Brave and Transgressive Appropriations Matter: A Review of "Exploring *Othello* in 2020" for Red Bull Theater

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Abstract ◆ Works Cited

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This is a review of New York's Red Bull theater's Zoom salon, entitled "Exploring Othello in 2020." The production used a BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of colour) cast. This review considers the production in relationship to larger trends within premodern critical race studeis and the idea that theatre can create a brave space for exploring the relationship between race and performance in Shakespeare.

New York's Red Bull theater put on a Zoom salon entitled "Exploring *Othello* in 2020," with a BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of colour) cast. The production ran for four Wednesdays in October 2020, and it is available to watch on YouTube (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K9yDHFfKPps). For those who might want to teach the production, the Red Bull Theater has also included playing text for download on their website (https://www.redbulltheater.com/exploring-othello-2020). Celebrated artists Keith Hamilton Cobb, Franchelle Stewart Dorn, Jennifer Ikeda, Anchuli Felicia King, Peter Macon, Alfredo Narciso, Madeline Sayet, and Jessika D. Williams participated in the production. Cobb, Macon, and Williams, moreover, have all recently played Othello to strong reviews, and each actor offers a strikingly different take on Shakespeare's general. Rather than assigning each artist to a particular role, director Dawn Monique Williams had the actors read varying roles with each scene, allowing audiences to experience how characters like Othello, Iago, and Desdemona feel different when they are played by men or women or by actors from different racial and cultural backgrounds.

The Zoom salon format offers an evocative space for appropriating Shakespeare that is not always available in a traditional production of the play. Each session consisted of forty-five minutes of dramatic readings where

the actors engaged with two scenes from the play, twenty-five minutes of salon-style discussions, and twenty minutes discussing audience questions. De'Aris Rhymes moderated the chat and curated the audience questions. The questions she selected were always on point, and her "good vibes only" wall poster set a wonderful tone for the discussions.

Regents Professor of English at Arizona State University and Director of the Arizona Center for Medieval & Renaissance Studies, Dr. Ayanna Thompson, served as the facilitator for "Exploring *Othello* in 2020." Thompson framed the production in her opening remarks, noting that she has "had lots of closed doors discussions with BIPOC scholars and artists about *Othello* and they've all been remarkably different from the ones [she has] had in theater companies with white-run directors and productions [with] predominantly white casts." She "wanted to create a safe space that would allow the artistic and scholarly communities to hear how *Othello* is grappled with by smart, engaged, and passionate BIPOC artists." As Thompson noted, part of the issue is that "more often than not, we have experienced a different play than the one you have experienced." The "you" here is evocative. Thompson is speaking to white viewers, many of them liberal and well meaning, who want to discuss race and cannot feel the play the way that it is experienced by BIPOC artists. Rather than reconciling these solitudes between white and BIPOC reactions to the play, Thompson gave white audiences a chance to hear the uncensored and ambivalent reactions BIPOC actors have to the play when they speak without catering to white fragility (DiAngelo 2018) or censoring themselves for fear of evoking white rage (Anderson 2016).

While I do not wish to quibble with Thompson's wording, I would call "Exploring *Othello* in 2020" a brave space rather than a safe space. According to Brian Arao and Kristi Clemens (2013), safe spaces remove emotional risks, whereas brave spaces involve taking intellectual and emotional risks together while supporting one another (2013, 135–36). While safe spaces are valuable, Arao and Clemens argue that social justice discussions necessarily involve emotional risk. It is risky, for example, to explore internalized racism or systemic racism within a group setting.

Like Cobb's play *American Moor*, "Exploring *Othello* in 2020" carries on the emotionally fraught work of imagining what an honest conversation about race in *Othello* might look like in a cast where the actors, directors, and producers supported each other and did not react defensively whenever someone suggested that the play was racist. Nobody in the production tried to argue that Shakespeare's plays transcended race or that Shakespeare's understanding of race was different from our own and thus we must be careful about presentism. These unhelpful ideas about transcendence and presentism often foreclose honest conversations about race and racism within Shakespeare scholarship and productions of Shakespeare's plays. The conversations that "Exploring *Othello* in 2020" enabled are exactly the ones that Cobb suggests are so essential but often impossible within the current racial power dynamics of American theater.

The BIPOC artists were open and unguarded during a recorded Zoom presentation, which says a lot about the remarkable trust Thompson has engendered within the American Shakespeare theater community. Playing

Othello has an extreme emotional cost for BIPOC actors, especially in productions done by white directors who center Iago. While introducing himself, Macon recounts a story about the first time he played Othello at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in 2008. He said that Ashland was "very, very progressive" and "very, very white." He said it was difficult to perform for 1200 mostly white people "because of what the play asks of the person playing that part." Some of this is because of the slow, deliberate, and present way Macon takes up the role. He said that he is determined to let "the words work on [him]." Being present for multiple nights over multiple weeks while you pretend to be someone else is one of the hardest skills an actor must develop. Macon reminds us that there is an extra emotional tax for a Black actor to being present while performing a racist play, especially when they are unsure of how a mostly white audience is reading them. I found it evocative that Cobb stressed the importance of taking emotional care of oneself during a run of the play. He also noted that theater companies need to ensure that the actors and directors support the actor playing Othello throughout the production. As this comment hung knowingly in the air, I pondered how many BIPOC actors were directly or indirectly pushed out of the American theater ecosystem due to experiencing overt or covert acts of racism while rehearsing and performing Shakespeare in what should be a brave space.

