

# "Young Hearts"/White Masks: Leading the (Color)blind at Shakespeare's Globe

Nicola Hyland, Victoria University of Wellington, N.Z.

---

## Abstract

"Young Hearts"/White Masks: Leading the (Color)blind at Shakespeare's Globe" explores the paradoxes of color-blind casting by reviewing an unintentionally cross-cultural production of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* performed at Shakespeare's Globe in London. An exploration of the language of the text examines connections with tribal tensions, the signifying presence of binaries, and the distinctive positioning of Romeo as a flawed outsider. The notion of a troubled black masculinity is identified through the representation of a desexualized relationship, revealing a continued anxiety about the performance of interracial romances. While a discussion of place explores the mimetic nature of performance as heightening cultural identities, this is challenged by the "happy hybridity" of Shakespeare's Globe, which uses race as a novelty. The production attempts to appear culturally integrated without engaging with the problems of racial politics. The analysis of this production reveals that the cultural identity of an actor cannot be made invisible and that race will continue to have political meanings in Shakespearean performance.

---

*These happy masks that kiss fair ladies' brows, / Being Black, puts us in mind they hide the fair. (Romeo and Juliet, 1.2.226-27)*

What's in a body? In July 2009, a production of *Romeo and Juliet* was staged at Shakespeare's Globe in London, with Romeo performed by young black actor Adetomiwa Edun and with Ellie Kendrick as his "truly youthful" white Juliet.<sup>1</sup> Yet this was a production that sought to render the race of the actors invisible. In contrast to the "color-blind" approach of the promotional material and critical reviews, I argue here that the production actually worked to heighten the blackness of Edun (and the whiteness of Kendrick), igniting a loaded discourse about contemporary racial anxieties. Rather than neutralizing race within the filter of Original Practice authenticity, this production attempted both to make inter-culturalism merely symbolic and depoliticize race in contemporary

Britain. Such contestable statements are identified in this discussion by exploring relationships among the language of Shakespeare's text, the bodies of the actors, and the politics of conflicted theatrical and national spaces. The argument this critique seeks to make is not that Romeo should not have been played by a black actor, but that this Romeo should have been "understood" as black throughout the performance and, therefore, should have been played with an awareness of the multiple complex questions concerning race, place, and representation.

### Reception: Failures to See

The provocation for this critique came from a Canadian woman seated next to me during a performance of the show. When I asked her what she thought of the production, she replied: "I must say, he's not the Romeo I was expecting." I asked her if this was because Romeo was played by a black actor and she commented that, while "multiculturalism" was "fine" in Canada, "you just don't expect that *here*." Is it possible to render "race" invisible when the audience arrives with such pre-conditioned ideas about what Romeo should be? This exchange exemplifies the complex repercussions that come with the decision to bypass the reality of race in contemporary Shakespearean performance, especially in Britain. What is particularly integral to this analysis is measuring the signifiers the production chose to draw attention to — youth and class — against those that were consciously not mentioned: ethnicity, cross-cultural politics, and interracial sexuality.

The opening night of the 2009 Globe production of *Romeo and Juliet* was timed to commemorate Shakespeare's birthday on 23 April. Directed by Artistic Director of Shakespeare's Globe, Dominic Dromgoole, the production was framed within a season of plays following the theme of "Young Hearts": *As You Like it* ("Love in Disguise"); *Troilus and Cressida* ("Love and War"); and *Love's Labour's Lost* ("Love and Lust"). With the tagline "Love of Love," *Romeo and Juliet* was the "poster production" for a season focusing on Shakespeare's youthful protagonists, plays "about the exuberance and the exhilaration of young hearts bursting out of themselves" (Program, Dromgoole 2009, 2). Dromgoole asserts that *Romeo* "stands alone as the greatest play about the purity of young love running tragically into a comic world of adult confusion" (2009, 2).<sup>2</sup>

The production utilized Original Practice stagecraft and the historically specific costumes of sixteenth-century Italy, but with doubled roles and a mixed-gender cast. Dromgoole adopted various versions of the text, with the most apparent deviation from typical adaptations being the considerable expansion of the roles of servants and clown figures.<sup>3</sup> The minor characters played a significant function in the production, both as quasi-narrator figures and as a connective force

between the audience and the textual location of the play. The performance began with the Chorus casually entering the space with musicians and proceeding to "play" with the groundlings — with acts ranging from a serenade to the performance of mock-duels and dancing. The final moment of this contravention between the real world and performed world saw the historically-faithful lyrics of a song broken with the line: "And remember to turn off your mobile phones" (*Romeo and Juliet* 2009). The Prologue commenced instantly, and the fourth wall remained mostly intact until the final scene, in which all the characters — alive and dead — joined in a hearty Elizabethan jig. The space was utilized effectively, accounting for the visibility issues within various areas of the arena. There was also extensive use of the yard by the performers, creating a sense of distance for the characters moving between physical sites in the play and providing innovative entrances and exits. While there is no evidence that the yard was used in Elizabethan performance (Dessen 2008, 48-49), this distortion between performance and real space further emphasized the communal atmosphere of the production.

Viewing a production at Shakespeare's Globe is a unique experience. The intimacy between actors and audiences and the exposure of the uncovered space creates an intense sense of liveness. There is a constant awareness of both "worlds," which could arguably detract from the experience, but also works to reinforce the theatricality of the piece, making the language and bodies on stage mean in multiple, divergent ways. It is this hyper-theatrical setting, along with the various attentions to "authenticity," that made the idea of cultural identities and the politics of color-blind casting in this production particularly loaded.

This awareness was made more complex by an alternation between my reading — and the critics/producers not reading — of the cultural codes of the performers. There is no suggestion in the reviews or program notes that this production aimed to present a color-blind approach to casting. There is no mention within any of the promotional material of an engagement with culturally-specific identities. The production design focuses on authenticity of performance practice, but disregards realism in either setting or cultural context (there were no Italian accents, for instance). The most obvious indication of this approach is biological logistics; Romeo is black, yet both his parents are played by *white* actors. On an even more pedantic level, it would be extremely unlikely, considering the casting of Rawiri Paratene, that there were any Maori friars living in sixteenth century Verona. The challenge to reception in this production was that the mimesis of theater was overwhelmed by the "facts" of reality.

