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The meaning of the body in performance : cross-cultural casting and racial identity

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**THE MEANING OF THE BODY IN PERFORMANCE:
CROSS-CULTURAL CASTING AND RACIAL IDENTITY**

A Thesis

Presented to

**The Faculty of the Department of Theatre Arts
San Jose State University**

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Laura Long Patterson

May 2000

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ABSTRACT

THE MEANING OF THE BODY IN PERFORMANCE CROSS-CULTURAL CASTING AND RACIAL IDENTITY

By Laura Long Patterson

This thesis addresses the topic of re-codifying the racialized body in performance through the application of cross-cultural casting. It examines the historical theories of the races and their stereotyped image in the theatrical medium. It also examines the political debate surrounding the usage of the perceived “wrong” body in performance and exposes the limitations of the minority perspectives regarding racial identity in performance.

Research reveals that cross-cultural casting has been a pervasive theatrical convention for hundreds of years, although, when viewed from the minority racial and ethnic perspective, it has been accused of colonizing identity into white hegemony. However, performance analysis shows that cross-cultural casting can effectively function to re-categorize identity, breaking down racial stereotypes. This type of casting directly challenges the realist esthetic as it detaches the body from a historical set of values and has the unique potential to change the political views of race.

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Introduction

The Condition of Blindness

Throughout the history of the American theater, cross-cultural casting, the method of casting the actor's physical identity in tension with the playwright's intended character identity, has been a pervasive convention. The earliest examples of this are evident in the casting of men in women's roles, done at a time when there were very few women in the theater. In the 1820's, Minstrelsy began to dominate popular entertainment, which cast men of European descent in the roles of the various immigrant groups: Irish, German, Asian, Italian and African American, playing both the male and female characters. Minstrelsy was perhaps the first specifically American style of performance, and the image of the white men appropriating the physiognomy of different ethnic groups survived into the middle of the twentieth century. The legacy of this theatrical style proved damaging to the minority groups in America because minority artists were rarely cast to play their own ethnic identities. As ethnically specific theaters began to produce their own plays, the perspective of these minority identities changed to reflect a new authentic voice that had previously been silenced by the dominant white perspective in the mainstream theaters.

As the Black Power and Asian Power movements grew in political voice at the end of the sixties, a new problem emerged in the issue of casting racial identities. In the 1950's, Joseph Papp, the artistic director of the Public Theater in New York, had begun the practice of casting minority group actors in roles that were traditionally given to white actors. In the 1960's, the La Mama Theater

in New York adopted Papp's open-minded policies, casting without regard to racial identity. At this point in time, the practice of cross-cultural casting was called "Blind Casting," referring to the director's freedom to cast any one in any role, regardless of race, and that the audience should be blind to the actor's racial identity in order to follow the narrative of the production. This method of casting, although provocative in the way the theatrical community interpreted old texts, created problems within the different minority communities. As the liberal wing of the theater was arguing in favor of mixed casting,

Black Power came on the scene and, in theory at least, said you can keep those honky roles...As blacks had somewhat more opportunity for work in white theaters, they had mixed feelings, and theorized less (about the meaning of crossing the color line into mainstream theater) taking the roles, and if they could get the in classical drama, often preferred them to characters in plays written by blacks. (Blau, 144)

This tension in the performance community seemed to demonize mainstream theater; so that any minority actor who crossed the boundary between theaters risked denying the perception of his perceived identity and betraying his race. But what is "white" theater? The assumption that to be white is to be of one racial identity is a fallacy in itself, and yet the theater community seems to have no problem drawing the line between white (without a specific ethnicity) theater and minority (ethnic) theater. However, this new interpretation of cross-cultural casting survived the Black Power and Asian Power groups' protest against its use and now, at the turn of the century, it has once again become a pervasive convention in American theater.

The Non-Traditional Casting Project, established in 1986, positioned itself as a champion of this issue of racial cross-casting, and has set up forums

for intercultural debate in conference settings in addition to addressing the individual artists' concerns through its own publications. Its original tenet for minority inclusion in casting stated that minorities and disabled artists should be offered consideration in the casting process so long as their cultural identity did not interfere with the playwright's intention for the role. Thus plays have been recategorized into racially specific and non-specific texts, hence reinforcing the authority of the playwright to determine the casting choices which influence the spectator's reception of the character's identity.

The Non-Traditional Casting Project's recent issue of its publication, *New Traditions*, is a retrospective of past articles contributed by artists and playwrights from 1992 to 1996, which attempts to reevaluate where the debate over cross-cultural casting has taken the American Theater. Reading through these articles, one wonders what has been accomplished. In spite of the advances in diversity these artists have achieved, there still remains a sense of division between the artists and the reception of their work.