This point became pressing when, in a moment of frustration, Macon exclaimed: "Ah, fuck this play." As Williams noted, Macon expressed an "immediate visceral reaction" to the text. In explaining his reaction, he confessed that it is difficult "just inhabiting those words, that place" because it had "extremely high emotions" and was "not a fun place to live." Macon says he was "shaking" after reading the scene. It is one thing to know, intellectually, of the emotional cost of performing the role of Othello. It is another thing to see an Emmy-winning actor with as much classical theater experience as Macon struggling to control his emotions after reading a problematic passage. A brave space allows people to say things that might be uncomfortable while owning their emotional reactions without censorship or shame. While some may see what Macon said as an unprofessional expression of rage from a large Black man, what I saw as a BIPOC audience member was a moment of human fragility that was humbling and beautiful to witness. In this moment, the actors showed obvious affection and care for Macon. What would the theater community be like if each actor who experienced the emotional cost of performing a racist scene was met with that kind of love and support by their fellow artists?

It was refreshing to listen to folks discussing sensitive issues and voicing meaningful disagreements in supportive and positive ways. We need more spaces to talk honestly about race and theater in North America. We need to have these brave conversations. As Ikeda notes, "audiences are hungry for this kind of dialogue." Ikeda's sentiment reminded me of Ayanna Thompson and Laura Turchi's argument that advanced learners in secondary school and universities are "confused about racism and bias and eager to have open and respectful discussions about them" (2016, 5). "Who benefits" Thompson and Turchi ask, "from a race-free, gender-free and ability-free approach[s]" to teaching Shakespeare (2016, 13)? According to Ian Smith, one of the reasons Shakespearians are hesitant to speak about race is that it can make whiteness visible and thus open to critique and criticism. He reads this as a protective foreclosure that serves the interests of a "white literary intelligentsia whose investments in the project of white invisibility—that is, its hegemonic ubiquity—require attention"

(2016, 107). As Arthur Little, Jr., has argued, Shakespeare is often thought of in our culture as "white property" (2016, 88), and if we refuse to discuss race in his plays, Shakespeare will remain white property that BIPOC artists will be allowed to play minor roles within, but will never be allowed to feel ownership over.

Each artist in the production was taking an emotional, artistic, and economic risk by speaking what they felt, rather than what they "ought" to say. Acting is often poorly paid contract work that many Shakespearian actors do more for the love of the artform than for the economic rewards. But those economic rewards still matter. They are how food is bought, rent is paid, and children are cared for. When artists go on the record and speak openly and honestly about racism in their field, they take a risk of alienating white audiences and white casting directors. For example, when Ikeda brought up sensitive issues in mostly white theater communities, she says that she experienced some pushback. As Sara Ahmed notes in *On Being Included*, many BIPOC scholars are pushed towards "institutional passing" as a means of self-preservation. In institutional passing, one minimizes signs of difference and performs being the "right kind" of minority, "the one who aims not to cause unhappiness or trouble" (2012, 157). When BIPOC scholars are vocal about racism in their community, the community can deal with these issues by taking the easy path of excluding them as problems for bringing up the problem rather than doing the hard work of addressing systemic racism within the (mostly white) community. Productions like "Exploring *Othello* in 2020" bring attention to the hegemonic whiteness of Shakespearean performance, and in doing so it can help to create a performance culture where Shakespeare belongs to everyone.

The production ends with a note of hope, where the participants discussed what plays they could do next. The discussion turned to what Thompson called Shakespeare's "toxic" plays, like *Taming of the Shrew*, *Merchant of Venice*, and *Titus Andronicus*. Using the "Exploring *Othello* in 2020" model to address the role of whiteness in Shakespeare's toxic plays sounds like an amazing idea. As Kim F. Hall reminds us, discussions of race need to deconstruct whiteness and not just focus on racialized peoples, because "Concentration on the 'other' raises issues of race but may not be antiracist since it does not necessarily engage issues of power. Such an approach may actually collude in racial inequality" (1996, 461). Such conversations among white people who were willing to deconstruct their whiteness, if done the right way, could go a long way towards making the oppressive whiteness of the Shakespeare theater industry visible and open to criticism. The danger, however, is that such conversations could center whiteness and white feelings in ways that could be unproductive. These salons would need to be carefully crafted in terms selecting participants and trusted moderators and facilitators who are willing to push the actors to talk openly, honestly, and bravely about their whiteness and privilege in ways that could lead to systemic change.

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