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Veteran actress Connie Coit adds another layer with 'Amy's View'

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Connie Coit might seem typecast in David Hare's *Amy's View*. Like Esme, the role she's playing at Theatre Three, she's a lifelong actress, a widow and the mother of an adult child. Unlike Esme, though, she doesn't live in a fantasy world in which she blocks off unpleasant truths.

"For one thing, I'd never sign a contract without reading it," Coit says. "In my personal life, I don't want to be perceived as acting like her in her self-centeredness. I can empathize with all of her feelings, but I wouldn't react the same way."

Esme disapproves of her daughter's choice of a husband, and doesn't mind letting both of them know it. She goes on and on about her petty problems while the daughter struggles with much larger ones. Finally, the character's whole life is bound up in her work.

"I do love Esme. I love the part, and I love the play," Coit says. "But she's just not that likable all the time."

Coit has been working at Theatre Three for the better part of four decades. Director Jac Alder discovered her not long after she graduated from [Southern Methodist University](#). She made a career singing difficult coloratura-style roles such as Cunegonde in *Candide* and playing comedy. But Alder had to draft her to play the more serious dramatic role she's doing now.

"In the play, Esme says, 'I play genteel. With layers.' That's Connie," Alder says. "She's been playing genteel with layers all her life."

Coit, though, saw herself as a musical comedienne. That's not surprising for someone who started out singing in the chorus at the [Dallas Civic Opera](#), as it was known then, and playing small roles in the Dallas Summer Musicals. New York director Jack Lee encouraged her to try the Big Apple, so she did. Her soon-to-be husband, the late Dr. Lloyd W. Kitchens Jr., didn't ask her to give up New York when he proposed. She still owns the small apartment on the Upper West Side they bought back then for her to commute to.

In addition to performing off-Broadway and in [Texas](#) and other regional theaters, Coit played for years in the European tour of Maury Yeston's more operetta-like alternative to [Andrew Lloyd Webber](#), *Phantom*. She excelled in classics like Kurt Weill's *Lady in the Dark* at Theatre Three and *On the Twentieth Century* at Stage West. She also starred in a number of plays without music – but they were comedies, including Neil Simon's *The Gingerbread Lady*.

A couple of seasons ago, a cold during rehearsals caused a vocal crisis that made Coit yield the leading role in Theatre Three's *The Light in the Piazza* to one of her closest friends, Wendy Welch. But she returned to the musical stage last year in Lyric Stage's [Funny Girl](#).

The idea of using Coit in a heavier dramatic role occurred to Alder when he was casting the Argentine play *Blind Date* in 2007.

"I think that people who can do comedy can act. I don't trust those long-faced people," Alder says. "Connie nailed that show. Same with this one. I bullied her to do it."

Coit says performing in *Blind Date* made her think differently about what she could do. The epic nature of *Amy's View*, which depicts two decades of British history in microcosm, daunted her. So did the length of the part, which she makes herself go over and over every day. But it turns out that the effort helps her to learn more about the character and gives her more depth – all those layers the script describes.

One other thing that might have intimidated any actress asked to play Esme is that the part is identified with the performer who played it in [London](#) and New York – the inimitable [Judi Dench](#). Alder, though, thinks the play might actually work better without such a huge name in the leading role.

"Other performers onstage just can't compete with a Judi Dench. It throws the play out of balance," the director says. "This production serves the play well because we have a little distance." Plan your life

Through Jan. 31 at Theatre Three in the Quadrangle, 2800 Routh St. \$10 to \$40. 214-871-3300. www.theatre3dallas.com.



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Connie Coit says she can identify with her role as a selfish mom in *Amy's View*, to a limited extent. 'I can empathize with all of her feelings, but I wouldn't react the same way.'