Minority actors wrote of the difficulties of finding challenging roles that underscore their achievement as artists instead of their racial identity. Actor Raul Aranuz wrote of the perplexing problem he has had to face as he is not clearly distinguishable as any one racial identity. Having an ethnic heritage of Chinese, Spanish, American, and Malay, he has experienced difficulty in obtaining Asian roles, although he defines himself as being Eurasian. Because there is little likelihood of finding roles that match his eclectic ethnic background directly, what is the actor to do? Aranuz wrote:

I have been told that I don't look Asian enough, whatever that means. Oddly enough, I have been told this by other Asians. When this happens, we are doing the same thing that we are

accusing Caucasians of doing to us - - stereotyping, judging on the basis of looks alone. By doing this, I'm afraid we are perpetuating divisions, not overcoming them. We are becoming our worst enemies. Asia is just like America. We have been inundated with different cultures over the centuries and have been changed by them. There is no longer a specific Asian look, if there ever was one. Looking for that is to hark back to a supposed ideal, while neglecting the truth of how things are now. (Newman, 6-7)

Aranas has overcome the problem of casting on the limitations of physiognomy as the push toward nontraditional casting has gained its popularity. He has been able to obtain work on the strength of his abilities as an actor and, ironically, has found that he has been getting cast more as a Cuban in recent years. Aranas wrote that he guesses his being cast as a Cuban is non-traditional casting, and perhaps it is better having an Asian actor play a Cuban rather than the role going to a Caucasian actor, but he wonders about what is really being accomplished by this adherence to the theatre community's codes of political correctness.

The minority directors represented in the publication felt that they had a more difficult time finding work than actors do, and, in spite of years of work, were always seen as emerging in the field rather than an active force in it. The African American directors felt that they have been limited to directing the plays that represent their own racial identity, and that they have met resistance when applying to direct traditionally white plays. They also felt restricted by a sort of unofficial quota system that allows for only one or two black directors per season to be hired under the guise of the theater companies' embrace of cultural diversity. (Newman, 9 - 10) Ron Nakahara wrote of the same problems the African American directors addressed, adding that the problem was more

difficult for Asian American directors, because there are not many Asian American playwrights:

Plays by Asian Americans have not been done very much in the general theater either. Those that are have more often than not been directed by Caucasians. I don't object to that. Theater is not real; that's why you get artists to do it. I don't mind anyone saying, "That grabs me, I can do that. "I think we underestimate the value of a play's writing to think that only directors from the same cultural background can understand and stage it. I'd like to see a more honest exchange about these issues between artistic directors, producers, and artists. The efforts so far have been cosmetic or very limited, more about letting "us" in, instead of opening the theater up. The realities in this country are changing. These issues are not trends or fads, they won't go away. Rather, they must be addressed continuously with intelligence and passion and by courageous people who keep working and growing.(Newman, 9)

The playwrights who contributed to the publication expressed concern about maintaining control over the production of their plays. Wendy Wasserstein wrote of her process of developing the characters that populate her plays: "I really take time to get to know the people who are in my plays; I understand their narrowness, their wideness. I have an intimacy with their cultural backgrounds and a feeling for how that affects their lives." (Newman, 14) She goes on to claim that not all of her characters are Jewish, and yet, in spite of the representation of supposedly different cultural backgrounds, all of her characters seem to be distinctively from her particular ethnic world. She admittedly has a hand in the casting of her work, and says that, ultimately, she is looking for the actor that fits her preconceived idea of the character. In her closing remarks, she equates her recent writing with the multiculturalist thrust when she notes the inclusion of one African American woman character in her

recent play, *An American Daughter*. (1998)

Wasserstein's article leaves one with the impression that plays will remain in the specific cultural world of the playwright because she can only write about life as she has experienced it. There is, then, not a lot of room for cross-cultural interpretation if the playwright maintains artistic control over the project and the copyright on the play forbids it. Unfortunately, the playwright is often unaware of the other aesthetic possibilities that a text contains, especially when it is a new play that is being developed for production. It takes the participation of a persuasive director to move the production of a play beyond the author's preconceived interpretation of character. Perhaps this is one of the main reasons that reconceptualization of the *mise-en-scene* of a play finds itself primarily limited to classical texts whose authors are deceased. In this situation, the director is able to create the world of the play free from the limitations placed on the text by the playwright. This freedom to create is evident in the continual reconceptualization of Shakespearean plays, as in San Jose Repertory Company's 1998 production of *Twelfth Night* performed with a multicultural cast with Flamenco music. It is also evident in the mounting of other classical works, such as the American Conservatory Theater's 1999 production of Moliere's *Tartuffe*, which was done with an African American cast in a contemporary setting. The vision of the director is the controlling factor in how the spectator reads the roles and in what body signifiers are used in communicating the narrative, so that the possibility of the theater reaching across the cultural barriers of the perception of race has an opportunity to be socially significant as well as entertaining.

