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Performing Race on the Original-Practices Stage: A Call to Action

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More than 300,000 people each year visit the recreation of Shakespeare's Globe on London's South Bank in order to see how the centuries old plays were originally performed.¹ In the US, visitors flock to the recreated Blackfriars Playhouse at the American Shakespeare Center in Staunton, VA, and to Shakespeare & Company in Lenox, MA. Still more visitors are expected after the American Shakespeare Center creates their version of the 1614 Globe, and Lenox becomes home to a Rose playhouse. Much of the attendance at these playing companies' performances are repeat, but no one can deny that large numbers of tourists also travel to the replica playhouses, meaning original-practices performances attract people who do not generally attend live theatre. This unusual make-up gives these companies a ready-made platform for discourses on topics such as race. As big names in the Shakespeare industry and theatrical world, these companies not only influence large numbers of playgoers but also have the potential to create true dialogues about race both inside and outside of the playhouses.

The companies which identify themselves as devoted to original practices, such as the three large ones mentioned, concern themselves with lighting, costuming, acoustics, doubling, pacing, and/or architecture, but none of them currently address the Shakespearean staging practices for performing race. Instead, the companies adhere to various types of color-blind casting. For example, the American Shakespeare Center considers "actors of all races . . . for all roles" so that "everyone in the audience can see themselves in the plays."² Indeed, not even the most strident believer of original practices would desire a return to an all-white and all-male cast, despite the fact that this was the staging convention for English

Renaissance playing companies. Further, most Shakespeare theatre companies tend to erase the subtle racism inherent in the canon by cutting lines like Claudio's "were she an Ethiope" from *Much Ado About Nothing* (5.4.38). Yet despite their good intentions, these companies make questionable casting decisions or otherwise ignore the implications of race entirely.

Thanks to work from groups such as the Non-Traditional Casting Project, most theatres consider their casting practices to be colorblind. For example, when asked about her casting practices, director Kathleen Powers, whose *Winter's Tale* played at the Blackfriars Playhouse in 2007, credited "Joe Papp for starting the tsunami wave that is now scarcely a ripple, even in more conservative parts of the country" (Powers). Similarly, another ASC director, Jaq Bessell, wrote, "I am a color-blind caster. I wouldn't consider a white man for Othello or Aaron the Moor, but that is about it" (Bessell). While non-traditional casting is certainly embraced more fully than it has been in the past, Powers's assertion that it is now "scarcely a ripple" is both untrue and symptomatic of the dilemma still facing non-traditional casting. To begin, colorblind casting can still bring about negative or confused comments. For example, the director Ralph Berry wrote about responses to "colour-casting," including critical responses to the 2000 Royal Shakespeare Company casting of David Ojelowo, an actor of Nigerian descent. An angry letter writer insisted that casting Ojelowo as the historical Henry VI was an "obvious untruth" and a "distracting irritation throughout the performance" (quoted in Berry 35). Another writer, this time in 2002, criticized a *Macbeth* "in which the son of the black Banquo was played by a ginger-haired actress" (quoted in Berry 37). And yet, as Richard Hornby points out, no one makes a fuss about genetics or the suspension of disbelief when a staged blond-haired couple has an equally impossible brown-haired offspring (Hornby 460). Perhaps instead of "scarcely a ripple," non-traditional casting needs to be taken far further than one or two actors of color in a company in order to break expectations of genetic realism.

Where original practices hold the greatest potential for non-traditional casting is in the use of cross-gender casting and extensive doubling. While doubled actors and their directors need to be clear in characterizations, audiences rarely have trouble understanding if a woman is playing a man or if one actor is playing multiple parts in one production.³ Voice, language, movement, posture, costume, and all the things that signify *character* become more important than physical appearances. The successful re-education of audiences to accept these playing practices means that

non-traditional casting is also generally un-remarked upon in these productions. That said, audiences do read performances and look for patterns, even reading signs that were unintended. Skin color, that most visible sign of race, is read along with other actor traits, “personal stature, vocal qualities and physical idiosyncrasies” (Elam 43).⁴ In successful colorblind casting, where no statement about race is being made (intentionally or otherwise), audiences quickly ignore color differences. If a pattern seems to be apparent, however, or if an actor’s skin tone seems to be making a point, audiences will look for that message and not allow race to fade into the story.

