

Blinders Off, Please: Creating a Color-Sighted *Comedy of Errors*

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Abstract

This article serves as a critical examination of a production of *The Comedy of Errors* that I directed in the spring of 2007 at Arizona State University's School of Theatre and Film. My main goal was to produce a "color-sighted" production that would implicitly challenge the tenets of colorblindness. I wanted to see if I could be fully "color-sighted" and make casting and directorial decisions based on the ethnicities of my students as well as responding to their training needs and challenges.

My previous experience writing about the practice of "colorblind" casting of Shakespeare proved to be quite an eye-opening affair (pun intended).¹ I learned that this practice, which originated with the desire to promote meritocratic casting, allowing the best actor to be cast, regardless of his/her race and/or ethnicity, has become a legitimate way for artists from non-dominant cultures/races to play with Shakespeare. By examining my own experiences as an actor, director, and trainer of actors whose primary relationship with Shakespeare is conducted in my second language, I learned that I had indeed appropriated — borrowed and stolen — Shakespeare to assert my own artistic identity in this adoptive country and language. I also learned that although this appropriation has served me well in my artistic and academic career, I still need to question Shakespeare's importance in my life and to challenge the ways in which I play with him. In fact, these appropriations proved to me that neither I nor the audience is ever completely blind to race, color, and/or ethnicity. At the end of the essay, I promised that my next encounter with Shakespeare would be much more closely examined: I wanted to experience Shakespeare without pretending that blinders are appropriate or even necessary. I promised to produce a "color-sighted" production that would implicitly challenge the tenets of colorblindness.

The opportunity to remove these blinders came in the spring of 2007 when I directed the graduate students at Arizona State University's School of Theatre and Film in a production of *The Comedy of Errors*. My main question as a director is always, "How can I bring the play to life and

create the most compelling evening of theatre possible?" Having the good fortune of counting on Ayanna Thompson as dramaturg for this production allowed me to ask a further question: Could I be fully color-sighted and make casting and directorial decisions based on the ethnicities of my students, as well as be able to respond to their training needs and challenges? What would it take to have a compelling evening of color-sighted academic theater? Does being color-conscious and color-sighted make for compelling theater, or is it merely an academic exercise?

Every director will acknowledge that casting a production well will cut one's work in half. When I hold auditions, I want the actors to succeed. I want excellent players, so that I can cast the play with the best and move on to the rehearsal studio — the place where the real playing begins. For me, and for many directors, though of course not for all, these excellent players may be of any race, color, and/or ethnicity and have any particular speech sounds as long as they can demonstrate a mastery of what I believe are the most important requirements: sharp wits, very open and imaginative hearts, and the incredible physical, mental, and emotional stamina required to be present on command. In this sense, I do promote being blind and deaf to notions of race and ethnicity, and I endorse meritocratic casting practices. But when casting a show in an academic setting, directors must make some compromises in order to serve the training of the actors and to accommodate the group's dynamic. Aiming to be colorblind, or even accent-deaf, in these settings becomes even more challenging. As a teacher, I am keenly aware of the actors I am casting, including their race, color, ethnicity, and linguistic background, as well as their specific acting challenges. *Comedy* at ASU was no exception.

This production was slated as a showcase for the eight graduate actors who had worked with me for three semesters. Although I knew the actors well (and, perhaps, *because* I knew them well), casting the show was an interesting puzzle. These eight students had very uneven levels of experience prior to entering the program, and they all faced different training challenges. The most experienced actress was Kristi, a pretty young woman from St. Louis who had spent four years in New York, but who had limited success in the business of acting. Maria, our lovely Latina from Ohio, also had some professional experience, but little in-depth training. Kerry, our oldest student, had had some acting experience in California, but was the most limited in terms of her instrument. Our youngest female students were Katie, a very intriguing performer from Southern California with a good amount of experience with Shakespeare, and Elizabeth, our most eager student, with absolutely none. The three men included Cathan, a bright and lovely young man from Washington state, with plenty of experience playing Shakespeare; David, a very interesting man of Filipino-American heritage in his early thirties who had served in the US Navy for eight years; and Sentell,

our twenty-five year old African American from Virginia, who is very talented, but who had limited experience with Shakespeare.