The theater critics who wrote articles for *New Traditions* seemed to

embrace the idea of cross-cultural representation, but their remarks were limited to including minorities in traditional white roles, saying nothing about the reverse situation. Holly Hill wrote of her experience of seeing a production of *Fuente Ovejuna* at the National Theater in London. Whereas she felt that the multicultural casting of the production was intriguing, another colleague of hers felt that the production was terrible because it had a black actress in the role of Queen Isabella:

My colleague wasn't as bothered that the young romantic and comic leads in the British *Fuente Ovejuna* were also played by black actors - - Moors might have inter-married with peasants during the Moorish occupation of Spain - - but it was unthinkable that a Spanish Queen could be black. I was stupefied that one actress' color would spoil a magnificent production for anyone and my colleague's comments haunted me as I began to consider their implications. Had I once had reservations about non-traditional casting? All I recall is being introduced to it at the New York Shakespeare Festival and La Mama in the sixties, and realizing somewhere along the way that non-traditional casting was a new theatrical convention for which I could suspend disbelief as I did for so many others.(Newman, 22)

Hill wrote that her experiences of entertaining adverse perspectives on the issue of non-traditional casting brought her to join the Subcommittee for Cultural Diversity of the American Theatre Critics Association, founded in 1990. This subcommittee's mission is to inform members of the issues of multiculturalism in the theater as well as to provide a forum for debate on the effectiveness of this type of representation. Hill wrote in hopes that eventually such a forum would not be necessary as non-traditional casting and minority hiring become the norm for the American Theater. (Newman, 23) One wonders if and when this could actually happen, as it would require American society to move beyond its insistence of classifying people racially.

By her own admission, Hill revealed that the very racial make-up of the Subcommittee was predominantly white and that there seemed to be a reluctance on the part of African American journalists to participate. She was encouraged by the increasing numbers of women who have joined the group, and hopes that journalists of color will follow suit. It is odd that a group which is seeking multicultural diversity in theatrical representation and understanding should have such trouble in diversifying itself. Hill did not really explain this phenomenon except to say that there was concern among African American journalists of becoming corrupted by association with the Subcommittee. (Newman, 23) As to how this "corruption" would occur, readers are left to form their own conclusions.

This very sense of a divided theater community is evident throughout the *New Traditions* publication. The articles did not include the opinion of white actors or directors and, with this omission, it serves as a limited and biased expression of the theater community. Actor Geoffrey Owens summed up the predominant perspective of the publication's articles when he wrote:

So, why does the professional theater, an industry, remain so hostile to the idea of black Romeos, Macbeths, and Lears? It's afraid that audiences wouldn't accept them. This may be partially true - - but how is it ever going to change unless some courageous and enlightened producers and directors start casting more boldly and consistently? (And not just James Earl Jones.) (Newman, 3)

The whole issue of multicultural representation in the theater may be a moot point, as the availability of funding through private foundation grants and the NEA is becoming more limited. With more theaters closing than opening, grant money has been redistributed to those companies that do more than just produce plays. Diversifying the audience base has become a requirement of

many foundations, as has the requirement to supplement communities' arts education projects. The debate has centered on what an audience will accept and be willing to pay for in the theater. The pivotal question now is whether American audiences are at least as open-minded as the artists and critics of the theater who wrote articles for the *New Traditions* publication, or whether non-traditional casting has created a climate of confusion for the theater patron. There seems to be a reluctance on the part of audiences to take either side of the argument, as no one wants to be accused of having politically incorrect ideals.

This shift in the requirements for the distribution of grants in the performing arts raised the ire of director and art critic Robert Brustein, who called this new trend in funding allocation "coercive philanthropy." (Brustein, *Cultural Philanthropy*, 251) In the May/June 1995 issue of the *Partisan Review*, Brustein wrote fervently about his opposition to theater grant money being used to promote cultural diversity. In his article, Brustein quoted Alexis de Tocqueville, who in the nineteenth century expressed his misgivings about the potential for serious artistic expression in a democratic country: "Democratic nations...will habitually prefer the useful to the beautiful, and they will require the beautiful to be useful." (251) While Brustein did not deny the need for community arts and education for young people, he expressed umbrage that theater companies must now focus their efforts on this social agenda rather than the production of plays. Brustein wrote:

