

Black Acting Methods

Critical Approaches



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Seeing Shakespeare through brown eyes

Justin Emeka

In the United States, because of our legacy of racial inequality and White supremacy, the scope of our stage has been historically limited to one racial perspective. Great authors often regaled with the title "classic playwrights" tell a "classic" story that is exclusive to a unique cultural framework that can often be defined by "Whiteness." As the American theatre becomes more inclusive and reflective of our diverse population, it will be important for our stages to reflect the richness and specificity of the multitude of cultural traditions that define America. First and foremost, this requires a commitment to nurturing and producing work written by artists of color. Yet, also imperative is redefining approaches to casting roles in the canon of "classic" texts that were written for White actors but now, as a result of many generations of struggle and protest, may be played by actors of color.

The plays of William Shakespeare continue to represent one of the most influential bodies of work in the English-speaking theatre. Shakespeare in many ways represents the center of the Western theatre tradition and the epitome of "classical theatre." Every year, Shakespeare is the most produced playwright in America—no other playwright even comes close.¹ At some point, most students of the acting craft will confront Shakespeare's canon. Each actor in addition to mastering the text will rely on the wisdom of their own experience and imagination to create these roles. Konstantin Stanislavski considered the "embodiment of the role" an essential part of the actor's process.² In addition to strong vocal and speech preparation, an actor's success will largely be determined by their ability to take ownership of the language and experience Shakespeare's characters through their own eyes. For the artist of color, this can pose a unique challenge if there is not a clear discussion or agreement as to the significance of race and culture in the construction of character within the production.

This chapter will trace some of my own experiences, as an African American actor and director, that have led me to move beyond color-blind casting toward practices that encourage audiences to see race and incorporate its significance into an author's story. Loosely defined, "color-blind casting" is the practice of casting the best actors for the job without regard to race and has

emerged as a popular response to the changing complexion of American theatre. It has been in some ways a step in the right direction; but today I find that race neutrality in "classic theatre" usually implies a cultural hegemony that denies a Black actor access to their own cultural memory, one of an actor's greatest resources. Culture is an important lens that allows us to process and respond to the world, so it can be difficult to create character without the specificity of how race and culture define norms, values, and behavior in the world of a play.

In the first section of this essay I share my own theatrical background, then sketch the history of Black actors' participation in Shakespearean theatre as well as prevailing approaches to creating multi-racial theatre in the U.S.—which is often termed "color-blind" or a form of "non-traditional casting."³ I then discuss my revelations while performing professionally in two different American "classical" productions, Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* and William Shakespeare's *King Lear*. The production of *Our Town* used a color-blind approach by a White director, while the production of *King Lear* was racially specific and featured an all-Black cast and director. I end by discussing my own approach and work as the director of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the Classical Theatre of Harlem, where I integrated Harlem's legacy into the production. My goal is to convey through my own experience the shortcomings and often ineffectiveness of color-blind approaches, in contrast to the great potential of examining Shakespeare and other White classic authors through a new cultural lens.

Reflections from the past

Does any here know me?

Who is it that can tell me who I am?

(*King Lear* I, 4)

My mother was a White woman from a small town in Oregon, and my father was a Black man from a small town in Arkansas. They were married at a time when it was still against the law for them to do so in much of the country, including my father's home state. Out of concern, both my father and mother's families initially urged them not to marry; however, my parents ignored their caution. They married and ended up moving around a lot, largely in search of a place to plant roots. As we moved from place to place around the country, I always found my way to a stage. Much of my childhood was defined by my passion for performing. I was the kid in class who was never afraid to read out loud or to perform on cue. All throughout elementary, middle school, and high school I was in talent shows, musicals, comedies, and dramas. I read or performed with church choirs and community groups. Big parts or little parts—I could make myself known onstage.

One summer, I was invited to participate in a Shakespeare acting intensive for teens at a professional theatre. We spent five weeks reading text and

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rehearsing scenes for a final performance. Although I learned a lot and could sense the richness of the writing, I also felt a profound distance from the process and struggled to define myself within the world of Shakespeare's texts. As the only Black actor in the program, rehearsals often left me feeling uncomfortable or uninspired, and I struggled to see myself in the scenes we worked on. As I continued theatre through high school, I felt myself becoming more disillusioned by the roles I was and was not considered for because of the shade of my skin.

As a student at Oberlin College, I majored in African American studies to broaden my perspective on history as well as my relationship to the world.⁴ My studies focused on what W.E.B. Du Bois called the "double consciousness" of being Black in America. He spoke of this phenomenon as a:

sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.⁵

I was also drawn to the Blues in my studies. More than just a genre of music, the Blues is a cultural aesthetic that informs many art forms—the artistic intersection of African sensibilities and American experience. The Blues shaped a worldview born out of the legacy of survival through the physical, mental, and spiritual bondage that Black people experienced in America.⁶ Inspired by the Blues tradition, I began to recognize its fingerprints in theatre within the plays of Lorraine Hansberry, Langston Hughes, Alice Childress, Aisha Rahman, August Wilson, and Ntozake Shange. Their voices echoed the transformative power of the Blues tradition and gave me a new way to see myself. These playwrights made me realize I could not personally move forward in the theatre without looking back at what had come before me.