### Critical Response

This critique rests on the omission in all reviews that the production adopted the practice of color-blind casting. There is no indication in any source that a black Romeo is playing against a white Juliet. There is no mention that the play's villain Tybalt (Ukweli Roach) is also black — in fact, almost a physical double of Romeo. The only hint at the mixed casting is the various comments made about Rawiri Paratene<sup>4</sup> (Friar Laurence), whom Michael Coveney describes as "the New Zealand-Maori actor" (2009, 16) and Phillip Fisher identifies as the "*Whalerider* star," praising him as "[a] novel import" (Fisher 2009). Yet, while there are certain facts concealed about this production, the choice of which information to include — particularly the use of certain descriptors — reveals much about the culturally guarded rhetoric of contemporary British critics.

The response to the production was primarily lukewarm. John Peter describes it as "a scrappy, coarse, under-rehearsed production" (2009, 20) and while Sarah Hemming admits that it is "lively, clear and peppered with witty touches," she concedes that it "doesn't pack the tragic punch" (2009). Charles Spencer is generous in his praise, emphasizing that the production had the capacity "to realise afresh the power of Shakespeare" (2009), while Zoe Griffiths questions why Dromgoole, determined to promote Shakespeare's Globe as a venue for "seriously good theatre" would consider "putting on productions like [*Romeo and Juliet*]?" (2009).

Many of the reviews imply that the actors playing the title roles did not match expectations. Hemming claims the leads are unable to "convey the tragic weight of their fate" (2009). Griffiths claims Ellie Kendrick (as Juliet) was only cast "for her ability to look 13 years old" and was "far too posh North London teenager" (2009), and Coveney describes her as "neither girlish nor sexually adolescent" (2009, 16), while Peter asserts that she speaks "like a girl who can't possibly understand her own words" (2009, 20). Adetomiwa Edun (Romeo) received comparatively less negative criticism, although Peter claims "he's clearly had little or no advice on how to play teenage infatuations" (2009, 20). Another recurring theme within the reviews was the absence of chemistry between Kendrick and Edun — "No sense of fulfilled sexual passion" (Spencer 2009) or "the flame of their passion burns with all the intensity of [a] Bunsen burner" (Shore 2009). Yet these criticisms are countered (or qualified) by the appearance of their "authentic" youth: "For once, you genuinely believe that Juliet is just shy of her 14th birthday" (Spencer 2009); "young, for once, is really the word" (Maxwell 2009).

There are several astute points raised in these reviews. The relationship between the leads appeared almost indifferent at times, the performance by the actor playing Juliet was reminiscent of a deer in headlights, and there was less impact than required in their highly symbolic deaths. The stress on the play's comic elements was refreshing, emphasising the multiple paradoxes within the

text, although the sexual punning seemed downplayed — perhaps sanitized for family audiences? What is missing in these analyses is the recognition of the various meanings — combined with the acknowledged factors such as the authentic youth — that are created by casting black actors in ethnically-unspecific roles.

Ayanna Thompson emphasizes that critics "have struggled with whether or not it is appropriate to write about specific casting practices in their reviews" (2006, 9), and it could be argued that this is a prime instance of "damned if you don't/damned if you do." Yet the gap between what is said and unsaid reveals underlying attitudes towards race still inherent within the reviewers' critiques. Their failure to draw a reading of Edun's casting reinforces a fear of seeming to be *race*-oriented (and thus *racist*). In 2001, David Oyelowo spoke of an "impatient despair" at the "'back-handed reviews' that seem to say: 'Isn't it great how good they are — considering they're black?'" (quoted in Kellaway 2001). The counter-argument here could be that at least the critics did not patronize Edun for playing Romeo convincingly despite his race. Yet it also creates a critical gap in the meanings created by the production; in other words, the critics seem not to be "seeing" the performance.

### Theater, Race, and Authenticity

Theater audiences are often expected to suspend reality and enter into a uniquely liminal space. This liminality is contained in the suspension between the "reality" of live actors and the fictional world created through performance. Drawing on the performance tradition of Shakespeare, the attention to authenticity within this kind of production is primarily focused on theatrical practices. The audience is never asked to believe that there is any external truth in the performance; the mere fact that the dead rise for the final jig affirms this. Authenticity is thus posited as an aesthetic effect, an ability to mirror the design and acting styles of the original Elizabethan playhouses.

The most problematic aspect of Elizabethan practices is the notion that what is being represented is more important than what is being shown. We are expected not to see Edun as Romeo but Romeo through Edun, just as Elizabethan audiences could believe that a boy actor could be Juliet or Cleopatra. Speaking of the erasure of female roles in the OP (Original Practices) productions, Rob Conkie writes that Shakespeare's Globe's "authentic" productions "tend to re-hierarchize binaries that have been deconstructed by identity-conscious politics. As one binary is privileged, another is marginalized" (2006, 105). Even while it is obviously present, Edun's blackness is "white-washed" because black bodies had no place on Shakespeare's stage; the black body is an inauthentic presence.

The black/white binary is thus weighted heavily towards white as normative and black as an alien, solitary exception. Because blackness is not plausible, it is therefore insignificant.

Or, as Thompson indicates, "more than an empty signifier, blackness [becomes] a false signifier" (2006, 3). Conkie adds that these productions "through their attempted reconstruction of unmediated (and un-critiqued) early modern ideas and ideologies, [offer] predominantly conservative representations of identities and subjectivities" (2006, 58). I would expand this point by suggesting that the Dromgoole production of *Romeo and Juliet* offered not only a conservative interpretation of identities — both youthful and racial — but also a deceptive representation of those identities.

