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San Diego Union-Tribune talks to Kelly about working with A-lister Kate Del Castillo

Like a sucker punch, the request he heard momentarily stunned him.

At a recent Hollywood audition, Jull Weber, a 25-year-old actor from Bayamon, Puerto Rico, asked the white film director to repeat his instructions.

"Can you be more Latin, please?" the director asked.

Weber, who earned an architecture degree from Massachusetts Institute of Technology, stifled his anger and gave it another try.

"I think I ended up sounding like 'Fez' from 'That '70s Show,' with a stereotypical 'foreigner' accent," Weber said, chuckling.

"I had no clue what he wanted me to sound like. Among the Latin dialects we have, we have different intonations. A Mexican accent sounds different from a Cuban accent, which sounds different from a Puerto Rican one. I've had other directors tell me I didn't sound 'Puerto Rican' enough. It's a dumb game people play when you don't fit their stereotypes."

That's a common frustration for Weber and his fellow performers. But Latino actors are finding ways to use their ethnicity and language to their advantage.

As Hollywood moves to capture the burgeoning Latino market at the box office – and the hiring of more Latino talent to work on and off-camera – Latino actors are increasingly hiring dialect coaches.

More coaches are training Latino actors to speak in "neutral American" voices and teaching them and non-Latino performers

how to use various Latin-American dialects.

But even with many Latino TV and film actors willing to make adjustments, they can find themselves typecast as unflattering caricatures. Still, learning to use a new dialect often means more work.

"It's a damn good idea for actors to do that and to improve their technique," said Manny Alfaro, executive and artistic director of the New York-based Hispanic Organization of Latin Actors.

"If they can return to their accent for specific roles, that's fine. If they get the work, then we can all get the work."

Indeed, the numbers show a slight rise in available roles for Latino actors. A recently released Screen Actors Guild report shows the total number of available parts in TV and movies for Latino actors climbed from 4.8 percent to 6 percent, from 2001 to 2002. That, the report said, represents a gain of nearly 400 roles, the biggest improvement of any ethnic minority group.

"Demographics have a lot to do with it, and a lot of the Latino advocacy groups in L.A., New York and Texas have petitioned for the studios to offer more meaningful work in front of the camera and behind it," Alfaro said.

"We're not pointing fingers or making demands. We're just saying, 'It's about time.'"

Weber said his work with dialect coach Joel Goldes has helped open some doors. Weber recently was hired for a new film, "Honey" – his most prominent role to date – which stars Mekhi Phifer and will be released this fall.

"Being Latin is a hot thing right now," Weber said. The Spanish market is getting a lot bigger. Look at artists like Jennifer Lopez, Penelope Cruz and Eva Mendes. If you can have a real Spanish accent and speak the language and look white – which is a standard of beauty in America – you fill in a lot more holes."

Weber described his character in the drama "Honey" as a Spanish-speaking dance instructor whose ethnicity is not mentioned. Just three years ago, Weber said he was mercilessly mocked for his accent by directors, choreographers and fellow actors and dancers. Weber persevered by enlisting the help of a speech therapist and a speech pathologist.

"I worked with people for eight months," he said. "They taught me breathing, voice projection and clarity."

Dialect coaches generally charge about \$100 for each hourlong session with a performer. In some cases, they spend as little as one day or as much as several weeks preparing clients for the auditions or roles.

The coaches say many Latino actors wonder if they'll lose their language and a measure of their cultural identity in learning to speak "neutral American" for Hollywood and fear that their legions of Spanish-speaking fans will desert them.

"So many Latino actors are told, 'You have to get rid of your accent,'" said Kelly Reiter, a longtime Hollywood dialect coach who has worked with many native Spanish-speaking actors.

"My job is to empower actors. I tell them, 'Don't throw away your identity.' If they want access to mainstream parts, they'll have a better chance if they're able to effect a neutral voice."

That's precisely Kate Del Castillo's goal. She's a well-known soap opera star in her native Mexico and is now part of the cast of "American Family," the weekly PBS TV drama.

"I don't want to be limited by my language," Del Castillo said. "I love my culture, Mexico and my people, but as an actor, you need to go wider. I can keep my essence and my identity."

Still, Del Castillo – like Weber – has had some unsettling

experiences at auditions because of her ethnicity and language.

A few years ago, after auditioning for a prominent part in "The Mummy Returns," her agent told her why she wasn't called back.

"It's your accent," Del Castillo recalled. "I was mad at myself. I didn't prepare for that role as I should have."

With Reiter coaching her, Del Castillo said she's gaining an additional voice – even if it's tough to get used to.

"The hardest thing is learning how to move your tongue and the way you use the back part of your mouth," Del Castillo said. "In Mexico, we use the front part of our mouths. With Americans, it's so smooth."

But even when Del Castillo auditioned for the part of a Mexican woman in an upcoming Adam Sandler film, she ran into trouble. She said she was shocked when she saw the 10 others competitors for the role.

"They were all brown-skinned, but none of them even spoke Spanish," Del Castillo said.

"They all were asking me how to do the accent. I felt weird about that. I thought to myself after that, 'I don't think they're going to want me.' They think if you have dark hair, dark skin and are short, you can play a Latino. The stigma and stereotype of Latin people has to move on."

While non-Latino actors playing Latino characters in films isn't new, it may become even more prevalent, according to Latino actors and dialect coaches.

"Hollywood has realized there's a burgeoning market for these films, especially for Latin American audiences," said Goldes, who was recently on the set of "The Cat in the Hat," coaching Canadian star Mike Myers to speak in a New York accent.

"But Hollywood considers the (Latino) talent pool so small, that they hire other actors to play Mexicans. I work with a lot of Italians and Middle Eastern actors who get cast in Latino parts.

I worked with a Filipina actor who plays someone from Belize. Casting directors still play toward really broad stereotypes."

Both Weber and Del Castillo cited the casting of Puerto Rican actor Benecio Del Toro as a Mexican in the 2000 movie "Traffic" as an example of Hollywood's lumping together of Latinos. Del Toro earned an Academy Award for best supporting actor in the role, but to Del Castillo, he was unconvincing.

"When he speaks Spanish in 'Traffic,' you can tell it's not Mexican," Del Castillo said.

"And Mexican accents are different in Monterrey than they are in Guadalajara, than they are in Mexico City. It makes me kind of angry. There are lots of good Mexican actors who could've done that role and made it believable. We are talented, but Hollywood is still a closed circle that's difficult to get inside."

However, Alfaro, of the Hispanic Organization of Latino Actors, defended the choice of Del Toro for that role.

"Benecio had a following who could guarantee a box-office draw," Alfaro said. "I thought he was quite a good actor. Is the racial extraction that different? Latinos have a common language."

So far, Weber has managed to inch his way into the Hollywood circle by enhancing his skills with a dialect coach and preserving his cultural identity.

"I'm only learning how to say things in a different way," Weber said. "I can go back to my native language at any time. I'm just learning a phonetic alphabet."

Alfaro acknowledged that even when the actors got to dialect coaches, they can still be pigeonholed by directors, to "be more Latin" as Weber recently was.

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