The oldest hath borne most: we that are young
Shall never see so much, nor live so long.

(*King Lear* V, 3)

Historically through the nineteenth century, most Black actors who wanted to perform onstage largely had to do so by Blackening their faces and performing characters in minstrel shows that made a mockery of Black humanity.⁷ Minstrel shows emerged in the early part of the nineteenth century as White performers grossly imitating Black peoples' songs, dances, and behavior in a way that helped justify the perpetual inhumane treatment of Black people. Yet by the end of the century, Black performers such as Bert Williams and George Walker were also building extraordinary careers by participating in these disparaging shows. In *Black Manhattan* esteemed African American

artist and scholar James Weldon Johnson noted that minstrelsy was, up to his time, the only completely original contribution America had made to the theatre.⁸ In this way the American theatre was one of the early tools used to justify the dehumanization of Black people. And so from the very beginning Black people faced an uphill battle trying to be seen as anything beyond the demeaning, stereotypical characters of the minstrel show—onstage and off.

While Black actors were allowed to perform in minstrel shows, they were excluded from participating in Shakespeare's plays. Blacks were not even allowed to perform Shakespeare's Black characters well into the twentieth century. African American actor Ira Aldridge is often said to be the first Black man to perform the role of Othello, Shakespeare's most famous Black character, in London in 1826—more than 200 years after the play was written, in 1604. Ira Aldridge came to be known as one of the greatest American actors in history, yet he had to leave America to work and perform in Europe because he was Black.⁹

It would be more than 100 years before Paul Robeson would take the stage as Othello in 1942 as the first Black man to perform the role in America. Robeson's casting opened the doors for other Black tragedians, such as Canada Lee, Earl Hyman, as well as Black directors, such as Owen Dodson, who taught and directed at Howard University, one of America's premier Black colleges.¹⁰ Though Robeson's performance in many ways redefined how the role would be cast (using a Black actor instead of White), it was the only Shakespearean role that he was ever offered. Black female participation in Shakespeare was even less encouraging since Cleopatra, his one Black female role, was rarely ever acknowledged as actually being a Black woman. For hundreds and hundreds of years, theatre companies failed to imagine a Shakespearean world where a Black woman could even exist.

From the beginning of American theatre, there were some important efforts to re-imagine Shakespeare with Black actors in White roles, yet they had little resources and were met with rejection by the White mainstream. One of the earliest efforts was the African Company in New York, one of the first Black theatre companies, which emerged in 1821 and presented Shakespeare's plays, including the infamous production of *Richard III* that closed due to violence and rioting by White audiences who felt threatened by the company.¹¹ The Federal Theatre Project of the 1930s and 1940s produced several productions, including *Voodoo Macbeth* in New York in 1937, which was set in Haiti with an all-Black cast, directed by Orson Welles. This production found an inspired audience even while receiving lackluster critical acclaim. In 1939, Broadway produced the short-lived musical *Swinging the Dream*, which integrated jazz with *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. This show featured the music of Benny Goodman and Count Basie, and featured Black actors in lead roles, including Louis Armstrong as Bottom. However, the integration was seen as a miserable failure as it was concluded that Swing and Shakespeare were irreconcilable; it closed in less than two weeks.¹²

Opportunities in the twentieth century were limited by discrimination, and it was not until the case to encourage diversity was directed by the Supreme Court in 1954 (Brown v. Board of Education) that the door was opened for Black actors like Paul Robeson, Ossie Davis, and Joseph Papp.

Joseph Papp's efforts led to the creation of the New York City Public Theatre, a professional theatre company that used this approach to produce new work as well as classic plays. New York's City Centre Theatre's *King Lear* (1971) and *Coriolanus* (1972) at the City Centre theatres such as the City Centre color-blind casting. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by Turner as Titania with actors of color. Eventually, the impact of the Civil Rights Movement on the theatre was significant.

Movements in the 1980s and 1990s led to the formation of Black theatre communities and the work of Harry Belafonte and other actors. Different approaches to cultural, community, and national symposiums, actors, directors, and producers distributed numerous institutions to the public.

Today, all universities, colleges, and non-traditional theatres include Theatre in their curriculum. Theatre is taught by Chris Cline, as Tamara in the production of *Hamlet*. On Broadway, *Juliet* featuring Cicely Tyson as Juliet.

