Dubbing

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

Our production consortium bought the rights to distribute the manga series “Diamante” some years back. We had done the same for two other manga series before, but this was a bit chancy, given the transgender component – the lead character’s sidekick transitions from man to woman, starting in the first series.

But the art was good, the animation improving, and the plot lines were great. There was intrigue and action, and there was that simmering “are they an item?” thing between the two lead characters. We thought that it might go across on a streaming service, where it could reach a specific audience.

All we needed was to dub the dialog.

People might think that voice acting is a walk in the park, but producers like me know that is not true. Even with an animated where you do not have to worry about the lips, you still need to get across the emotions and the drama. But most of all, the voice has to be appropriate, and that is not always an easy thing.Add to that, this character had to start as a baritone and end up as a soprano. Well, not quite, but we could not have two voices for the same person. We could not say half we through the transition: “OK, bring on the female voice actor.”We found the guy. He was new to voice, but new is cheap. He had enjoyed a short career as a child actor but had grown out of it but had got to almost 20 before he did. We can talk about how he did that later, but from our perspective he had acting skills and a huge vocal range to draw from.We signed him up for a contract that allowed him other work but committed him to do voice work for this character only, for as long as the series ran. We had him do some other voices too, so he was busy and happy.

We were happy too, because he turned out to be a great actor. People talk about voice acting not being the real thing, but they do not understand what it is all about, in particular with animated characters. Drawings do no allow for the subtleties of emotion, so that is all down to voice. And in the case of “Diamante” there was the added dimension of the male character and the female character. Pre-transition the character was aggressive and even macho, and after transition she must be totally feminine but still strong.

Our actor was able to achieve this so well that if you closed your eyes while he was playing into the microphone you would be convinced that this was not only a woman, but a beautiful one.

The might call this the power of the voice. This was good work, but you can’t help wondering where this voice was coming from.

“I might have an inner woman,” he joked. “Or an inner super hero – a female one.”

I did not want to break the spell of that voice so I added to the credits under the list just titled “Voices” an extra invented one – “Gemima Stone”. It was a joke of a sort – Diamante voiced by a Gem Stone. The actor’s name was in there too, but the standing joke in the studio was to call him Gem.

Two things happened. The first thing was that “Diamante” was a surprise hit. We started to get fan mail for the title character. Some of it was simply lewd – questions like - “Does Diamante have a dick and if so how big is it”, some of it romantic and some from trans people talking about her being “a role model for transwomen everywhere”.

The second thing was that Gem started to pick up offers of work for dubbing foreign language films – female roles.

“They think that I am a girl, Boss,” he said. “I would love to do the work but if I turn up and they see I am not female I don’t think I will pick up the job.”

I offered to help him do the recordings. Voice actors dubbing voice watch the foreign show and read the translated script and usually record separately, with the voices spliced together later. I told him to call the producer as Gemima Stone and accept the tape, the script and the direction and offer to do the recording in our studio. That was how Gem got the first work outside of “Diamante”.

It was a French film. Gem listened to the voice of the actress speaking French and was able to get the timbre just right, even adding a slight French accent to the words in English. It was not asked for or expected – voices dubbed for a US audience speak in American accents, even butchering French names in the process, but here the producers decided to keep the voice just as it was recorded by Gem and me.

We split the fee. Gem called me - “my manager and sound engineer and entitled to the share”.

Suddenly we were on a roll. Gemima Stone was becoming real.

It so happened that the French actress who played the role in that first movie was a new starlet in France, and “the next big thing” over there. As a rule, producers try to keep the same voice actor dubbing the work of the same live actor. The same in France – one guy has been doing Bruce Willis in French for decades. Gem was becoming the voice of this French actress, Sophie Bonnieux, and getting more work as her success grew.

And then came the news that Sophie was coming to California and wanted to meet “her voice”.

“If she finds out that I am a guy this work is finished,” said Gem. “What are we going to do?”