I wanted to cast two actors to play each set of twins. Thus, one actor would play both Antipholi, and one actor would play both Dromios. I knew that any of the three male graduate students would certainly benefit from the challenge of playing either set of twins. Choices: The student with the most experience and ability with Shakespeare text was Cathan, the white actor, who really needed the challenge of playing a romantic lead. Furthermore, I knew he would gain a lot by meeting the challenge of differentiating between the two Antipholi. Besides, it would be easy to find him a stand-in twin for the last scene of the play; there are always plenty of young, white male undergraduate students at our auditions. David had the most physical training and prowess and would be ideal for the two Dromios, and I knew that playing the clown would challenge him to a new level in his acting. The clown's most important lesson is finding the sheer delight and pleasure of each moment by seeking out as many creative ways to fail: the clown is only successful when the clown fails. That willingness to risk it all without being able to control the outcome is a crucial skill to master for any actor. David needed to learn this, and Dromio would teach it to him. And, as Fortune would have it, a very strikingly similarly shaped Filipino-American undergraduate showed up at auditions and would be his ideal doppelganger for the end scene (figure 1). But what about Sentell? Where did I *see* him in this world? Or, better yet, what world would I see him in? As his teacher, I recognized that he was not ready for the challenge of a romantic lead. More importantly, as an artist of color, I did not want him to play Dromio, who is constantly reminded of being a slave, and who is physically abused throughout the show. I knew our audiences, primarily comprised of students and families from ASU, would be, by and large, white and somewhat privileged. I assumed that they would bring into the theater the conscious and unconscious racism and homophobia that permeates all of our society. Why present them with the image of a black, slightly effeminate, young man being abused and denigrated? Would I not be reinforcing an injustice by doing so? As the clown, Dromio must be funny, but, to me, an image of a black Dromio would at best be uncomfortable, and at worst offensive. We needed to find a place for Sentell to play in power so that he could delight the audience regardless of their potential prejudices.

My dramaturg encouraged me to keep the play in the world of Ephesus, and this, in fact, ended up having a large impact on the creation of my color-sighted production. Whenever I direct Shakespeare, I adapt the text, cut and paste it, borrow and steal, to create a story that is as compelling as possible for a modern audience. By keeping the play in Ephesus, a loud and frantic port-city in the Eastern Mediterranean, a town full of "cozenage" and odd characters, we were able to identify a place for Sentell as the foreign Merchant who demands the goldsmith to settle his debts. Rather than

ignoring his skin color, we built a character based on it, discovering a sort of North African identity for the Merchant, which Sentell centered on a mild French accent and very bold physical language. Along with the color of his skin, Sentell was also interested in challenging his own fears about how his sexual orientation might manifest on stage. His constant monitoring of his physical behavior had resulted in a physical instrument plagued with muscular tension, which he needed to release in order to further his training. By keeping the play in Ephesus and letting the Merchant be fully recognized as the "outsider," Sentell was able to give himself permission to play as an outrageous, fully empowered black, and effeminate, Merchant. The result was a captivating character full of life and wit, which not only delighted the audiences, but also made him grow as an actor.

In order to further contextualize his existence in this Ephesus and to highlight the Merchant's outsider status, I borrowed some lines from *Othello* and inserted them into the Merchant's first scene. These are the original lines, followed by my appropriation:

Haply, for I am black
 And have not those soft parts of conversation
 That chamberers have; or for I am declin'd
 Into the vale of years (yet that's not much),
 She's gone. I am abused, and my relief
 Must be to loathe her. O curse of marriage! (*Othello* 3.3.263-68)

Haply, for I am black
 And have not these soft parts of conversation
 These Ephesians have; I am abused
 And my relief must be to loath them.
 O curse of Commerce! (*The Comedy of Errors*, adapted by Antonio Ocampo-Guzman)²

Having these lines inserted, we spelled our experiment out for the audience and allowed for no ambiguity. They were seeing a black character played by a black actor who was fully in power of both his race and his physicality. Without these lines, we would have run the risk not only of confusing the audience, but also of allowing any latent racism and homophobia to brew.

