HOLLYWOOD'S SECRET WEAPON FOR LOSING THE "GAY" ACCENT

WITH NEWSWEEK RECENTLY SLAMMING WILL & GRACE STAR SEAN HAYES AS BEING A GUY WHO "TIPS OFF YOUR GRANDMOTHER'S GAYDAR," IT'S NO WONDER BUSINESS IS GOOD FOR VOICE COACH BOB CORFF, THE L.A. SPEECH GURU ACTORS HIRE TO LEARN THE STRAIGHT TALK.

BY JEFF GORDINIER

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If you're an actor in Hollywood and you land a role for which you need to sound like a Russian hit man, or an Irish boxer, or a South American tycoon, or a backwoods Kentucky moonshiner, it is very likely that at some point you will wind up putting in a call to Bob Corff. Corff, 62, is arguably Southern California's most sought-after voice coach. A former actor and singer himself, he has spent over 30 years soaking up expertise on accents from around the world and has helped train the pipes of hundreds of stars, including Javier Bardem, Samuel L. Jackson, Shia LaBeouf, Jennifer Aniston, Kate Beckinsale, Peter Sarsgaard, Jennifer Aniston, and Jake Gyllenhaal. What's less known is that actors occasionally seek out Corff with an altogether different laryngeal dilemma: They sound too gay, and an ever-so-slight trace of queerness seems to be slowing down their professional advancement. Corff recently spoke with Details about what sounds straight, what sounds gay, and what happened when Rock Hudson put on a kilt.
How many people might you consult with in a given day?
Bob Corff: Sometimes 14, but usually it’s about eight or nine.

That’s a wide range of accents.
Bob Corff: Absolutely. I mean, so far we’ve got a record of, like, 80 different accents that we do, and if something new comes up, I do a lot of research and figure that one out, and then I’m able to do that one and teach it.

If you’re working with an actor who needs to speak in, say, Bolivian-accented English, would you do research to figure out what the nuances need to be?
Bob Corff: Exactly. I’ll do research, and I will put out word that I need that accent, and, because there are so many actors in Los Angeles from all over the world, I can record somebody and take down all the vowels and all the consonants—we have techniques that we’ve broken down over the years. And then you have it on CD, and you are able to figure out what’s the cadence, what’s the rhythm, what are the stresses, and then you study it and pass it on.

And you, personally, can speak in all those accents?
Bob Corff: Yes.

You must have incredible elasticity when it comes to your voice.
Bob Corff: I was a singer, and so I think that that really helps, because an accent is like a little song—it’s got its own little ups and downs. Every region has its own little melody.

So I understand that you sometimes work with actors who feel compelled to sound "less gay."
Bob Corff: Well, often they are sent by a manager or a teacher—it’s so interesting, because I can tell what it is. Sometimes they come in and it takes them a lesson or two before they finally admit why they’re here. Which I knew the first second that they talked. But sometimes they’ll just come right in and say, “Somebody said I sound gay.” And sometimes they are married and straight but they sound gay, and that’s not gonna work for being a leading man in Hollywood at this time.

And so the manager will send them your way, in a sense, to "fix" that?
Bob Corff: Yeah, they say, "I think that's what's holding you back; I don't think that is serving you in getting the parts that you want to get."

What are you hearing that sends off that signal?
Bob Corff: Okay, well, let me start by telling you what it is that sounds "straight." Straight actually turns out to be the perfect word to describe what straight guys do. It's very straight—it has no curlies, it has no frills or any kind of melodic turns. So they say, "Hi. How are you?" It's simple, and the lines are very straight, instead of "Hi, how are you?" You know, women are much more melodic—their voices go up and they go down, and they even move their mouths more. There's a lot more animation. A straight guy just goes, "Hey—this is as much energy and animation as I'm putting out for this thing."
Details: So it's a monotone?
Bob Corff: If you're monotone, in either case, you're going to be boring. You don't have to be monotone. It's more about—you can do that straight sound, but you can't keep on starting in the same place. So if I say, "This is what I want you to do: I want you to go down the street. And then I want you to turn left," even though my voice kept going down in this very straightforward, direct way, I wasn't starting in the same place and ending in the same place on the scale.

Details: Then there's a narrow bandwidth of notes in a straight accent?
Bob Corff: Right. Even in the face—the mouth is very simple, the lips stay close to the teeth, and the jaw just drops down.

Details: And the gay accent?
Bob Corff: There's many levels of this. With some people there's just this little thing that's happening, and it's not much, but it's just this little tiny melody and inflection that tells you maybe there's something there. And then there's some people who are just [Slips into Charles Nelson Reilly mode] com-PLEEET-ly doing THIIIISS, and you go, "Well, clearly, they're not even attempting to . . ." And listen, I make no judgment. I mean, I've been in show business—I did the leads in three Broadway musicals, so I've been around this all my life, and it makes no difference to me. And I don't think it should to anybody, because it's none of our business what you do in the bedroom.

Details: Of course.
Bob Corff: It's how you deliver doing your job, whatever that is.

Details: And whatever the actor's orientation, he's going to want access to a variety of roles.
Bob Corff: Exactly. See, to me, the gay sound is just like an accent. Because if somebody has an accent, there's nothing wrong with that accent, but if you come from the South or you come from New York, it limits you in the kind of roles you can play, because you can't play the brother of somebody who doesn't have that accent. So often I'll say to people, whether it's an accent from a different country or an accent from this country or having this "gay" thing, I'll say, "This is the question for you: Are you an actor, or are you English?" And then they have to answer. If being English is more important to them than being an actor, then they don't need to do it.

