



## The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare and Race

Patricia Akhimie (ed.)

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### CHAPTER

## 29 Casting Shakespeare Today

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### Abstract

This chapter expands widely-used casting categories such as 'colour blind' and 'colour-concept' from four categories (as quoted in Thompson) to nine categories. It also addresses the rationale for removing 'colour' as the primary focus of casting decisions and provides new terminology that shifts away from ableist language (such as problematic usage of 'blind'). The chapter puts forward terms such as 'Nondeliberate Identity Casting' as 'Identity Conscious Casting' instead. Citing diverse artists and casting scholars throughout, this chapter is the culmination of more than a decade of research and practice in the theatre. The chapter closes with a critical analysis of the factors that inform questions of dramaturgy, ethics, authenticity, and positionality in casting practices. The new and expanded vocabulary about casting is necessary for a wider conversation about staging and the aesthetic considerations and ethical practices of theatre-making.

**Keywords:** casting, colour blind casting, Shakespeare, performance, antiracist theatre, equity diversity inclusion (EDI), theatre, theatrical practice, nondeliberate identity casting

**Subject:** Shakespeare Studies and Criticism, Literary Theory and Cultural Studies, Literature

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As theatrical practices and identity categories have changed over time, casting as a means to provide cultural context and to engage with the political moment has only increased in importance. While casting strategies are shared across the staging of works by various playwrights and in theatres across the world, what is unique to casting Shakespeare crosses multiple strands: his prevalence in the cultural consciousness, the repetition of his plays across media and in education, lengthy and international performance histories, that the forward action of the plays is not largely dependent on specific cultural settings, the historical figures are long deceased, and his work is in the public domain so it therefore can be

altered without penalty and performed at no cost. This last factor offers a freedom for experimentation that is now central to any conversation on staging Shakespeare today.<sup>1</sup>

p. 478 Through my work as a consultant and dramaturg for theatres over the last decade, I have extended strategies for casting practices to nine categories.<sup>2</sup> In this chapter, I detail these types of casting, specifically for Shakespeare. Most casting terms have traditionally begun with ‘colour’, as theatre is a highly visual medium. But the term ‘colour blind casting’ uses the metaphor of disability in a problematic way and for a phenomenon that extends beyond the colour of skin. Experimentation with casting is always an engagement with politics and identity more largely. Here I redefine casting categories to go beyond the visual that is often equated to race and embrace the nuances of intersectional identities inclusive of ethnicity, gender, sexuality, ability, and neurodiversity that have different legible signifiers, onstage and off. My removal of ‘colour’ from the prefix to casting categories is a radical restructuring, or the basis of intersectionality as praxis. Blackface in theatrical performance today rarely has to do with putting on black makeup; it is often the coded language of asking actors to act more ‘street’ or ‘sassy’; brownface functions much the same way, with an excessive emphasis on accents and language.<sup>3</sup> What follows are nine strategies for casting, each with their own implication for Shakespearean performance.

Additionally, I establish a conversation about both dramaturgical and ethical questions that inform casting decisions. Casting is a highly critiqued portion of the process of theatre-making, and despite the heavy emphasis on representation in conversations today,<sup>4</sup> scholar Amy Cook argues that strategic mis-casting against authentic ideas about a character can prompt conversations about power and society (Cook 2020, 32–33). Cook writes that ‘counter casting’ occurs when ‘the body playing the part does not match the presumed race or gender’ (Cook 2018). For example, when the Royal Shakespeare Company cast Nigerian-British actor David Oyelowo to play King Henry VI in their 2001 *This England: The Histories* trilogy (dir. Michael Boyd), he became the first Black actor to play an English king on a prominent British stage; when they revived the show in 2006 and replaced Oyelowo with Nigerian-British actor Chukwudi Iwuji, this reinforced the push against traditions and stereotype, and with this repetition, shifted ideas about who could and should play such roles.