Yet color-blindness is difficult to impose on an audience experiencing a live act. Thompson asserts that "the mimetic nature of performance destabilizes identity. When identity is racialized, this destabilization could be even more painful: painful for both the actors performing and the viewing audience" (2006, 14). The decision to ignore the blackness of Romeo might allow the audience to disregard the troubling meanings connected to racial identities. Yet it also renders blackness invisible, therefore operating through the colonizing mechanism of assimilation.

Lee Lewis describes two key processes that allow an actor's race to be transcended in performance: *passing*, "which describes the assimilationist tactic of concealing all one's personal markers of cultural and racial difference, so that one can effectively be seen as white in a white-dominant community" (2007, 11); and *covering*, which offers a "lived experience of whiteness as a social construction rather than a biological category" (2007, 13-14). "Passing" is the attempt to erase markers of cultural identity — such as a way of speaking, moving, or even "looking." "Covering" stresses the ways in which lifestyle or training deviate from the traditional experience of a cultural community — such as living in a predominantly white community, having an exclusive education, and even sympathizing with a "white" political view.

Edun's performance typified all the qualities of a trained Shakespearean actor: he spoke with recognition of the inherent meters within the language, using the received British pronunciation inherited through the classic style of Olivier and Gielgud. In other words, as Edun's blackness was erased, through "passing," by an overt "Britishness" of performance. This slippage between his performed and perceived cultural identities challenges the idea of "race" as a fixed signifier. By not performing "race," Edun effectively denies that his cultural identity should make any impact on his ability to create a character. In addition, the program's allusion to Edun's Eton education — while disregarding any mention of his ethnic community — is an explicit example of "covering." As a young man in a privileged position, he is denoted as British before he is black.

Thompson suggests that "the performance of the other is painful not only because the potential exists to be 'transformed' into the other through the erasure of one's own identity, but also because the mimetic nature of performance *highlights the performative nature of all identities*" (2006,

15; emphasis added). Edun's performance did not heighten the performativity of his cultural identity, but instead rendered it invisible. The issue is that while Edun's performance was a credible performance of whiteness, the mimesis of an imperial classical (white) performativity was destabilized by the fact that it will always be "not quite" (white). This occurs in the slippage between the reality of his "authentic" performance and a reality haunted by the expectation of a performative "blackness" that revealed itself as superficial, or entirely physical.

As a response to these failures to see, the following analysis explores how relationships among language, bodies, and place create potent and conflicting cultural statements in the production. Focusing on the written text, the actual performance, the hybridized experience of Shakespeare's Globe itself, and the reality of race in Britain, this analysis challenges the possibility of an autonomous, color-blind viewing experience. Yet there also must be a concession that cultural hybridity creates a "con-fusion" of viewing; that is, the heterogeneity of every culture means that there must inevitably be multiple ways of seeing and understanding bodies, from the openly-blind to the critically-aware.

### Language: Black or White

Shakespeare's spoken text has the potential to create hybridized meanings when coupled with the reality of both contemporary cultural politics and historical racism. Patterns in the language of the text itself make it pliable to cross-racial interpretations. One of the most potent language associations within *Romeo and Juliet* is the use of fairness/whiteness and blackness to connote complete oppositions such as good and evil, clarity and blindness, safety and danger, and even national and foreign.

Blackness is used throughout the text of *Romeo and Juliet* to evoke negative, destructive images, while "fairness" epitomizes feminine beauty and purity. While impending doom is signalled by "black fate" (3.1.119) and "black strife" (3.1.178), Juliet is described as a "fair sun" (2.1.46), with eyes superior to the "fairest stars" (2.1.58).<sup>5</sup> These literary tropes are not original; located within the context of Shakespearean England, blackness is a "highly mobile metaphor" (Loomba 2000, 207) deriving from discourses that link blackness to such forces as the "Black devil figure" (Daileader 2005, 1). Yet blackness also has a significant connection to imperialist desire; Rutter asserts that "dark desires are the story of whiteness" (2001, 67). In a text that endures because of its themes of forbidden desires, the imagery of blackness and darkness in the language of the text is inexorably linked with desire as transgression. Such allusions reinforce the ambivalence of forbidden desire as an "unnatural" but magnetically "dark" force.

The effect of these metaphors in the text of *Romeo and Juliet* is also to reinforce the binary thinking that has grown with the family feud. Shakespeare uses a language of contrast to emphasize the division of the community. In order to maintain the brawls as rational, these oppositions are repeatedly invoked to emphasize the heightened passions created in the characters' world. These binaries also reflect a tradition of religious allusion where heaven is associated with whiteness and black is associated with hell. Within a society fixated on the idea that "fate" is the ultimate force controlling their lives, allusions to heaven and hell also signify their acknowledgment of the transience of their volatile, earthly lives — or, conversely, that the chaos of their situation has shifted their focus to an ephemeral world beyond.

Fairness or whiteness also has a politicized connotation in the original context of Shakespeare's play. Kim F. Hall speaks of the representation of fairness in literary texts linked to Elizabeth I, in which hyper-whiteness "reflects her virgin purity and Christian grace," and which, by making Elizabeth as a synecdoche for the nation, "represent England as white — as powerful and favored by the forces of good" (1998, 69). Where blackness represents the unknowable other, whiteness represents national solidarity. To be black and British, in this situation, becomes oxymoronic.

### Dark Romeo

Before he even arrives on stage, Romeo's contemplative mood is described as "Black and portentous" (1.1.137). As he enters, the audience recognizes how Edun literally embodies this description. These tensions between the performed text and "reality" are again tested when Romeo describes Juliet as seeming to "hang upon the cheek of night / As a rich jewel in an Ethiop's ear" (1.4.58-59). It takes little effort to discover a hidden meaning in his description, the image of the hyper-fair Juliet "hanging" from Romeo himself. These accidental intimations occur again when Juliet discovers that Romeo has murdered Tybalt, labelling Romeo a "[d]ove-feathered raven" (3.2.76), one whose appearance disguises a more sinister reality, whose blackness is "hidden" behind the visage of his romantic endeavors. This interplay between language and physicality occurs in the plighting scene, in which Romeo feigns fear of discovery, stating "I have night's cloak to hide me from their eyes" (2.1.118), which could be construed as a reference to his "blackness" as camouflage — which has, in turn, been made "invisible" through the direction of the production.

