

Shakespeare and integrated casting

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For full version of abbreviations click 'Abbreviations' on FB's website.

I don't want to suggest a Bateman cartoon, but can we discuss colour-casting for a moment? When Declan Donnellan directed his RSC Academy Company *King Lear* (2002), he cast a Lear, Nonso Anozie, who came over as an African potentate. That was his cultural identity as projected. Anozie filled the role with great brio and conviction. But the first three broadsheet reviews I saw made no mention of ethnicity or culture. *The Stratford Herald* supplied a helpful photograph but no match-up words in the review. The issue was silenced. Self-censorship is no help to the stage.

When the issue is raised in the media, the problems tend to be passed over. Such debate as exists on 'non-traditional' or 'integrated' casting often bypasses audience difficulties. The casting of David Ojelowo as Henry VI in the RSC production of 2000 was not universally acclaimed. Ojelowo's family came from Nigeria, and his choice as the company's Henry Plantagenet was much discussed in the press.* Francis Bennion's letter to *The Sunday Times* (1 October 2000) states the adverse case:

'I suggest David Ojelowo's defence of his casting lacks conviction. A white actress playing Cleopatra is made up to resemble Cleopatra, but an actor of Nigerian ancestry can't be made up to resemble Henry VI. If on stage he pretends to be Henry VI, that convinces nobody, and the obvious untruth is a distracting irritation throughout the performance. Ojelowo correctly says theatre is make-believe. He must see that this is defeated when an actor's appearance constantly reminds the audience that the truth is different from what is being portrayed on stage.'

The issues come down to dramatic conventions, and their hold upon audiences. These conventions start from a premise unique to drama. The stage is different from other walks of life. Acting is not a job like other jobs, because it depends upon casting, and casting is not commensurate with other rights that we take for granted in society. An actor is his body. Whatever his acting skills, he is inescapably his physical self. In other jobs, people are appointed and promoted on qualifications and experience. No other considerations may affect the appointment of accountants, secretaries, janitors and cameramen (even if some unions operate a discreet colour bar). Not so actors, who have to live with their height, vocal pitch, perceived attractiveness, and so on. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the tall blonde gets to play Helena, the short brunette plays Hermia. They might like it the other way round, but they have to submit to the imperatives of text and casting. Short thin men with light tenor voices can only dream of playing Falstaff.

There are now two casting conventions on the stage, 'colour-blind' and 'colour-conscious'. 'Colour-blind' seeks to operate on the same principle as employment in everyday life. The audience is to ignore the ethnicity of non-white actors: it does not exist. Sometimes this is easy enough. In *Love's Labour's Lost*, either of the two young men, Longaville and Dumain, can be played by a black actor. This was done in Ian Judge's production for the RSC, and Kenneth Branagh's film. No special point was made. But when Richard Eyre cast a black actor as De Flores in *The Changeling* at the National, this was meant to be noticed. In a nineteenth-century South American setting, De Flores was a majordomo of slave stock, and his resentments, sexual and social, drove the action forward. Again, Philip Prowse's production of *The White Devil*, also at the National, cast Josette Simon as Vittoria. The director made the Corombonas a family additionally resented by the aristocratic Medicis. In such productions, the black actor assimilates and highlights playing values that are at least latent in the text. Just as eclectic costuming is now widespread, so eclectic casting is coming in. But one has to take note of the trend, and to make some distinctions.

* See, for example, several articles in *The Times* of September 20/21/22.

For a start, it can only operate on the stage. Films treat ethnicity literally. The camera is the absolute witness of truth, and a black actor in a contemporary film is always taken to represent a black in real life. Similarly with whites. Contemporary plays are also bound by the facts of present-day life. Outside avant-garde theatre, this convention is I think absolute. In classical drama - Wilde and earlier, say - this convention is relaxed. Many classics, especially Shakespeare, are open to imaginative castings on stage. Shakespeare welcomes the non-traditional. His wide-ranging, eclectic, often anachronistic texts lend themselves to imaginative castings, as the stage has often demonstrated. But even here this freedom has its natural limitations.

Whatever the intentions of the director, certain problems cannot be willed away. The first, inevitably, is kinship. Many stage characters have mothers, brothers, etc. who appear on stage often in the same scene. Shakespeare's Histories remain the biggest hurdle: all the royal figures and nobles are white, and all are kin (they are always addressing each other as 'cousin'). At Stratford-on-Avon a few years ago, the appearance of a black actor playing a French king was greeted with an angry outburst by a French woman in the audience. Hugh Quarshie has played Hotspur, when his stage father, the Earl of Northumberland, was white. But the comedies, and tragedies, have an easier access. *Pericles* is a Mediterranean travelogue-fantasy, and *David Fearon's Pericles* for the RSC gave no problem. *Hamlet* can be seen as a solo-part play, a concerto for soloist and (chamber) orchestra, so Peter Brook's casting of Adrian Lester caused no great stir. After all, the aged Sarah Bernhardt had played Hamlet. Even so, a black Cordelia engages the mind in tortuous moves. (Did Lear remarry? I knew a distinguished scholar who was convinced that Lear had three queens.) For the audience, part of the dramatic energy is dissipated in such cumbersome explanations. Or it is a burden of convention that the audience has to shoulder. Even a non-naturalistic play needs to be rooted in some kind of social reality, 'to hold the mirror up to nature'.

Then, the dynamics of the play can be blocked by an insensitive casting. However you cast *Othello*, Iago has to be played by a white actor, else the play is destroyed. John Simon cites an American production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in which Lysander was cast as a black, the only one of the four young lovers. The audience was puzzled: did Egeus not want his daughter to marry a black?† In the same vein, William T. Liston, in his survey 'Shakespeare's plays in performance from 1970'‡, has a sharp dismissal of Peter Sellars's production of *The Merchant of Venice* at Goodman's Theatre in 1994. 'The production was a travesty of multicultural casting: blacks played the Jews, Asians played Portia and her household, and Latinos played the Venetians. Confusion reigned: Was Portia's black maid an oppressed black or an oppressed Jew?'§ (p. 1941). Sometimes a casting decision is simply ludicrous in itself. Amanda Hopkins** cited 'a touring production of *Macbeth* in which the son of the black Banquo was played by a ginger-haired actress. Suspension of disbelief indeed'.

Finally, there's the historical sense, which - however vaguely located in the audience - holds that some castings would be out of place. A clear instance is Jane Austen movies. It is given that the audience expects total fidelity to the historical setting, the England of 1800-1810. No concessions are made to class or ethnicity. The fiction is set in concrete reality. More subtly, any play revived from the past, even if not obviously a 'classic', can raise questions of historical authenticity. In 1997 Arnold Wesker's *Chips With Everything* was put on again. First performed in 1962, this study of National Servicemen in the Royal Air Force was set in the 1950s. The drama critic of *The Sunday Times*, John Peter, objected to its free introduction of a black actor among those playing servicemen (all but unknown in the 1950s, and a casting not seen in the 1962 production). 'This is a case of dedication to integrated casting ignoring the basic facts. *Chips With Everything* is not only a play, it is also a piece of history, and neither playwrights nor directors should re-write it'

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† 'Shakespeare and the Modern Critic', in *William Shakespeare: His World, His Work, His Influence*, ed. John F. Andrews, 3 vols., New York: Scribner, 1985, III, 869.

‡ *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997).

§ Page 1941.

** Letter to *The Times*, 27 April 2002.