p. 479 Identity categories vary across countries and have the potential to change over time—which peoples are grouped together, if they are constituted by geography, religion, shared history, or other demarcations, how terms such as race and ethnicity are distinguished—and these ongoing conversations signal that the categories are constructs, but bias and racism are real.<sup>5</sup> We have divided up the world and its peoples into categories, and sometimes people from different groups have more in common, in experience and/or appearance, than people within the same group. Identity is personal, yet it is also relational, and that relationship extends through the performer, the concept setting, the theatre space, the audience member, and the context of the play. Casting always forces a confrontation with not just theatrical norms but conceptions of identity; indeed, Claire Syler argues that ‘casting is inherently a political act’ (2019, 4). While the casting considerations presented here apply to practices and dramatists beyond Shakespeare, Shakespeare’s position in arts, culture, and education informs a key element in the network of decision-making about casting, and the choices made for Shakespearean performance drive casting experimentation for works by other playwrights.<sup>6</sup>

## Casting Strategies

Formerly known as ‘Colour Blind Casting’, what I term **Nondeliberate Identity Casting** is predicated on the notion that identity factors do not inform casting preferences or audience reception of a character. Described as resulting in the ‘best actor’ for the role, its original conception was ‘a meritocratic model in which actors are cast without regard to race’ (Thompson 2011, 76). This often results in the repetition of long-standing casting choices, primarily white casts on British and American Shakespearean stages. Additionally, one of the flaws of this type of casting is that it often weighs some identity factors more rigidly than others; for example, gender-aligned casting is often adhered to even when race or ‘colour’ is considered not to be a factor. It also tends to result in casting actors from dominant identities (white, able-bodied, cisgender) in primary roles and actors from marginalized groups in secondary and tertiary roles.<sup>7</sup> For example, the 2013 West End production of *Henry V* (dir. Michael Grandage) aligned the genders of the actors with the characters and the show starred white super-celebrity Jude Law as the lead with other white actors in the majority of roles and cast BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour) actors in secondary roles, such as Noma Dumezweni as Mistress Quickly/Alice, Prasanna Puwanarajah as Montjoy, and Ashley Zhagazha as Chorus/Boy.

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**Conceptual Casting** uses identity as the concept for the production. This strategy is often meant to provoke attention to dominant histories (theatrical and/or sociological) by subverting them. The oft-cited Shakespeare Theatre Company’s (STC) 1997 *Othello* (dir. Jude Kelly) starring white British actor Patrick Stewart with an all-African American cast differentiated Stewart from the cast racially and sonically, as Stewart retained his British accent amongst the cast of Americans. More importantly, the casting choice worked against the contemporary performance tradition of casting a Black *Othello* with an otherwise white cast. Likewise, in Will Geer Theatricum Botanicum’s 2014 *King Lear* (dir. Ellen Geer) Ellen Geer starred as Queen Lear alongside three male actors as her sons. As in the case with the STC *Othello*’s racial concept casting, the Theatricum’s gender concept casting was not commented upon in performance but caused the audience to experience the disjunction between textual character descriptions and performance traditions versus actors’ bodies.

**Societal Casting** involves the casting of actors of a certain identity in roles that they often ‘fill’ in society (Thompson 2011, 76–78). While this may be intended to mirror society, it can reinforce stereotypes or essentialist ideas. In *William Shakespeare’s Romeo + Juliet* (dir. Baz Luhrmann), the Capulet men are cast as a Latinx gang and played by Latin, Latinx, and Latin American actors—Italian Paul Sorvino, Colombian/Puerto Rican John Leguizamo, Mexican actor Carlos Martín Manzo Otálora, respectively—bringing together tropes about violence, skin colour, ethnicity, and masculinity. Chicago Shakespeare Theater’s 2010 *Romeo and Juliet* (dir. Gale Edwards) cast Black actress Ora Jones as the Nurse and white actress Joy Farmer-Clary as Juliet. A white woman with a Black servant aligns with historical paradigms, as does a thin white woman as the ingénue and a curvaceous Black woman in a secondary, comedic, and servant role aligns with theatrical paradigms. In Yale Rep’s 2011 *The Taming of the Shrew*, director Lileana Blain-Cruz invoked societal casting to draw attention to prejudice; she cast Lupita Nyong’o—the only Black woman in the cast—as Katherine, to depict the isolation and treatment that Katherine experienced from the other characters as a reflection of how white society often positions Black women.