The four plays of the American Shakespeare Center’s 2007 season, played in repertory, succeeded to varying degrees in eradicating race as a sign system for audiences to read. The least successful in this way was *The Winter’s Tale*, directed by Kathleen Powers, simply because the casting did not require a suspension of disbelief. Partly through the vagaries of casting in repertory, partly through directorial choice and actor desire, the actors cast to play Leontes and his daughter Perdita (and ill-fated son, Mamillius, as the two characters were doubled) were black. Naturally, this requires no suspension of disbelief of the type so decried by the angry letter writers cited above. However, since the rest of the cast was entirely comprised of white actors, this led to questions about Leontes, questions which even one more black actor on the stage could have avoided. Because the question of paternity is so important to Leontes in *The Winter’s Tale*—asking it, as he does, of his son, and denying it, then later recognizing it in his daughter—genetics, and therefore skin color, come to play a part in the question for a contemporary audience. As Leontes and Mamillius/Perdita were the only black characters on stage in this production, Leontes’s questions about paternity verge on the ludicrous, especially true when he held a dark-skinned doll to portray baby Perdita and accused the white Polixenes of siring black Perdita with white Hermione. When asked about this choice, the director wrote, “We did discuss in rehearsal that when Paulina . . . is showing the baby to the Lords and detailing all the ways in which she resembles her father, well, in this particular case, if he would just LOOK at the child, he would see that she was his, and not Polixenes’s!” (Powers). On both the available podcast discussion and during a talk-back in October, René Thornton, Jr. spoke of the difficulty he had in making Leontes’s actions and irrational jealousy understandable to the audience.⁵ While the text makes it clear (from the god Apollo himself) that Hermione is chaste, this particular casting choice made Thornton’s job exponentially harder. In an interview Thornton explained

that he was “livid” about the doll. Recognizing that the doll’s color made his character’s paternity a given, Thornton explained:

to me the doll was another step on [the director’s] part to make sure Leontes is framed as nothing but evil. If you watch the show closely though you will notice that in the one scene I have with the baby I never look directly at the baby so am unable to see the color of its skin, and when Pauline [sic] is holding it she has it on her shoulder with the baby facing away from me so I am still unable to see the baby myself. (Thornton)

The easiest answer to this dilemma is either never to show the baby to the audience or simply to have another actor who is not white on stage, to tell audiences that yes, there are more black characters in Sicilia besides the royal family, so perhaps Leontes would have at least the potential for semi-logical jealousy. One hopes that these sorts of considerations are not necessary in colorblind/non-traditional casting, but plots that involve questions of paternity can bring race to the forefront in these productions.

Perhaps this is not necessarily a bad thing. When asked if the then-resident troupe at the American Shakespeare Center had had discussions about race in preparation for any of their four shows, everyone answered in the negative. However, the actor who played Hermione, Elisabeth Rodgers, mentioned there were “Good natured comments about how truly crazy Leontes must be to deny that Perdita is his child [as] she certainly doesn’t look like Hermione or Polixenes!” (Rodgers). Of course, Rodgers’s description of “good natured comments” jars with Thornton’s description of being “livid.” Admittedly, interviews and the *Winter’s Tale* podcast suggest that director Kathleen Powers and René Thornton, Jr. had fundamental differences regarding the character of Leontes, but the semiotics of skin color on stage, in the form of the baby Perdita, exacerbated the situation.

Similarly, a momentary joke in *Love’s Labour’s Lost* brought skin color to the audience’s attention and confused the sign system. The conceit of the play’s masking scene, that the four noblemen can only identify their beloveds by the accessories they wear, is already ridiculous, but accepted by audiences as a plot device, both in this play and in *Much Ado About Nothing*. Because the play is not about race or skin color, audiences are simply expected to ignore it as a sign, both in this scene and throughout the play. However, doubling practicalities placed the black actor Susan Heyward in the roles of Katherine and Jaquenetta, with three white actors playing the other noblewomen.⁶ As Bessell points out, “the idea

that a man could only identify his beloved by the jewelry or gloves she wears [is] only slightly less ridiculous than not being able to tell a white woman from a black woman" (Bessell). The problem in this production occurred in act four when Jaquenetta asks Holofernes to read aloud the letter she has accidentally received, the greeting of which reads, "To the snow-white hand of the most beauteous lady Rosaline" (4.2.123). In this production Heyward frowned at her dark-skinned hand in a comedic bit, while the white actor playing Holofernes simply muttered, "Hmmm." Audiences enjoyed the moment, and clearly that was all it was meant to be, a jab at the mistaken identity. The director explained her take on the moment in this fashion:

