



Insights into Siobhan by Geraldine Alexander UK Tour 2015

I've never thought of Siobhan as a narrator; when we first see her, it is the first time she is reading Christopher's book and she's reading it to him and there's a circle of listeners. Normally as a narrator you know the end of the story whereas Siobhan doesn't; in a way it would be easier if she was the narrator but certainly in the first half of the play this is new information to her and so it makes her more challenging to play; I wasn't really interested in just being a mouthpiece anyway.

To start with, I found where she is supposed to be at every moment really puzzling; the orange chair anchors her very definitely in the classroom. I know exactly what that classroom looks like, I'm not in a theatre, but the audience are part of my class.

The scenes when I'm reading the book, I'm reading to Christopher:

"The word metaphor is a metaphor. Wow. That's clever"

After that though, I leave the orange chair. So when, during the scene with Mrs Alexander, I say:

"She moved very slowly because she was an old lady..."

That's when things change, when my relationship with the book changes, I come much more off the page and become more inside Christopher's head.

When he's having a fight with his dad, Siobhan steps in and says

"I think I would make a very good astronaut."

This is Siobhan speaking for him and that's a big clue, she is in his head then. Its freefall for Siobhan from then onwards but also definitely for Christopher; the more he can't speak for himself, the more she speaks for him but she does it using his words; she starts inhabiting his brain.

Siobhan says:

"Christopher, I think you should do what your father tells you to do."

Right up until the hit and then she changes – she sticks with him.

He's not meant to be doing the investigation; as a teacher she should say 'we're not meant to be doing this Christopher' but she doesn't, she plays along with him – she becomes a detective with him.

It gets very complicated when Judy is on. When Siobhan is reading the letters; she's reading Judy's letters, as Siobhan, in Christopher's head. It's like Russian dolls; there's three strata going on and I make very subtle changes in my voice to try and show who I'm being at the time.

You're helped by the lighting. When it came to our first tech – I got it. I realised much more clearly where I was supposed to be at different moments. At first I wondered 'why am I being lit now?' and then I realised actually how clever the production team were being and how the lighting does a lot to help tell the story.

Siobhan in the play is quite different from in the book; she doesn't feature much in the novel and so I've built up a whole character for her. Maths is her passion but I think she studied Geography at university and that's what she taught when she was in mainstream education. She loves maps - there are maps everywhere. She's been a teacher for a while but has only recently transferred to specialist teaching.

She and Christopher have the same interests – they're quite similar in many ways; she loves that train set and would rather play with it than write a story too. I've got a teenager who is awaiting results and so I understand that side of things – the balance between 'why didn't you work harder?' to ensuring you're telling them 'well done!'

I think she's quite cheeky and naughty. I like that she makes mistakes and that she finds things funny when she shouldn't; she's curious and she's not tick-box.

I wear an ear cuff and loom band wrist bands that I think some of the other pupils have made for me and when Siobhan gets stressed she plays with them; she understands using coping strategies. She's given him that thing of counting and breathing and because she's really good at maths she knows the numbers and counts them along with Christopher (you can see my lips moving if you watch closely) but she's not as brilliant as him.

She's one of those people who enables and she really helps Christopher. He summons her when he's in London; whenever he's in trouble he thinks 'what would Siobhan do?' and she solves things for him.

You don't see her knocking back a glass of wine at the end of the day; we don't really find out about what she cares about other than teaching or Christopher. She never says what she's feeling other than through him.



She understands Christopher and has warmed to him especially and that's something that she'll have to deal with later but she never patronises him and she doesn't lie; at the end when he asks her:

"Does that mean I can do anything?"

She doesn't say yes of course, she wants to say that but she can't lie to him about the reality of the situation; she doesn't know the answer and I think that makes the audience think more.

The fact that Christopher says:

"I see everything"

Could be seen as misleading in terms of the audience trusting his validity as a 'narrator'. For example when Siobhan reads that:

"Mother died two years ago."

You would expect to immediately go to the how and why of that but Christopher gives us every detail of his getting into the house and going to his room; someone who is not on the autistic spectrum would probably go straight to the emotional response of that information.

Siobhan helps to unpick some of his responses at certain times. But she does also make mistakes as a teacher – including when he has found out about his mother and Mr Shears having an affair, she says:

"Did it make you sad to find this out?"

And that's all good because she's taught him how to draw faces and so on but at that point in the production, she gets him to talk about his feelings by stopping him from building the train track and if we think about the moment in Hampstead Heath or at the start with the policeman then we know, and more importantly, she knows, that it could have ended in a terrible tantrum or a fight and professionally that's a mistake.

Siobhan doesn't think much of Judy and Ed, that's her non-professional thing coming in again. I think it comes through when she's reading the letters so when she says the line:

"And that's when I started spending lots of time with Roger."

Before Judy says it, that's her realising 'you weren't dead you just ran off with the neighbour!' She doesn't think much of them at all. Also when we see her meeting Judy her first line is:

"So you're Christopher's mother"

And there's a world in that "so". Siobhan is not going to be all mimsy towards her; she is harder on them than the audience – she knows it's not on and that she has to deal with the fall-out of all this upset.

But we must remember this is only a moment in time – the family has exploded – she's going to have to be part of that healing process but probably the best way will be by standing back a bit.

Of all the characters I've played in my career, I really like Siobhan. It seems like she just helps him and enables him but he helps her also. He helps her to see that you can't put all your attention and love and whatever into something that's not yours.

At first when he decides he can no longer live at home they have the exchange:

Christopher: I can't go and live with you because you can't look after me when school's closed.

Siobhan: I could try and –

Christopher: No because you're a teacher

Later on when he's not enjoying living in shared accommodation with his mother we see a different exchange:

Christopher: Can I come and live in your house...?

Siobhan: No Christopher you can't....because I'm not your mother.

She learns something through the play that no matter how bad or good she feels his mother is, it's not her job to mother Christopher and that informs what I do.

*Interview conducted by Melanie Whitehead
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