Romeo is positioned in several ways within *Romeo and Juliet's* text. He begins as a melancholy youth, distracted by a destructive "love" of a circumscribed idea of love. The heightened language of courtship and his physical distance from Juliet in the plighting scene is Romeo's attempt to emulate the literary trope of the Petrarchan lover. This irrationality is placated by the more lucid



language of Juliet; she becomes an object of clarity, a focal point to manage his paradoxical, unpredictable emotions. This rationality is short-lived, however; Romeo's impulsive act of murder reaffirms his uncontrollable "animal" instinct. While the Friar and Juliet attempt to ease his mind while in exile, Romeo's impulsiveness draws him back into Verona, where he commits murder again and finally, in desperation, kills himself.

This portrayal of Romeo, however, is complicated by the fact of Edun's blackness. The combination of this "uncontrollable" force within Romeo and his representation by a black actor reveals an unintentional allusion to the racist trope established in *Othello*: that, no matter the degree of civility learnt, the black man has an underlying, irrational savagery (Neill 2008, 52). In fact, Daileader writes that the popularity of casting a black Romeo against a white Juliet "says as much about contemporary racial discourse as its early modern progenitor in the portrayal of Blackamoors like Othello" (2005, 7). Romeo's struggles thus appear to be complicated further by the contradictions between duty and instinct; his Petrarchan act reinforces that he is a mere performer, challenged by an internal (racialized) baseness.

### Fair Juliet

Juliet's fairness is an even more entrenched "fact" of the text. Romeo laments at never seeing again the "white-wonder of Juliet's dear hand" (3.2.36). The language of the text operates to create multiple racialized and sexualized subtexts in the context of the production. Juliet's "Gallop apace" speech, expressing her anticipation of the wedding night, takes on new, paradoxical, resonances:

Come night, come Romeo, come thou day in night;  
For thou wilt lie upon the wings of night  
Whiter than new snow upon a raven's back.

Come gentle night, come loving black-browed night. (*Romeo and Juliet*, 3.2.17-20)

Romeo is initially the night and the "knight," whose arrival also anticipates a second "coming" — the act of sex. The roles are then reversed, with Romeo as the "day" and Juliet as the "night." Romeo will lie on the "wings of night" (Juliet), where his whiteness will appear like "new snow" on the blackest bird. Juliet reverses the physical appearance of Romeo with her own, evoking a contradictory view of the real image of lovemaking, where his raven "blackness" will contrast with her snowy complexion; consummation, therefore, makes them interchangeable. In the final line, Juliet reverses the roles again, with the "gentle" night/knight described as "black-browed" — an echo of Romeo/Edun's own physicality.

Yet, these highly-charged double entendres were not realized in the production, due to what I perceived to be a deliberate desexualization of Juliet. Juliet's "authentic" youth was presented as integral; not only did Ellie Kendrick look like a fourteen year old, but she also performed as a very young girl, emphasizing qualities of naivety and uncertainty. Because there was limited physical contact between the pair, the criticism of their so-called "passion" as unbelievable is absolutely warranted. The post-consummation scene was located outside the space of Juliet's bedroom; they entered separately, with Romeo fully-dressed and Juliet in a particularly "chaste" nightdress that merely reinforced her childishness. The scene did not produce any sense of the unseen act that preceded it; Romeo failed to convince viewers that he was satiated, and Juliet was unconvincing in her "desperation" to keep (or lure) Romeo to her bed. In other words, there was a deviation between the sexually-loaded nature of the language and the actions of the speakers; the actors were not imparting the full meaning of their dialogue.

Significantly, the metaphor of light and darkness in the text evokes the notion of being "blind" to a truth or reality. Romeo advises "He that is stricken blind cannot forget / The precious treasure of his eyesight lost;" (1.1.228-29). The slippage occurring between the intention of the line and the effect in this production is that the "blindness" that we are expected to apply to physical cultural signifiers cannot completely take precedence over our preconditioned ideas about the meaning of the body.

### Bodies: Seeing is Believing

In the simplest semiotic terms, the calm, feminized purity of Juliet and the "dark" uncontrolled nature of Romeo were exemplified by their extreme physical difference. Using the "language" of the eyes, it was not difficult to read that these two were born opposites. Yet the ways in which bodies change the meaning of language reinforces how the text is unable to maintain ultimate authority. Rutter writes that "the body in play bears continuous meaning onstage and always exceeds the playtext it inhabits" (2001, xiii) — a point that concurs with Gilbert and Tompkins's assertion about the body's primacy in holding an audience's attention (1996).

While the critics feigned a "blindness" to Edun's blackness, several made mention of his physical appearance. Marples asserts that "Romeo attracts with his good looks and easy movement" (2009); Coveney describes him as "well-favoured in appearance" (2009, 16); Maxwell labels him "limber," while Hemming pronounces him as "lithe and handsome"(2009). This recalls Celia Daileader's comments regarding the critics' failure to mention blackness in RSC productions that utilize color-blind casting; she suggests that their focus on a black actor's "virile physique" and "full-blooded sexiness" (Daileader 2000, 196) overshadowed any description of his actual

performance. In the same way, critics paid more attention to Edun's "athleticism" than to his acting ability.

The effect of this is twofold. While seeming to avoid acknowledging Edun as a black actor, the invocation of his physicality reinforces notions of the desiring gaze towards the othered body, particularly eroticized views of black masculinity. Michael Macmillan explores the idea of black masculinity as a myth, part of a performed identity that perpetuates historically racist formations. Macmillan writes that the continued rendering of an archetypal black masculinity is "an articulated response to structural inequality, acting out and subverting hegemonic definitions of power and control rather than an alternative to them (Macmillan 2004, 61). The imagining of a black masculinity is associated with phallogentric stereotypes in which black men are idealized as virile, sex-obsessed misogynists (Macmillan 2004, 60). Author/activist bell hooks believes that the unreasonable demands of this version of masculinity create a feeling of failure amongst black youths that is "informed by their inability to fulfil their phallogentric masculine destiny in a racist context" (quoted in Macmillan, 2004, 60).