**Cross-Cultural Casting** transposes a play to a different culture, achieved through casting choices and dramaturgy (Thompson 2011, 76–78). This permits theatres and actors from marginalized communities to perform a story that was not written with their cultural identity in mind. The Federal Theatre Project’s 1936 ‘Voodoo *Macbeth*’ (dir. Orson Welles) is an example of cross-cultural casting; the Scottish setting was transposed to a vague Caribbean one, and Black actors were cast.<sup>8</sup> Nearly a century later, cross-cultural casting today involves an improved specificity and attention to the cultural setting due to a heightened valuation of dramaturgical research into the concept setting, an increased diversity of artists in the

production process, and a greater desire for mimesis in cultural transposition. For the World Shakespeare Festival in 2012, the Royal Shakespeare Company staged *A Much Ado About Nothing* (dir. Iqbal Khan) set in contemporary Delhi with a south Asian cast, costuming, music, and aesthetic, and in 2019 Yale Repertory staged *Twelfth Night* (dir. Carl Cofield) with BIPOC actors and created Illyria through a theatrical aesthetic of Afrofuturism—the philosophy and intersection of the Black diaspora and technology. Shakespeare’s plays, or at least a dozen of his most recognizable, offer familiar stories that are not dependent on specific settings ↪ to drive the action; they function as templates that can absorb new cultures and locales, allowing casting and a concept setting to transport the play to a different culture.

Formerly ‘Color-Conscious Casting’, **Identity-Conscious Casting** casts with knowledge of the actor’s identity to create a diverse world (Hopkins 2018). Antithetical to Nondeliberate Identity Casting, this strategy acknowledges that identity factors are signifiers to audiences and makes a deliberate effort to create a diverse world onstage, even if identity factors are made a priori within the production.<sup>9</sup> In the Oregon Shakespeare Festival’s 2010 *Hamlet* (dir. Bill Rauch), Hamlet and Claudius were played by white actors, the Ghost by a white and deaf actor, Gertrude was played by an African American actress, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were played by a Korean-Canadian/American woman and a Nicaraguan-American woman as a lesbian couple. The Public’s 2009 *Twelfth Night* (dir. Daniel Sullivan) starred white actress Anne Hathaway as Viola, Latino actor Raúl Esparza as Orsino, and African American actress Audra Macdonald as Olivia. These choices mirror the diversity of contemporary culture and chip away at hegemonic traditions in the casting of Shakespearean plays.

**Conscious Casting**, as defined by David Valdes Greenwood, extends the consciousness that can be achieved through Identity-Conscious Casting to an imperative that it must begin with the writing (Greenwood 2018). Greenwood conceives that holistic and intersectional casting practices must be embedded in the script. Conscious Casting can be found in adaptations and appropriations of Shakespeare’s plays. Ping Chong and Company’s *Throne of Blood* (dir. Ping Chong)—a stage adaptation of Kurosawa’s film of the same name—at Oregon Shakespeare Festival and Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM) in 2010—was written for and cast with Japanese culture and Noh aesthetics throughout; Japanese actress Ako played the Lady Macbeth character, and as detailed in the script, performed the sleepwalking scene entirely in Japanese. The 2011 film *Private Romeo* (dir. Alan Brown) stars gay actor Matt Doyle and actor Seth Numrich as teenagers who fall in love while in an all-male military academy. Likewise, American singer Halsey (she/her, they/them) released the concept album *hopeless fountain kingdom* in 2017 that was largely based on *Romeo and Juliet*; the album included vocals by bisexual artist Lauren Jauregui, swapped gender roles for the title characters, and included gay romantic pairings. Certainly, Shakespeare did not write with today’s politics and national divisions in mind, though with changes to theatrical laws (e.g. allowing women on stage) and changes to political laws (e.g. desegregation), modern and contemporary adaptations of his works can result in a version of conscious casting of actors from marginalized groups.

