

The problem with colour-blind casting

Benjamin Kuffuor

In his 1952 book *Black Skin, White Masks* psychiatrist and intellectual Frantz Fanon wrote a broad dialectic on the effects of colonialism in shaping the black psyche. Fanon was born and raised in Martinique; in his observation, blacks were taught to revere white people in his native land and forced to adopt European values and customs if they chose to migrate to their colonial overseer, France. Fanon's book makes the argument that in order to exist in European society, the black man must be recognised as white or close to white. This could be achieved through manoeuvring successfully through western education and abandoning all 'primitive' elements of one's native culture. Essentially, rather than the white hegemony having to acknowledge a culture or ideas outside of its own, the blacks would simply learn to imitate it so both sides could co-exist amicably. This wouldn't resolve years of trauma and violence suffered by blacks, but it would enable the individual to flourish in a society that existed in opposition to them. When applying Fanon's perspective to the recent discussion of diversity in the arts, it's hard not to recognise a number of distinct parallels.

Diversity has become the buzziest of buzzwords in modern times; this is in large part thanks to the internet and the democratisation of critical opinion. Trending topics such as #OscarsSoWhite forced conversations into the public sphere that had hitherto only existed in black and brown spaces. Black entertainers and athletes became avatars for those working 9-5s who felt they weren't receiving their due as a result of structural racism. Through that prism, Beyoncé losing the Grammy Award for Album of the Year to Adele in 2017 became reflective of a white power structure suppressing black elevation, as opposed to a rich woman losing to another rich woman. The 'liberal' media had no choice but to react. In the States there were new success stories appearing seemingly overnight in film and television series from *Moonlight* (2017) to *Atlanta* (2016); *Get Out* (2017) to *Black Panther* (2018). The UK continued to drag its feet on screen and simply kept trust in the same crop of white authors, but incorporated more characters of colour in supporting roles. A more notable shift is occurring in British theatre, where black authors are beginning to earn West End transfers and productions of some classic texts are cast 'colour-blind'. The latter approach has been hailed as bold, innovative, progressive, vibrant and evolutionary. But is it?

The shift towards 'colour-blind' casting highlights that in some aspects the discussion has never been about diversity and has often been about visibility. It is a very important distinction to make because it speaks volumes about the audience perception of where power lies. The battle for visibility was fought mostly on two fronts, by the general public and by established performers within the industry. The public made memes and hashtags about the lack of black and

brown characters appearing in mainstream work. Performers used their clout and celebrity to force a change from within. Therefore, the industry responded by firstly appeasing both tiers of attack. Many actors were not just given the opportunity to appear in colour-blind pieces that would satisfy theatre audiences, they were also given more opportunity away from the stage as theatre-makers. Both moves were considered to be notable signs of an industry desire to change.

There have been incidents where colour-blind casting has received a strong push back from heavyweight industry names. In 2017, Edward Albee's estate refused to give permission for a production of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, because the director planned to cast a black actor in the role of a character who is referred to as having blonde hair and blue eyes throughout the text. In 2018, director Gregory Mosher walked off a Broadway production of Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* because he was refused the option of casting the siblings Ann and George Deever as African Americans. Rebecca Miller (custodian of the estate) stated, 'When Gregory suggested casting the Deevers as African American, I wanted to be sure the concept held water historically and thematically'. Miller continued by stating that she felt Mosher's casting 'was in danger of white-washing the racism of 1947 suburban Ohio'. When she suggested that Mosher adopt a truly colour-blind approach – meaning opening up all the roles to actors of colour, Mr Mosher chose to leave the production. The Albee estate had come under fire from the inclusive theatre community for a decision that was considered to be primitive and dated. The artistic director of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival Bill Rauch stated, 'As a classical theatre director I strongly believe in classics being interpreted in multiple

ways [...] And when it comes to trying to responsibly create work that reflects the 21st century, even with period work, casting, should be creative and inclusive wherever possible.'

The Albee and Miller examples illustrate what I have always perceived to be the biggest flaws of colour-blind casting. First, is the level of suspension of disbelief it imposes on the audience and the artistic fallout that occurs as a result. Second, is the underlying subtext for the need of white acceptance from black artists or the feeling of wanting to attend a party where you're not invited. The central argument of theatre makers in favour of colour-blind casting tends to fall in line with the idea that the stage is home to 'make-believe' and therefore one's ethnicity shouldn't matter at all when staging a production. However, that argument refuses to acknowledge that there's a world outside of theatre and for many in the audience their ethnicity does matter on a day-to-day basis.

When creating a character, every aspect of their life has to exist in the mind of the author. The author must have the capacity to think about who the character is but more importantly why the character makes the choices that they make. The reaction and thought process of the character will be determined by all of the components of their characterisation i.e. their gender, race, age, class, upbringing. If they react in a manner that is counter to our understanding of that character's experience or place in the world, we as the audience demand that this be justified in the text. If this doesn't occur at any point, then this is seen as a failure of the writer.

