



PROJECT MUSE®

---

Casting for Racial Harmony: Strategies of Redemption in  
Caleen Sinnette Jennings's Double Play

Peter Erickson

Shakespeare Bulletin, Volume 27, Number 3, Fall 2009, pp. 415-423  
(Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/shb.0.0105>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/316800>

## Casting for Racial Harmony: Strategies of Redemption in Caleen Sinnette Jennings's Double Play

PETER ERICKSON  
Williams College

Caleen Sinnette Jennings's intertwined two-play sequence *Playing Juliet/Casting Othello* (1998) activates three distinct meanings of *casting*.<sup>1</sup> Most obvious is the metadramatic scenario of characters who are casting Shakespearean parts for two productions by a multiracial company called New Vistas. Here Jennings explicitly engages two recent major developments—and disruptive transformations—in the history of casting practices in Shakespearean performance.

The first is the historic breakthrough in having black actors play black characters, a shift signified by Paul Robeson's performance of Othello, a part which was originally invented for a white actor in blackface and from which blacks were actively excluded. Robeson's appearance as Othello in the highly visible theatrical site of Broadway in 1943 stands as the symbolic moment of change for black male actors' irreversible entrance into the field of Shakespearean performance.<sup>2</sup> The expansion of possibilities for black actors continued a decade later through a second initiative: colorblind and other forms of non-traditional casting originating with Joseph Papp's New York Shakespeare Festival in the 1950s.<sup>3</sup> Ultimately Jennings's plays place us in a complex situation by asking us to contemplate the juxtaposition of these two innovations in casting as they affect our perception of race. When we view Jimmy's role as a black Shakespearean character through the lens of race, Jennings presents us with an energized, positive picture. Yet when we look at Georgia's colorblind roles through the same lens, the plays show an ambivalent, enervated result. The two vantage points clash and Jennings forces the issue by bringing the two characters together in marriage.

The second meaning of casting concerns the two linked plays as a love story. In addition to the professional challenges of their Shakespearean roles, the characters as themselves enact personal dramas of falling in love. The company consists of six actors—three black (two female and one male) and three white (one female and two male)—who are in effect auditioning for potential partners. As the love relationships are tested over the course of the two plays, three couples are formed to create a social microcosm that displays a representative spectrum of racial variations: one white pair (Wendy and Dave), one interracial pair (Lorraine and Chris), and one black pair (Georgia and Jimmy). The process by which they experience and resolve the difficulties that they encounter with love exerts a shaping force in the dramatic outcome.

The public plot as Shakespearean actors and the private plot as lovers overlap through the shared focus on race. This effect of a racial double plot intensifies both the problem and the need for a solution with regard to Shakespeare and race, understood both as race in the context of Shakespeare and Shakespeare in the context of race. Hence the third meaning of casting involves “casting about” in the sense of trying to find the racial harmony indicated in my title. From this standpoint, the two plays are dramatic explorations that seek a way to make the two plots—the characters’ professional and personal lives—mesh and work together in terms of race. At the end, the question is not only “What is racial harmony?” but also “How is it achieved?” The phrasal verb, “to cast about,” leads in slightly different directions depending on the respective tones of two definitions. The first, “to search or look for,” implies an exploratory mode that is open-ended. The second, “to devise means, contrive,” places an emphasis on making it happen through active construction involving artificial means. The use of artifice in theatre comes as no surprise, but the interest lies in the precise details of how the artful structuring operates.

