

Notes from the Rehearsal Room: Casting People of Color

Jay Paul Skelton, University of Notre Dame

Abstract

This essay provides personal reflections on casting actors of color in Shakespearean productions. As a theater practitioner who has recently come to the academy, I offer thoughts on my practical experiences directing and producing colorblind productions.

I made my first casting decision based upon an actor's race in 1992. I was in the midst of seeking my master's degree in directing from The Theatre School at DePaul University and had chosen to direct a production of *God's Country*, by Stephen Dietz. The play tells, in documentary style, the story of a white supremacist who, with his devoted group of like-minded followers, murders a Jewish radio talk-show host. I was not entirely pleased with my selection of the play, but it did satisfy most of the unwritten requirements of the "workshop," as described by the acting and directing faculty: namely, that it was moderately contemporary, required little in the way of production elements, and offered the requisite number of roles for the available casting pool. The performance space was a large converted classroom, and the limited resources, according to the faculty, rightly placed my directorial focus on character development and telling the story.

But I had other ideas. I hoped that during the casting and rehearsal process, somehow I could find ways to make the play more interesting to myself and to the audience. I saw my opportunity when an M.F.A. acting student of mixed race auditioned. Siiri Scott, the daughter of a white woman and African-American man, was a fine actress in her own right, but I figured that I could add "depth" and "dimension" to the character of the white supremacist if I cast Siiri in the role of his girlfriend. My choice, I thought, would also heighten the level of control that the white supremacist enjoyed over his followers if they were forced to accept the inherent dichotomy between his words and his deeds.

It was daring! It was insightful! And it was really stupid.

"I didn't know what to do when I saw the cast list," Siiri tells me now. "I had to go straight to Bella!" she continues, referring to Dr. Bella Itkin, our wise, old Russian acting teacher during that time (S. Scott 2007). Dr. Itkin listened patiently as Siiri explained the play, the role, and the inherent

problem in playing the mixed-race lover of a virulent racist. Dr. Itkin shrugged her shoulders and told Siiri, "You have to make it work, I guess." In retrospect, I feel sorry for Siiri, the cast, and the audience. "You should!" Siiri says (S. Scott 2007). My choice produced more head scratching than anything else. Siiri was confused. The rest of the cast was uncertain, at best. The audience was lost. My attempt at provocation obscured the characters and doomed any hope of clear storytelling. My experiment with racially-conscious casting had failed miserably.

I begin with this sad story to characterize the thrust of my experience with casting people of color in theatrical productions. I believe I have the best of intentions, and, yet, I often fail. I am not an academic in the strictest sense of the word. I have limited exposure to race theory as it pertains to performance. I do not often find myself in debates over the merits of colorblind casting. I have only recently heard arguments that no person of Jewish descent should play Shylock and that no African American should portray Othello, since each of these roles are constructions of a white male. I am a theater practitioner who has spent fifteen years directing, producing, and writing over eighty productions in Chicago, Boston, and New York. I am currently an assistant professor in the Film, Television, and Theatre Department at the University of Notre Dame, where I also am Producing Artistic Director of the Notre Dame Shakespeare Festival, formerly known as Summer Shakespeare, the professional theater in residence on campus. I guess what I am trying to say is that this essay is an attempt to describe my practical experience with casting and directing people of color. I cannot guarantee that you will not roll your eyes at my inability to match current theory with the practical issues that may arise in the stories ahead. What I can guarantee is an honest account of a Shakespearean director fumbling toward an understanding of his process and its relation to the world around him.

All's Well That Ends Well

In late 2005, I was invited by my friend, Stephen Burdman, Artistic Director of New York Classical Theatre, to direct a Shakespeare play of my choice in the summer of 2006. At the time, NYCT was planning its tenth season of outdoor traveling performances in upper Central Park, and Stephen, who had directed and produced all of the company's productions to date, felt it was time to extend the company's artistic family. I was honored to be his first guest director and nervous to undertake my first large scale New York production. I chose *All's Well That Ends Well* primarily because of its strong through-line, multiple locations, and, in all honesty, the lack of theoretical baggage that trails Shakespeare's more notable works. In other words, *All's Well* was a play that I could direct without the sense of expectation that comes with a production of, say, *Hamlet* or

King Lear. Stephen supported my choice and added that he was looking forward to introducing his audience to one of Shakespeare's lesser-known plays. The show was on!