Opportunities for Black actors in any roles remained scarce well into the twentieth century. In 1959, because Black actors continued to face extreme discrimination, Actors Equity Association agreed to sponsor a special showcase to encourage theatres to integrate their hiring practices. The showcase was directed by Lloyd Richards, and featured Harry Belafonte, Diahann Carroll, Ossie Davis, Lou Gossett, and Ellen Holly.¹³

Joseph Papp in many ways was the first to answer their call by directing color-blind productions of Shakespeare in the Park in the 1960s. Papp's efforts led to the creation of the Public Theatre in 1967—one of the first professional theatres to practice a "color-blind" approach to casting. Using this approach, Papp created spaces for actors of all backgrounds to perform new work as well as classic work such as Shakespeare. In the 1960s and 1970s New York's Central Park became home to such memorable performances as *King Lear* (1973) featuring James Earl Jones, Rosalind Cash, and Raul Julia; and *Coriolanus* (1979) with Gloria Foster and Morgan Freeman. Other theatres such as the Arena Stage in Washington, D.C., began to embrace color-blind casting practices in productions, such as their 1981 production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* featuring Avery Brooks as Oberon and Kathleen Turner as Titania. These productions typically cast only one or two roles with actors of color while the cultural milieu remained largely unchanged. Eventually, color-blind casting began to raise questions in regards to the artistic impact of Black and Brown bodies delivering a White story.

Movements like the Non-Traditional Casting Project (NTCP) of the 1980s and 1990s made another attempt to encourage the use of marginalized communities on stage. Founded by Clinton Turner Davis, Joanna Merland, and Harry Newman, the NTCP attempted to clarify and outline four different approaches to non-traditional casting, which included: societal, cross-cultural, conceptual, and blind.¹⁴ In 1986, the NTCP produced a two-day national symposium on "non-traditional casting," which included over 1000 actors, directors, producers, educators, and critics. In the following years they distributed a book, *Beyond Tradition*¹⁵; a video, *Breaking Tradition*; and conducted numerous forums and symposiums that challenged producers and institutions to make a commitment to diverse casting policies.

Today, all across the nation, professional theatres, as well as colleges and universities, continue to rely more heavily on various forms of color-blind or non-traditional casting as a way to be inclusive. Recent productions of note include Theatre for New Audiences' (Brooklyn, NY) production of *Tamburlaine* by Christopher Marlowe featuring John Douglass Thompson, a Black actor, as Tamburlaine; as well as the Wilma Theatre's (Philadelphia) production of *Hamlet* featuring Zainab Jah as the first Black female in the titular role. On Broadway, recent examples include the 2014 production of *Romeo and Juliet* featuring an inter-racial cast that included Condola Rashad and Orlando Bloom; as well as the 2013 Black productions of *A Trip to Bountiful* with Cicely Tyson, and *A Streetcar Named Desire* starring Nicole Ari Parker and

Blair Underwood. In 2012, the Royal Shakespeare Company toured a production of *Julius Caesar* set in Africa. "Color-blind," "non-traditional," or "experimental" practices that cast Black actors in White roles continue to gain interest and enthusiasm. As casting practices continue to evolve and mean different things for different productions, I believe it is important for actors and directors to develop clear and consistent approaches to the implications of race within a production.

The impact of race on casting today

Speaking in racial terms, I have identified three directing approaches that are often used when working with a Black actor in a role that was written for a White actor:

- 1 Attempt to create a race-less or color-blind reality onstage where racial distinctions bare no biological or cultural significance. An example would be casting a White family with an Asian mother, a Black father, and White child.
- 2 Maintain the character is still White even though the actor is not. All theatre is a game of pretend so onstage anything is possible—a woman can be cast to play a man; a man can be cast to play a child; a Black person can be cast to play a White person.
- 3 Change the race of the character. That is, invite the audience to recognize the character as a Black person within the world of the play and incorporate this dynamic into their understanding of the story.

In an ideal theatre, where all people participate equally, I believe there is room for all three approaches. However, I believe the first two approaches are more problematic than progressive. In my own experience, most times when White directors cast Black actors or other actors of color in White roles, they believe they are implementing the color-blind approach; when they are actually implementing the second approach—creating a White cultural experience using Black and Brown actors. I believe this type of directorial vision occurs largely as a result of an inability to discuss the implications of race and specificity of culture, as well as a dangerous assumption of what is "universal."

Topics concerning race continue to be some of the most difficult conversations to have in our country. As Americans, we still struggle to address our legacy of racial injustice and cultural inequality. Wounds from the past continue to haunt us and inform our national identity, so when the issue of race arises many choose to avoid it altogether and act like racial inequality does not even exist. Much of America's progress in racial politics is measured by the ability to effectively ignore the idea of race at all times. This is often reflected in the American theatre by the use of color-blind casting.

The practice hopes to be all-inclusive and alleviate preferential treatment based on race by not seeing or "blinding" oneself to race during the casting process. Although it was once a progressive approach because of its ability to include Black and Brown people into a largely exclusive American Theatre, actors of color who are asked to participate in "color-blind casting" are often required to deny their culture and aesthetic as a reference point for the sake of becoming race neutral or "universal." So if the race of a character that was written for a White actor is not consciously or effectively addressed with the actor of color, this practice often forces them to assume or imitate Whiteness in order to fit into the world of the play. Actors of color must mold themselves in the shape of White people under the pretense that they are "just a person."

Whose town is *Our Town*?