I worked with Sentell extensively to develop this character. Here is how Sentell describes his experience:

The Merchant allowed me to go to a place that I often repress in my everyday life. This particular character was a personal challenge because I did not want to create and perform

another black and gay stock character in front of a mostly white audience. For too long, the representations of black gay men as eye rolling, sashaying, drag wearing, snapping their fingers, fabulous divas, has been somewhat of a cliché. Yes, these are the characters that make audiences laugh and smile because they are larger than life and demand respect. However, those types of representations suggested to me, at a very young age, that all black gay men must behave that way. After I came out, I repressed public behavior that suggested I could be lumped into such a category, but secretly I did admire those black men who did not care about being larger than life. I made a choice, in the beginning stages of rehearsals, that I wanted the Merchant to be sexual, exotic, and different than anyone else in the world of the play. What emerged during these beginning rehearsals from inside of me was all of the behaviors that I clearly thought were stereotypical. Eventually, I came to a place with the role that I brought out my inner truth as a black gay man and allowed myself to explore what that means in the world of the play. I discovered that despite the Merchant's effeminate, exotic, and wild behavior, he still demanded respect and had power over many individuals in the town. By the time the production opened I knew that I did push through a stereotype that much of the society has about black gay men. However, those qualities that I once thought were offensive and inappropriate were the very ones that I embraced within myself in order to make the Merchant come to life. This role allowed me to play with my own blackness and sexuality in ways that I have never dared to exhibit on stage before. (Harper 2007)

These comments are fantastic! On the one hand, a young actor was able to achieve a breakthrough in his training, playing without physical tension. He was able to create a mesmerizing character from an honest questioning and assertion of his place in our society. On the other hand, we were able to, if not destroy, at least keep at bay any latent or unconscious racism and homophobia in the audience; given that Sentell was so compelling, their only possible response was admiration, and very well-deserved applause at his exits. Thus, I felt that my color-sighted approach to casting and directing *Comedy* not only enabled this young actor's personal growth, but also created compelling theatre that subtly challenged potential biases.

There is more. Having a side-kick is a very common and effective element in comedy, and the Merchant certainly needed one as much as Sentell needed to have another black actor on stage in a university known for the lack of an African-American presence (figure 2). Yes, as a minority artist and educator, representation is very important issue for me, and Shakespeare is an ideal place for this. Since we as a society have largely bought into the notion of the universality of Anglo-

Saxon Shakespeare, I, as a Colombian-born actor and director, can argue that we all may lay a claim to a place in his plays and fully hold up the mirror to our nature and our society's make-up. Fortunately there was Michael, a freshman full of energy and personality who helped complete my vision. Those two nearly stole the show every night. With the guidance of our Fight and Movement Director, David Barker, they developed a very intriguing Master/Servant relationship in which the status shifted humorously. The servant carried a bag full of trinkets and surprises that added much delight to the evening. One great example was the nail file that the Merchant's servant used on the Merchant while Antipholus discussed the chain with the goldsmith. My favorite, though, was the very large, very black gun the Merchant drew on Antipholus when he drew his small, silver handgun to challenge him to a duel (figure 3).

And, yet, while writing this, I have to ask myself why I was not bothered by the fact that a Filipino-American was playing the role of the slave, a character who is physically abused all evening? Was my non-blindness in one arena merely enabling blindness in another? In attempting to thwart the perpetuation of one stereotype, was I actually perpetuating another? Again, my being clearly-sighted allowed me this rationalization: David is a very well-built young man, who served in the U.S. Navy for eight years. Visually, though his skin and his facial features reveal his ethnicity, his physical strength signals that he can withstand abuse. Furthermore, as his teacher, knowing his interest in physical theater, I was confident that the stage combat would be executed with precision, dexterity, and humor. Indeed, the two Dromios emerged as the true heroes of the play. For me, the climax of the production was their very moving recognition scene at the very end, where their identities become as universalized as possible. This is the most salient moment in the play, when the local Dromio, who has been constantly abused and demeaned throughout the day, realizes, in seeing his twin's face, that he is indeed handsome and worthy. This play becomes a play about recognition after a long time of being lost, be it lost at sea, or lost in a sense of unworthiness.

David scored a triumph in the role, carrying the weight of the evening on his shoulders (pun intended). Rather than guiding the audience to witness his ethnicity, I asked them to focus on the delightful vulnerability of this well-built, agile, handsome young man, who just happened to be Filipino-American. This is what is considered colorblind casting: I asked the audience to be blind to David's ethnicity because he was the best choice for the role; and as an actor in training, he fully deserved the challenge. But in Sentell's case, I wanted the audience to open their eyes and see his race. Is that a double standard? Not really. By removing my blinders when I cast, I am not eliminating the notion of meritocratic casting. Rather, I am asking myself to see more clearly and *examine* more diligently the choices I make in order to have a compelling evening of theatre. The

issue of colorblindness is not so clearly black and white. Like race and homophobia, it is an issue that merits constant examination and re-definition.