Romeo's blackness might be read in this way to transform perceptions of his "love of love" as an uncontrollable lust. Thus, Romeo's "failure" as a lover could also be construed as tied to the anxieties associated with black masculinity. No other actor received as much attention for what they looked like (ironically, without revealing his actual appearance). Another element to consider is the fact that Romeo commits the most violent acts in the play. Here, an idea implicit within imperial discourse is revealed, in which "black" masculinity, particularly in relation to white females, is viewed as an unnatural subversion of power — a "violent masculinity" (Said 1978, 284).

The second effect is the implication that Edun's acting skills were unimportant; his ability to draw attention through his physique was deemed more important than his capacity to make the Shakespearean language signify. This draws on the idea that color-blind casting could be construed as an aesthetic effect. In other words, the "difference" of blackness provides a novel (and literal) "color" to the production, inviting audiences to take pleasure in the *viewing of* but not *reading of* race.

### Interracial Romance

The positioning of a white Juliet against a black Romeo inevitably conjures up the historically-loaded interpretations of cross-cultural sexual relationships. Robert Young discusses the image of interracial unions as linked to the inherent anxiety contained in imperialist discourses about the potential for "hybrid" offspring (1995, 25). The anxiety is constantly enacted through Romeo and Juliet's fear of discovery; the implication of their forbidden romance is always the possibility

of a hybrid Capulet/Montague child. This represents, to the audience, that the threat of cross-racial relationships still contains a degree of stigma in reality, as Thompson asserts: "fears of miscegenation signal that race is never defined solely by a physical materiality and is, instead, defined by a cultural, discursive construction" (2006, 15). Yet, in relation to post-colonial notions of ambivalence, there is also a sense of desire enacted through viewing the performance of "forbidden acts," as Daileader alludes to in discussing the "highly erotic" nature of the "bi-racial image" (2005, 196). The sexually-charged liaison between the youthful protagonists is further heightened (or tainted) by an audience's attraction to various taboos — whether it is simply "youthful lust" or a perception of interracial relations as transgressive.

Carol Rutter writes about how black and white bodies on stage have played significant roles in reinforcing imperialist ideals about race-as-nature. Whereas the white body is "a civilized body, a rational, ordered body," the black body is rendered, through the logic of imperialism's binary thinking, as "loose, sensuous, irrational, primitive, 'natural' — a lazy lascivious body whose failure of abstinence figures savagery or incontinent sexuality" (2001, 66). It is not difficult to imagine how these tropes are attached to the characterization of the "rational" and "pure" white body of Juliet, in contrast to the "irrational" and even "primitive" black body of Romeo. The irony in this production was that the sexuality already imbued in the text — potentially exploited by these race-bound tropes — was, in fact, silenced by the radical desexualization of the protagonists.

Contrary to the critics' opinion that the lack of chemistry was produced by the limited acting skills of Kendrick as Juliet, the subdued sexualization in this production appeared to be a decision by the director to avoid any of the dangerous connotations associated with interracial relationships. The argument could be, with Kendrick's youth so "authentically" portrayed, that intimations of sexuality might be considered inappropriate in a society where children's sexuality is so fervently guarded. Yet, I would argue that race had as much to do with the dulling-down of sex in the production as did youth. Paradoxically, while they had attempted to disguise the cultural differences of their leads, the failure to follow through with the overt sexuality prescribed by the text suggests that the production was highly aware of the possibility of "race" being read. Daileader writes that the ideology of imperialist representations of interracial relationships — even sexually-explicit portrayals — is "designed to chastise, purge, annihilate, or contain the erotic body" (2005, 9). This production appears to anticipate this phenomenon as an inevitable reading in the black male/white female pairing and thus prevents it completely through the un-sexing of its protagonists. The second irony is the juxtaposition between a text that revels in youthful sexual banter and a performance that desexualizes (and thus infantilizes) the protagonists.

### Place: The Happy Hybridity of Shakespeare's Globe

The 2009 Dromgoole production of *Romeo and Juliet* was presented in a venue where the lines between reality and the world of the play are being blurred constantly, not only by the variability of the architectural design but also by the conscious dissolution of a fourth wall by the actors. Shakespeare's Globe is hybridized through these in-between events, fluctuating between reality and mimesis. Asking an audience to ignore the physical facts of the actors is as impossible as asking the audience to ignore that the actors are performing live. The reality is that Edun was one of only three actors who were not white; by merit of sheer numbers, blackness became more obvious by its (literal) minority presence.

Beyond this consideration is the role of Shakespeare's Globe as a tourist site. Every production must be marketable and possess a sense of innovation in order to draw audiences. The "Young Hearts" campaign emphasizes an "authentic" and playful youth — reinforced by posters for the productions in this series, which are made to look like crude children's drawings. Yet there did not seem to be an explicit gimmick; "Original Practices" were only marginally adhered to and, despite minor additions, there was little innovation in the script or design to suggest that this was a radical new reading of the play.

The "novelty" of the production may therefore be seen through the casting of Edun opposite Kendrick. This can be read as an aesthetic innovation, which also provokes an unintended variety of cultural discourses. Paul Gilroy writes: "Black culture is not just commodified but lends its special exotic allure to the marketing of an extraordinary range of commodities and services that have no connection whatever to these cultural forms or to the people who have developed them" (2004, 214). Edun's blackness, in contrast to the "hyper-whiteness" of Kendrick, creates a potent visual signifier. Blackness becomes the novelty of the production because it is explicitly different and therefore marketable, yet is given no cultural context beyond "visibility."