A crude example would be to place an old Etonian in a council estate at the start of a play. The audience will assume that the author is making a point, because we recognise an incongruity between the surroundings of an estate and the individual character placed in it. The hope is then that the author satisfies us with the choice of placing that character in this world as the narrative reveals itself. In my reading, Rebecca Miller was right to object to Gregory Mosher's original intention of making the Deevers African American but she was also wrong to suggest a fully colour-blind rendering of the play. Without delving too heavily into the text of the play, Miller's suggestion would've needed the audience to accept the idea of George Keller as a black man who happens to own his own munitions factory, a whole twenty years before the advancement of civil rights. This would undermine the naturalism in which the play is written and is perhaps why colour-blind casting lends itself better to plays written in verse or musicals. In the cases of *All My Sons* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* the audience are being asked to accept one aspect of the production as a piece of realism but then discarding a whole other element of truth from that time period.

There is also a failure to take into account that in these examples the authors are white men, writing how white people communicate in white spaces. Culture determines how families and individuals communicate with each other even in private. The director is commonly left with two choices when mounting a colour-blind production. They can either choose to relocate the play or change fragments of the text. The former is more common – an Ibsen play relocated to Africa,

Shakespeare in Brixton or O'Neill in the Caribbean. The choice in relocation barely investigates how the environment alters the dramatic meaning of a text. For example, in a West African version of *Romeo and Juliet*, would both characters be so quick to embrace the idea of suicide in cultures where dying by your own hand is considered an abomination or sin? The choice to re-write sections of a classic text simply poses the question, for what? If one has to revise whole sections of a play and reimagine character motivations, why not simply write a completely new play? Should there not be more of a drive to leave a canon of well crafted plays written specifically for black actors so in the future they can experience telling stories from their lens?

The lack of opposition to colour-blind casting from black theatre makers and performers throws open another fascinating layer of debate, beyond the obvious benefit of more employment. I suspect that part of the silence surrounding the topic has much to do with the distinction between diversity and visibility that I highlighted earlier.

Performers often need visibility to advance in their careers and blind casting offers them that. Diversity would require a systemic overhaul. It would be less interested in who got the job and more invested in who hires. The other reason for a lack of opposition may lie in the need for black performers and theatre makers to advance in their craft. Often black directors, writers and producers are sought to deliver not just black texts, but texts that adhere to an idea of blackness seen through a white filter. Subsequently, if black actors were only called upon to work in black shows they would end up playing variations of the same thing. The opportunity to

do a Miller or a Pinter or a Stoppard frees a performer up to play a role that isn't about their ethnicity or the issues surrounding being black. The irony of course being that in colour-blind productions their ethnicity is still part of the reason as to why the director chooses to cast them. Still, the open door allows the performer to show the full scope and range of their abilities. This is a further reason why it's key to separate the idea of diversity and visibility. There aren't too many other lines of work in which one would assume that the customer-facing part of the workforce is where the power lies. However, this has long been the pervading myth of the entertainment industry because the relationship between fan and consumer is so strong. The true reform needs to occur amongst the people that the audience doesn't see, in order to truly alter the perspectives of the people they do see.

In 1936 Orson Welles directed what is now known as the 'Voodoo' *Macbeth* at the Lafayette theatre in Harlem. The action of the play was transposed from Scotland to a fictional Caribbean country with customs resembling those of Haiti. The ten-week run is considered to be one of the most pivotal events in African American theatre as the all-black cast performed to sell-out crowds every night and rubbished notions that blacks were not interested in the theatre and/or capable of performing Shakespeare. The date of the production highlights that colour-blind casting can no longer be considered bold or radical or inventive in the modern day. At this stage, this is fairly ordinary at best and trite at worst. The more pertinent issue that the date flags up is that I shouldn't have to write an essay like this so many years after. There still aren't enough pieces by black authors in the

canon to advance the discussion away from colour-blind casting. Was it due to a lack of writers or a lack of opportunity? Either way, as a community we now have to make a decision on what we're trying to establish for generations to come. Is the desire to create an infrastructure that can present a myriad of black voices depicting a range of different stories and ideas or will future generations be performing in an all-black rendition of *The Ferryman*, with black authors being commissioned to transpose the text of Jez Butterworth's modern classic to Rwanda or Nigeria?

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Benjamin graduated from the National Film and Television School in 2011, and his first project following graduation was developed by Big Talk Productions for E4. Prior to his time at the NFTS, Benjamin's first short play was produced at the Theatre Royal Stratford East in 2007, and he participated in the Young Writers' Programme at the Royal Court Theatre in 2008. Benjamin has had attachments at both the Bush Theatre and the National Theatre. He is currently under commission at the Bush Theatre, writing a shadow script for *Kaos* (Netflix) as well as developing original pieces for *Kudos*, *Fearless Minds* and *The Forge*.

A recording of this talk can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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