

A Director's Work

Re-Thinking Non-Traditional Casting

by **Daniel Banks**

(This article was received before the publication of Cleo House's "Cross-Cultural Casting in *The Amen Corner*" and was not written in response to House's position).

*we are all imprisoned in the castle of our skins
and some of us have said so be it
if i am in jail my castle shall become
my rendezvous
my courtyard will bloom with hyacinths and jack-in-the-
pulpits
my moat will not restrict me but will be filled
with dolphins sitting on lily pads and sea horses ridden by
starfish
goldfish will make love
to Black mollies and color my world Black Gold
the vines entwining my windows will grow butterflies
and yellow jackets will buzz me to sleep*

— Nikki Giovanni, *Poem*

The conversation about "non-traditional casting" in this country, over the past seventeen years, has been essential in opening up the way we think about theatre and creating much-needed dialogue. When the Non-Traditional Casting Project opened its doors in 1986, as a result of conversations happening at Actors Equity, it was a way of drawing attention to the under-representation of non-White-looking actors on the U.S. stage. I am concerned, however, about the way it is currently used, and how it can become a catch-all for talking about diversity in the theatre. I believe we are now able to take this conversation and its impact to the next level, both in terms of language and aesthetics.

The movement towards non-traditional casting was indispensable in driving a wedge into certain neo-traditional and conservative practices in American theatre in the '70s and '80s. The problem I now have with holding onto this verbiage for discussions of color and ethnicity is that it positions one casting practice as "traditional," and another as "alternative." Thus for this "alternative" or "non" traditional practice, we

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Susan Cook

Stephen Beckford, playing the Jewish protagonist, opposite Tertia Lynch in a student production of Max Frisch's *Andorra*, directed by Daniel Banks at Marymount Manhattan College.

must make exceptions in our minds and imaginations. "Creating" classical roles for actors of color positions us as casting problems to be solved. As W.E.B. Du Bois wrote one hundred years ago, "How does it feel to be a problem?" I myself moved into directing when I was told that I was "uncastable" because I didn't look like "anything;" that "ethnic" was not "in."

In some cases, thinking in terms of "non-traditional" cast-

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ing, has tended to re-write history, a history that privileges Whiteness, and the dominance of White culture. For instance, why do we call casting Black actors in Shakespearean roles “non-traditional,” when there is a tradition, in this country and abroad, of African Americans acting Shakespeare that dates back at least one hundred eighty years? It is not “non-traditional,” merely unspoken and unstudied. Perhaps more egregiously, rather than “non-traditional,” it is “non-modern,” and we must then inquire as to why, historically, we have taken a step back—unless of course the real issue is not Black people performing Shakespeare but performing Shakespeare in an integrated cast; and that, too, is an American conversation well worth having. Meanwhile, audiences accept having women in Shakespeare as the norm, which is the “true” non-traditional casting (not to mention North Americans of any color playing Venetians or Bohemians. It is ALL non-traditional, if we use this lens. Why, then, single out only certain performers?). Calling the practice of multi-racial casting “non-traditional” at this point, I believe, inadvertently obscures a more complex and rich history that we have been taught to ignore—or which has been suppressed—and continues to make it seem as if we are “doing something special” for actors of color. In some cases, it risks miseducating our audiences, and re-affirming half and un-truths.

I first found myself talking about “non-traditional casting” in a formalized way on a panel that New York University held after my production of Marc Blitzstein’s *The Cradle Will Rock* seven years ago. Although the panel had in its title “non-traditional casting,” I explained that such casting was not my intention, nor did I feel it was what I was doing. Before, during and after the production, people critiqued my choice of an African American actor as Mister Mister, and questioned the casting of White actors to play his children. There were at least two issues to address in regards to these observations, and to observers’ calling this casting “non-traditional.” First, it was presumed by many that there would be no African American in Mister Mister’s position in the ‘30s, which is patently inaccurate. Not only has there long been a Black bourgeoisie in this country, but Franklin Delano Roosevelt relied on his “Black Cabinet” of advisors comprised of university presidents, lawyers, ministers and businessmen. Moreover, Blitzstein had intended that the play be multi-racially cast, which Orson Welles and John Houseman did not do. Both of these facts are little known, but crucial pieces of American history—which brings me to the second,

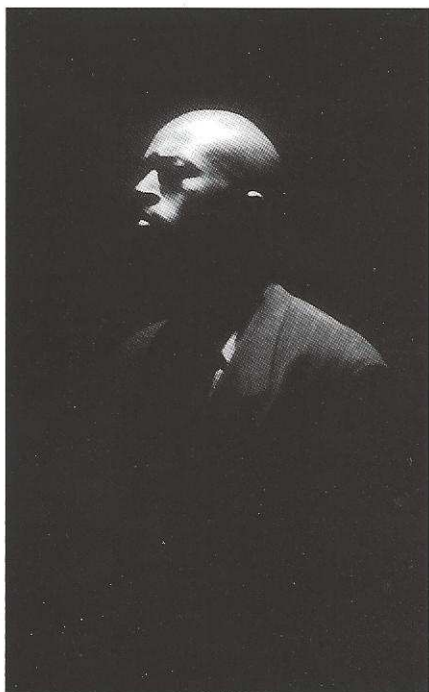
seemingly innocuous, but, I would contend, rather serious misperception—that a Black man in the ‘30s could not have “White” children (about which James Weldon Johnson eloquently wrote in his *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* in 1912). Why is it that White Americans still do not know what non-White Americans have lived with for generations—that color and blood-line do not always neatly match? The belief

that such casting was “unrealistic” was the same reaction I had to a multi-racially cast family in my production of John Guare’s *Landscape of the Body*, and to the casting of a Black actor in the role of the supposedly Jewish protagonist of Max Frisch’s *Andorra*. Never mind that *Andorra*, for example, is a parable, an allegorical text, set in a fictitious place with the “black army” living across the border. The irony, as I discovered the week before opening, was that the young Black actor I cast was, in fact, Jewish-descended from his mother’s mother.