I was certain from the very outset that a person of color should play the role of Helena. I am unsure where this conviction came from, but several things that happened in my life around that time influenced me. I was a volunteer Wish Granter for the Make-A-Wish Foundation of Chicago in the period leading up to the production, and several of my assignments at the time involved young African-American girls and Asian-American boys with life-threatening illnesses whose wishes involved, more often than not, being a princess or meeting celebrities. My Wish Partner and I would visit the homes of these children, and their heroes were often white princesses or wrestlers. They clutched blond-haired dolls to their chests or admitted to loving Eminem. I specifically recall one silent little girl whose bed was covered in dolls, none of whom reflected the color of her own skin. I may also have been influenced by my boyfriend's niece, Autumn, whose mother is Dutch and Indonesian and whose father is African American, and her obsession with animated Disney films. One Sunday was spent cataloguing all of the movies she had seen and her favorite characters. Until that moment, I had never really thought about the prevalence of white heroines created by one of the largest entertainment companies in the world. I then happened to have a conversation with a colleague at school about these observations. "Possibilities," she said, but I did not know what she meant. "These kids are being taught that it's only possible to be a hero or a princess if you're white. You have to really hunt for dolls, movies, you name it, that aren't reflecting the predominant culture. It narrows the sense of possibilities for these kids."

All of this was on my mind when I began casting for *All's Well* that spring. My gut told me that Helena should be an actress of color. Helena's actions certainly divide audiences, but, ultimately, she is a smart, strong woman who succeeds against all odds in her mission to win the hand of Bertram. Her actions are deemed unsavory by some and clever by others. She is a flawed heroine, but she still wins her prince in the end. I also reasoned that casting an actress of color in the leading role would better reflect the community in which the role was created and the audience for which it would be performed. NYCT enjoys a diverse, loyal audience of adults and children, and that conversation about possibilities was definitely working on my conscience.

I was pleased to find that New York had no shortage of talented actresses of color with an appropriate amount of training and experience in classical language. Mahogany Scott, an exuberant African-American woman with good language skills and tremendous heart, became our Helena in short order. She had performed a small role in a previous NYCT production, and Stephen, the artistic director, had been pleased with her work. Mahogany was more than happy to "graduate" to leading lady, and soon our rehearsals began. My good spirits soon sank during our first full cast

reading, though. My choice of an African-American Helena became something altogether negative when we reached act 2. Helena, given her choice of nobleman after curing the ailing King of France, claims Bertram as her husband. Bertram, in our production, was played by Jeffrey Woodward, who is tall, charming, and white.

KING: Why, then, young Bertram, take her; she's thy wife.

BERTRAM: My wife, my liege? I shall beseech your highness,

In such a business give me leave to use

The help of mine own eyes.

KING: Know'st thou not, Bertram,

What she has done for me?

BERTRAM: Yes, my good lord,

But never hope to know why I should marry her.

KING: Thou know'st she has raised me from my sickly bed.

BERTRAM: But follows it, my lord, to bring me down

Must answer for your raising? I know her well:

She had her breeding at my father's charge:

A poor physician's daughter my wife? Disdain

Rather corrupt me ever. (*All's Well That Ends Well*, 2.3.101-12)¹

I watched and listened as Bertram's disdain for Helena's lower-class stature appeared to be transformed into a rejection based on race. This was then compounded in later scenes through Bertram's words and behavior toward her. Helena professes to Bertram that she is his "most obedient servant," while he refers to her as "my clog" (2.5.68; 49). I was crushed. How could I not have foreseen this? Did anyone else feel the same way? What could I do to save the production? Would I be fired and asked to crawl back home to Chicago? Was I now an inadvertent racist?