The way I work, I hope to reach the end of the rehearsal period (which is short, in the case of ASC) with the cast understanding fully what is important to the story, and what is not. After the show opens, I fully expect (and hope) that the actors develop new ideas, or "bits" as long as none of these hold up the story, or compete with it. Susan [Heyward]'s idea to draw attention to the fact that Jaquenetta (in this production) is neither virgin nor white of hand, was entirely her own invention, and I didn't ask her to cut it out for that reason. That doesn't make it a "directorial choice" but I did recognize it as an actor's choice. (Bessell)

The metadramatic moment amused audiences and even clarified this moment: that Jaquenetta had received the wrong letter. The problem, though, occurred when, a few scenes later, Heyward returned to the costume and character of Katherine and disguised herself for the masking scene. Because attention had been called to her skin color a scene before, it remained as a sign, making the question of mis-identification that much stranger in 5.2. Bessell anticipated that audiences would forget the Jaquenetta-moment when Heyward again appeared on stage as Katherine. Bessell's suggestion that indeed the men ought to be able to recognize their lovers, even when masked, is valid. Naturally, in a comedy, this is another comedic moment, playing up the inauthenticity of the love of the men playing at courting. However, the Princess and Rosaline were dressed in similar palettes and were of the same height and body type, while Katherine and Maria were each dressed in similar colors and were also of the same height and body shape, which suggested that the scene was, in fact, played for some degree of realism. Perhaps, without the similarity of costume, the Jaquenetta/"snow-white hand of Rosaline" moment would have passed as Bessell anticipated, as just a bit to make the audience smile and forget. Yet, as Keir Elam suggests, "phenomena

assume a signifying function on stage to the extent that their relation to what they signify is perceived as being deliberately intended" (Elam 20). Heyward's skin color was intentionally important in 4.2, and was meant to be forgotten by audiences later. But two competing messages were displayed in the masking scene (5.2), making the signification of skin color muddled and the focus on the men's confusion, well, confusing.

For most audience members, skin color produced no patterns to read in the American Shakespeare Center's production of *Antony & Cleopatra*, which can be viewed as a problem in and of itself. From even the first row of the Blackfriars stalls, no difference in skin color could be discerned between the Egyptian queen and her Roman lover. Of course, this was not two-way directional non-traditional casting, but instead, another in the long tradition of lily-white Cleopatras. Given the specific references to her skin color in the text, which were left in for the ASC production, casting Elisabeth Rodgers in the role denied the text, an offense that the ASC is founded on avoiding. When asked about the lines, Rodgers explained, just as Celia Daileader references in her article, "The Cleopatra Complex," that "Cleopatra was actually a Macedonian by descent" (Daileader 208). Of course, as Daileader explains, even without any Egyptian intermarriage, Macedonian would still have left the historical Cleopatra's skin tone "a brownish-red ochre" (Daileader 209). Further, one still must ask how much history ought to be involved in the skin color decision of the fictional Cleopatra who specifically calls herself "black." Rodgers remarked:

I figured that my dark red hair and a little bit of bronzing at the tanning salon would suffice to justify that text. I did definitely "brown up" a little, mostly because I am normally very fair skinned, and I wanted it to be believable that I lived in Egypt. (Rodgers)

Evidently she, the costume designer, and the director considered more extensive body makeup, but they felt it would be too messy, given the white clothes for the Egyptians. Because Rodgers also appeared in the other three shows in repertory, further tanning "would not work" (Rodgers). And yet, *The Winter's Tale* does not say that Hermione does not have dark skin, nor does *Romeo and Juliet* specify that Lady Capulet has no tan. As exemplary an actor as Rodgers is, this production still became another in the line of the "white monopoly" on the role of Cleopatra, and belies the "melting pot" that Rodgers suggested the Egyptian court would have been. Audiences are not likely to see a pale Cleopatra and her three servants, two of whom in this production were played by black actors, and

think “melting pot.” Instead, they are going to see, at least subconsciously, a reification of a white woman ruling over black servants.