The primary relationship in the two plays is the one between Georgia and Jimmy. Pivoting on the slash, the double title, *Playing Juliet/Casting Othello*, implicitly names the black pair—Georgia plays Juliet and Jimmy is cast as Othello—as the organizing principle of the overall dramatic design. Each of the two main characters goes through a parallel process in responding to the other’s acting, whereby initial disapproval yields to enthusiastic acceptance. In the first play, Jimmy opposes Georgia’s role as Juliet because Romeo is played by a white man: “Cause I didn’t want the woman I love slobbering all over some white boy” (44). In turn, Georgia is similarly uncomfortable with Jimmy’s role as Othello in the second play when she discovers that he has been trained in secret by the white

woman who plays Desdemona: "I'm not particularly thrilled about Jimmy rehearsing love scenes on a bed with a white woman" (90). Shakespeare thus successfully serves as the medium that enables Georgia and Jimmy to negotiate racially-tinged sexual jealousy and to complete a series of exchanges that results in happy reconciliation. Yet, despite the benignly ironic convergence of the two characters' emotional trajectories, the respective endings of the two plays manifest a deeper, gendered asymmetry.

As a dramatic obstacle to the goal of achieving unity, Jennings sets herself the harder challenge of diametrical opposition: where Georgia criticizes Shakespeare, Jimmy defends Shakespeare. Georgia and Jimmy are so sharply contrasted in their attitudes toward Shakespeare that it is difficult to imagine how their relationship can hold together. The specific verb associated with the two title characters structures their experience of performance in a different way. Casting logically precedes playing, but the conspicuously inverted order in Jennings's title puts playing first and casting second. Georgia's racial discomfort in the role of Juliet gives her "playing" a problematic, dispirited tinge, while Jimmy's attraction to Othello makes his "casting" feel inspired and euphoric. But casting is a preliminary stage; by stopping at this prior moment, the deeper questions that emerge in actual production are not reached and the stress of full rehearsal is postponed and effectively suspended.

This fundamental difference correlates with their divergent links to different points in the history of casting practices: Georgia's roles involve colorblind casting, whereas Jimmy's single role follows the Robeson model. The order of the plays tilts the balance in Jimmy's favor, allowing his situation to prevail over Georgia's. Furthermore, the sequence of the plays reverses the historical sequence of the two casting practices: we move from the 1950s back to the 1940s of Robeson's triumph. The effect is one of returning to an earlier, less complicated time.

As a black actor playing a white woman, Georgia as Juliet is placed in a predicament of cross-racial casting in which Shakespeare's racialized language and Georgia's racial identity are in conflict. By insistently calling attention to linguistic contradictions, Georgia's articulate, vocal stance presents a sharp critique of Shakespeare:

How am I supposed to deliver a line like . . .

"Thou know'st the mask of night is on my face

Else would a maiden blush bespight my cheek."

They'll laugh me off the stage. And he's real clear about what black means too.

“So shows a snowy dove trooping with crows  
As yonder lady o’er her fellow shows”  
White is beautiful. Black is ugly. (37)

Such practical performance questions lead to heated debate in which the banner of race-transcendent universality is raised: “This play shows a universal beauty that’s far more than skin deep” (38). But the debate is left unresolved.

By contrast, Jimmy’s subsequent casting as Othello is portrayed as a comfortable fit. The origin of the part as a white actor’s blackface role is registered in a quick joke—“Tell me it’s Dave in blackface!” (71)—but this retrospective glance only enhances the appeal and validates the currency of racial congruence. The overriding emphasis is on a romanticized version of Jimmy’s racial authenticity as a black man playing a black man. Although Jennings is careful to insist on Jimmy’s aptitude and discipline, his lack of education is seen as an advantage: “He’s never had formal acting training but he’s talented” (72); “I think you’re more natural” (74); “But he’s got the heart of this guy. Wendy can coach him for the rest” (78). Hence the issue is casting; the only obstacle is access, not content.<sup>4</sup> Once the casting of Jimmy as Othello is assured, racial questions are assumed automatically to take care of themselves.