Our first reading concluded, everyone applauded, I offered a few positive words of thanks and encouragement, and we broke for the day. No one mentioned what had now become, for me, the proverbial elephant in the room. I scheduled the first hour of our next rehearsal to be a discussion with Mahogany. We sat on a blanket in Central Park, the site of our rehearsals and performances, and talked about my concerns. I listed my reasons for casting her in the role, including her skills and her positive energy. I outlined my view of Helena as a witty, well-educated, and determined young lady who also is unabashedly romantic and not a little bit obsessive. I shared my horror at the idea that my choice to cast a person of color in the role of Helena was now potentially damaging to the show. In short, I placed my bleeding liberal heart on the blanket before us.

Mahogany listened intently and said, "Wow. Okay." Here it comes, I thought. She told me that she had not heard the racist interpretation that I heard in Bertram's rejection of Helena, but she understood that some audience members might view it as such.² Rather, as an actress in the moment, she instead heard Bertram's rejection of her in classist terms ("a poor physician's daughter my wife") and his understandable desire to control his own destiny ("I shall beseech your highness, / In such a business give me leave to use / The help of mine own eyes"). Mahogany further explained that she prefers to play the role and not the color of her skin. She was not so much concerned with the issue of her race as with her ability to play the character well. She was not overly concerned about my fear that the audience would see her subservience to, and rejection by, Bertram as inherently racist. She said that there was only so much we can do as artists to predict the response of every audience member. The fact that race might have been factored into my choice to cast her was positive in her view because, as the business of being an actor is unstable at best, she was simply grateful for the work.

A few days later, Mahogany and I sat down with Jeffrey, our Bertram, to talk about the same issue and how we might try to ameliorate Bertram's shallowness and, in this production, his potential racism. Jeffrey was not afraid of being disliked by the audience so much as finding some interesting dimensions to his character and his relationship with Helena. In subsequent rehearsals, we addressed some moments that spoke to these issues. For example, we found that carefully staging the first interaction between Helena and Bertram in act 1, scene 2 could set the tone for the ensuing scenes. As he exited the playing area to start his journey to Paris, Bertram paused respectfully beside Helena, warmly took her hand, slightly bowed his head, looked her in the eye, and said, "Be comfortable to my mother, your mistress, and make much of her" (*All's Well That Ends Well*, 1.1.70). Bertram then smiled at Helena as she curtseyed and went on his way. We hoped that this small gesture would establish that the relationship between Bertram and Helena, who, after all, were raised in the same household, if not in the same manner, was friendly and that Helena's curtsey signaled to the audience their relative class difference.

Later, we had Helena, who had been granted her choice of husband from the assembled courtiers, approach audience members as those courtiers to evaluate their respective fitness for marriage, saying:

[*To First Audience Member*]

Sir, will you hear my suit?

Thanks, sir. All the rest is mute.

[*To Second Audience Member*]

The honour, sir, that flames in your fair eyes
 Before I speak, too threat'ningly replies.
 Love make your fortunes twenty times above
 Her that so wishes and her humble love!
 My wish receive,
 Which great Love grant. And so I take my leave.
 [To Fourth Audience Member, hopefully a boy]
 You are too young, too happy, and too good,
 To make yourself a son out of my blood. (*All's Well That Ends Well*, 2.3.73ff)

Through the blocking, we made it very clear that Bertram and Parolles were not even paying attention to this process and were, in fact, deep in their own discussion about other matters. Helena then crossed to the area about ten feet away from Bertram and Parolles to deliver her line:

I dare not say I take you; but I give
 Me and my service ever whilst I live
 Into your guiding power. — This is the man. (2.3.98-100)

A moment of silence followed and, noticing the change in the air, Bertram and Parolles both turned to Helena. Bertram's face blanched, while Parolles raised his hands and backed away from any implication that it might be he that Helena has chosen. Bertram then pointed to himself to confirm with Helena that she had chosen him. Helena nodded her head, and Bertram looked pleadingly to Parolles. Parolles mouthed the words "Say no!" to Bertram, and the scene continued as written, with the King saying, "Why, then, young Bertram, take her; she's thy wife."