**Identity-Specific Casting** casts actors for the sole/nearly-sole purpose that the actor’s identity aligns with the character’s identity. While this can provide the authenticity that dominates casting choices and controversies today—for a character from a ↪ marginalized identity to be portrayed by an actor from that identity—it can unintentionally essentialize and homogenize conceptions of those very identity categories.<sup>10</sup> The Peter Hall Company’s 1989 *The Merchant of Venice* (dir. Sir Peter Hall) starred Dustin Hoffman as Shylock, likely because Hoffman is Jewish. A celebrity and lauded actor, Hoffman’s Americanness and American accent distinguished him from the British cast (just as the Conceptual Casting of STC’s *Othello* in which Patrick Stewart’s British accent distinguished him from the otherwise American cast), a savvy dramaturgical tactic to connote Otherness.<sup>11</sup> But it was the only time he performed on Broadway since the 1960s (aside from his role five years earlier in *Death of a Salesman*), and it would be his last. It was also his first (and last) Shakespearean role. Similarly, the 2014 *Othello* (dir. Barry Edelstein) at San Diego’s Old Globe starred Black actor Blair Underwood as Othello. He had performed the role of Claudio

in a production of *Measure for Measure* in Shakespeare in the Park in 1993, and like Hoffman, was not known as a Shakespearean or stage actor.<sup>12</sup> Akin to this experience of a Hollywood actor on a theatrical stage, in a film, the identity of an actor can function in the same way amongst other celebrities who are not (known to be) from the same marginalized identity. For example, the uncredited cameo of gay actor Rupert Everett's portrayal of Christopher Marlowe in the 1998 film *Shakespeare in Love* (dir. John Madden) reinforced a thesis that Marlowe was gay, simply through the actor's known identity and without anything to suggest it within the dramaturgy.<sup>13</sup> These types of casting decisions are predicated largely on one factor as means to avoid controversy through an 'authentic' casting choice for a character from a marginalized group that stands apart from other characters in the play or film, and the actor is often locally or globally renowned.

**Skills-Object Casting** involves casting actors based on skill with puppetry, masks, or objects, regardless of identity factors. This shifts emphasis from an actor's body to a theatrical object to create a character. Puppets and masks can in fact carry identity markers and puppeteers may be cast based on their identity to invoke characterization for the puppet.<sup>14</sup> Yet typically when employed in Shakespearean performance they do not. ↪ Examples include the UK-based Forced Entertainment's 2016 *Complete Works: Table Top Shakespeare* in which six artists presented thirty-six of Shakespeare's plays in condensed versions, told through objects and puppets. Likewise, Off-Broadway's The Puppet Shakespeare Players, founded in 2011, has staged puppet versions of *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Titus Andronicus*.<sup>15</sup>

**Coalitional Casting**, as defined by Patricia A. Ybarra, involves 'committing to the cause of telling a marginalised story' (Ybarra 2015). To actualize this, a theatre must go beyond a focus on casting to one of storytelling, and expend greater care in the processes of making theatre. For example, to fully commit to allyship, Brian Eugenio Herrera notes that Coalitional Casting must integrate vocal coaching for dialects and dialogue (Herrera 2017, 29). Although Ybarra and Herrera advocate for this work in university settings, and in fact model how Coalitional Casting is necessary to train the next generation of theatre-makers, in Shakespearean performance, the strategies that they define are most often actualized by robust Shakespeare theatres with extensive resources. Recent examples include the 2020 staging of James Baldwin's *The Amen Corner* (dir. Whitney White) by the Shakespeare Theatre Company in Washington, DC and the 2022 staging of *Out of Time* (dir. Les Waters), five monologues by Asian writers and performed by Asian actors,<sup>16</sup> at The Public Theater in partnership with The National Asian American Theatre Company (NAATCO). But this type of process-oriented work can also be done with Shakespeare's plays, as evidenced in the 2019 development and production of *La Comedia of Errors* (dir. Bill Rauch) at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival that employed dramaturgs from the Latinx communities adjacent to Ashland who also functioned as liaisons to their communities, a diverse group of artists on and off-stage, and was performed at cultural centres and smaller venues within the local area (Della Gatta 2023, chapter 5, 'El Público: Healing and Spectatorship'). Ultimately, Herrera notes that with Coalitional Casting the performers and the production team are accountable as allies (Herrera 2017, 32).

