

# Casting a Movement

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The Welcome Table Initiative

**Edited by Claire Syler and Daniel Banks**

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## Chapter 2

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### **Playing with “race” in the new millennium**

Justin Emeka

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# Playing with “race” in the new millennium

*Justin Emeka*

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When I was accepted into graduate school for directing, I received a suggested reading list of plays and authors that terrified me. I was not terrified by the amount of reading, but by the number of White authors I might be expected to direct. Although I liked some of the plays, culturally speaking, I did not feel much connection to these texts and I resisted the idea of using them to develop my skills as a director. I feared that they might somehow force me to compromise my passion and/or purpose as a Black artist.

The fear must have been on my face when they introduced me during orientation because, afterwards, I was approached by one of the professors who had helped recruit me. She invited me to her office and told me, “Don’t be scared, Justin. You are here because of the strength of your individuality, not in spite of it. I know that you know who you are, and so you will never lose yourself inside this education. In fact, I believe that you will find a way for it to make you stronger.” Her words and conviction gave me the confidence I needed to begin to read the plays from that suggested reading list and learn to see the possibilities for staging them through the cultural lens of my own legacy.

Three years later, I directed my thesis production of William Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, re-imagining my production in the South just after the Civil War. Though I kept Shakespeare’s language, characters, and plot largely intact, I created a unique backstory using historical research and set the action in and around a once majestic plantation house. In my interpretation, Macbeth was a White Northern general completing a brutal military campaign to win the war. Lady Macbeth was a Southern belle, with whom he had recently fallen in love and married. Although she sincerely loved Macbeth, Lady Macbeth despised the Northern King Duncan, a charismatic Lincoln-like figure, whose demise she was eager to plot. Macbeth’s best friend and comrade in arms, Banquo, was a Black Union soldier. Although equal to Macbeth in intelligence, merit, and experience, Banquo remained under Macbeth’s command. The witches were newly freed African slaves who still lived an impoverished life as servants in the house and in the fields. At night, they were sustained by their ancestral rhythms and spiritual faith that allowed them to see beyond the

present and into the past and future. Through ritual and possession, the witches foretold Macbeth’s ascent to the throne, as well as the ultimate succession of Banquo’s seed—Black kings claiming power for many generations to come.

As a result of the success of that production over twelve years ago, I have continued to develop productions throughout my career that re-imagine the function of “race” in plays such as *Death of a Salesman*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *The Glass Menagerie*, and *Romeo and Juliet*. My purpose with this essay is to illustrate how I developed my process as a director for re-imagining race while incorporating Black and Brown actors in “classical” plays by White or European authors. I accomplish this approach by:

- re-interpreting the text through a Black or Brown experience;
- finding ways to support that interpretation with creative and historical cultural references;
- and using archetypes to help actors shape characters that can transform the expectations of both artists and audiences.

Through this process I create new opportunities that can provide actors of color access to a legacy of Eurocentric theater that, for many years, has remained culturally exclusive. As theaters and schools work to find ways to engage contemporary audiences by being more inclusive, in addition to producing plays by writers of color, it is also important to invite different cultural lenses into the process of staging plays by White authors that continue to be widely studied and produced year after year. In doing so, audiences and artists discover important new perspectives, new relevance, and new possibilities in performing great texts from the past.

## Recognizing “race”

In “The Welcome Table: Casting for an Integrated Society,” Daniel Banks argues, “because of the continued discussion of race in US society, racialism (accepting and acting according to a system of so-called racial difference) and racism (discrimination according to presumed race, often based on appearance) are ever present” (Banks 2013, 3). Race is an abstract and elusive idea which makes it challenging for many people to discuss. Sometimes race is a reference to physical features such as skin color or hair texture or lip fullness; sometimes race is a reference to place of birth or parents’ birth; sometimes race is a reference to language, religion, or behavior. Within the context of this essay, I use the term “Black people” broadly and inclusively to refer to all those with African ancestry. I use the term “Brown people” to refer to communities from the Americas and Asia that have had limited or no access to systemic “White privilege.”

Scientifically, it has been proven that there are only extremely small genetic differences that separate us as human beings or warrant the racial distinctions



Figure 2.1 The three witches inviting Macbeth. Production photo from *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare at Oberlin College in 2010. Directed by Justin Emeka. Photo by John T. Seyfried.

that we have come to rely on in distinguishing the world's population. That is to say, scientifically, there is only one race—the human race (Bonilla-Silva 2010, 8). Nevertheless, from generation to generation, race has continued to play a significant role in how people in the United States construct identity and, in turn, as a concept, race greatly informs how and who theaters cast in their season of plays. Therefore, placing Black and Brown bodies in roles originally imagined for White actors potentially raises complex questions that actors, directors, and audiences must learn to address.