The casting problems described above in regards to the 2007 American Shakespeare season are not limited to original practices. Instead, the original practice of extensive doubling can be of great use in disrupting the semiotics of skin color on stage. Doubling in *Romeo and Juliet* successfully enabled the audience to “suspend concern” about race.⁷ A glance at the poster, depicting black actor Susan Heyward as Juliet and white actor Gregory Jon Phelps as Romeo, might suggest otherwise, that casting had been done in order to make the basis of the play’s familial struggle about race. The original practice of doubling made this not the case, and the story was told without that extra layer; skin color could be discounted as a signifier. Nearly all of the actors in the company played characters in both the Montague and Capulet families. In order to keep the family lines uncomplicated for audiences, the director and costumer resorted to the somewhat simplistic method of color coding costumes; the Montagues wore blue and the Capulets red, meaning that there was never any doubt, even if audiences missed a character’s identification in the dialogue, about his/her affiliation. Further, because Juliet’s parents are most often shown onstage, directing their daughter to marry Paris, played by another white actor, the casting and performance did not read as though Juliet were forbidden to marry Romeo because of his skin color; the “ancient grudge” between two families remained of unknown origin.

While doubling helps disrupt the stage patterns, and casting fewer white actors would continue to do so, these are only part of the solution. Accomplishing more, however, requires first that original-practices companies recognize the casual (and sometimes overt) racism of Shakespeare’s texts *and* wish to do something about it. Academics might tell their students that *Othello* is a problematic play with regards to its constructions of race, but an analysis of these problems can lead to fruitful discussions. Yet these discussions seldom seem to leave academia’s halls.

Fortunately, original-practices companies already have the necessary institutions in place to explore and discuss the performance of race, should they choose to do so. As non-profit theatres, the large Shakespeare companies like the American Shakespeare Center, Shakespeare’s Globe, and Shakespeare & Company possess education departments, which include workshops both in-house and in area schools. The workshops tend towards introducing students to the language of Shakespeare, or instructing young actors. However, these outreaches should broach Shakespeare’s problematic constructions of race, rather than sweeping them under

the carpet of historicism and/or universalism. The former Director of Education for the Maryland Shakespeare Festival, Megan McDonough, expressed discomfort in referencing race in Shakespeare during school workshops, unless the school had specifically asked her to do so, or a student brought up questions during the program (McDonough). Offering a workshop on the performance of race, however, would make it more likely for a school to ask for something in that vein. Some theatre companies, such as the ASC, offer workshops in their own theatre spaces. Companies could begin with holding the occasional workshop about race in-house rather than in schools. Furthermore, any workshops that include discussions of life in Elizabethan times, and of Shakespearean staging practices, ought to address the racial conditions under which these plays were written.⁸ Facilitators and students might then be able to branch into fuller discussions about race and racism onstage and off. The Maryland Shakespeare Festival's educational philosophy states that, "Shakespeare gives students a language to fully express their experience, passion and despair. It gives them a power to be heard."⁹ Workshops that address race and the ways race has been, and is, performed would allow students more opportunities to "express their experience[s]."

The American Shakespeare Center takes its education commitment even further, having partnered with Mary Baldwin College to create a master's degree in Shakespeare and Renaissance Literature in Performance. This program educates directors, actors, and teachers, the very people who ought to be more prepared to discuss aspects of race when they go on stage or into classrooms. The master's degree partnership provides enormous potential for this discussion, both academically *and* in experimental practice. The program is founded upon the spirit of exploration and discovery. The graduate students might experiment with non-traditional casting and even with Elizabethan styles of blackface.

Thus far, only one student has experimented in this direction. Rick Blunt, in working on his master's degree in 2005, researched make-up recipes for darkening the skin. His project acquired some air of controversy, worrying his advisors that it might offend, and in order to clarify that he was not "playing black" but only investigating make-up, during his performance he applied make-up only to small portions of his actors' faces (Blunt). Theatre historian Virginia Mason Vaughan suggests that the recreated playhouse and original-practices companies are precisely the places to experiment with blackface performances. She worries that when watching, for example, *Othello* played by a black actor, white audiences have their stereotyped expectations of blackness reinforced (Vaughan

171). She suggests instead that those roles should be experimented with in blackface, and cites the original-practice theatres as the places to do so, in order to learn more about early modern expectations of race, and to keep from reifying the negative aspects of early modern black characters as perceived by white playwrights as racial fact (Vaughan 174). The risk of an entire blackface production is probably too great for a company to willingly take on, but experimentation on the laboratory stage carries much less weight.

Original-practices companies can go beyond the traditional academy with conferences and forums. In 2007, the Maryland Shakespeare Festival hosted a forum entitled "Making Shakespeare Matter," while the American Shakespeare Center hosts a five-day-long conference every two years for academics, theatre practitioners, and secondary-school teachers. These sorts of events need not make their entire theme about the performance of race, but they could certainly encourage speakers to address the topic in their calls for papers. At the most recent Blackfriars Conference at the ASC, held in Fall 2007, only one paper out of seventy-two touched on race. These conferences and symposia could invite one of their keynote speakers to talk about the performativity of race.