I must mention that Cathan was fantastic as the two Antipholi, not only rising to the challenges of differentiating the two characters, but also growing tremendously as an actor, in his willingness to play and listen on stage. He was quite captivating. So far, so good. Removing the blinders had given me excellent results.

Casting the women was more complicated. Five young actresses were angling for four female roles, which meant I would have to cast one as a man, or else, shift the gender of one of the characters. In a previous adaptation of *Comedy*, I had condensed the roles of Balthasar and Angelo into a single goldsmith, and had arbitrarily placed him in the Jewish faith. For that production, I had set the play in the world of 1940s Argentina, where, of course, there is a very large Jewish community, and I gave the goldsmith the family name of one of my dearest friends, Goldfarb. (Yes, I do unashamedly borrow, lend, and steal. I will do anything to make Shakespeare compelling on the stage.) In that previous production, a young woman played the role as a very lively Jewish widow, who had a thriving jewelry business. However, my dramaturg at ASU, opening my eyes to issues of gender-switching, questioned whether a woman would conduct business in Ephesus. After all, Adriana and Luciana have a conversation about men having more liberties out of the house:

Adriana: Why should their liberty than ours be more?

Luciana: Because their business still lies out a' door. (*The Comedy of Errors*, 2.1.10-11)

Paying attention to this tension in the play, I decided to keep the gender of the jeweler male. I did, however, decide to maintain the homage to my friend, keeping this cross-dressed role as Jewish because Jews would have been operating in the port of Ephesus. Choosing the actress for the role was a tough decision. I cast young Katie in the role to give her the almost impossible challenge of creating a role so distant in gender, age, and background that she would not be able to resort to any of her usual habits of emoting and gesturing (figure 4). Like the North African Merchant portrayed by Sentell, I felt the need to contextualize the character of the jeweler further by having Goldfarb wear a yarmulke under his hat and a prayer shawl under his suit. I have heard Shylock's famous words, "Hath not a Jew eyes?" from *The Merchant of Venice* in countless movies and sitcoms. Have they become the most appropriated lines in the canon now? Nonetheless, I chose to borrow them for *Comedy* as well to give Goldfarb a good exit line and a compelling button for his scene with the local Antipholus. I knew I was asking the audience to be blind about the gender of the player, suspend their disbelief, and accept this young woman as an older Jewish man, while

simultaneously asking the audience to see and hear Goldfarb's Jewish ethnicity/race. Not only were the lines delivered to elicit a laugh, but also I think they helped the audience know that he was indeed a Jew: I left no room for mistaken identities.

I had to take the blinders off once again when I was faced with casting Adriana. The student who most needed and deserved the challenge of a lead role, as well the student who most needed to fully explore her femininity on stage, was Maria, our beautiful Latina (figure 5). But, of course, we did not have another Latina to play her sister. It was "colorblindness" that led me to cast another dark-haired student as Luciana — not that Kristi did not deserve that role. Although it is clear to the eyes that Maria and Kristi belong to different ethnicities, I thought our audiences would be more willing to suspend their disbelief and accept them as sisters on the stage. Latinos are the fastest growing minority in the United States and are beginning significantly to impact large sections of US society and culture, including theater, film, and television. Yet our casting leaves some room for ambiguity, since our ethnic backgrounds can be so diverse, allowing for Latino actors to play different ethnicities. That is possibly another rationalization that gave me no qualms about casting Maria and Kristi as sisters. Maybe the experience would have been different if Maria spoke with an accented English, but she does not. Like many young Latinos born in the U.S., she has lost her family's foundational Spanish and has completely assimilated the speech sounds of her native Ohio.

Which leads me to this question posed by my dramaturg, Ayanna Thompson: Is there a relationship between the employment of actors of color and the desire to adapt Shakespeare's plays politically, culturally, and/or socially? The simplest answer is, yes. Borrowing, lending, and appropriating Shakespeare allows for the construction of worlds onstage where peoples of different backgrounds, skin colors, and speech sounds can all play with Shakespeare's "universality." For years, I had blindly appropriated Shakespeare to validate my creative abilities in my second language: I felt I was worthy because on some level I had mastered the master. But I, and I think any artist whose ethnic and linguistic background does not connect directly to Shakespeare, cannot continue to accept him as a paragon without examining him, his works, and his cultural capital more closely and more dispassionately.