I should mention at this point that we had opted to interpret the relationship of Bertram and Parolles as one similar to that of Oliver Twist and the Artful Dodger. Bertram was certainly no innocent child dragged into a ring of thieves, but Parolles, in our view, represented a carefree adventurer to the more formally-trained Bertram. We included several moments, including the one described above, in which it seemed that Bertram looked to Parolles for direction. Our hope was that Bertram's rejection of Helena would consequently be represented as a rejection of the idea of marriage and its attendant feelings of stasis, rather than his refusal to marry a black woman.

Finally, in act 2, scene 5 Bertram instructs Helena to return to Rosillion. Here, I asked Bertram to include in his subtext the idea that his rejection had nothing to do with her person, but more with what she represents. The result was as follows:

You must not marvel, Helen, at my course,

Which holds not colour with the time, nor does
The ministration and required office
On my particular. (*All's Well That Ends Well*, 2.5.54-57)

Here Bertram stepped closer to Helena and caught her downcast eyes. Once visual contact was confirmed, Bertram appeared to apologize for his behavior:

Prepared I was not
For such a business, therefore am I found
So much unsettled. (2.5.57-59)

At this point Parolles, who had been standing some distance behind Helena in Bertram's line of sight, gestured to Bertram to "wrap it up." Bertram did so with the following lines:

This drives me to entreat you
That presently you take our way for home,
And rather muse than ask why I entreat you,
For my respects are better than they seem,
And my appointments have in them a need
Greater than shows itself at the first view
To you that know them not. This to my mother. (2.5.59-65)

Bertram placed the letter in Helena's hand, and they paused for a moment as they became absorbed in the sight and sensation of their physical contact. I had proposed to the actors that, in that moment, perhaps Bertram felt a twinge of doubt about his actions. Perhaps marriage to such a beautiful, talented woman as Helena was not quite so distasteful an idea. The moment was broken, of course, by Parolles with a theatrical clearing of the throat. Bertram stepped away from Helena and finished his instructions: "'Twill be two days ere I shall see you, so / I leave you to your wisdom" (2.5.66-67).

Did we succeed in addressing my fear of the potential unintended racism in this production of *All's Well*? Did we somehow damage Shakespeare's intentions with our interpretations of Parolles and Bertram? Is it even proper to investigate alternative interpretations of characters such as Bertram and Parolles in order to solve the fear of the potential problems with casting a person of color? I like to think that we at least made an admirable attempt to address these issues. The final arbiter, of course, is always the audience. Over 2,500 people saw the production during a particularly rainy month in New York. No reviews mentioned the color of anyone's skin. I heard no reports of complaints from the Artistic Director. I also received a letter of praise about the production from Tony-winning director Jack O'Brien.

I did trade emails with our Helena, Mahogany Scott, shortly after the production closed in July 2005. She called me "Casper" during the production process, in reference to the friendly white ghost of comic book fame (so much for being sensitive about skin color). Here is what she said:

Hey, Casper! I am so glad to have had the opportunity to work with you. Thank you first of all for not being discouraged by the daunting task of directing a show that many see as a "problem," as well as taking the risk of putting me in the role that could have potentially turned the play into something else altogether! Your foresight and directing ideas took us to different levels in the play and made the cast really come together. Thank you for that. (M. Scott 2006)

Of course, I felt as if I owed her the thanks for helping me to begin to explore the complex issues involved in casting and race in Shakespeare.

Love's Labor's Lost

The summer of 2007 brought the opportunity to direct *Love's Labor's Lost* for the Notre Dame Shakespeare Festival (NDSF), where I am Producing Artistic Director. NDSF provides high-quality professional entertainment and educational opportunities for the campus and surrounding Michiana communities. Our mission includes a Mainstage production, usually performed in August, that features a majority of professional actors supported by carefully selected students and community members.