A person's positionality—location, identity, experience, biases—informs how they receive and interpret signifiers—inclusive of images, cultural references, and bodies onstage. What is most important for a theatre and cast is to know why casting decisions are made, and everyone needs to be clear about the philosophy that informs choices because casting is just as much a part of the design of the show as set, costuming, music, and dramaturgical design. Audiences are diverse and will invariably interpret aspects of a production differently, but casting strategies must be discussed and communicated to the artists like other key factors in the director's vision. The influence of the arts, ↪ especially the live experience of the theatre, carries a responsibility as well. Among other considerations, what is theatre's responsibility to the theatrical legibility of accuracy of identity? This question will continue to be debated—the how, why, and to what effect.

## Dramaturgy and Ethics

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There is no formula for casting, and the intersection of each production, play, theatre space, geographic location, company, and design team will produce different results. Casting is an aesthetic and artistic practice that changes because of acting methods, technological possibilities, repertory and hiring practices, laws, and social customs. At the intersection of these factors is a conversation between dramaturgy—the cultural context that is embedded in the script and the cultural context integrated into the production—and ethics—here, the moral questions and sociological factors that inform theatrical choices. These tensions play out in multiple forms across four intersecting strands: history, representation, dramaturgy, and the actor's identity.

Cultural and economic histories affect the consequences of theatrical casting decisions. This is the reality that makes the notion of living in a society that does not recognize or distinguish between identities only possible if you don't account for history or cultural context. Indeed, the categories of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, ability, and neurodiversity have all expanded and changed over time, and with those changes, new dramaturgies arise. For example, in the first US Broadway production of *Othello* to star a Black man with a white cast (dir. Margaret Webster) in the 1940s, Paul Robeson starred opposite Puerto Rican actor José Ferrer as Iago. Although the ethnic category of 'Hispanic' was gaining prominence at the time, Ferrer was largely considered white and not subject to the stereotypes and language that is applied to Hispanic or Latinx actors today. In addition, theatrical conventions, even if audiences are not well-versed in them, will resonate for an audience; blackface, gender-based traditions, and performance histories for a specific character all inform ideas of authenticity, acceptability, genre, and expertise. Yet they may provoke divergent responses, especially at the intersections of race and gender.<sup>17</sup> For example, the 2002 *Twelfth Night* (dir. Tim Carroll) at Shakespeare's Globe starring Mark Rylance as Olivia, was described as its 'most historically authentic to date' due to the all-male cast even though adult rather than adolescent men played the female roles (Costa 2002), whereas the 2019 all-women of colour *Richard II* (dirs. Adjoa Andoh and Lynette Linton) at Shakespeare's Globe in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse starring Adjoa Andoh in the title role, was described as 'a strong political statement' (Billington 2019). The intersections of a predominantly white cast of men playing a comedy in the outdoor Globe and staged in a vague and antiquated time and place will produce a fundamentally different response than a cast of women of colour in a British history play in the smaller indoor Wanamaker Playhouse that through its dramaturgy explicitly took up the consequences of British empire and nationalism.