In *Casting Othello* (1996), Caleen Sinnette Jennings extends Phillip Hayes Dean’s justification of Paul Robeson’s accommodation and affirmation of Shakespeare’s *Othello* by showing that Robeson’s triumph can be replicated by an ordinary black man.<sup>5</sup> Though employed as a maintenance man, Jimmy feels a connection to the part through a twofold affiliation. First, his entry into the part is mediated by Robeson’s successors, who offer a sense of kinship with black brothers in acting: “Move over, Denzel Washington! Move over, Larry Fishburne! Jimmy’s in the house!” (52). Second, his deep conviction about the part comes intuitively from within as interior knowledge: “I know this guy. He’s a brother, just like me” (79). Direct identification gives Jimmy the confidence that he can answer Othello’s call to “speak of me as I am” (5.2.351):

But see, that’s why I *do* understand. Othello’s a soldier. A working guy like me. His home is the battlefield, right? But here he is living in the city. Just like my home is in the basement fixing up stuff, but here I am hanging around with all you educated types, right? He’s a working-class black dude. (95)

Othello’s declaration of lineage at the outset—“I fetch my life and being / From men of royal siege” (1.2.21–22)—makes the class parallel a stretch.

Yet Jennings allows Jimmy's desire for credibility to authorize his interpretation of the character: "People want to make brothers into monsters all the time. This guy's just a regular dude. I wanna show that" (96). The question for Jennings's play is how Jimmy's vision can be achieved.

The issue of colorblind roles returns as a problem in *Casting Othello* where Georgia plays Emilia: "It's bad enough I'm playing a maid. I'm not doing that: 'Oh mistress let this darky brush thy golden locks'" (71). But the scope of her critique is greatly expanded to encompass the entire play, including the non-colorblind role of Othello: "Look, I have a problem with this whole damn play" (88). In the extended confrontation in the second play (88–101), Georgia launches a telling indictment of *Othello's* racial stereotyping that cannot be solved by casting a black man in place of a white man as the title character: "It's the same old stereotype" (90). In this position, Georgia is joined by the only other black woman but, though they bring a strong voice to the argument and their stance is given full expression, they lose the debate. How does this happen? Jimmy's fervent, if naïve, endorsement of Othello creates an intraracial discussion that changes the subject from race to class. The play uses Jimmy's working-class status to shift the sympathy to his side, which is reinforced by vociferous denials from all three white characters: "Race is not everything" (89); "This racial stuff is always sensationalist" (89); "This isn't about race!" (93); "What do you want to do, rewrite the ending? Othello and Desdemona go to marriage counseling?" (95). The sarcasm about rewriting closes off the option of revision as a potential vehicle for critique. As Dave insists, "All we've got is the text" (94).

Exploration of the disagreement is not even-handed: the play summarily gives full support to the Jimmy-Shakespeare alliance. Although Georgia's view is acknowledged, it is not addressed but sidestepped and effectively dropped. Her reduction to a token straw-woman can be heard in her final plea: "Can you understand how I feel about the play?" (101). The plaintive question remains unanswered. The critique is deflected to her black female colleague, Lorraine, who refuses to play her assigned role of Bianca (97). This is a minor concession, however, because the decision is motivated by her commitment to Chris, the play's director, whose father would draw the wrong conclusions about a black woman as whore, fitchew, and monkey (64–65, 92–93): "But I can't rewrite the part. I'd be living all your father's stereotypes of me on stage" (98). The fallout is further minimized because she continues to fulfill her duties as the play's stage manager (98).

In the ultimate casting decision, Jennings casts Shakespeare as the proving ground on which Jimmy demonstrates his worth and compen-

sates for not have gone to college. As a vehicle for upward mobility, Shakespeare creates an opportunity for symbolic class advancement. The resulting legitimacy lifts Jimmy into his rightful place in the generational family order. His successful casting as Othello culminates in Jimmy's vision (104) of winning acceptance as son-in-law ("I want your father to see me"); confirming his suitability as Georgia's husband ("I wanted you to be proud of me"); and impressing the child with whom, since her morning sickness at the beginning of *Playing Juliet* (12), Georgia has been pregnant ("I want to be able to say to our kid, 'Kid, your old man played Shakespeare!'"). Shakespeare's comic closure is founded on just such scenes of family renewal, and Jennings's conclusion literally draws strength from the Shakespearean imprimatur.

