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Shakespeare Bulletin, Volume 27, Number 3, Fall 2009, pp. 359-361
(Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/shb.0.0109>

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FROM THE SPECIAL ISSUE EDITORS

Introduction: Shakespeare, Race, and Performance

AYANNA THOMPSON

Shakespeare, race, and performance are three seemingly simple words which individually have a host of complex meanings that only become exponentially more multifaceted when placed in conjunction. *Shakespeare* is the man, the plays, the assumed authorial intentions, the original practices, and the cultural capital. *Race* is a social construct that classifies humans based on physical, cultural, and religious differences, but these constructs are historically, nationally, and performatively informed. And *performance* is an event, a set of specific practices, a way of making meaning, and an historical *and* ephemeral moment. The essays in this special edition approach the conjunction of Shakespeare, race, and performance from various angles.

This special edition begins with an historical angle with essays that focus on the meaning and the ethics of reporting past performances. If a performance is a fleeting event that can never be fully recovered, how can one ascertain the meaning of race in past performances? Exploring this fundamental question, Patricia Akhimie delves into the ethics of reporting theatre history when race is involved through an examination of the *Hamlet* 1607 performance aboard an English ship off the coast of Sierra Leone. Adele Seeff, however, interrogates how and when a production's meaning is established when race is explicitly performed and competing discourses are employed by the actors, directors, theatre reviewers, and theatre historians.

The essays then shift angles to focus on the practical with two well-known black American actors discussing their experiences with, and relationships to, Shakespeare on the page, stage, and screen. The conversation between Harry J. Lennix and Laurence Fishburne reveals them grappling with the tensions between assumed authorial intentions, performance his-

tory/conventions, and the desire for personal integrity. This conversation is followed by Peter Erickson's exploration of the casting implications in modern Shakespearean productions when both racial authenticity *and* racial harmony are the desired outcomes. Erickson applies productive pressure to the notion of "casting about" in Shakespeare.

The final angle employed in this special edition weds practice to theory to explore how race should be performed in future Shakespearean productions. Jenna Steigerwalt discusses how practical concerns quickly become ethical ones for self-avowed original-practices companies. She asks the seminal questions: How *does* the performance of race fit into original practices? And how *should* the performance of race fit into original practices? And finally, I discuss different ways to theorize a potential return to blackface performances in contemporary Shakespearean productions.

While this set of essays was selected to reflect the disparate ways to approach the conjunction of Shakespeare, race, and performance, there are numerous moments of intersection and dialogue in the essays. Most obviously, many reflect upon the relatively recent change in casting practices from mono-racial to multi-racial. Noting this change, several ask about the impact on notions of racial authenticity and racial performativity. Likewise, several essays explore Shakespeare's cultural capital in the margins of empire, as the trajectory from center to margin necessarily impacts performances of racial difference. Laurence Fishburne's quip, "That's when women became the niggers of the world," reflects another point of intersection within several of the essays: the exploration of the relationships between gender relations and race relations—gendered performances and racialized performances.

Nonetheless, the largest point of intersection within the essays is their attention to *Othello*. Despite the fact that *Macbeth* is widely known as the haunted play, as Ben Okri writes, "Othello haunts the English stage," and the character and the play haunt this special edition (Okri 86). Despite the fact that we all know that race is not limited to black and white, and despite the fact that the performance of race in Shakespeare is not limited to *Othello*, this haunting reveals the un-finished nature of the play's significance in history. Here is the Okri quotation in full:

What matters is that because of Shakespeare's genius Othello haunts the English stage. He won't go away. He is always there on the stage, a reminder of his unexplained presence in the white consciousness, and a symbol of the fact that black people and white are bound on the terrible bed of history. Doomed to his relentless cycle, he will not vanish from

our dreams. And yet I dream of ways of liberating him from that bondage. (Okri 86)

Although Othello clearly haunts this special edition—look closely at how Fishburne talks about “surrendering” to the text—the edition as a whole offers unique ways of “liberating him from that bondage” and “leaping out of Shakespeare’s terror,” to borrow from Okri one last time (86). It is through the analyses of Shakespeare, race, and performance in conjunction that the essays demonstrate the power of leaping to new practical, theoretical, and ethical grounds.

Works Cited

- Okri, Ben. “Leaping Out of Shakespeare’s Terror.” In *A Way of Being Free*. London: Phoenix House, 1997. 71-87.