

# Review

At the inaugural lecture, from l to r: Professor Dan McIntyre, Professor Lesley Jeffries, Brendan Gunn and Assistant Editor Dr Jane Lugea



# 10 issues

## THE INAUGURAL BABEL LECTURE

Babel celebrated the publication of its 10th issue with a special lecture by dialect coach Dr Brendan Gunn. **Dominic Watt** reports

**P**icture the Hollywood glitterati, and the concept of conceit might not be far behind. Among the A-listers – if we believe the tabloids – the tantrums, the capricious catering demands, and the brattish abuse of sound-stage crew are almost part of the job. It would be rarer to call to mind an older sense of ‘conceit’ as a thing conceived: a contrivance, an artifice, a ‘gaiety of the imagination’, in Samuel Johnson’s words. When we join the audience of a film, TV show or play, we become participants in the conceit, buying into the

illusion that what we see has meaning and coherence in its own fictive universe as well as in the real world.

Brendan Gunn, ‘dialect coach to the stars’, made this notion his jumping-off point for the first Babel Inaugural Lecture, which he gave as part of the celebrations for Babel’s tenth issue. Gunn’s CV is impressive: directors such as Ridley Scott, Roland Emmerich and Guy Ritchie seek his services to school the likes of Juliette Binoche, Cate Blanchett, Robert de Niro, Brad Pitt, and Mickey Rourke, in how to feign English dialects on screen. A native Ulsterman, Gunn specialises in helping

actors to approximate different Irish varieties; examples are Pitt’s Shelta-peppered patter in *Snatch*, or Blanchett’s portrayal of the journalist Veronica Guerin. But Gunn’s dialect menu is by no means confined to Ireland. During his talk he entreated the audience to try producing phrases in a broad range of accents of English – Received Pronunciation (RP), Cockney, Glaswegian, Russian – guided by a mixture of narrow phonetic transcriptions and a system based on English spelling that he uses when working with actors who can’t, or won’t, master the International Phonetic Alphabet.

Getting an accent off-pat may be counter-productive, though: as an actor, there is little point trying to sound fully authentic if one's audience can't follow what's being said. Gunn's 'mixing desk' analogy gives a sense of how, when coaching an actor, he makes adjustments on two opposing dimensions: one lever on the mixing desk is for general clarity, the other for authenticity. The key thing is to ensure that the conceit remains unpunctured: the audience's grasp of the plot or of the characters' motives should not be sacrificed to linguistic purity.

Avoiding caricature is always a concern, too. Gunn reports that actors trying out a new accent will often 'overshoot' the target by falling back on inaccurate stereotypes. Part of his job is to rein in the actor such that the final effect is plausible, yet unobtrusive. At times, depending on the nature of the production in question, Gunn will give directors a choice of options. For instance, in *Child 44*, set in the postwar Soviet Union, the 'Russian' characters could all have been given RP accents. They could alternatively have used thick Slavic accents, replete with trilled /r/s and the darkest of /l/s. Gunn proposed to take the middle ground, by having the characters speak in modified RP accents featuring raised vowels ('beg' for 'bag', etc.) and subtle rhoticity. Inventiveness is also demanded of the successful dialect coach: to voice Baldwin IV of Jerusalem in Ridley Scott's *Kingdom of Heaven* – Baldwin being a man whose face was so ravaged by leprosy that he always wore a mask – Edward Norton was advised by Gunn to talk with his thumb in his mouth. Given that viewers cannot see Norton's face, achieving the right compromise here between

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Gunn's parting message resonates among those of us who concern ourselves with the study of language: when one stops to reflect upon it, it is astonishing that a stream of air emanating from the lungs, modified before it exits the head by organs whose principal functions are for breathing and eating, can give rise to the limitless complexities of meaning afforded to us by language. In conjuring up the illusory worlds of cinema, television and theatre, the role of speech and language cannot be overestimated. You may have to wait a long time after the movie has ended to see their names among the credits,

but in no small measure it is thanks to Gunn and the small cadre of professional dialect and dialogue coaches working in our entertainment industries that the deceit involved in the creation of the conceit usually goes undetected. ¶

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