For this production, I was interested in pursuing a diverse cast, but for reasons that were somewhat different from my approach to *All's Well*. I believe that any theatrical event needs either to reflect the community in which it is created or to introduce that community to a world outside of its immediate experience. The latter idea guided me in this instance, since the student body of the University of Notre Dame, our home, is, according to August 2007 figures, approximately 80% white. I also informally researched the previous seven years of Mainstage productions and found the number of actors of color employed to be in the single digits. I felt that the company's role as a *de facto* ambassador for the University and as a leading arts organization in the greater community demanded a change in casting policy, one that was consciously geared toward greater diversity. Given the yearly turnover of students invited to join us for the summer and the special demands of each Mainstage production, I was hesitant to set a standing policy. I was not hesitant, however, in making a commitment for this production to cast at least two of the eight professional contracts with actors of color.

I knew heading into the casting process that, due to our commitment to provide opportunities for students to work directly with professionals, the quartets of male and female nobles would contain two student actors. I had no students of color that summer and, subsequently, I knew that Longaville, Dumaine, Maria, and Katherine would all be white. The supporting roles of Moth and Jaquenetta would also be cast with students who were white. I had also set aside the roles of Marcade, Dull, and Nathaniel for pre-selected community members who had auditioned a few weeks prior to professional auditions. All of these community members were also white. The roles remaining to be cast with professionals boiled down to King Ferdinand, Berowne, Princess, Rosaline, Boyet, Costard, Don Armado, and Holofernes.

Adam Belcuore, moonlighting from his full-time position as casting director for the Goodman Theatre in Chicago, called in some of the city's best actors to read for these roles. I would guess that about 40% of the actors brought in over the entire casting process were people of color. The majority of the actors of color who did take part in our casting sessions were younger, between their 20s and early 30s and, of those actors, most were female. I had made a previous commitment to a long-time actor/instructor friend of the company's to cast him in the production, and he was best suited for King Ferdinand. We found the perfect Costard in a veteran Chicago character actor named Ron Rains. Both men are white.

These statistics and events, slowly accumulating during the casting process, led us to the conclusion that the actors of color I was determined to hire would more than likely be cast in at least two of three roles: Berowne, Rosaline, and the Princess. I am happy to report that several casting possibilities presented themselves, not only in regard to my self-imposed commitment to hiring actors of color, but also in regard to the qualities of the actors themselves. Kareem Bandyaly, a young actor of Indian-Pakistani descent, possessed the burning intellect and quick wit of Berowne, while Monet Butler, a recent graduate of Theatre School at DePaul University, had limited experience with Shakespeare, but was one of the most regal and graceful young actresses I had seen in quite a long time. I opted to cast Bethany Caputo, who is white, as Rosaline after she impressed all of us with her technical skills and her playfully wicked way with a line.

I had already cut the script of *Love's Labor's Lost* prior to the rehearsal process, but, remembering that sinking feeling from the first read of *All's Well*, I combed through the text once more to search for potential issues that might arise as a result of our Berowne and our Princess. The only section I felt was inappropriate, given our African-American Princess, occurs during act 4, scene 3. Although the text is long, I want to quote it in its entirety to demonstrate the lengthy-nature of the tortured metaphor employed:

FERDINAND: What zeal, what fury hath inspired thee now?