Conferences might enable yet more experimentation. The Blackfriars Conference, for example, sets aside time for afternoon workshops which allow participants "to apply methods and practices in Shakespearean staging."¹⁰ Some of these workshop slots could be designated for exploring race, possibly even in the use of blackface to explore the metatheatricity that Vaughan posits lies within the original texts (Vaughan 97).

Theatre practitioners need not only the opportunity but also the encouragement to face these kinds of conversations. Ethel Pitts-Walker, in her examination of theatrical multiculturalism suggests the same need:

The most effective remedy is to insist on more serious, honest interchange that allows individuals to present criticisms—both positive and negative—about new artistic visions. This dialog, if honest, will often be painful as artists examine not only attitudes towards each other, but attitudes towards artistic values and a culture of diversity. (Pitts-Walker 9)

Currently, these conversations are not being had amongst practitioners, let alone with audiences. The American Shakespeare Center, for example, provides actor talk-backs after several performances of each production. Certainly, audience members can ask about the performance of race, but generally seem hesitant to do so, especially when the topic is not explicitly introduced. The actors and directors themselves, however, might broach

the topic, to see if audiences can be encouraged in that direction. Furthermore, the ASC provides podcasts on its website, conversations between cast members and playhouse directorial staff. These recorded discussions might also include conversations about race, and not only with plays such as *Othello* or *Titus Andronicus*.

In the spirit of discovery, original-practices companies occasionally produce new plays written for their recreated spaces, or for Elizabethan-style playing practices. A theatre company could create textual and practical discourses between plays if they produced modern plays written in response to the questions of race found in one or more of Shakespeare's plays. The ASC has already produced *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* along with *Hamlet*, and *The Tamer Tamed* in the same season as *The Taming of the Shrew*, to create dialogues between shows. A new play which addresses race and makes use of recreated playing spaces, performed in repertory with a play like *Othello*, could both highlight the shortcomings of the latter's portrayal of an Africanist persona, as well as explore original-practices in new and vital ways.

Questions of race become frightening territory for original-practices companies as they attempt to maintain the goodwill of their ticket-buyers and donors. However, original-practices companies were also founded on the spirit of exploration and discovery, and the belief in Shakespeare's ability to speak to everyone, which places them precisely in the opportune position to encourage experimentation and genuine discourse. Only through criticism, honest conversations, and active work with race in performance can the pervasive and casual racism of Shakespeare's plays and today's world be overcome.

Notes

¹For these figures see: <http://www.shakespeares-globe.org/press/media-guide/>

²See the ASC website: <http://americanshakespearecenter.com/v.php?pg=80>

³Obviously when a show actively deals with questions of gender or disguise, directors must take especial care to provide a sign-system for their audiences. An MFA production of *The Roaring Girl* which recently appeared on the Blackfriars stage faced both of these problems. The director elected, albeit reluctantly, to give cod-pieces to all of the play's male characters in order to clearly differentiate the women playing men from women playing women dressed as men. Most plays do not face dilemmas quite so layered.

⁴While Elam does not include skin color or race specifically in his theories, he does express that the actor's body "will influence the spectator's perception and decoding of messages" (43). With current American audiences, skin color cannot help but be a part of that influence.

⁵Available at: http://www.americanshakespearecenter.com/component/option,com_production/Itemid,112/task,cast/id,77/

⁶Susan Heyward requested the role of Katherine, and either Bessell or the ASC's artistic director doubled Katherine with the role of Jaquenetta. According to the director, no comment on race was meant.

⁷Hornby suggests that colorblind casting cannot exist until "society itself becomes color-blind," a result that is "not only unlikely but probably undesirable." Instead he suggests aiming for "color-neutral casting," so that rather than expecting audiences to suspend disbelief, they simply "suspend concern" when it is clear that racial signifiers are unimportant to the story being told (Hornby 460).

⁸According to McDonough, 80–90% of the time, schools want the workshop gives "to throw in historical stuff about Shakespeare and Elizabethan England," which should give ample opportunity for educators to include information on the attitudes towards race.

⁹See the Maryland Shakespeare Festival Education Philosophy on their website: <http://mdshakes.com/education.html>

¹⁰See the ASC's note on conferences on their website: <http://www.american-shakespearecenter.com/education/conferences.php>.

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