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The frequency and genre of representation factor into casting as well. The less often a group is portrayed, the more weight any instance of representation in the media or arts carries. This too applies to plays, especially those that are singularly synonymous with a playwright—with Shakespeare as the primary example that runs antithetically to the experience of BIPOC playwrights; his plays are produced so often that a problematic production carries little weight on his producibility. By contrast, for BIPOC playwrights and characters, who have a lower frequency of production and representation, respectively, a greater concern falls on each performance to establish and maintain credibility;<sup>18</sup> this sentiment is often referred to as 'rep sweats', (Yang 2021) or sweating the representation of a group because they are portrayed or acknowledged infrequently and/or pejoratively.<sup>19</sup> The 2012 all-Aboriginal *King Lear* (dir. Peter Hinton) at the National Arts Centre (NAC) in Ontario was the first Shakespeare production on a mainstage in Canada with all Aboriginal actors—including August Schellenberg (Mohawk) as King Lear, Monique Mojica (Guna and Rappahannock) as Goneril, Tantoo Cardinal (Métis/Cree) as Regan, and Jani Lauzon (Métis) as Cordelia and the Fool—thus elevating the stakes for representing Aboriginal cultures, for making clear the credibility of Aboriginal artists as Shakespearean actors, and for opening up possibilities for Native practices in the Shakespearean rehearsal room.<sup>20</sup> Along with frequency of representation, production and reception also change based on genre of representation. For example, both the 1998 film *Shakespeare in Love* (dir. John Madden) which

contained a *Romeo and Juliet* love story in which nobody dies, and the ethnically inflected musical films of *West Side Story* (dirs. Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins 1961, and Steven Spielberg 2021) that end with the Juliet character alive, cultivate an affective experience for the audience that is fundamentally different than the experience of Shakespeare's stage tragedy. Cartoons, puppets, musicals, historical period pieces, and other theatrical and cinematic styles all prompt different expectations and consequences for those from marginalized groups.

p. 486 Dramaturgy provides context for a production, considering the historical context of the play, the time it was written and first performed, the concept setting, and the time period and location of the production. Two negotiations take place here: intention versus affect and authenticity versus expectations. In the first of these negotiations, the question arises if the actor is either to mimetically portray, or give the affective qualities of, a particular identity. If the actor and character are from wholly different identities, impersonation is often the effect, such as white British actor Laurence Olivier's 1965 film (dir. Stuart Burge) in which he employed blackface to play Othello. If from similar identity categories, such as Black British actor David Harewood's role as Morocco in the 2004 film *The Merchant of Venice* (dir. Michael Radford), connections can be more easily and ethically drawn for the audience—here based on assumptions about skin colour and not based on cultural background.<sup>21</sup> In the second of these negotiations, authentic casting choices may not be legible from the stage to all audience members; heritage, sexuality, gender, and ability are mis-read onstage (and off). When Kyle Seago performed as Demetrius in the bilingual—American Sign Language (ASL) and spoken English—version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at Seattle's Sound Theatre Company in 2018 (dirs. Howie Seago and Teresa Thurman), his performance and fluency in ASL led some audience members to assume he is deaf. The expectations for 'authentic' casting carry the questions of how far back we trace heritage, how to cast those who are not certain of their biological ancestry, and how appearances may not adhere to mainstream ideas of an identity. The biggest challenge to authentic casting is that it can imply that essential qualities of an identity exist, and that they can be communicated from the stage.<sup>22</sup>

The individual actor's identity typically gets the most explicit focus in conversations about casting, but there are two key considerations that fundamentally change audience reception. The first is the value of celebrity or status.<sup>23</sup> The impact of celebrity on a production cannot be underestimated, and this includes the stature of being known in a community or repertory that may function in a similar way. Celebrity/stature can result in more or less artistic freedom, depending on the role. For example, 82-year-old Ian McKellen's celebrity status was key to his casting as Hamlet in 2021 (dir. Sean Mathias), a role reserved for much younger actors and one that he played fifty years earlier. By contrast, the 1971 John Guare and Mel Shapiro musical adaptation, *Two Gentlemen of Verona* (dir. Mel Shapiro), starred then lesser-known stage actor Raul Julia as Proteus and involved a mostly devised theatre process—the actors' improvisations in rehearsal were woven into the script. With a role designed for him, and in part by him, it became the catalyst that propelled him to stardom.<sup>24</sup> The second consideration is the heavy question of who gets to perform whom. Factors include the following: how long ago the story takes place; if the actor and character are from the same identity group(s); how the actor is made to convey the character's identity (makeup, accent, prosthetics, voice, gesture, etc.); and whether the character is/was a real-life person.<sup>25</sup> In Shakespeare's plays, the few 'real life' characters are long deceased, although casting Adjoa Andoh, Cate Blanchett, Andre Holland, or Kevin Spacey as Richard II offers a point of interpretation even before the show begins.

