

MOVIES

A Dialect Coach Assesses Every Russian Accent in *Black Widow*

BY MARISSA MARTINELLI

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Scarlett Johansson, director Cate Shortland, Florence Pugh, and David Harbour. Photo by Jay Maidment. Copyright Marvel Studios.

Florence Pugh said she was “scared” for her Russian accent to debut in *Black Widow*, and who can blame her? Putting on any accent can be tricky for actors to begin with, and with a Russian one, there’s always the risk you could wind up sounding like one of the villains from *Rocky & Bullwinkle*. Slate spoke to Adrienne Nelson, an actress and dialect coach who worked with Lars Mikkelsen and other actors for years on *House of Cards*, to explain how her job works, evaluate *Black Widow*’s Russian accents, and divulge the classic mistakes to be avoided at all costs. This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

How did you get started as a Russian dialect coach?

When I was seven years old I went to this Russian immersion program. Kids from all over the country would go to this culture-language program and learn Russian singing and dancing. It started off as a two-week program but by the time you got to middle school and high school, you took proper finals, and we ended up going to Russia in '88 or '89 when it was the former Soviet Union and were one of the first groups to enjoy a home stay in Novosibirsk.

That was life-changing, to have this cultural peace exchange with Russian children and educators and going to the summer camp—my friends at home would call it “commie camp.” But when you think about what the world did not know about Russia and her people, it was an awakening for me as a young person. It changed me not just as a student learning Russian but as a woman, as an actress, as an educator. They have Arabic camp, they have French camp, they have Klingon camp.

Klingon camp sounds like a good time. What is the dialect coaching process like?

You don't always have four months to just teach your actor while riding a train across Russia with balalaika music playing in the background. Sometimes you get three days to get it together. But in the ideal world, I invite the actors first to get into a Russian body, with that sort of forward pout, because you can more easily produce sounds through that than an American mouth. If I'm teaching someone a midwestern dialect, they're more polite and self-deprecating and a lot of things end in a question. With Russian people [*using Russian accent*] if you clean floor, if you are opera singer, is proud, beautiful, passionate.

I then take them through all of the vowel shifts and consonant shifts. Short *Us* usually go to “ah,” so words like *baht*, *fahk*, *glahve*. Best case scenario, I have their script already, so I'll formulate warmups with the actual words they'll be saying.

[Read: How Black Widow Corrects for the Marvel Movies' Most Controversial Scene]

The Russian musicality and rhythm: It's not “Natasha,” it's *Natasha*. We start very big and bold and I tell them right away, “Don't be scared for it to sound like big, bad, Borat, clownish acting at first.” You almost have to go really big to work the muscles, and then we'll find a way to throw it away or filter it through your character. Along the way, I layer in actual Russian connective-tissue words to warm up their instruments, words like *nu*, which is an *um* word, or like when Irish people say *ehm*. A light bulb moment for a lot of my actors is, I share Russian singing and music, which reflects the speaking rhythms. If they're playing a

Russian opera star, I'll send them Anna Netrebko interviews. Some actors welcome tapes, others want to run through everything, others don't want another human voice in their head, they want to find it themselves.

Sometimes you have a lot of time to layer all of this in and the actors end up with a dialect that they own and know and can share for life. And other times it's like, "OK, fast and dirty." They got it, they made it work, but they don't have it without the safety blanket of a coach. Not to give my work away, but I love to equip actors so that they have the tools and techniques to do this on their own, whether it's Russian or a dialect I don't coach. I had read this about Damien Lewis and I got chance to witness it firsthand when I worked a little bit on *Billions*: If you want to get to the next level, stay in dialect all day. Damien Lewis, with his perfect American accent, stays in dialect all day. It's not always possible. When I was coaching Lars, who's Danish, he'd have to call his boys to help with homework or call his wife, and I'd be faux-mean Soviet Russian coach saying [*using Russian accent*] "No more Danish."

What are some of the common mistakes that actors make when using a Russian accent?

Giving. Each. Word. Same. Weight. Versus finding out what's *stressed*—and what can be thrown away. If you're talking about "You have to talk to Ivanushka—but fuck that guy," you don't want to say "You. Have. To. Talk. To. Ivanushka. Fuck. That. Guy." Another common mistake is playing the dialect instead of what they want. I'm an actor, so I use an actor's toolbox. You know when you have a character that's drunk? You don't play drunk. You play a character who's trying to be sober. If you have to cry onscreen or onstage, most actors try not to cry, and then when they cry through that, it's so much more of a gift to the audience. That same little trick works with the accent.

Making *Vs* into *Ws*, like *vodka* becoming *wodka*—that's rarely the case. That's more of a Polish thing. Making *ing* into *ink*, like *drinkink*. Yeah, folks deep into Siberia might say *drinkink*, but for most of the characters, if you're speaking English and have had a little Western exposure, they usually change it to *een*, so *drinkeen*, *bringeen*, *fisheen*. A short American *A* is the first dead giveaway that you dropped your dialect. *Plehn*, not *plan*.