Furthermore, the casting of Rawiri Paratene also contributes to the notion of other-as-novelty, yet through a more complex post-colonial lens. Paratene is the only actor whose ethnicity is acknowledged in any of the reviews, yet the fact of his "Maori-ness" is ignored in his playing of the Friar. He is very clearly framed as an other; Paratene's first entrance was the only one originating from the yard. His dress, unlike the lavish costumes of the rest of the cast, was a crude sacking robe, and his was the only character without any footwear. As an in-between "agent" character, the Friar's hybridity is made a visual sign through the fact of Paratene's not-black, yet not-white ethnicity. While Paratene is undeniably a strong and believable actor, it cannot be ignored that the role seems to have been cast through the connotations associated with Maori as the not-too-exotic

colonial. This is linked to the notion of Maori as "universal others" — taking on international roles as the (token) Arab, Mexican, Columbian, or (in Paratene's case) Egyptian.<sup>6</sup> Paratene's novelty is "controlled" by his belonging to a cultural group that is neither entirely unfamiliar nor entirely alien. In this sense, Maori are posited as the (non-threatening) other.

Making race even an implicit novelty factor is linked to what Jacqueline Lo describes as "happy hybridity" (2000). Lo writes that this idea of hybridity is manipulated as "a kind of white-wash for the status quo" (2000, 153). Configured as "unbounded culture," the term hybridity is stripped "of tension, conflict, or contradiction involved in [the] understanding of inter-cultural and/or cross-cultural encounters" (Lo 2000, 153). In contrast to cultural hybridity, which acknowledges the difference and particularities both between and within cultural communities, happy hybridity conjures images of a multicultural melting pot for aesthetic purposes — a dominant group's attempt to create "color" or "novelty." Lo writes that within happy hybridity, "[t]here is no sense of self-reflexivity of its own conditions of production, no awareness of either the tensions or contradictions of history" (2000, 154). The presentation of race without politics within *Romeo and Juliet* is exemplary of this practice, creating the illusion of an "intercultural world" without exploring its reality or reception.

### British Black

The casting of Ukweli Roach as Tybalt, Romeo's antagonist, also creates space for further discursive readings. Tybalt is one of the play's most narrowly-drawn characters; he exemplifies unmotivated prejudice and an irrational proclivity towards violence: "Talk of peace? I hate the word / As I hate hell, [and] all Montagues" (1.1.66). With his enemy, Romeo, cast by an actor whose physicality was so similar, Tybalt's "rage" took on new meanings. His naming of Romeo as a "slave" (1.4.166) at the masque appears as an ironic reference to the Elizabethan perception of "Black slaves" as a tautology — Tybalt is unravelling his own prejudices. The fact that this production's most violent scene involves one black man killing another in revenge for the death of his white friend (Mercutio) creates further discursive complexities. The first is that Romeo, by killing his "double," could be seen as destroying his anxiety about his true cultural identity. The second relates to the world beyond the play, in the context where the violence of black youth is a heightened public issue, particularly in Britain.

The reality of blackness in Britain is fuelled by tensions related to contemporary moral panics — and riots — surrounding black subcultures, gangs, and the rhetoric of terrorism.<sup>7</sup> Tensions created by Caribbean youth during the 1981 Brixton riots and the violent reactions to the Fatwa against Salmon Rushdie in 1989 by Islamic youths were reinvigorated after the 2005 terrorist

attacks on the London underground and subsequent acts of terrorism.<sup>8</sup> These recent acts, performed by British youth in public spaces, create a heightened sense of the "unhomely" in Britain, invoking a culture of fear specifically towards black youths, whose presence evokes ideas of "home-grown" terrorism. Thus black youth have come to be seen as "scapegoat" or folk devil figures. Paul Gilroy describes the emergence of "mythic" figures such as "militants, muggers and posses" (1999, 58) associated with black youth. Gilroy writes that public discourse on blackness transforms urban sites in Britain into "jungles," where "bestial, predatory values prevail" (2004, 312).

Yet, Gilroy also suggests that London is simultaneously being articulated as a "homogenous" space, an idea that is not only "linked not only to fantasies of return to the imaginary homogeneity of past whiteness and the restoration of Britain's imperial status," but also "marked by the lingering suggestion that 'race,' like the black bodies that are its primary bearers and signifiers, belong[s] elsewhere" (2004, 57). The idea that black communities can still be considered other, despite a settlement dating back four generations, suggests that British culture would prefer to be "blind" to its own differences — or, as Gilroy reinforces, to ignore the intrinsic "post-coloniality" of London itself (1999). Therefore, positioning a black youth on a Shakespearean stage in London, within an institution committed to preserving a highly-valued version of British culture, will have fundamentally loaded repercussions: it is a statement of visibility.

The "authenticity" of Shakespeare's Globe makes it loaded because its aesthetic historicity alludes to a time of vast inequality between cultural groups. The creation of an authentic experience makes a British audience realize that their cultural identity would signify a whole different set of meanings if they were located within that particular historical frame. Shakespeare's Globe creates painful memories through its architectural mimicry; it reveals a past tainted by the exclusion and exploitation of others within Britain itself. Yet it fails to present this "truth" in this performance.

## Conclusion

There is no onus for contemporary productions of *Romeo and Juliet* to create an allusion to any context of cross-cultural conflict, to make any political statement by positing "rival" racial/ethnic/religious communities against each other as the two families. Yet, *Romeo and Juliet* is a text that revels in binaries. The two families are represented as opposites in almost every regard apart from their mutual hate — which is why so many theater makers have retold it or reframed it as a war between two visibly different communities. The language of the text, the history of staging it, and received historical notions of the relationships between race and conflict have all affected *Romeo and Juliet*'s meaning in contemporary performance. Each casting decision can alter the meaning of

the text through connotations relating to gender, race, or even acting style. In other words, a black Romeo will ultimately be read differently.