My love, her mistress, is a gracious moon,
 She an attending star, scarce seen a light.
BEROWNE: My eyes are then no eyes, nor I Berowne.
 O, but for my love, day would turn to night.
 Of all complexions the culled sovereignty
 Do meet as at a fair in her fair cheek,
 Where several worthies make one dignity,
 Where nothing wants that want itself doth seek.
 Lend me the flourish of all gentle tongues —
 Fie, painted rhetoric! O, she needs it not.
 To things of sale a seller's praise belongs.
 She passes praise — then praise too short doth blot.
 A withered hermit fivescore winters worn
 Might shake off fifty, looking in her eye.
 Beauty doth varnish age, as if new-born,
 And gives the crutch the cradle's infancy:
 O, 'tis the sun that maketh all things shine.
FERDINAND: By heaven, thy love is black as ebony.
BEROWNE: Is ebony like her? O word divine!
 A wife of such wood were felicity.
 O, who can give an oath? Where is a book,
 That I may swear beauty doth beauty lack
 If that she learn not of her eye to look?
 No face is fair that is not full so black.
FERDINAND: O paradox! Black is the badge of hell,
 The hue of dungeons and the suit of night,
 And beauty's crest becomes the heavens well.
BEROWNE: Devils soonest tempt, resembling spirits of light.
 O, if in black my lady's brows be decked,
 It mourns that painting and usurping hair
 Should ravish doters with a false aspect,
 And therefore is she born to make black fair.
 Her favour turns the fashion of the days,
 For native blood is counted painting now,

And therefore red, that would avoid dispraise
 Paints itself black, to imitate her brow.

DUMAINE: To look like her are chimney-sweepers black.

LONGAVILLE: And since her time are colliers counted bright.

FERDINAND: And Ethiopes of their sweet complexion crack.

DUMAINE: Dark needs no candles now, for dark is light.

BEROWNE: Your mistresses dare never come in rain,
 For fear their colours should be washed away.

FERDINAND: 'Twere good yours did; for, sir, to tell you plain,
 I'll find a fairer face not washed today.

BEROWNE: I'll prove her fair, or talk till doomsday here.

FERDINAND: No devil will fright thee then so much as she.

DUMAINE: I never knew man hold vile stuff so dear.

LONGAVILLE: Look, here's thy love — my foot and her face see.

BEROWNE: O, if the streets were paved with thine eyes,
 Her feet were much too dainty for such tread!

DUMAINE: O vile! Then as she goes, what upward lies
 The street should see as she walked overhead. (*Love's Labors Lost*, 4.3.225-77)

It is agreed by scholars that Berowne is referring at the start to the black of Rosaline's hair, but the subsequent discussion between the men that demeans blackness as anathema to the standards of Elizabethan beauty was, I felt, too difficult to parse in performance. Moreover, Ferdinand's comments about Ethiopes would have clearly enabled the audience to read the entire discussion as a reference to the color of our Princess's skin.

The final performance text reflects the changes I made due to these issues, as well as my wish to provide additional lines to the student actors playing Longaville and Dumaine and my desire to keep the performance running time to less than three hours. Here are the changes:

FERDINAND: What zeal, what fury hath inspired thee now?

My love, her mistress, is a gracious moon;
 She an attending star, scarce seen a light.

BEROWNE: My eyes are then no eyes, nor I Berowne.

O, but for my love, day would turn to night!

DUMAINE: O, if the streets were paved with thine eyes,
 Fair Kath'rine's feet too dainty for such tread!

LONGAVILLE: O, vile! Then, as she goes, what upward lies
The street should see as she walked overhead.

I understand that some may view this cutting and rearrangement of the text as reckless or savage. I can share with you that neither the audience nor, especially, the actors questioned me about these changes. They were, in fact, only referred to once while I was having a discussion about the scene with our text coach, Matthew Radford. "Cheers, mate," he said, "it was probably a wise decision, yeah?"

In fact, if memory serves, allusion to the skin color of our Princess arose only two or three times during the entire rehearsal and performance process. The first was in relation to choosing the best color for the Princess's dress in the final scene; the second was finding the right hair color for her two wigs; and the last was at the final performance, when I asked Monet if she was interested in sharing her thoughts about people of color in productions of Shakespeare. She readily agreed and said, "We never really talked about it, did we?" "No," I replied. Monet looked thoughtful and was about to reply when I was asked to leave by one of the dressers, who wanted to continue with her duties in private. Monet has since traveled outside of Chicago, gotten married, and was not available for this essay.