Thus, the other potential liability in focusing on “non-traditional casting” in terms of color and ethnicity is that it reduces the conversation to notions of Black and White (or Brown and White, or whatever extreme people are positioned on), so that one must affiliate as either/or. It occludes the presence of people who are mixed and, as such, have a mixed identity (or, since, as Adrian Piper claims, the majority of people in America are mixed, it discourages such identification). How many writers, even today, are

writing scripts that specifically reflect a mixed-race population? Or that have multi-racial casts? It is astonishing to look at Saturday morning television, as compared to prime-time TV; most of the shows do not have all-White or all-Black casts. The younger generation knows what’s what. It’s we adults who keep perpetuating certain fictions—fictions that, as evidenced by the Affirmative Action debate, are politically and economically motivated. By focusing on the “special needs” of minoritized populations, we miss the opportunity to create a more complex—and mimetic—stage culture. Any audience that walks away from a play featuring a monochromatic cast should be deeply troubled (unless it is science fiction!). The problem is not that, as I have heard argued, we are working in a fictive art. The problem is that so many people do not notice the monochromatic casting...but they *do* notice when a Black person is playing Shaw, or Shakespeare.

I know there is always great concern as to how audiences will react—will subscribers be “ready” for a Black Lear? It then becomes our responsibility as directors, producers, and educators, to remind them that Ira Aldridge successfully played King Lear in England in 1827. We must remind them



Kevin Wilson as Mister Mister in Daniel Banks’ production of *The Cradle Will Rock* at New York University

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that this is part and parcel of the tradition of performing the canon (and also discuss his performance of this role in whiteface). Is it possible that we no longer live in as deep an age of intolerance as one of miseducation and misunderstanding? Conversations about "race" and diversity take place in schools, corporate settings, the front page of *The New York Times*. Perhaps we need not so much "educate" our audiences, which suggests a hierarchy of knowledge, as include them in our conversations and have ancillary programming so that our discussions do not happen behind closed doors, but as part of a larger, community dialogue. What a tremendous opportunity to contribute to this national dialogue, not lag behind it, and raise the level of critical thinking in our art. And if, perchance, there are segments of the audience that are using the theatre to escape the now omnipresent multiracialism and multiculturalism in this country, I suggest we no longer offer them sanctuary, thereby enabling this particular behavior and thinking. In any event, as subscription statistics show, the majoritarian audience is coming less and less to the theatre. If we have any hope at all of reaching out to disenfranchised and untapped demographic groups, these groups must feel they have a permanent place at the table, not a conditional invitation when the wind blows in the right direction. I feel we must ask ourselves collectively, is our theatre going to be an American theatre, or a homogenous one, representing a non-traditional (and amnesiac) America?

The bottom line is, I do not know how much more "castable" I would be today were I still acting, except, as is often suggested to me, as understudy to Brian Stokes Mitchell or Roger Guenveur Smith (and what an ironic footnote that casting Mitchell, a Mediterranean-looking man, in *Man of La Mancha* is now considered non-traditional). I believe we are now ready for a more complex conversation about these issues, one that will help the production, commissioning, and casting of new work, the revival of classics and the expansion of what we think

of as classics (maybe *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* will get a much deserved revival). The work that has been done in the name of "non-traditional casting" has changed the industry, and brought crucial conversations to the fore. There are clearly other applications of non-traditional casting that are still critical to foreground in terms of gender, disability, and other strategies of diversifying what we see onstage. Although the term applies to more than just color and ethnicity, for the most part, that is the common currency of the debate. By shifting the conversation, substituting a more precise and historically accurate verbiage about "race," we could focus the initiative on these other areas where progress has been less visible. We still need to address representation and diversity in terms of actors of color—but does the heading "non-traditional" casting serve this particular purpose any more? We can now get even more specific with our goals, introduce a language that does not conflate color and ethnicity, that does not continue to teach the fiction of racial difference, and that, in fact, allows us to understand how class and culture are just as crucial elements in this equation as skin color. If we succeed, it may be that very soon our stages will truly resemble our streets and, in fact, many of our homes.✽

Black Business...

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Black artists don't woo Black businessmen. They feel more comfortable seeking the support of Black ministers and the Black church.

What exactly does a Black artist need from Black business? Black artists need Black companies to purchase art for their offices and lobbies. Black theatre companies and dance companies need Black businesses to make yearly grants; they also need CEOs and COOs to join the Board of Directors of these nonprofit institutions. Alvin Ailey Dance Theatre of Harlem, National Black Theatre, New Federal Theatre, Karamu Theatre, Amas Repertory Company, ETA, The Oakland Ensemble, Lorraine Hansberry Theatre, Jomandi Theatre Company, AUDELCO, Studio Museum of Harlem, Benny Andrews, John Biggers, (to name just a few) represent the best of artists and institutions providing cultural and spiritual sustenance. Yet, not one of these artists or institutions is supported primarily by Black businesses.

What does Black business need from the Black arts? They need art, dance, music and theatre as cultural and spiritual nourishment. They need access to the creative process so they can under-

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