The paradox is that *Casting Othello* converts the tragedies of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Othello* into what Jennings's subtitle calls "serio-comedies." By reframing the genre as comedy, Jennings invokes the convention of an affecting but sentimental happy ending. In the play's final speech, Jimmy doesn't have to choose but instead has it both ways: "If Othello hadda hooked up with some Moorish sister in the first place, he wouldn't have gone through all them changes. Oh well, I got mine" (104). By simultaneously playing black Othello to white Desdemona and also affirming his marriage as black man to his black wife Georgia, Jimmy averts racial conflict and radiates racial harmony. Jennings thereby circumvents the tragic consequences for Georgia that black women face in Djanet Sears's *Harlem Duet* (1997), where Billie's fight for equality compels her to reject Othello, or Derek Walcott's *A Branch of the Blue Nile* (1983), where Sheila, a black actress who, like Georgia (34, 37, 42), is uncertain about her beauty, survives as a solitary figure at the end.<sup>6</sup>

Pitting the two casting practices of colorblind casting and racial realignment against each other, *Playing Juliet/Casting Othello* produces racial harmony by decisively choosing the latter. As the representative of colorblind roles, Georgia raises many complexities—too many to be accommodated by a feel-good ending. The result is to cast doubt on the whole ethos of cross-racial discrepancies and frayed loose ends involved in the non-traditional casting project. This outcome is short-sighted because the alternative for which Jennings casts about is an uncritical investment in the one-to-one racial realignment in which black actors are matched with black characters. Jimmy's identification with Othello turns the tide because the mutual redemption society in which Shakespeare redeems Jimmy but also Jimmy redeems Shakespeare seems so inviting and harmonious.



Yet this harmony implies a triangulation that stresses Jimmy's connection to Shakespeare at the expense of Georgia, whose critical objections to racial stereotyping in Shakespeare, though devalued and silenced, remain crucial. The strong side of the triangle is the bond between Jimmy and Shakespeare, to which casting gives Jimmy access. The perceived weak side is the link between Georgia and Shakespeare, which playing has eroded through Georgia's struggles against specific textual content. The status of the third side—the connection between Jimmy and Georgia—is left uncertain. On the one hand, Jimmy's casting as Georgia's husband cannot quite compete with the enthusiasm about his felicitous casting as Othello. On the other hand, Georgia's admirable forcefulness is dissipated by the play's end.

### Coda: "Until I meet you face to face"

The Shakespearean triangulation with a black couple resurfaces with a twist in Jennings's *Halloween* (1999).<sup>7</sup> This short play recalibrates the triangular pattern: *Halloween* features the relationship between the two black characters Maxine and Doug as the primary bond and relegates Shakespeare to an ancillary, even superfluous, status. The Shakespeare-dominated conclusion of *Casting Othello* places the emphasis on the Othello role as the only channel available for heroic black masculinity. By contrast, in *Halloween*, Doug's single-minded pursuit of Maxine displaces the focus on Shakespeare and opens the way to an alternate bypass route for black male identity.

Shakespeare's presence is strongly registered at the outset through Doug's choice of "The Bard" as his internet tag in the poetic exchanges with Maxine, known as (Emily) "Dickinson." The Shakespearean resonance is reinforced when the name behind the Bard is explicitly revealed through the photograph, supplied to Doug, of Maxine in her wheelchair at the source: "Full-length, looking gorgeous in front of Shakespeare's birthplace" (79). While the adopted names are appropriate for two teachers of Honors English and Intro to American Literature (85), these surrogates are ultimately shown to belong to an online fantasy world. The play's overall effect turns on the disparity between their meeting in this fantasy realm and their actual face-to-face meeting. The shift is signaled by the contrasting names called forth by the term "Bard." The first naming identifies the Bard as Shakespeare, but the second naming allows Doug to come out from behind his Bard mask: "So, Bard . . . can we call



you Doug?” (84). This moment disrupts Doug’s unalloyed association with Shakespeare and releases his identity to travel on a new course.