Kareem Bandealy, who played Berowne in our production, was able to speak with me only recently, after a very busy couple of months since the close of the show. I began our discussion by asking him to describe his background. He told me that his father was born in India, his mother in Tanzania, and that he himself was born in Pakistan. His family considers themselves Indo-Pakistani, but Kareem simply calls himself an American. I asked him about his roles previous to joining the cast of *Love's Labor's Lost*, and he replied:

Freedom fighter, a guy with a bomb strapped to himself, usually some kind of treacherous individual. I often played a role where my character was more of a device in the script that caused some kind of development, understanding, or fear, on the part of another character. I was very much the Other. (Bandealy 2007)

Things began to change for him in early 2007, when he was cast in a production of *The Real Thing*, by Tom Stoppard, as Billy, a young actor carrying on an affair with the wife of a prominent playwright: "There is no reference to the ethnicity of Billy in the script, so I thought it was excellent of the director to take a chance with me and see me as an actor rather than anything else. And then to get Berowne was pretty great" (Bandealy 2007).

There were two moments in our production of *Love's Labor's Lost* that had the potential to be as awkward as those past moments in *All's Well That Ends Well*. The first occurred during our first full-cast table reading during the very same moments of act 4, scene 3 referred to earlier. Berowne's letter to Rosaline has just been discovered by the other three men and lies torn to shreds on the ground:

FERDINAND: What, did these rent lines show some love of thine?

BEROWNE: "Did they?" quoth you? Who sees the heavenly Rosaline
That, like a rude and savage man of Ind
At the first op'ning of the gorgeous east,
Bows not his vassal head and, stricken blind,
Kisses the base ground with obedient breast? (4.3.216-21)

At the reading, Kareem paused after the phrase "rude and savage man of Ind," looked up to address the group, and said, "That's me, right?" The assembled cast laughed and Kareem continued reading the rest of his line. Of course my heart sank as it did at the first reading of *All's Well*. The same questions arose: How could I have not foreseen this? Was Kareem offended? Was anyone else offended? Should I fire myself and crawl back home? Was I still an inadvertent racist?

Kareem dismissed the issue when I questioned him later. "I think what is more important at that moment in the script," Kareem told me, "is what Berowne is saying to the King about Rosaline. The fact that I'm of Indian descent isn't the most important thing about that moment. The most important thing is how Berowne feels about Rosaline and her beauty. It's about the story, not about me" (Bandealy 2007). Kareem continued to explain his belief that there is always some kind of detachment or separation from yourself when you play a role, especially when you take on a character created by Shakespeare: "Shakespeare is a celebration of language, and my job as an actor is to embody that language as best as possible. I can't stand outside myself in the moment and remind myself that I am that 'man of Ind' that Shakespeare is referring to" (Bandealy 2007). He continued to say that he felt he would do a disservice to the audience if he were to call attention to himself and his ethnicity rather than remain in the moment of Berowne interacting with the King. I pressed him on this particular issue because he seemed to describe something closer to letting go of his ethnicity. He said with a smile: "Look, Jay, I don't see it that way. I'm getting out of the way of the story. I don't think Shakespeare ever wrote *Love's Labor's* thinking that an actor of Indo-Pakistani descent would be playing Berowne. Why is it my business to insert myself into the story he wants to tell?" (Bandealy 2007). He shrugged and then laughed as he said, "All actors are sellouts. I'm a hypocrite" (Bandealy 2007).