Grover's Corners, Sutton County, New Hampshire, United States of America, Continent of North America, Western Hemisphere, Earth, the Solar System, the Mind of God.

(*Our Town*, Act I)

One of my first color-blind experiences as an Equity actor was in a production of the classic play *Our Town* by Thornton Wilder at a Tony Award winning regional theatre. In his preface, Wilder asserts that the play offers a picture of humanity, a generic account of people's failure to perceive the true value of life¹⁶. In the play, the audience is introduced to two (White) families—the Gibbs and the Webbs—in a fictitious New England town named Grover's Corners near the end of the nineteenth century. When I learned the director was using a multi-racial cast filled with enormously talented actors of all shades, I was very excited and honored to be a part of it. The theatre developed a marketing campaign promoting the multi-cultural production as a way to explore the complexities of what it really means to be an "American."

On the first day of rehearsal I walked into a room filled with photos from the turn of the New England century. In the room, as customary at the commencement of a project, were designers, administrators, and actors. We were all encouraged to walk around the room and enjoy the research images. We were told the images captured and reflected the world we were creating—people, places, objects, houses, etc. Yet in the numerous (100+) pictures, there was not a single Black or Brown face. In a cast of roughly 25, over half the cast was not White—about a third of us were African Americans. Given the fact that there were African Americans in turn-of-the-century New England, I wondered if I was the only one who was a little confused about our function as Black people in this production. I waited for an appropriate moment to frame my concern.

After we finished our first read-through, everyone left except the actors and director. At that point, we sat around the table and the director began to talk more about his vision and the world of the play—never mentioning race at all. He invited us to ask questions or share any comments. For about an hour, the other actors praised the writing, the profundity of the story, and what an extraordinary opportunity it was to be in the cast. Finally, I asked, "Does race exist in Grover's Corners?" There was immediate silence in the room while the director hesitated. As a White man, he was genuinely confused by my inquiry. I continued, "Do the characters of this town recognize or reflect cultural distinctions based on race?" The rest of the cast waited attentively in anticipation of his response. Still unsure, his tone became slightly defensive and he began talking proudly about how race had nothing to do with any of his casting decisions—he only saw our tremendous talent as actors. Ignorance defined his sincerity. My question was more practical than philosophical. In a biological family that is made up of a Black father, a White mother, a Black son, and a White, blonde hair, blue-eyed daughter, as an actor, I needed to know what type of family we were referencing. At the turn of the nineteenth century in New England, a White family and Black family, even within the same economic class (and it is important to note the existence of middle-class New England African American families at the turn of the century), may have significantly different cultural nuances that define the character of the entire family. Uncertain, yet still confident, the director finally answered, "No, the characters did not see race as a distinction." He asserted that questions of race in this world would only be a distraction to what we were doing. We were simply creating one homogenous culture inspired by the culture of Thornton Wilder—one race defined by Wilder's vision and description of life in Grover's Corners. Whether the director knew it or not, he was telling the actors of color that we were all, culturally speaking, "White."

During rehearsals, I felt some actors struggling to shape a "cultural mask" to fit into Grover's Corners—even though it was a mask many of us were familiar with. It was a mask used to hide or minimize any ethnic flavor the actor naturally possessed. Behavior was shaped with comments or notes from the director that never mentioned race specifically, such as our speech could be "folksy," but not with too much "drawl"; our laughs could be "joyful" but not too "loud" or "boisterous"; our walks could be "loose" but not too "bouncy"; as we sang our parts in the choir we were instructed to sing straight, with no vibrato. The donning of this "cultural mask" was subtle but profound. A mask used to navigate being a dark body in a White space. The struggle was often relieved on break with jokes. Laughter became the armor against our uncertainty as we wore our masks on stage to fit into a world that was ultimately incapable of recognizing our full existence.

The show sold out almost every night. The largely White audiences gave us regular standing ovations. They admired us as much as themselves for

never noticing with, "It was so able to take pride. Like a tree seven Corners. The it about the comedy invisible and it further masking the audience's admiration."

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never noticing race. During talkback after talkback, comments culminated with, "It was so universal. I never even saw color." Unfortunately, I was not able to take pride in a job well done. I felt something profound was missing. Like a tree severed from its roots, I felt like I had no roots in Grover's Corners. The irony of the experience was that the production aimed to talk about the complexity of the American identity, yet left many of us feeling invisible and insignificant. An opportunity for cultural expansion was lost, further masking the honesty and diversity of American culture to its audience's admiration.

In America, if we are not racially, ethnically, or culturally specific, the White majority is assumed as "universal." One of the most profound and subtle benefits of White privilege is the ability to ignore race—the ability to not identify Whiteness even while enjoying the specificity of "White culture" or "White institutions."¹⁷ For instance, one does not need to say *White* university to be discussing a university that is predominately White—one just calls it a university. One does not need to take a *White* history course to focus on the history of White people—she or he just takes a history class. Theatres do not address themselves as *White* theatres, even when they are run by predominately White staff and plan a season of work dedicated, with few exceptions, exclusively to examining the lives of White people. We often reference these companies as representations of American theatre. In this way, "Whiteness" is usually perpetuated in silence.