What pushes the play forward is the hilarious stage business in which the dramatic action of Doug’s arrival (78–85) unmask the Shakespeare-derived poetic language—an unmasking literally symbolized by the unraveling of the costume that Doug invents for the occasion. Shakespearean lyricism and fatalistic romanticism vaguely reminiscent of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Othello* cannot survive the corrosive action of the performative dimension promoted by the motif of Halloween masquerade. Doug’s plan to play a dashing role by arriving on the balcony (75) in a homemade cape (84) is sabotaged by the “harrowing climb” (81), by his futile tapping at the sliding glass door while exposed to wind and cold (73), by his prolonged “heavy panting” in an effort to catch his breath (80), and by the damage to his body and his costume: “He is scratched and disheveled. His outfit is ripped and dirty” (81). This comic metamorphosis exposes the Shakespearean rhetorical resonances as melodramatic pastiche.

Shorn of this linguistic excess, Doug can proceed to speak in his own down-to-earth terms about the loss of his wife (86–87), which marks the beginning of his connection to Maxine. Though he continues to speak Bard talk through his Shakespearean sounding sonnet (88–89), what prevails is the more humble tone that acknowledges psychological “impairment” (90–91) and makes “whatever you can give” (89) sufficient. In *Playing Juliet/Casting Othello*, Jimmy and Georgia strive for the same sharing but Jimmy’s allegiance to Othello gets in the way.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>I thank Amy Scott-Douglas for bringing the Jennings plays to my attention during “Shakespeare in Color: A Symposium on *Macbeth* and African American Performances and Appropriations” at Rhodes College on January 25, 2008.

<sup>2</sup>For further discussion, see Erickson 2007, 77–101, in which recognition of Robeson’s achievement is counterbalanced by a post-Robeson critical perspective.

<sup>3</sup>See Thompson.

<sup>4</sup>On the distinction between access and content, see my response to Anthony Appiah in Erickson 1998, 28–29.

<sup>5</sup>See Dean; Erickson 2009.

<sup>6</sup>Additional commentary on Djanet Sears’s *Harlem Duet* is available in Erickson 2007, 111–17, and on Derek Walcott’s *A Branch of the Blue Nile* in Erickson 2009. The motif of dark versus light complexioned black women represented by

Georgia and Lorraine in *Playing Juliet* (34-37) recapitulates the division between Sheila and Marilyn in the Walcott play.

<sup>7</sup>*Halloween* in Jennings 2000, 71-92. The six plays were performed as staged readings in 1996 and 1997, and produced in 1999-2000; this timeframe overlaps with the dates for *Playing Juliet/Casting Othello*.

### Works Cited

- Dean, Phillip Hayes. *Paul Robeson*. Garden City, NY: Nelson Doubleday, 1978.
- Erickson, Peter. "Black Characters in Search of an Author: Black Plays on Black Performers of Shakespeare." In *Weyward Macbeth: Intersections of Race and Performance*. Ed. Scott Newstok and Ayanna Thompson. New York: Palgrave, 2009. Forthcoming.
- Erickson, Peter. *Citing Shakespeare: The Reinterpretation of Race in Contemporary Literature and Art*. New York: Palgrave, 2007.
- Erickson, Peter. "The Moment of Race in Renaissance Studies." *Shakespeare Studies* 26 (1998): 27-36.
- Jennings, Caleen Sinnette. *Inns and Outs: Six Short Plays*. Woodstock, IL: Dramatic Publishing, 2000. 71-92.
- Jennings, Caleen Sinnette. *Playing Juliet/Casting Othello: Two One-Act Serio-Comedies*. Woodstock, IL: Dramatic Publishing, 1999.
- Sears, Djanet. *Harlem Duet*. Winnipeg: Scirocco, 1997.
- Thompson, Ayanna. "Practicing a Theory/Theorizing a Practice: An Introduction to Shakespearean Colorblind Casting." In *Colorblind Shakespeare: New Perspectives on Race and Performance*. Ed. Ayanna Thompson. New York: Routledge, 2006. 1-24.
- Walcott, Derek. *A Branch of the Blue Nile*, in *Three Plays*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1986.