In 1996 August Wilson delivered his famous address, “The Ground on Which I Stand,” to the Theatre Communications Group National Conference in Princeton, NJ, where he vehemently denounced the casting of Black actors in so called “colorblind” productions:

Colorblind casting is an aberrant idea that has never had any validity other than as a tool of the Cultural Imperialists who view American culture, rooted in the icons of European culture, as beyond reproach in its perfection ... For a Black actor to stand on the stage as part of a social milieu that has denied him his gods, his culture, his humanity, his mores, his ideas of himself and the world he lives in, is to be in league with a thousand nay-sayers who wish to corrupt the vigor and spirit of his heart.

(Wilson 2001, 22)

When I first read a transcription of August Wilson’s address shortly after he delivered it, I had recently graduated from college and was struggling to find my place and purpose in the US theater. Wilson’s words helped me realize that part of my struggle as a Black artist was the result of inheriting a canon of “classical” plays written by White men that mainly explore and celebrate some variation of White life. Thinking on my own experience growing up as an actor of color in “colorblind” high school productions, I realized how Black and Brown actors were often consciously and/or sub-consciously conditioned to hide their ethnicities in rehearsal rooms in order to fit into the world of the play. This process usually began in the audition, where the handful of Black actors had to tactfully adjust their speech and mannerisms so as not to be seen as “too Black”—they did this so they might have the opportunity to exist in the worlds of plays such as *Our Town*, *The Music Man*, *The Man Who Came to Dinner*, or *Hamlet*. This was especially true with Shakespeare, where actors’ eagerness to fit in can even lead them to try and take on a bit of a British accent in their speech. As Ayanna Thompson notes in her work *Passing Strange: Shakespeare, Race, and Contemporary America*:

Shakespeare can oppress the people because the promotion of his universality makes White Western culture the norm from which everything else is a lesser deviation ... it is often assumed that Shakespeare’s plays are not only universal and timeless, but also humanizing and civilizing.

(Thompson 2011, 6)

Recognizing this struggle, I wanted to find creative ways to explore and celebrate Blackness onstage. My first instinct was to explore the works of August Wilson as well as other US-American Black authors such as Lorraine Hansberry, Alice Childress, Amiri Baraka, and Adrienne Kennedy; then I also read African and Caribbean Black authors such as Ama Ata Aidoo, Derek Walcott, and Wole Soyinka. I began to discover how diverse Blackness actually is and became inspired by the various ways Black theater artists represented themselves on stage through unique forms such as ntozake shange’s choreopoems and Aimé Césaire’s *A Tempest*, a retelling of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. I began to realize my problem with “colorblind” casting had to do with employing Black actors to perform roles written for White actors without incorporating Black culture. Ultimately, I decided to try and resolve my dilemma by directing.

As a director in graduate school, I became interested in casting Black actors to help craft a Black social milieu on stage in my favorite plays written by White playwrights. I thought about how some of my favorite jazz musicians—such as John Coltrane—were able to redefine songs through their own cultural aesthetic, like “My Favorite Things” and other Broadway tunes written by White composers. In this way, they were able to develop their own artistry while also introducing new possibilities for how music is played and

appreciated. In a similar fashion, I wanted to encourage a new style of theater that redefines the cultural identities of characters within the canon of “classical” plays by White authors. Theater has the ability to teach audiences to see beyond what actually is—and to dream about what can be. Over the years, I have directed many productions that provided opportunities to develop my unique directorial approaches by redefining “race.” One of my most significant early experiences was directing Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*.

## **Redefining “race”**

In 2008 I was invited by Oberlin College president Marvin Krislov to direct a multi-racial production of *Death of a Salesman* with a cast of half students and half Actors’ Equity Association actors (i.e., professional union). *Death of a Salesman* was always one of my favorite plays because it illustrates, through the story of Willy Loman, the tragic nightmare that can exist within the American Dream. The main action of the play involves the struggle to define one’s own identity in a world where a man’s worth is defined by his ability to make money. As a Black man in the United States, I felt I had a special appreciation for Willy’s attempts to be fully recognized in his society while trying to build a lasting legacy for his family. Featuring the renowned stage and screen actor Avery Brooks in the role of Willy Loman, I envisioned the Lomans as a Black family and began historical research to help me flesh out the concept of the play.