Let's talk about the accents in *Black Widow*.

I thought Florence Pugh was fantastic. She nailed the *ee/* sounds, like in *weel* ["will"] and *keel* ["kill"]. It's often a missed sound and a false note. When she started hitting those I'm like, "Ugh, I'm in heaven." Another thing she did beautifully, when they say don't, they often drop that *T*. [*in Russian accent*] "I don' care."

She also gorgeously integrated the musicality and rhythms that I was talking about. One challenge for actors is only being able to keep the dialect consistent when they're speaking at one tempo, which they'll embrace for every situation. She succeeded in being able to keep her dialect consistent whether she was in a fast-paced, intense, high-stakes scene or a more casual, heartfelt scene. The dialect was just one of many colors and layers that comprised her character. And if there was a line or word that grabbed my ear, it was too fast to be distracting.

Would you say Florence Pugh was the most successful of the actors, then?

Everyone had things to love. I was charmed and delighted by David Harbour's character. He was a *[in Russian accent] fahking hoot*. *[In American accent]* Can I say that? Can I say *fahking hoot* in your interview, Marissa?

You absolutely can.

I didn't mind that his dialect was broader and more comic, because he so fully embraced the Russian swagger, even as the clown, the self-described brawn vs. the brains in the group. If he was my client, I would remind him about the short As, because I did catch a few short As like *plan, dammit, captain*.

But his line "she was the strategist, I was the muscle," was *perfect*. He hit all the vowels, the stresses, the soul, the swagger. When he wasn't consistent, I wondered: Did he get new pages? Was something else thrown at him? That can shift your dialect. But like I said, he was a *fahking hoot*.

[Read: The Casual Marvel Fan's Guide to Black Widow]

When you honor the dialect, you honor the people. Yeah, Putin's given them a bad name, but I wouldn't want anyone to judge me based on Trump. Honor those colors and that culture. He honored so much of that Russian essence.

We've gone this long without even talking about Black Widow herself, Scarlett Johansson.

I should say, I haven't seen all the Marvel movies, though now I want to see them all. So this is just based on *Black Widow*.

She actually uses an American accent most of the time in them anyway.

I understand why Natasha didn't embrace her Russian dialect. They mention it when Yelena and Alexei—and by the way, it's generally *Ye-leh-na*, not *Ye-lay-na*, and *Alex-ay*, not *Alex-ee*, but not everyone gets that right. They mention she's become so Western that she doesn't speak like her sister. That made sense for a spy on her level. A lot of times it's about plausibility. Think in real life, if you have Russian friends and they're talking to their mom on the phone or they've had a couple drinks, it gets really thick, but if they're at the club and trying to fit in, it's different. The idea that she's a superspy and knows all these languages, it makes sense that she's not revealing a big Russian dialect. I recall this choice on *The Americans*, which seemed to work very effectively. But she seems to embody the Russian soul, along with the young actor who plays her as a child. Rockstar casting.

I haven't seen all the *Avengers* films, but one of the gifted translators I work with, David Teitelbaum, did send me a clip of when Scarlett did speak actual Russian in an interrogation. I would've loved to work with her to help her make those things more integrated, where you hit or attack those Russian stresses but swallow and throw away and blow through some of the other words.

And Ray Winstone?

Dreykov, his acting was so mesmerizing that the dialect issues became not so much a distraction as a curiosity. I wondered if the British and Russian colors I was hearing had to do with his backstory.

I do not think the character is meant to be British. But Ray Winstone is.

Because I was so compelled by his acting, the dialect issue was not distracting. That's not always the case in movies. There's some boys in *John Wick* that could've used some coaching. Woof.

Not to throw any coaches under the bus, because I know this is hard work and sometimes you get the perfect amount of time, sometimes you get no time, but I am curious if sometimes Russian coaches give up and say [*in Russian accent*] "This is good as you're going to get from American." Scarlett Johansson is so gifted, she does her wire work, she does stunt stuff. If she's good enough to nail all of these things, she's good enough to nail anything you throw at her. I never fault actors. I fault productions—let me not say *fault*, mama wants a job—I invite productions to make a little more time for that part of the process.

[\[Read: Black Widow Is Too Late to Be the Movie She Deserved\]](https://slate.com/culture/2021/07/black-widow-russian-accents-scarlett-johansson-florence-pugh.html)

We're learning. Just like there never used to be intimacy coaches or trauma coaches, we're learning as an industry. Honoring dialect—you don't want to insult people from another part of the world. Not to put too much pressure on the film industry, but this is where it goes back to me as a 16-year-old in Russia. You were supposed to hate these people, and there we were singing songs together. They were so happy that these American kids took the time and respect to learn their songs and learn their language and their dances. Those little baby steps can sometimes turn into epic changes. And it'll help you do better work, too. 🍷

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