It seemed to me that we were in a corner and there was only one way out. I just blurted it out – “Well, I guess you will have to become Gemima Stone, for a day or two anyway.”

It seemed to me that the voice was there, and even when just speaking the voice, Gem had a habit of adopting a feminine stance and gestures that looked so totally girlish that is was disconcerting, and as for the look … it seemed that there might be no real problem. After all, voice actors don’t have to be good-looking.

But the truth is that Gem was not particularly manly in appearance. The career as a child actor had persisted because Gem had never grown very tall and still had a childlike face with big eyes and a shaggy crop of hair. I was in the TV business – I knew people who could work miracles with costumes, hair and makeup.

Gem was reluctant at first but as I explained – “If you want to get out of the sound booth and back on the sound stage then a good place to start is with a live performance. I have seen you be Diamante as more than just the voice. Now you will need to wind it back a little and be Jemima. I know you can do this.”

I figured that even if we had to explain to the French actress that Gem had not been born female then it would be better to have her voice portrayed by a transwoman that by a man pretending to be a woman, but that was a backup. I felt that Gem could pass as female, especially to a foreigner who probably thinks of all American women as crass.

But I was not prepared for the person who returned from the film studio that afternoon. In waltzed Gemima Stone, wearing a floral dress and heels, with long flowing hair and the face of a beauty queen.

“They told me that if you are going to stay in costume for a few days then extensions were preferable to a wig,” said Gem, proudly swing her long locks and then pulling them over her shoulder on to her bosom. “And what you are staring at is just a padded bra but not stuffed – these are gel inserts. Would you like to feel them?”

I have to say that I did, and I reached out to touch them. She gasped and smiled, teasing me that she could feel my hand on the silicone, and watching for my reaction.

The look was wonderfully playful and coquettish. It made it easy to forget who and what she was. She was in character, but I still had yet to discover who that character was.

“Sophie has already flown in, and we will be meeting her for dinner tonight,” I said. We need to run through a story as to who you are – just to keep things consistent.”

“Sound’s great,” she said trotting across my office to a chair and seating while pushing her dress under her bottom as if she had worn one every day of her life. It seemed to me that she had been well coached. What other explanation could there be?

It seemed that she would stay in character all afternoon, using her voice and developing her personality. She was confident and a little mischievous, and clearly a professional.”

“They said that this dress would be suitable for dinner,” she said. “But they did suggest that I need a bag. Perhaps you might buy me one?”

I was happy to, although quite why I was still trying to work out. It was clear that the kind of girl Gem was trying to be was used to getting her way with men. I was ready to go along with it, so on the way to the restaurant we bought a bag and a few essentials to go in it.

We arrived at the same time as Sophie Bonnieux and her manager. She greeted Gem warmly and they both kissed one another on each cheek.

“I am so glad to see that you are pretty,” said Sophie. “You voice sounds pretty.”

“I wanted to sound as beautiful as you are,” said Gem. “I cannot match you for looks, but I am glad to hear that you find my voice works for you”.

“You are too modest,” said Sophie with a laugh. “If we are to be friends, we need honesty before modesty.”

“You speak English so well that you could do your own voiceover,” said Gem.

“Some people do that,” said Sophie. “Have you heard of the German Actor Daniel Bruhl? He speaks English, Spanish and French as well as German and dubs his own work in all those languages. And Danny DeVito – he speaks no language other than English, but he has done voiceovers of his work in many languages including Russian, German and Spanish … but not French. It can be difficult. That makes dubbing big business in France.”

“I would like to learn French,” said Gem.

“I thought that you might because you have a very good French accent in your voice.”

They chatted for hours like this. I had some small conversation with Sophies manager, but it was difficult to understand why we were there. There was no business to be had. But it was obvious that he was besotted with his young client – surely everybody could see it in his eyes, except maybe Sophie herself. For her, he barely existed.

But for me, Gem cast me the occasional glance and a smile, as if to say that my presence was appreciated.