First, I needed to create a new backstory for Willy Loman as a charismatic, African-American traveling salesman in the 1940s and 1950s. I searched for stories or examples that could help ground my creative vision in reality and found a book by Stephanie Capparell, *The Real Pepsi Challenge* (2007), which detailed how the Pepsi-Cola company used African-American salesmen in the 1940s as a way to open up new markets to try and gain an advantage over their competitor, Coca-Cola. Although the play never mentions exactly what Willy sells, I used this as inspiration and decided Willy had made a career for himself by opening small, over-looked markets in African-American communities for a large, predominately White sales company. I wondered who might have been one of Willy’s heroes when I came across Booker T. Washington’s speech at the Atlanta Exposition in 1896. Washington articulated a philosophy of Black mobility by gaining trust and employment from White people. He felt it was far more important for Black people to learn a good trade and be liked as opposed to going to college and fighting for social equality. I realized Willy reflected a similar philosophy that the best way for him and his sons to get ahead was by building character through trades and services as opposed to academics and scholarship. As I read the following speech from Willy to his two sons, Biff and Happy, I recognized great potential in Booker T. Washington being a strong influence in Willy’s life:



Figure 2.2 Production photo from *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller at Oberlin College in 2008. Petronia Paley as Linda Loman, Avery Brooks as Willy Loman. Directed by Justin Emeka. Photo by John T. Seyfried.

WILLY: Bernard can get the best marks in school, y’understand, but when he gets out you are going to be five times ahead of him ... Because the man who makes an appearance in the business world, the man who creates personal interest, is the man who gets ahead. Be liked and you will never want.

(Miller 1980, 23)

Next door to the Lomans lives Charley and his son Bernard. Willy and Charley are good friends; but they are also locked in a subtle but profound competition with one another that is established in their first scene together in which they discuss the fate of their sons while trying to beat each other playing cards. To highlight the complexities of their relationship, I did not want Charley to be Black. I wanted Charley and his son to reflect the experience of another marginalized ethnic group in America that, at the time, may have confronted similar challenges as Black Americans, but was able to overcome them to achieve more socio-economic mobility. In my research, I found the book *Strangers and Neighbors: Relations between Blacks and Jews in America*, edited by Maurianne Adams and John Bracy, which helped me trace the historical alliance between Black and Jewish communities as well as conflicts around accusations of Jewish racism or Black anti-Semitism (Adams and Bracy 1999).

I conceived of Charley as a Jewish immigrant who fled Poland during the invasion of Hitler's Third Reich at the beginning World War II. Charley and Willy's friendship originally emerged out of the convenience of being neighbors. However, Willy always saw himself as ahead of Charley, because Willy believed himself to be more "American" than his Jewish friend. Yet, over the years, as Charley and his son Bernard climb the socio-economic ladder while Willy and his sons struggle to find their place in the world, Willy's respect for Charley becomes muddled with resentment. When faced with financial hardships, Willy's pride will not allow him to accept "hand-outs" from Charley or be in a position where he must accept the fact that he is worth less than Charley in the United States:

WILLY: I can't work for you, Charley.

CHARLEY: What're you, jealous of me?

WILLY: I can't work for you, that's all, don't ask me why.

CHARLEY: You been jealous of me your whole life, you damned fool!

(Miller 1980, 71)

Willy struggles his whole adult life to understand how Charley, an immigrant, so easily passes him by economically. His inability to find an answer for himself creates an estranged relationship between Willy and his own country.

Willy is haunted by an acute "double consciousness," as described by W.E.B. Du Bois in 1903, that results from being Black and American, trying to navigate two worlds, two loyalties, two sensibilities (Du Bois 1996, 17). Having served his purpose for his company, he is of little use to the next generation of the company's leadership. Willy is caught between the reality of who he wants to be in "America"—how he wants to be seen—and the reality of who he is in the United States and how he is actually seen—which is not at all:





Figure 2.3 Production photo from *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller at Oberlin College in 2008. Marc Jablon as Charlie, Avery Brooks as Willy Loman. Directed by Justin Emeka. Photo by John T. Seyfried.