The Dromgoole production of *Romeo and Juliet* gives the appearance of cultural diversity without providing any social or political statements. The director manipulates the security of color-blind casting to ensure that the "token other" will be noticed but not critiqued, knowing that reviews cannot frame the ethnicity of the actors unless the production offers the space for this. This critique reinforces that theorizing color-blind casting is highly problematic. It also highlights a considerable hole in theater practice, in that the audience's response is often silenced. With critics not acknowledging how the casting decisions of culturally-specific actors in canonical roles can affect reception, theater-makers are not held accountable for the "mis-reading" of the audiences. This experience emphasizes that there is a need for these practitioners to be more open to critique, as Gilbert and Tompkins assert that a "performance must somehow engage with the looking relations it establishes" (1996, 248).

Yet the discussion also reveals the distance between post-colonial theater practice and the work in the "center." There is a sense that certain Shakespearean groups, such as Shakespeare's Globe, have the defense of authenticity against an incentive to engage with the problems of cultural politics. With the focus primarily on bringing a "truthful" version of *Romeo and Juliet* to a tourist audience, attention to cultural identity is reduced to a tokenistic, "politically correct" method of casting. This choice not to engage with contemporary issues of cultural identity would suggest that Shakespeare's Globe has decided that it is not the place for such an examination. This again reinforces that the problems associated with performing cultural identity have outweighed the merits; it is easier to ignore race than to hypothesize how it might be read. Yet, ironically, the notion of *Romeo and Juliet* as a universal text is undermined by *not* engaging with the "looking relations" established in this production. Therefore the most crucial discovery made in the analysis of this production is that race will always mean something; as Lee Lewis asserts, "all cross-racial casting is political" (2007, 5). And, while it is crucial that black actors are given a prominent presence on all theater stages, it is equally important that theater-makers also recognize the un-concealable histories and politics of an actor's ethnicity.

### Notes

1. In the blurb for the Shakespeare's Globe DVD of the production, Ellie Kendrick is described as "truly youthful," against a "boyish" Edun.
2. "Young Hearts" also alludes to the popular soundtrack from the 1996 Baz Luhrmann film *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet*, specifically Kim Mazelle's "Young Hearts, Run Free"



— perhaps an attempt to meld the "historical" association of Shakespeare's Globe with the "hipper" contemporary text.

3. In an interview with Rawiri Paratene, I remarked how there were several people in the audience following the performance with copies of the play, and he laughed, saying, "Yeah, lots of people do that. It wouldn't have helped them today, as our version is taken from a few sources. And I think it's a great version; [Dromgoole]'s taken poetry from the quarto and from other versions" (Paratene 2009).
4. The essay will focus primarily on the casting of Edun, although mention will be made in the final section on the "meanings" of Paratene's and Roach's performances.
5. All citations are from the Oxford *Romeo and Juliet*, edited by Jill L. Levinson (2009).
6. Paratene starred as an Egyptian pharaoh in the August 2009 Globe production of Frank McGuinness's *Helen*. There are several prominent Maori actors who have acquired international film roles playing an ethnic other, with the most prominent being Cliff Curtis and Temuera Morrison.
7. Before 1962, citizens of the Commonwealth were granted mostly unrestricted entitlement to settle in the British Isles through British Nationality Law. While "others" had been settling in Britain for centuries, labor shortages after World War II, cheaper airfares, forced exile, and promises of a "better life" saw a considerable influx of migrants from the Caribbean, Africa, and South Asia during the 1950s-60s. Many of these British others would, in increasing numbers, refuse to return "home" (Spencer 1997, 39). Legislation in the late sixties and early seventies — such as the Commonwealth Immigrants Act (1968) and Immigration Act (1971) — was a significant response, seeking to control the vast numbers of "colored" peoples entering the country by tightening rules of access and settlement and the rights of spouses and dependants. These acts also coincided with Britain's membership to the European Economic Community; while citizens of the European Union gained the right to settle in the UK, its former subjects found the borders increasingly blocked. Although it had always prided itself on a non-discriminatory immigration policy, the British government found itself continually denying that decisions on who could be granted the right to settle were made on the basis of skin color (Spencer 1997, 151).
8. Conversely, in the 2011 riots, a commonality of race, culture or even economics did not define the "perpetrators" as much as a disenchantment of "youth" as a singular, raceless category. Nevertheless, the most frequent images in global media forms were that of young black men in hoodies.

Permissions

Photo by permission of Shakespeare's Globe Theatre.

## References

- Carson, Christie, and Farah Karim-Cooper, eds. 2008. *Shakespeare's Globe: A Theatrical Experiment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Conkie, Rob. 2006. *Shakespeare's Globe Theatre Project: Shakespeare and Authenticity*. London: Edwin Mellen Press.
- Coveney, Michael. 2009. "First Night." *The Independent*. 1 May. Available online: <http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1P2-20200333.html> [accessed 12 December 2010, link no longer active].
- Daileader, Celia R. 2005. *Racism, Misogyny, and the "Othello" Myth: Inter-racial Couples from Shakespeare to Spike Lee*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Daileader, Celia R. 2000. "Casting Black Actors: Beyond Othellophilia." In *Shakespeare and Race*. Edited by Catherine M. S. Alexander and Stanley Wells. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 177-202.
- Dessen, Alan C. 2008. "Original Practices at the Globe: A Theatre Historian's View." In *Shakespeare's Globe: A Theatrical Experiment*. Edited by Christie Carson and Farah Karim-Cooper. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 45-54.
- Dromgoole, Dominic. 2009. Program to *Romeo and Juliet*. London. Shakespeare's Globe.
- Fisher, Philip. 2009. "*Romeo and Juliet*." *The British Theatre Guide*. London: Peter Lathan. Available online: <http://www.britishtheatreinfo.com/reviews/RandJglobe09-rev.htm> [accessed 12 May 2009].
- Gibbons, Fiachra. 2000. "RSC Casts Black Actor as English King for the First Time." *The Guardian*. 19 September. Available online: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2000/sep/19/fiachragibbons> [accessed 12 September 2009].
- Gilbert, Helen, and Jacqueline Lo. 2007. *Performance and Cosmopolitics: Cross-Cultural Transactions in Australasia*. Basingstoke [England]; New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gilbert, Helen, and Joanne Tompkins. 1996. *Post-colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics*. London: Routledge.
- Gilroy, Paul. 2004. *Between Camps: Nations, Cultures, and the Allure Of Race*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Gilroy, Paul. 1999. "A London sumting dis . . ." *Critical Quarterly* 41.3: 57-69.
- Griffiths, Zoe J. 2009. "Theatre Review: *Romeo and Juliet* at Shakespeare's Globe Theatre." *Londonist*. 1 May. Available online: [http://londonist.com/2009/05/theatre\\_review\\_romeo\\_juliet\\_at\\_shak.php](http://londonist.com/2009/05/theatre_review_romeo_juliet_at_shak.php) [accessed 12 September 2009].