As the evening wore I on, I became aware of the fact that I had feelings for Gem. I enjoyed just looking at her, and hearing her voice and her laugh. I wondered if it was not just some fascination with what we created together – a new person. She was, after all, not a woman at all, just a clever actor. But there was no mistaking that my attraction to her was to her – it was sexual.

Of course I tried to dismiss it. I could have easily looked away, to find a beautiful woman to look at to redirect my desires, but the two best looking women in the place were sitting at my table, and the one I wanted was not Sophie.

Sophie said that she was going to a studio in the morning to audition for a part. She had already sent in videos and the producers of this upcoming movie were happy enough to pay for her to come out for a screen test.

“If you are not doing anything tomorrow, Gemima, why don’t you come with me and audition for one of the supporting roles?” Sophie suggested. “I would love to work with you. I think that we would be good together.”

Gem looked at me again, as she had done. She trusted me. She even depended on me. And I adored her. I knew that now.

“It sounds like a great idea,” I said. “We have nothing pressing tomorrow. You go.”

“Will you come with me?” Gem said. Her look was pleading. It was that kind of a look in a woman that no man can resist. My heart leapt.

“Sure. Why not?”

Every day in Hollywood there must be hundreds of auditions, and there would be a thousand lies told. Why would it matter to me that Gem should simply tick the box “Female” and invent a past that would have to match. She could not point to all her past work as a child actor – she could only refer to the work that she had done with me, and that was only voiceover work.

But she could draw on past skills and some knowledge of how the camera works, and where the marks are, and what movement needs to stay in shot. Casting people look for these things. They can spot those without ability that will need time-consuming training. It might be worth it for the right face, but not often.

And in this case, they had the endorsement of Sophie. It was not a big part, but the character was essentially Sophie’s characters closest friend in America. Their relationship on screen needed to be right, and their obvious affection for one another off screen carried over into a screen test together that Sophie requested.

Gem got the part. She was now an actress, and I was her manager.

To some extent I felt a fraud in promoting something that was not real, but I simply chose to believe that it was real, and that made everything perfect. I had a role to play in the career of a young performer, and I was not gay for desiring her the way I did.

For a while I wondered if she was not sexually attracted to Sophie, and the thought of that made me quite jealous, but it was just a friendship. Then I was worried that she would only see me as involved in business, so I decided that I needed to tell her my feelings.

“Gem, I am not sure where you are going with this, but it seems to me that you have become the person who perhaps you were pretending to be?” It was my clumsy way of pushing her to become that person.

“I want to do more than dubbing,” she said. “If I have to be a woman to get back on screen, then that is what I will be.”

“But tell me it is not more than this,” I said, in my heart pleading her. “You cannot simply say that you are pretending to be female. You are female. I see it. I think I see the real you. You are a woman and … I am in love with that woman.” There. It was said.

She just came over to me and hugged me. I hoped that she would raise her head and let me kiss her on the lips, out she kept her head down. Her face buried in my shoulder. She said nothing. She was letting me hold her. It was like being handed a jewel to hold and admire, but on the condition that you understood that it could never be yours.

I helped to arrange the hormones and electrolysis and other things that allowed Gem to complete her transition. I know that in a very real way I had a big part in her transition from man to woman, and from failed actor to in-demand actress. That gives me a sense of satisfaction, but it is no match for the feeling of loss I felt when she walked out of my life.

I sometimes wonder if it was the fact that I knew her as a man that saw her push me away. If it were that simple then I would throw myself before her and tell her that I never knew the male her, and that I only ever saw Gemima. But that is probably not the reason why she needed to move on, in both relationships and professionally.

Film and television are both cutthroat businesses and they need relationships and specialists deeply set in those worlds. Alright so I have a few animated series that I have adapted for American screens, but that does not prepare me for promoting the future of somebody like Gem. What I do is dubbing.

The End

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Author’s Note: I owe this one to a story by Lynda Shermer on Big Closet. I told her that I liked the idea but would have my own take on it. “Feel free to borrow a concept,” she said. So, that is what I did.