The second awkward moment during *Love's Labor's Lost* occurred during our first dress rehearsal. We had decided to dress our eight principals in evening wear for the lengthy final scene. The women wore beautiful, color-saturated gowns with matching silk gloves. The men wore handmade Edwardian tailcoats, complete with starched cardboard collars, bright white shirts, and snow-white gloves. Our dress rehearsal progressed as usual until we reached the moment of Berowne's pledge to reject his affectations and to love Rosaline plainly and honestly:

Taffeta phrases, silken terms precise,
 Three-piled hyperboles, spruce affectation,
 Figures pedantical — these summer flies
 Have blown me full of maggot ostentation.
 I do forswear them, and I here protest,
 By this white glove — how white the hand, God knows! —
 Henceforth my wooing mind shall be expressed
 In russet yeas and honest kersey noes.
 And, to begin, wench, so God help me, law!
 My love to thee is sound, sans crack or flaw! (5.2.406-15)

The white glove in question is understood to cover the chaste white hand of Rosaline. In our production, that white glove was instead on the hand of Berowne, thanks to our previous costume design decisions. I was mortified yet again at my lack of attention to a detail that could transform into a larger issue. I stopped the rehearsal and approached Kareem onstage to address the problem. He suggested a solution that combined visual sense with an intellectual leap of faith. Kareem would simply raise his gloved right hand as if making a pledge, which would make the visual connection for the audience. "In this world," he told me recently, "White is a symbol of purity. In the original meaning, Shakespeare was referring to the chastity of Rosaline as reflected by the whiteness of her hand beneath her glove" (Bandealy 2007). His belief was that once we made the connection between his gloved hand, the gesture, and his pledge, the remainder of the line — "How white the hand, God knows!" — would further confirm the solemnity of his pledge by referring to the metaphorical purity of the hand that lies beneath his glove. He told me, "As long as Berowne is in love, the audience will see the gesture for what it is, a pledge of love" rather than a reference to the color of his skin (Bandealy 2007). "Were these lines ever really constructed to refer to race? I'd prefer to think that these lines were constructed to express an ideal of beauty of that time. Our job is to tell that story of devotion, not comment on who's saying the lines" (Bandealy 2007).

Complicated Issues

I promised an honest recounting of my experiences casting people of color in Shakespeare productions. I understand that some readers may find aspects of this narrative objectionable or my thoughts and actions more laughable than reasonable. I am also uncertain if the situations and outcomes support or contradict current theories. The actors of color that I have had the pleasure to work with appear to understand the complicated issues at play. But in the end, the spiritual and economic need to perform seems to override any theories. As Kareem Bandealy told me during our last conversation, "We're actors. We need the work" (Bandealy 2007).

Notes

1. All citations from Shakespeare come from the *Norton Shakespeare* (Shakespeare 1997).
2. Because I have not been able to contact Mahogany Scott for this essay, I am summarizing her response to my concerns.

Permissions

Figure 1. Robert Armstrong (King of France) and Mahogany Scott (Helena) perform in *All's Well That Ends Well* in Central Park for New York Classical Theatre. Photo by Stephen Burdman.

Figure 2. Robert Armstrong (King of France) and Mahogany Scott (Helena) perform in *All's Well That Ends Well* in Central Park for New York Classical Theatre. Photo by Stephen Burdman.

Figure 3. Luke Cieslewicz (Longaville), Nate Grams (Dumaine), Kareem Bandealy (Berowne), Monet Butler (Princess), and Bethany Caputo (Rosaline) perform in *Love's Labors Lost* for the Notre Dame Shakespeare Festival. Photo by Heather Gollatz-Dukeman.

Figure 4. Kareem Bandealy (Berowne) and Bethany Caputo (Rosaline) perform in *Love's Labors Lost* for the Notre Dame Shakespeare Festival. Photo by Heather Gollatz-Dukeman.

Figure 5. Kareem Bandealy (Berowne) performs in *Love's Labors Lost* for the Notre Dame Shakespeare Festival. Photo by Heather Gollatz-Dukeman.

References

Bandealy, Kareem. 2007. Interview. 25 October. Published with permission.

Scott, Mahogany. 2006. Email correspondence. 19 July. Published with permission.

Scott, Siiri. 2007. Interview. 25 August. Published with permission.

Shakespeare, William. 1997. *The Norton Shakespeare*. Edited by Stephen Greenblatt et al. New York: Norton.