Details: What are some other elements associated with the gay sound?
Bob Corff: Well, a lot of times—not always—but a lot of times there is a sibilant s. I work on that with people, too. You can be a girl, you can be a guy, you can be straight or gay—what it is is that your tongue is too close to the back of your top teeth, so the air has no place to get dispersed. It just bounces into your teeth. [Lisps slightly] Can you hear it on the phone?

Details: Yes.
Bob Corff: So this is the sibilant s, and that [Slips into an accent in which each syllable sounds like a tiny snake hissing], along with the melody of going up and down, and having these little curlicues—it's more decorative, it has more colors and stuff like that.
Details: Have you ever had an actor who just could not lose the gay sound?
Bob Corff: Nobody who’s ever worked at it has not been able to do much, much better. I’ve had people who’ve just bailed before they were finished because it was too uncomfortable.

Details: Uncomfortable how?
Bob Corff: It’s uncomfortable to have to change something—if you think that who you are is the way you sound, you feel as if you’re killing yourself off. But you’re not. I mean, one of the things I have on the front of one of my CDs is: “You can change your accent and keep the essence of you.” Because that’s the big thing. Whether it’s an accent or lowering your voice or taking away the nasality—I work with all of those things—people feel that that’s them. And when they change, they’re afraid that they’re going to lose who they are. And they aren’t.

Details: I’ve suddenly become incredibly self-conscious about my voice.
Bob Corff: I know. I always say to people, “I’m fun to be with, aren’t I?”

Details: Are you straight or gay yourself?
Bob Corff: I’m straight. I’ve been married for 19 years, and I’ve been together with her for 26. In Hollywood that’s 72 years. Her name is Claire Corff. She also teaches with me. We’ve been working together for a long time now, and she’s fabulous.

Details: Is it necessarily correct to always associate a certain speech pattern with a sexual orientation?
Bob Corff: Looking back over the years, I’ve seen guys who were straight—married—but when they came in, I thought, This guy is gay. It turns out this one, he was a ballet dancer in Europe for years, so if you are around that gay thing all the time—I mean, I know, because I was in three Broadway musicals. It’s fuNNN to talk like this! If you’re around that all the time, you could get pulled into it.

Details: You sort of pick it up?
Bob Corff: You just pick it up because it’s fun and everybody else is doing the same thing. I had one guy who, again, said, “Hey, I’m straight, I’m telling you.” And it was like, “Well, really? That’s interesting.” His mother and father had owned a dress-making shop, so everybody was into fashion. So he grew up with that—most of the people around had that sort of frilly way of speaking, so he just picked it up. I’ve done a lot of research over the years—nobody really knows why gay people sometimes sound like that. Nobody knows what that is. But it’s something that does seem to happen.
Details: You can help change that if an actor wants a role in which he isn't supposed to make that sound?

Bob Corff: Absolutely. I mean, that's something that I do. It's working on the tongue placement. The tongue just needs to come back a little bit so that you're not blowing air so hard right into the top of your back teeth. I mean, I've got people now that I'm working with, and a lot of times they come in and they're not aware of what they sound like. For all of us, it's hard to really be aware of what we're doing because inside our heads it sounds different than it does coming out of us.

Details: But what if someone prefers to speak in the gay accent?

Bob Corff: Well, listen. Sometimes I'm working with people who have a fabulous British accent, and I'll say, "Let me just be clear with you that I don't think that our accent is aesthetically more pleasing than yours. It's just that you can make more money if you can master the one I'm doing—here, in this country, right now." Some people's accents limit them. Like the southern accent—a lot of people in the North think that that's not as smart a sound. I mean, some of the smartest people I've ever known are from the South, but even in business they sometimes have to change to the standard American accent, because then people think of them differently.

Details: But if, say, a gay actor is not out, is not open about his orientation, then the voice work could be psychologically complicated.

Bob Corff: Right. But if that's true, then getting this thing handled for them is even more important. And that's what it's all about. I've had people who were really, really out there, and they've mastered it. They went, "I got it." And they totally were working in class and doing jobs. And then they went, "You know what? This is not as important to me as me just feeling comfortable with my friends," and they decide that they just don't want to go there.

Details: So they'll essentially re-gay the way they talk?

Bob Corff: Yeah. But to me, that's just a lifestyle decision. Because you never "lose" anything. You just gain another point of view, another option.

Details: You're not in the conversion business.

Bob Corff: No!

Details: With this particular focus on sounding gay or straight, have you seen your actors get better roles because of it?

Bob Corff: Oh, yeah. Definitely. People get work and they just call me and say, "Thank you, man." It really has nothing to do with what they do in private, and it shouldn't. I mean, who cares! What's important is that you've mastered some little thing that gives you a foot up on the competition. I've worked with people from one end to the other. I worked with Vanessa Redgrave for a project in which she was a man who had a sex change and became a woman, and we had to lower her voice and get her into the man thing.
Then again, during your years as an actor you shared camera time with Rock Hudson in an episode of the 1970s TV crime show McMillan & Wife.

Bob Corff: Rock Hudson was the most masculine man I'd ever seen. People were shocked when word came out that he was gay, but everybody in show business knew he was gay, even then. But this was a man's man. The episode that we did took place in Scotland, so we were all wearing kilts. You put a bunch of guys in dresses for a week and there's gonna be a moment where you'll kind of do a little something—he never did anything.

Details: You mean he never joked around?

Bob Corff: He'd go, "This thing is so goddamned hot." I never saw a more masculine guy.