Certainly, one of the layers of that cultural capital is the notion of Shakespeare being almost omnipresent in training programs. In other words, why do I stick with Shakespeare when I want to change so much of the plays — borrowing, cutting, and appropriating them? This is one question that I have fully examined as I continue to champion the usefulness of Shakespeare as an excellent training ground for young actors. The actor's instrument is a delicate and complex combination of body, voice, intellect, imagination, and emotional life, which may be deliberately trained to be fully present and incredibly mesmerizing on stage. An actor's body must be full of

core and spine energy so that it has presence and commands attention onstage. It must be flexible, dexterous, and coordinated in order to be responsive to any nuance of expression the actor desires to communicate. An actor's voice must be equally free from any constraints of habitual patterns, and it must be able to communicate clearly and precisely all that the actor desires to express with the least amount of effort. An actor's intellect must be quick and witty, able to comprehend deep philosophical dilemmas and the inevitable paradoxes of human existence, as well as respond swiftly to humor. An actor's imagination needs to be wild and free, capable of inventing and recreating any situation possible, both individually and as part of an ensemble. An actor's emotional life must be available, ready for the actor to immerse deeply into memories of the personal and collective story, in a healthy and creative manner. Above all, the actor needs to be an impeccable listener because acting is not about the actor but about relationships. An actor must be able and willing to play together, to cooperate, and to lead and be led.

There is no other playwright who gives a young actor a better training ground to practice and master this combination of body, voice, intellect, imagination, and emotional life than Shakespeare. Firstly, since Elizabethans referred to performers as players, I can constantly remind my students that without open-hearted and generous playing, the text will not come to life, and this kind of playing is what is needed for any genre of theater. Furthermore, I believe that because of the rhetorical devices used throughout Shakespeare's texts, contemporary actors stand to gain a lot of clarity, precision, and agility of thought, bringing them to life on the stage, which again translates into more articulate actors. Shakespeare's characters often operate at extreme levels of emotion, and young actors must unearth deeper parts of their humanity in order to make such emotional extremes believable and compelling to a modern audience. Having done Shakespeare, an actor can more easily return to the subtleties of modern drama. And of course, there are a lot of physical demands in Shakespeare — from stage violence to clowning, singing, and dancing, all of which are useful for a contemporary actor to possess.

While I continue to believe that there is an element of the universal human condition that is expressed brilliantly in Shakespeare's work, and while I continue to believe that young students of acting have much to gain by playing Shakespeare, I think it is time that we theater artists take our blinders off and clearly *see* what is represented on the stage. If we are going to continue to play with Shakespeare and do justice to his own advice of holding the mirror to our nature, we must *open* our eyes, and our hearts too, and look at the truly diverse nature of our age. And if, after removing the blinders, we realize that in order to create a compelling evening of theater for the multiethnic, multiracial, and multilingual audiences of today, one must borrow, lend, and steal frames of reference, so be it. This production of *The Comedy of Errors* was my first attempt at

playing with Shakespeare with my own blinders off, and I think it was a much more solid production precisely because it did not go unexamined.

Notes

1. See Ocampo-Guzman 2006.
2. The text used here is the *The Riverside Shakespeare*, edited by G. Blakemore Evans et al (1997).

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Figure 1. David McCormick and Adam Roa as the Dromios in Arizona State University's 2007 mainstage production of *The Comedy of Errors*. Photo by Becca Priddy.

Figure 2. Micheal Thompson (Merchant's Assistant) and Sentell Harper (The Merchant) in Arizona State University's 2007 mainstage production of *The Comedy of Errors*. Photo by Becca Priddy.

Figure 3. Cathan Bordyn (Antipholus) and Sentell Harper (The Merchant) in Arizona State University's 2007 mainstage production of *The Comedy of Errors*. Photo by Becca Priddy.

Figure 4. Katie Harroff (Goldfarb) and Sentell Harper (The Merchant) in Arizona State University's 2007 mainstage production of *The Comedy of Errors*. Photo by Becca Priddy.

Figure 5. Maria Enriquez as Adriana in Arizona State University's 2007 mainstage production of *The Comedy of Errors*. Photo by Becca Priddy.

References

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