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee. Unfortunately, it is not the culturally diverse piece that some believe it to be. It is actually quite the opposite. Neither the music nor the book is written by a Latino, the score does not accurately reflect Puerto Rican music, and many times Latina/o actors are not cast in the Puerto Rican roles. Recent efforts in 2008 by Arthur Laurents to make the play more authentic by changing some of the lyrics and book to Spanish failed on Broadway and the original text was reinstated. Worst of all the play supports Rosina Lippi Green's conclusion that, "stereotypes around Chicano and Latino Americans are almost exclusively negative."¹ The Puerto Rican males represented as gang members and the

¹Lippi-Green, English with an Accent: Language, Ideology, and Discrimination in the United States, 236.

Puerto Rican women portrayed as either virgins or spitfire whores are perfect examples of these stereotypes.

These issues became part of a wonderful discussion at UWM when we produced the piece in 2007. I was asked to coach the production, as well as, lead a discussion on race and representation. The research and preparation for the public discussion allowed me to educate and share my thoughts about these issues of stereotypes and cultural diversity. However, collaborating as a dialect coach for the actors (many of whom were white) in these stereotypical roles was a challenge for me. Was I promulgating stereotypes or seizing a moment of teaching?

When asked what makes a play Hispanic, Puerto Rican playwright José Rivera responded, “Latin culture is very specific – a belief in family, a willingness to think magically, a passion for love and sex, a code of honor and respect ... these things, more than food and music, are what define Latin culture for me.”² These words helped me to guide the students away from stereotypes and into the culture. The gritos (Ay Ay Ay!) in the song “America” could potentially be a moment of white kids running around making uncomfortable screams. But for Puerto Ricans and other Latinos, music has been an intricate part of the culture since the ceremonies of the pre-Columbian indigenous people. Great joys and terrible sorrows of the people are expressed through song and dance. The cries of sorrow ring from the mariachi singer drunk with love. Joy infuses the contagious percussion driven music that moves people to their feet. My memories of family gatherings growing up are filled with song, dance, and roaring laughter. These images, this history, this culture is what I brought into rehearsals with the Sharks. While the text played to stereotypes, I took the opportunity to dig deeper into the Latino culture.

I focused on my job as a voice coach and worked, as in any other production, to the best of my ability to create an accurate and culturally embracing sound that was true to the characters. The audiences did not mind that Caucasian actors were cast as Sharks. Countless productions including the famous 1961 film have not cast Latina/o actors as the Puerto Rican characters. The beloved songs overshadowed the Latino stereotypes. Racial casting (or the absence thereof) had no effect on sales, as the entire run sold out. However, the dialogue with the students and community about race and representation resonated. It continued into season selection meetings, classroom disagreements, and pedagogical discussions.

The next season UWM produced the classic *Of Mice and Men*. The director cast a Puerto Rican male student as one of the farm workers. Though I was not coaching the play, I am always available to our students for one-on-one work and assistance with voice work throughout the year. The students involved in the

² José Rivera. Email interview. April 15, 2003.

production were required to do extensive research on the Great Depression and its affect on the people in the United States.

After doing research on the play and time period, the student actor discovered the huge numbers of Mexican and Mexican-American migrant workers in California during the 1920's. After discussing his research with the director, he chose to play the character as a Mexican-American migrant worker and came to me for help on the sound changes. I was impressed, excited, and thrilled to work with him on the dialect choice. The actor made the smallest muscular shifts to accomplish the dialect. We softened his percussive Puerto Rican sounds to a softer, elongated Mexican sound. He created a full and authentic Mexican-American character that worked beautifully in the director's vision of the piece.

Perhaps the audience did not notice the subtle difference between the Spanish influenced Puerto Rican sounds and Mexican sounds. I am not even sure the director knew the difference, but she was extremely supportive of the work. Smaller shifts in dialect work are sometimes more difficult than performing a dialect that is completely different than the actor's natural way of speaking. He was successful in accomplishing a clear and distinct difference that the Latino audience, the actor, and myself could all identify. This distinction is not something that I am called on often to do and I very much appreciated the opportunity and embracement of the racial casting. It was historically accurate and a wonderful teaching moment.

The voice is a powerful instrument. Confidence, education, ethnicity, race, gender, class, and nationality can all be given away by the sounds we make. Still, it is impossible to predict what a person will sound like based on the color of their skin. Having dark skin does not mean that English is a second language. Assumptions and stereotypes guide casting because we settle for generalities and quick fixes. We ignore race with colorblind casting and ask actors of color to erase their cultural heritage so that they can speak and act like a Caucasian person.

Audiences are confused by a black actor doing a Norwegian accent because they do not see enough black actors in diverse roles. Casting directors ask for a "Hispanic sound" because Latina/os are horribly underrepresented on stage and screen. An "Asian sound" will suffice, because audiences have more experience with Asian stereotypes than with actual people and stories. There is a dialectical difference between the Cuban characters in *Anna in the Tropics* and the Tejanos in *Santos y Santos*. If audiences are educated enough to navigate through the British sounds of Received Pronunciation, Cockney, and Northern England, then why wouldn't we offer the distinctions of East LA and Nuyoricans?

Educators and artists must make a commitment beyond colorblind casting and non-traditional casting. There is too long a history of blackface, yellowface, and brownface. We must train and support artists of color starting at the youngest

possible age. These artists must be nurtured and mentored so that they might become playwrights, directors, producers, casting directors and artistic directors. Then these colleagues can produce diverse works that reflect our society. If we educate and engage young audiences, we secure future audiences. If we put stories on stage that reflect diverse experiences, then we get a diverse crowd in the audience. We support the growth and evolution of theatre in the United States. Racial casting will be a factor as long as we refuse to change how we produce theatre in both educational and professional institutions.