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## Beyond the Appearance of Diversity

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Although people have expectations about a play, a theatre space, and well-known characters, there is both discomfort and the possibility of creating amazing art when expectations are challenged through diverse artists and artistry. The goal in art-making is to have a diversity of mind and of artistic practices, not just diversity of appearances, which includes listening to the voices of the cast and creative team. As Michael Rohd, founder of Sojourn Theatre Company, states, ‘Diversity is not a politically correct term for being nice or not offensive—it is a principle of inclusion by which you and your work grow more rich, more complex and more challenging, for you and those with whom you work and for whom you create. *To think about diversity not as representation, but to make art more diverse*’ (2011).

Theatre companies that limit casting based on identity factors such as race and/or gender in fact open up possibilities for creativity by foreclosing the possibility of nondeliberate identity casting. For example, the Los Angeles Women’s Shakespeare Company (LAWSC) that was established in 1993 staged their first production of *Hamlet* in 1995, co-directed by white actress Lisa Wolpe and Japanese-Canadian actress Natsuko Ohama, and they alternated playing the lead role. Likewise, Sherri Young founded the African-American Shakespeare Company (AASC) in 1994 in San Francisco to offer opportunities for Black and other BIPOC artists to perform classical works. More recently, the Mawa Theatre Company in the United Kingdom was founded in 2021, becoming the first Black female Shakespeare company in the country. These companies continue to experiment with unsettling dominant casting histories, and in so doing, they alter the theatrical landscape.

There isn’t one casting strategy that is best, as there isn’t one directing strategy that is best. It is the creativity of art-making and the ongoing expansion of who gets to make and perform Shakespeare that advances our understanding of his works, of our conceptions of identity, and of the means we use to express them.

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## Notes

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- 1 For an excellent breakdown of directorial strategies for Shakespeare, see Ney 2016.
- 2 Ayanna Thompson describes four types of casting practices for Shakespeare: colour blind, conceptual, societal, and cross-cultural (2011, 76–78). These four categories were established by the Non-Traditional Casting Project (NTCP), founded in 1986. The NTCP is now the Alliance for Inclusion in the Arts. See Pao 2010.
- 3 See Della Gatta 2023, especially chapter 2, 'Aurality: Hearing Ethnicity', and Dave 2013.
- 4 'Representation matters' is a nearly ubiquitous saying today, that simultaneously emphasizes the lack of visibility of marginalized peoples in media and positions of power and acknowledges the positive impact that recognizing oneself in a celebrity, successful person, and/or mentor can have on subverting limitations, both perceived and real.
- 5 The histories of assimilation and acculturation point to the reality that identity categories are elastic and change over time. For example, at present in the United States, on official forms such as the Census, there are four races (white, Black, Asian, and Indigenous) and one ethnicity (Hispanic/Latino). These categories, and who is included in them, are not permanent, and they vary greatly from those in other countries and even from the United States' past formulations of race and ethnicity. Likewise, gender and sexuality categories have expanded substantially in the past four decades, from two gender categories (male and female) on official forms to three or more today, and the expansion of GLBT in the 1980s to LGBTQIA+ today.
- 6 From the establishment of the New York Shakespeare Festival (now The Public Theater) in the 1950s until his death in 1991, Joe Papp was a key figure in experimenting with casting in Shakespeare. His work shifted audiences to welcome, and in fact, expect a range of actors and accents onstage. Though many of his experiments with accessibility and diversity were short-lived or caused controversy, his work crucially moved forward strategies for diversifying Shakespearean performance and US American theatre. In the UK, federal funding for large, established theatres such as the Royal Shakespeare Company and The National contributes to their influence on theatre throughout the country.
- 7 This practice is rightfully historically attributed to white directors and power structures, but unconscious bias and long-standing ideas about certain Shakespearean characters can lead to this casting practice by any director.
- 8 Thompson places this production under Conceptual Casting, but here I recategorize it as Cross-Cultural because the context (dramaturgy) connoted a different society and culture; casting Black actors was not simply to provoke a conversation about expectations (Conceptual Casting) but to transpose the story to another setting (Cross-Cultural Casting), no matter how vague.
- 9 Director Lavinia Jadhvani extends this diversity to offstage and backstage as well, stating, 'Identity-conscious directing involves design, it involves casting, it involves the rehearsal process and the run' (2021). For backstage statistics about the League of Resident Theatres (LORT) by pronoun, see the annual reports by McGovern (2015–2020).

