

Behind the scenes at Wilma Theater, a key role for dialect coach Hartley



Haverford's Neill Hartley had to teach more than 20 dialects Wilma Theater's production of 'The Body of an American.' Submitted Photo
By Ruth Rovner, Special to the Times
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lan Merrill Peakes and Harry Smith perform in 'The Body of an American' at the Wilma Theater. Photo by Alexander Iziliaev

The Wilma Theater's current production, "The Body of an American," focuses on an unusual friendship between a war photographer and a playwright. Just two actors play the roles of 20 characters in the play, often in far-flung places from Mogadishu to the Arctic Circle. That's why Haverford's Neill Hartley has a key role in this production, even though he's never on the stage. As the dialect coach, he helped the actors learn to speak like the people they encountered throughout the world. Even for an experienced dialect coach, this play was a challenge, which Hartley realized as soon as he read the script. "My reaction was, 'This is unusual because of the large number of dialects,'" he said.

Photographer Paul Watson's experiences, the main character in "The Body of an American," took him all over the world. The actor who plays Watson, Ian Merrill Peakes, has to speak in dialects that include Somali, Polish, Burmese, Indian, South African, German, Ghana and even a dialect for the Inuit tribe in the Arctic Circle. Actor Harry Smith, playing playwright O'Brien, sometimes shares the war scenes with Peakes, so he, too, learned many dialects.

"Dialect is the way someone from another place would speak American English," Hartley said.

His own preparation for a play began well before the first rehearsals in December. It started with Internet research on particular dialects. He used YouTube as well as websites with videos with specific dialects.

For instance, Hartley listened to speeches by the president of Somalia, jotting down sounds that were typical of that dialect. He also listened to a speech by Mother Theresa. She has just one line in the script.

"But I listened to an entire speech of hers, to get a sense of the rhythm and pattern of the sounds," said Hartley. Hartley's research then led him to create "dialect sheets" for each actor, marking the script with the symbols from the International Phonetic Alphabet, so the actors would see the words phonetically.

During rehearsals, Hartley listened attentively to both actors, making notes as he listened. Then came one-on-one coaching.

"They're both terrific actors who were very receptive and worked hard on the dialects," said Hartley.

The versatile dialect coach is also a professional actor, director and educator. He's had principal roles in "The Sixth Sense," "First Freedom" (A PBS documentary) and on seasons two and three of the Netflix series "House of Cards." He's also had acting roles for area theater companies, including the Arden, InterAct, Philadelphia Shakespeare Company and 1812 Productions. He's sometimes the sole actor in one-man shows, presenting seven different shows. "It's a series of one-man shows performed up and down the East Coast," said Hartley, who's also an assistant professor of voice and speech at the University of the Arts.

"I fell in love with language when I was in graduate school," said Hartley, who earned a master's degree in acting from Temple University. So far, he's mastered 20 dialects. The busy actor and dialect coach has worked on 10 shows this season, including the current Wilma Theater production, which led him to learn an entirely new dialect, Inuit, the language of the indigenous people inhabiting the Arctic regions of Greenland, Canada and the United States. Serving as the dialect coach for the Wilma production has been a highlight in several ways. "It has the most dialects of any play I've worked on," he said. "It's been a wonderful challenge and I loved it." It's not Hartley's first experience with the Wilma, and he's been happy to return there. "What I especially appreciate about the Wilma is that they really value the importance of a dialect coach," he said. "And they consistently put on high-quality theater programs. So it's a pleasure to be part of their productions."