Historically, classifying people specifically as "White" or "Black" was largely an American phenomenon that was constructed over hundreds of years to promote one portion of the American population ("White") with notions of superiority and entitlement, while damning another part of the population ("Black" or "Negro") to perpetual servitude and inferiority.¹⁸ Although race is confusing because of the inconsistencies and contradictions as to how race is actually defined (sometimes color of skin, sometimes nationality, sometimes ethnicity, sometimes heritage, sometimes religion—not to mention the complexities that emerge as a result of races "mixing"), the effects of race and racism are very real and remain a vivid reality in terms of how we relate to one another. Today, many seek to undo the negative effects of racial distinctions by not speaking of them. Yet, if we ignore race we ignore the persistence of White supremacy woven into the fabric and foundation of our collective consciousness. I am not referring so much to the White supremacy of extremists such as the Ku Klux Klan or Neo-Nazis, but the subtle and persistent notions within public and social policy that White people/culture are somehow more important, more valuable than Black people/culture. Because a contemporary heart cannot be legislated, artists and artistic institutions have a critical function in transforming the soul of the nation. Black cultural expression, in a way, serves as a tool to counter the overt and covert assault of White cultural imperialism.

The Africanization of *King Lear*

So we'll live,
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
And take upon the mystery of things
As if we were God's spies.

(*King Lear* V, 3)

Avery Brooks was the first person to introduce me to an idea and process he called "Africanizing" Shakespeare.¹⁹ In 2004, he invited me to Yale Repertory Theatre to play the role of Edgar and serve as the movement coordinator for an original production of *King Lear* that was directed by African American director Hal Scott.²⁰ Avery had been invited to play Lear and his "Africanizing" concept was inspired by the work of world-renowned scholar Ivan van Sertima, who documented in his groundbreaking book, *They Came Before Columbus*, how Africans came to America hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of years before the arrival of Christopher Columbus. Avery's idea was that *King Lear* was one of the last of these early African Kings in ancient America. The ancient Olmec heads found in Mexico with uncanny African features provided the backdrop of our set. We were an all-Black cast with Black composers and choreographers.²¹

Avery's idea and vision for the production struck a deep chord in me. The process was unlike anything I had experienced in my previous work with Shakespeare. Each rehearsal we warmed up with African dance and worked to develop a unique movement vocabulary for how people moved and interacted in this world. Hearing the drums and Black tongues wrapped around Shakespeare's text everyday invited me into the world and gave me unique confidence as an actor. I had never experienced Black culture in Shakespeare. I started to recognize the iambic pentameter inside the heartbeat of the drum, and it gave me a new way to embrace the musicality of Shakespeare's verse and prose. Hearing my fellow actors deliver the text, I could hear how the iambic pentameter was a part of our natural rhythm of speech, as opposed to some foreign speech pattern that we had to imitate.

The play made sense in a way I had never experienced a "classic" text. I understood the scenes better and it became easier to commit to my dramatic actions. I suddenly felt as if Shakespeare belonged to me—I could look inside myself to find his characters. There was no longer the enormous pressure of doing it the "right" way. Shakespeare and I could both be "right" together, instead of dueling opposites, as I had believed for much of my life.

Though the production had its challenges and was by no means perfect, being involved in it liberated my imagination and gave me permission to dream for the first time inside of Shakespeare. Night after night we played to packed houses. I was reassured to know that audiences were eager and hungry for such cultural innovation. Some critics praised us, while others questioned

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the audacity and validity of our artistic vision. Still, I was infinitely inspired by the idea of what we were doing and wanted to continue this "Africanizing" approach as a director.

Black Shakespeare

Where is our beautiful fire that gave light to the world?
The fire of pyramids;
The fire that burned holes through slave ships and made us breathe;
The fire that made guts into chitterlings;
The fire that took rhythms and made Jazz.

(*Catch a Fire*, poem by Sonia Sanchez)

Within the continuum of Black culture throughout the African diaspora, there is a long tradition of creating or transforming artistic forms in the new world by syncretizing African or "Black" aesthetics with European traditions. This process can be identified in music, dance, poetry, language, cuisine, fashion, and religion. The Black aesthetic is a creative fire with an unrelenting commitment to expressing itself—redefining everything it touches. As a director, this is the light that shines on every text I read and prepare to direct—so that in shaping my vision, my creative process is similar to music. In jazz, gospel, funk, hip hop, it is common for a musician to take a "classic" tune or standard and re-mix it through their own lens—their unique sensibility. This does not replace or undo the original author's intent, but rather expands its reach by locating the song within a new style and tradition. For example, jazz legend John Coltrane created his own classic version of "My Favorite Things" by using a song from Rodgers and Hammerstein's *The Sound of Music* (culturally speaking, one of the whitest plays on Broadway). Through an integration of his own artistic talents, Coltrane created a powerful new experience while the legacy of the original song remains intact and is even re-affirmed.