WILLY: You know the trouble is Linda, people don't seem to take to me ... I know it when I walk in. They seem to laugh at me ... I don't know the reason for it, but they just pass me by. I'm not noticed.

(Miller 1980, 26)

Willy's obsession with gaining success in a White world creates a strange emulation of "Whiteness" and, in an attempt to find validation, he engages in a secret affair with a White woman that would haunt him for the rest of his life.

Though it involves laughter and simple pleasures, it is not merely a simple fascination between a Black man and a White woman but also a momentary connection between two individuals who are alienated in their own realities:

WILLY: You picked me?

WOMAN: I did. I've been sitting at that desk watching all the salesmen go by, day in and day out. But you've got such a sense of humor, and I think you're a wonderful man ... My sisters'll be scandalized.

(Miller 1980, 27)

Willy's emulation of whiteness also creates an acute sense of "colorism." Alice Walker states in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* that colorism "is the prejudicial or preferential treatment of people within the same race based on the color of their skin tone" (Walker 1983, 280). In this production, colorism impacts Willy's relationship with his two sons—Biff has lighter skin and Happy has darker skin. Both sons desperately seek their father's approval, yet Willy favors Biff, convinced of his destined success, and pays little attention to Happy, who ultimately seeks self-love through womanizing and material things. Young Biff enjoys his privileged status until he catches his father cheating on his mother with a White woman. In that pivotal moment Biff realizes his father's profound weakness and is shattered by a sense of betrayal in his father and his own self-image. Biff's life and identity are sent into a tailspin as he struggles to figure out who he is now.

In the climactic scene, Biff forces the family to speak truthfully and confront the illusion that holds them all captive:

BIFF: You're going to hear the truth, what you are and what I am.

LINDA: Stop it!!

BIFF: The man don't know who we are! The man is gonna know! We never told the truth for ten minutes in this house! ... I am not a leader of men, Willy, and neither are you. You were never anything but a hard-working drummer who landed in the ash can like all the rest of them ... I'm not bringing home any prizes any more, and you're not going to stop waiting for me to bring them home ... Pop, I'm nothing! I'm nothing, pop. Can't you understand that? There's no spite in it any more. I'm just what I am, that's all.

(Miller 1980, 95–96)

In the end, Willy takes his own life as his last attempt to try and help his family gain access to a world that rejects him. At his funeral, as the family reflects on the significance of Willy's troubled legacy, Biff leaves after coming to the conclusion, "He had the wrong dreams. All, all, wrong ... He never knew who he was" (Miller 1980, 100). Linda, Willy's wife, is left alone onstage by herself to make sense of their fate. In the final line of the play she ironically decries: "We're free ... We're free ... We're free" (101).

Once I completed my initial concept illuminating the story and major themes of the play through Afrocentric cultural perspectives, the next challenge was to guide the refinement of the concept in rehearsal with actors, for it is the actors who ultimately are responsible for transforming “race” within the play.

## **Transforming “race”**

Each production introduces me to different casts that bring unique personalities, skills, and challenges to the process. From production to production there is no exact blueprint for how to guide actors from first rehearsal to opening night. However, it is important to develop a working understanding of the company members as individuals and artists; and secondly, it is helpful to provide good reference and direction that rouses the best of their creative abilities.

One of the most important techniques I use while working with actors of color to help them see themselves inside a role is to find archetypal references that allow each actor to embrace their character within their own cultural spectrum. I learned this early in my career while directing a production of *The Glass Menagerie* with a Black actor in the role of Tom. About two weeks into rehearsals, although the actor was doing reasonably well in his emotional work, I could tell there was something inhibiting his ability to embody the role fully. One night after rehearsal he confessed that he was still really struggling to see himself inside the part. He was a big fan of Tennessee Williams and knew the play was autobiographical, so he could not stop hearing Tennessee Williams’s voice inside his head as he spoke the lines. Every time he opened his mouth, he said he felt a little ridiculous.

We spoke for some time, as I was trying to assess if he had any personal hang-ups about embracing my concept that Tom was a Black, sexually repressed, gay man in the 1950s who longed to abandon his mother and sister to pursue his dreams as a writer. Although the actor had no problem embracing those circumstances, when he spoke he felt out of place in Tennessee Williams’s reflection. Finally, after about two hours of talking, I asked him, “Have you ever heard James Baldwin speak?” (the actor looked a lot like James Baldwin). And as soon as I asked it, a light came on in his head and he said, “Of course!” He went home and spent the next morning listening to James Baldwin interviews. When he came back the next day to rehearsal, he was glowing and, almost miraculously, was able to find his own voice. I was amazed how quickly his acting was elevated. I realized he needed a reference that would give him permission to embrace the role for himself culturally. By referencing James Baldwin’s voice, it allowed him to find his own voice while speaking the words of Tennessee Williams. I realized how important it can be in building a character to find images and voices of people in which the actors can see their own likeness. Without such references, it can create serious psychological barriers that keep them from being able to fully embody their roles.