- Hall, Kim. F. 1998. "'Those bastard signs of fair': Literary Whiteness in Shakespeare's Sonnets." In *Post-colonial Shakespeares*. Edited by Ania Loomba and Martin Orkin. London: Routledge. 64-83.
- Healy, Thomas. 1997. "Past and Present Shakespeares: Shakespeare Appropriations in Europe." In *Shakespeare and National Culture*. Edited by John J. Joughin. Manchester: Manchester University Press. 206-32.
- Hemming, Sarah. 2009. "*Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare's Globe, London." *FT.com* — *Financial Times*. 3 May. <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/6afb4d4c-3671-11de-af40-00144feabdc0.html> [accessed 12 September 2009].
- Hepple, P. 2004. "Review: *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare's Globe." *The Stage*. 7 May. <http://www.thestage.co.uk/reviews/review.php/2287/romeo-and-juliet> [accessed 12 September 2009, link no longer active].
- Kellaway, Kate. 2001. "My Kingdom for a Part." *The Guardian*. London. 8 July. Available online: <http://www.theguardian.com/theobserver/2001/jul/08/features.review17> [accessed 28 November 2015].
- Kiernan, Pauline. 1999. *Staging Shakespeare at the New Globe*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Lewis, Lee. 2007. *Cross-Racial Casting: Changing the Faces of Australian Theatre*. Strawberry Hills, N.S.W.: Currency House.
- Lo, Jacqueline. 2000. "Beyond Happy Hybridity: Performing Asian-Australian Identities." In *Alter/Asians: Asian-Australian Identities in Art, Media, and Popular Culture*. Edited by Ien Ang, Sharon Chalmers, Lisa Law, and Mandy Thomas. Annandale, NSW: Pluto Press. 152-68.
- Loomba, Ania. 2002. *Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Loomba, Ania. 2000. "'Delicious traffic': Racial and Religious Difference on Early Modern Stages." In *Shakespeare and Race*. Edited by Catherine M. S. Alexander and Stanley Wells. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 203-24.
- Loomba, Ania, and Martin Orkin, eds. 1998. *Post-colonial Shakespeares*. London: Routledge.
- Macaulay, Thomas. 1979. "Minute on Indian Education " (1835). In *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. Edited by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. Second edition. New York: Routledge.
- Macmillan, Michael. 2004. "'What Happened to You Today That Reminded You That You Are a Black Man?' The Process of Exploring Black Masculinities in Performance, Great Britain."

- In *Theatre and Empowerment: Community Drama on the World Stage*. Edited by Richard Boon and Jane Plastow. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 60-93.
- Marples, M. 2009. "Romeo and Juliet at Shakespeare's Globe." London SE1, London: 4 May. Available online: <http://www.london-se1.co.uk/news/view/3860> [accessed 12 September 2009].
- Maxwell, D. 2009. "Romeo and Juliet at Shakespeare's Globe, London: Theatre Review." *The Times*. London. 2 May. Available online: [http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts\\_and\\_entertainment/stage/article6206175.ece](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/stage/article6206175.ece) [accessed 12 September 2009].
- Neill, Michael, ed. 2008. *Othello, the Moor of Venice*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Paratene, Rawiri. 2009. Interview. 24 July.
- Peter, John. 2009. "Romeo and Juliet at Shakespeare's Globe, Southwark, SE1." *The Sunday Times*. 10 May.
- Romeo and Juliet*. 2009. Dir. Dominic Dromgoole. Shakespeare's Globe. 23 April-23 August.
- Rutter, Carol Chillington. 2001. *Enter the Body: Women and Representation on Shakespeare's Stage*. London: Routledge.
- Said, Edward. 1978. *Orientalism*. London: Penguin.
- Shakespeare, William. 2009. *Romeo and Juliet*. Edited Jill L. Levinson. Oxford Shakespeare. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Shore, R. 2009. "Romeo and Juliet." *Timeout*. 11 May. Available online: <http://www.timeout.com/london/theatre/event/134244/romeo-and-juliet> [accessed 12 September 2009].
- Spencer, Charles. 2009. "Romeo and Juliet, Shakespeare's Globe, Review." *Daily Telegraph*. 4 May. Available online: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/culturecritics/charlesspencer/5271965/Rome-and-Juliet-Shakespeares-Globe-review.html> [accessed 14 September 2009].
- Spencer, Charles. 2004. "If Only Juliet Had Been a Boy . . . . Romeo and Juliet, Shakespeare's Globe." *The Daily Telegraph*. 4 May. Available online: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/drama/3617361/If-only-Juliet-had-been-a-boy....html> [accessed 12 September 2009].
- Spencer, Ian R. G. 1997. *British Immigration Policy since 1939: The Making of Multi-Racial Britain*. New York: Routledge.
- Sun, William H. 2000. "Power and Problems of Performance across Ethnic Lines: An Alternative Approach to Nontraditional Casting." *TDR* 44.4: 86-95.
- Thompson, Ayanna. 2006. *Colorblind Shakespeare: New Perspectives on Race and Performance*. London and New York: Routledge.

Young, Robert J. C. 1995. *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race*. London: Routledge.