- 10 Onstage, identity-specific casting promises authentic representation of a key quality associated with the actor and character; in the casting process, it is a strategy for actors from marginalized groups to be given opportunities from which they previously have been excluded due to racism, homophobia, and all forms of unconscious bias.
- 11 When the show moved from the West End to Broadway, some of the British actors were replaced with American actors.
- 12 Two years prior, Underwood had his first experience on Broadway, starring in the Cross-Cultural Casting version of *A Streetcar Named Desire* (dir. Emily Mann), which employed an all-Black cast and retained the location of the French Quarter in New Orleans but removed all the specific cultural references (such as Stanley as Polish) to transpose the play to Black culture and aesthetics.
- 13 Scholars have weighed in on the question of Marlowe's sexuality for some time, and this casting choice was a purposeful invocation of the long-standing debate. Everett was one of the few out Hollywood actors at the time and had just starred as the only gay character in the 1997 film, *My Best Friend's Wedding* (dir. P.J. Hogan).
- 14 For example, *Sesame Street*'s Big Bird, who is eight feet two inches, requires a tall puppeteer; Carol Spinney, who was five feet ten inches, originated the role of Big Bird and upon his retirement, was replaced by Matt Vogel, who is six feet one inch. In the successful musical with puppets, *Avenue Q*, some characters/puppets have blue or green skin colour, and race was clearly designated for the characters of Gary Coleman and Christmas Eve, but the lead roles of Christian and Kate were consistently cast by a male and female actor, respectively, due to the required vocal range for the songs. In both cases, skill as puppeteers was required along with identity characteristics necessary for performance.
- 15 Many elements of this type of casting extend to media that do not include actors' bodies such as animated and audio Shakespeares.
- 16 Also, *Out of Time* was the first all-Asian cast over the age of 60 in New York City.
- 17 In Justine Nakase's work on performance, she conceptualizes intersectionality as the 'nested figure' of the actor and the interplay of identities as 'scalar interculturalism' (Nakase 2019).
- 18 Plays by people from marginalized groups, even if there are no characters from that group, are subject to such scrutiny, especially if an identity category is key to the theme or dramaturgy; for example, African American playwright Branden Jacobs-Jenkins' play, *Appropriate*, has only white characters, but Black-white relationships are central to the plot.
- 19 The term was coined by Jenny Yang, Jeff Yang, and Phil Yu in 2015 at the premiere and viewing party for the sitcom *Fresh Off the Boat*.
- 20 Yvette Nolan (Algonquin) argues that the creative team must also be Aboriginal to fully actualize the space for Native practices in rehearsal (Nolan 2015). The 'opening up' I suggest here is part of a genealogy and process that develops over time with subsequent Native stagings.
- 21 Harewood is British with parents who hail from Barbados, while the character he portrayed is from Morocco.
- 22 It is also illegal in most countries to ask about a person's identity in a job application or interview. With strategies for ascertaining this information, identity is often read (and mis-read) in the audition room.
- 23 Status applies to theatre spaces as well: highly experimental productions typically occur at small theatres or exceptionally large and well-funded ones, but mid-size regional theatres may be more budget-constrained and resistant to 'risky' and experimental productions.
- 24 Julia notes how he sang a calypso one day in rehearsal and by the following day composer Galt MacDermot had written a calypso number for Julia's solo in the show (Julia 1987).
- 25 Outside of Shakespeare, other factors include: if a real-life character or their family expresses an opinion about the portrayal and if the character is still alive or was recently alive or active.