Building from these insights, on the first day of rehearsal I try to fill the room with historical and artistic images that I use to help create my concept—particularly those images that resemble the appearance of my actors in the room. I make a point early on in the process to lead a discussion with the company about “race”—and how it impacts the actors’ identities offstage—to help build a cohesive understanding for how race will inform their character work onstage. Our ability to talk about race within the artistic process requires us to discuss it from different points of view, even different periods in time.

In my process, recognizing Blackness in a character is not to prescribe a particular behavior to that character, but rather to provide an important point of entry for both the actor and the audience. Some actors get it immediately, while others have a hard time and need more reference and direction. Actors of color who grew up in predominately White communities may not feel an instinctual relationship to any Black and Brown cultures and subsequently lack confidence in their ability to identify “authentic” cultural references to draw from. Some Black and Brown actors, who have little to no experience with material by White authors, may also have aversions to working on these texts. In most cases, creating a strong sense of community among the cast will greatly enable the actors to overcome their own apprehensions and take risks by building off of each other.

All peoples have legacies and dreams within their cultural memories that may be applied to stimulate innovation and inspiration in the classical theater of other cultures. In my work I invite actors to help fill the room with references for the characters that are rooted in the company members’ own cultural experiences and imaginations. I encourage all the actors to bring into the rehearsal room different songs, dances, music, books, artwork, objects, and/or stories that they believe reflect something unique about the characters and/or world we are creating. In this way actors can begin to help serve as valuable references for each other. For instance, in my production of *Macbeth*, an actor playing one of the witches was also an African dancer. One day she taught the company a dance that she felt reflected the “energy” of the witches. I could tell it was the first time one of the other actors playing a witch had ever danced like that and I could sense how she was frustrated and perhaps a little ashamed by her inability to catch on immediately. But, as the whole cast continued to encourage and support each other, she became more comfortable. As she became freer inside the dance, she gained a new confidence that transformed her presence inside the rehearsal room.

The next day another actor, playing the Porter, brought in a traditional Afro-Brazilian instrument called the *berimbau* that he thought the porter might play in his spare time. On a break he began to play. Drawn to the sound of the instrument, the actor who had initially struggled the day before began to do the dance as the Porter-actor continued to play. The other witches joined in. Seeing them work together, I realized the potential of creating a more developed relationship between the Porter and the witches, imagining that they

were all servants on different parts of the Macbeth plantation. We began using the *berimbau* to construct melodies with the witches’ lines that became chants. As we moved into staging, I created transitions with the Porter inconspicuously playing rhythms on his *berimbau*. Then, in the climactic scene between Macbeth and the witches, we heard the Porter playing his instrument in the distance while the witches danced and chanted in time to his rhythm, “Double, double toil and trouble; / Fire burn, and cauldron bubble” (4.1.10–11).

## In conclusion

Theater is fluid, and the cultural aesthetics from production to production are not fixed nor prescribed. The world of the play is uniquely crafted by the artists involved with each production. By reimagining the presence of Black and Brown life within the context of Eurocentric plays, I use theater as a tool to teach people to look for Black and Brown life where they have been trained by omission to ignore it. As our world changes, I believe we are living in exciting times that demand all theater artists to re-imagine how we see ourselves both onstage and off. Living in a nation that promotes an ideal of racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity—yet in action is still segregated in so many ways—there is a growing movement to find ways to fearlessly address issues of race through casting in a way that invites more participation from historically marginalized communities.

Ultimately, I want my work to help teach audiences and artists to embrace the creative possibility that there is no place on this planet nor time in history where it is impossible to imagine the contributions and presence of Black and Brown peoples. If contemporary audiences can sit in a movie theater and believe in White, Black, and Brown, English-speaking people living on space-ships a long time ago, throughout galaxies far, far away, then surely they can come to embrace a Black or Brown Prince in a fictionalized Denmark struggling with the dilemma of whether “to be or not to be.”

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