Theatre, like music, is fluid not fixed. No two productions are ever the same. In this way classic theatre that has been handed down over hundreds of years functions like myths and folktales—with the ability to be re-told within a different time, a different place, a different people, and still reveal an important truth about the human experience. Many popular classics lend themselves to great risk taking, as no single production alters the importance of its legacy and production history. For example, no one production of *Hamlet* will define the past or future legacy of the play. No matter how good or bad it is, its legacy will remain intact once the production closes. The reality that Shakespeare's plays continue to be far and away the most widely produced works in the country (and perhaps the world) lends them to extraordinary interpretations.

When a production of Shakespeare is produced there is invariably enormous cultural license that takes place. We are all 400 years culturally

(*King Lear* V, 3)

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removed from the Elizabethan era, so no one can speak with certainty of what is or is not accurate; or what Shakespeare did or did not intend. Many White directors unapologetically embrace this fact, and take extraordinary risks when staging Shakespeare. For instance, Peter Brook's 1970 landmark production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the Royal Shakespeare Company was staged in a white box set with a trapeze. And still, for all the fantastical and experimental conventions that have been praised and deemed successful in modern Shakespeare productions, audiences and critics are still essentially unaccustomed to the idea of Black culture existing within the same world as Shakespeare.

When it comes to inviting the Black aesthetic into theatre, there is still a cultural rigidity that imposes strange limitations on audiences' imaginations. I have often found it odd that theatre companies, producers, and directors are likely to think it more possible for an audience to accept the fact that a Black actor could play the blood relative of a White actor, yet not have any faith that audiences might actually accept the possibility of Black cultural traditions existing in the world of the play. In turn, we are collectively guided as to what is and is not within the realm of our own minds. There is a need for a revolutionary quality of the imagination to emerge among theatre artists and audiences that will allow us to see and embrace reflections of Black life onstage as well as off—in new works as well as old.

Though some of my heroes such as August Wilson have suggested that Black actors performing in works by White playwrights represent a form of cultural mimicry that inherently undermines efforts to create authentic Black theatre,²² I do not believe the only way to reveal an authentic Black experience onstage is to use a script written by a Black playwright. Just as Black music is not predicated on having a Black songwriter, as John Coltrane and numerous jazz musicians regularly illustrate, Black theatre is not always defined by *what* is being done—equally important is *how* it is being done.²³ Engaging a Black aesthetic is its own methodology and Black culture can be invited to the stage through the writer, the actor, the designer, or the director.

Directing *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in Harlem

I have had a most rare vision. I have had a dream, past the wit of man to say what dream it was...

(*A Midsummer Night's Dream* IV, 1)

When I was invited to direct William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the Classical Theatre of Harlem, though it was 2013, I was keenly aware of the fact that I was still one of the few African American directors to direct Shakespeare on a New York stage with a cast of all Black and Brown actors. Rather than be intimidated by this fact, I wanted to take advantage of

it. The artistic director of the Classical Theatre of Harlem, Uptown to celebrate the Richard Rodgers and Malcolm X Center, pointed to a figurat

I thought for Uptown. Why do we have to lose? We are Shakespeare over our own Black and Brown. These ideas attract by a commitment often American racial color to participate White people. I remember of a Black high school because most all-I-tion of the church inferior to their V and maintained A aged my brothers been shipped to 1 and norms as equal Black and White Harlem, while br work together eq

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A Midsummer Night's Dream magical fairy tale the fairies to celebrate set in the ancient palace of Duke men—the mechanism defined. Shakespeare English cultural

it. The artistic director wanted to use the production to institute a tradition of free Shakespeare in the Park Uptown—to give people a reason to come Uptown to celebrate the traditions of Harlem. The production was staged at the Richard Rodgers Amphitheatre in Marcus Garvey Park, near 125th St. and Malcolm X Blvd. Everything about the location of the production pointed to a figurative and literal crossroads, a cultural intersection.

I thought for a long time about the point of bringing Shakespeare Uptown. Why do it? What does Harlem have to gain? What does Harlem have to lose? Would this encourage the people of Harlem to revere Shakespeare over our own great writers? Was this a chance to show everyone that Black and Brown people can speak and perform Shakespeare, too? None of these ideas attracted me. Ultimately, I realized my artistic vision was driven by a commitment to effectively and equitably integrate cultural traditions. So often American racial and cultural integration in practice requires people of color to participate in White spaces assuming the ambition is to be just like White people. I remember hearing how my grandfather, who was a principal of a Black high school in the segregated South, lamented the desegregation of schools because he knew he would be out of a job. He was in fact correct, because most all-Black schools—most all-Black institutions with the exception of the church—were indeed shut down, having been seen as inherently inferior to their White counterparts, even though these institutions managed and maintained African American cultural capital. My father always encouraged my brothers and I to wonder what would have happened if Whites had been shipped to Black schools and taught to value Black cultural traditions and norms as equal to their own—what impact would this have had on both Black and White people? So I wanted to find a way to bring Shakespeare to Harlem, while bringing Harlem to Shakespeare; so that both traditions might work together equitably in revealing what is great in each.

Artistically, Harlem represents a mecca for Black culture—a melting pot of cultural exchange that reflects the unique identity and creative impulses of the African in America. Whether through poetry, music, dance, art, fashion, food, or religion, the Black presence in Harlem has inspired new kinds of expression, new ways of seeing, new ways of understanding, and new ways of influencing the whole world. Privileging nothing above or below, I wanted to engage the spirit of Harlem and the writing of William Shakespeare as a way for the audience to better understand something about Black life today.

A Midsummer Night's Dream is one of Shakespeare's most popular plays. It is a magical fairy tale that weaves together the world of the living with the world of the fairies to celebrate dreams, magic, love, and marriage. Originally, the play is set in the ancient city of Athens and takes place in three major locations—the palace of Duke Theseus, the woods near Athens, and the place of working men—the mechanicals. This world represents an ancient period that is loosely defined. Shakespeare reimagines history in his depiction of Athens. He imposes English cultural references that are distinctly “un-Athenian”—such as giving

Theseus the title of "Duke"; using English names for many of his characters, as well as incorporating fairy characters that come from English lore.²⁴ By setting his play in an ancient Greek city and endowing the characters with the contemporary qualities of his own times, Shakespeare took enormous creative and cultural license in his storytelling—presumably to create a more profound experience for his audience. This was the same impulse I wanted to use to encourage my actors and audience to take ownership of the play and see themselves at its center, as opposed to experiencing it from the cultural margins. Without changing the names, the language, or the city, I decided to use Harlem and its mythic cultural legacy as the inspiration for my depiction of ancient Athens. "Athens" would exist as an amalgam of time and culture—an elusive moment when time converges on itself—ancient and contemporary, young and old, spirit and living, city and nature, African and American.

We will meet; and there we may rehearse
most obscenely and courageously.

(*Midsummer* I, 2)

My cast included all Black and Brown actors with diverse cultural experiences and backgrounds—many with roots in the U.S. as well as throughout the Caribbean, and Africa. I worked to create a dedicated rehearsal space that allowed the actors to fuse their own experience and cultural imagination with Shakespeare's characters. Because Shakespeare wrote different dialects for different characters, I gave my actors permission to develop their natural voice or an accent they had a personal connection with. Without changing the language, we stayed true to the traditional scansion of Shakespeare's text using accents including: Jamaican, South African, Puerto Rican, and Haitian. Their speech informed the ethnicity and attitude of the characters they shaped. The personality and musicality of the different tongues of Harlem came to life through Shakespeare's verse and prose.

We shaped their speech through traditional text work as well as experimental. One strategy for actors having difficulty embracing Shakespeare's scansion and imaging was to reference how Black tongues claim and deliver the verses of the Bible. Often viewed as intimidating or incomprehensible to the masses, Shakespeare's language is essentially the same as the language in the original King James Bible. Most everyone in the room had first- or second-hand experience with attending a Black church and hearing the musicality of how the Black preacher and/or congregation naturally delivered complex verse. Grandmothers, grandfathers, mothers, aunts, uncles, or community members regularly and naturally quote Bible passages in their own heightened voice. With this sense of ease and ownership of the text I wanted us to deliver our story.

One design challenge for almost anyone directing *Midsummer* is developing a creative and effective approach to the magical elements of the play—fairies, spells, magic herbs, shape shifting—in a way that is rooted in the reality and

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imagination of the audience. Referencing books such as Robert Ferris Thompson's *Flash of the Spirit* and John Mbiti's *African Religions and Philosophy*, I found that many traditional African cultures believe that there are invisible, mystical forces and powers in the universe. These forces are neither good nor bad; they are just like other natural things operating in man's realm that may be controlled.²⁵ I decided the "fairies" in *Midsummer's* forest could represent the convergence of African spiritual forces in Harlem—inspired by a wide pantheon of deities from traditional West African cosmology. Puck and the fairies' magical movements became defined by a vocabulary of West African dances in the Diaspora.

My production of *Midsummer* averaged approximately 400 people each performance, and on closing night we had an audience of over 2300 people from the neighborhood, as well as guests who made the journey Uptown to see what everyone was talking about. Critics and audiences alike applauded the production for embracing the Black aesthetic as opposed to ignoring it. The *New York Times* praised my cast for their "rare and nuanced understanding of the Elizabethan words they are called on to speak."²⁶ By acknowledging race and incorporating its cultural implications onstage, this production created unique possibilities for the audience to understand the text that also demanded dynamic performances from the actors allowing them to draw from their own cultural experiences.

In conclusion

Directing *Midsummer*, I learned in order for a director to effectively integrate and/or infuse particular traditions in Shakespeare, the director must be fluent in the language of Shakespeare, the craft of acting, as well as equally confident in directing the cultural history and behavior of the characters onstage. When directing Black characters, a director must understand how race informs the construction of identity, character, community, and behavior. They must have a trusted relationship with the culture represented onstage in order to maintain the actor's faith and help them create archetypes, as opposed to stereotypes. In this regard, the race of the director matters. Although it is not impossible for a White director to direct Black characters—the complexity of this dynamic should not be overlooked or ignored. It is easier said than done and many "all-Black" productions have lost their soul in the hands of "expert" White directors.

In creating theatre that reflects the complexities of our multi-racial, multi-cultural, multi-national world; race is an important dimension of our work and should be discussed during the rehearsal process. Because of race's significance and mis-assumptions of what is "universal," casting practices that attempt to ignore race can serve as regressive decisions that push away those it seeks to include. Speaking from my own experience, color-blind theatre is alienating, as it often forces people of color to function in an environment

where their culture must be left outside of the rehearsal room in order to participate. This is not to say that actors of color are not completely capable of being "artists first." However, one's artistry can never be separated from the totality of their experience and the legacy they represent. We can employ race and culture as a creative way to better understand the characters, settings, conflict, and story within a given text. In doing so, I believe we invite stronger performances from actors; revitalize texts for contemporary audiences; as well as contribute to our ability as a nation to address the complexities of race relations in our society.

Notes

- 1 Every October *American Theatre Magazine* lists the top produced writers of the year with the note that they never include Shakespeare in the list because he would always hold the number one spot by far.
- 2 Konstantin Stanislavski, *Creating a Role* (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1961), 105.
- 3 Ayanna Thompson, *Passing Strange: Shakespeare, Race, and Contemporary America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 76–77.
- 4 At Oberlin College, my path to self-discovery was guided by extraordinary teachers such as bell hooks, Calvin Hernton, Ama Ata Aidoo, Wendell Logan, and guests Sonia Sanchez, Ivan van Sertima, Angela Davis, Amiri Baraka, Toni Morrison, and perhaps the most influential, TV, stage, and film actor Avery Brooks, who would become my longtime mentor and friend.
- 5 W.E.B. Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folks: Essays and Sketches* (New York: Fawcett Publications, Inc.), 17.
- 6 For further discussion, see James Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (New York: Seabury Press, 1972), 97–127.
- 7 Yuval Taylor and Jake Austen, *The Darkest America* (New York: Norton & Company, 2012), 31–56.
- 8 James Weldon Johnson, *Black Manhattan* (New York: Arno Press and The New York Times, 1968), 87.
- 9 See Errol Hill, *Shakespeare in Sable* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), 17–27.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 130.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 11–12.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 103–116.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 130.
- 14 Angela Pao, *No Safe Space: Re-casting Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality in American Theatre* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 4.
- 15 See Ana Deboo, "The Non-Traditional Casting Project Continues into the '90s," *The Drama Review* 34, no. 4 (Cambridge: The MIT Press Stable Winter, 1990): 188–191.
- 16 Thornton Wilder, *Three Plays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 12.
- 17 For further discussion, see Birgit Brander Rasmussen and Eric Klinenberg, *The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2001).
- 18 Lerone Bennett, Jr., *The Shaping of Black America* (Chicago: Johnson Publishing, 1975), 77.
- 19 I was introduced to Avery Brooks by one of my other mentors, Calvin Hernton, at Oberlin College. Avery attended Oberlin in the late 1960s and helped found a theatre group called Psuekay (Greek for "soul") to help Black students see themselves

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in the world and process their experience on campus. He was the first graduate of the Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University, receiving his MFA in Acting and Directing before building an extraordinary career in theatre, TV, film, opera, and music. Avery remains one of my closest friends and strongest references.

- 20 In 1989 at the Folgers Theatre in Washington, D.C., Avery Brooks and Hal Scott created a groundbreaking production of *Othello* featuring Avery as Othello and Andre Braugher, a Black actor, in the role of Iago. They used race to add a complex dynamic between Othello and Iago—as two Black men trying to gain power and respect in a White world. In a similar vein, Yale Repertory Artistic Director James Bundy invited Avery to develop an innovative concept for *King Lear*.
- 21 In addition to Avery and I, the cast included Petronia Paley as Regan, John Douglass Thompson as Edmond, Johnny Lee Davenport as Kent, and Rosalyn Ruff as Cordelia. African American composers Anthony Davis and Eli Fountain, Jr. created the music, and Brooklyn-based choreographer Lakai Worell provided choreography.
- 22 August Wilson, *The Ground on Which I Stand* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2001).
- 23 For a more complete description of "Black Theatre," see the introduction in Paul Carter Harrison's *Kuntu Drama* (New York: Grove Press, 1982), 3–30.
- 24 Jan Blits, *The Soul of Athens* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2003), 10.
- 25 John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophies* (New Hampshire: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1990), 74.
- 26 Anita Gates, "A Midsummer Night's Dream Gets a Harlem Spin," *New York Times*, July 16, 2013, www.nytimes.com/2013/07/17/theater/reviews/a-midsummer-nights-dream-gets-a-harlem-spin.html?_r=0.