Whatever its impact on education, for philanthropy to administer non-profit funding by utilitarian rather than traditional aesthetic criteria is almost certainly likely to doom the arts as we know them. It is very ominous indeed that the word "quality," the standard by

which art has habitually been measured, is now avoided in the majority of funding circles, being considered a code word for racism and elitism. This is true not only in federal, state, and city cultural agencies, where one expects the arts to be subject to populist and egalitarian political pressures, but even in the most private funding organizations. (252)

His article named fund after fund that has changed its grant policies to reward companies who are trying to do more than simply produce plays. The recipients of these grants are referred to by Brustein as “deeply committed social workers” (255) rather than artists. This is the main limitation in Brustein’s writing: he categorizes his own work and the work of others like him (white directors) as having a superior aesthetic quality, while down-grading all other artists who have found that art can do more than simply entertain. His argument was at its weakest in this regard, for he offered no evidence from specific performances to back his categorization of theater companies. It is entirely possible that theater companies that promote cultural diversity in their staff as well as their audience also produce a superior aesthetic quality in their work.

African American playwright August Wilson, the two time winner of the Pulitzer Prize for his plays *Fences* and *The Piano Lesson*, entered the debate in June of 1996, when he gave a passionate speech at a conference for the Theater Communications Group. According to Jack Kroll, the entertainment critic for *Newsweek*, “Wilson in effect accused public and private organizations of racism in failing to fund black theaters, and scolded black performers for taking white roles in so-called colorblind casting.” (65) His statement placed him directly in conflict with Robert Brustein, and the two began a print debate in the *New Republic*, which lasted six months. The culmination of their argument was the Wilson/Brustein Debate, arranged by *American Theater Magazine* at

New York's Town Hall on January 27, 1997. This event was moderated by Anna Deveare Smith, whose own work has challenged ethnic and racial divisions in American society.

Wilson maintained his position of racial and cultural separatism, saying that "only black artists are capable of understanding and expressing the reality of black life and culture." (Kroll, 65) He even claimed that only a black director should and could direct an African American play, having once opposed employing a white director for the movie version of his play *Fences*. Brustein balked at this idea of cultural separatism, as he felt it would launch society backwards into the divided world that the Civil Rights Movement fought so hard to overcome. Brustein also challenged Wilson's claim of racial identification among African Americans, that all African Americans had descended directly from those who had been forcibly brought to the United States in the slave ships. At this point in their debate, the argument shifted to self-definition of racial identity with Wilson claiming that his own physical appearance suggested that a "white Master" had visited the slave quarters. This was an odd moment in the debate. For Wilson to make such a claim meant that he was denying the truth of his own parentage. He is actually the child of a biracial union. Is racial identity a matter of choice? Historically, there have been light-skinned African Americans who hid half of their identity in order to pass for white. Is this then the reverse situation, only now it has become politically advantageous to pass for black? Wilson's weakest moment in the debate came, after his extended rhetoric demanding more African American theaters, when he said that he was not interested in starting a theater himself or in helping others financially to do it.

Brustein's argument fell apart when he claimed that artists were really

two people, citizen and artist, and that the two positions had different and separate functions. This was surprising because Brustein has long been regarded as a liberal, having written the book *Theater of Revolt* (1964), which called for artists to take a Brechtian approach to social change through theatrical expression.

This event was quickly down-graded to the classification of a discussion rather than a debate in the critical writing that followed. *American Theater Magazine* published the commentaries of thirteen individuals who attended the event in order to understand what had been accomplished. The majority of the opinions expressed regret that this discussion did not move the debate forward but locked it in the same rhetoric that has always limited cultural and racial progress in the theater. Critic and author Gordon Rogoff summed up the underlying problem of why this event failed when he wrote:

Yes, indeed, there's enough race disgrace in this country to pass around from one institution to another, but there's also a small matter of class that must be acknowledged finally if we are ever to recover a hold on political reality. Nobody prevailed at the Town Hall debate because nobody was addressing the exclusionary world in which most citizens live, whether artists or working stiffs. As one out-of-work Theatre friend (a white woman) put it to me recently, we're all dinosaurs now - - meaning we're too many anyway, and certainly too ill-equipped to tussle with marketplace pressures, especially the wounds inflicted on the mashed-potato brains of the great far flung media audience no longer looking to theatre for anything beyond another small notch in their infotainment agenda... Enfeebled power figures were brought before us as representative and they demonstrated that they neither see, hear nor smell the insidious tyranny surrounding the rest of us. They, too, are dinosaurs, but - - unlike most writers, actors, teachers, and directors working against the odds in one rainbow wilderness or another, making something lively out of dreams not current in the market - - they can't begin to admit that, by now, the enemy is them. (17)

While expanding artists' opportunities to work is important, the issue of cross-cultural casting is much broader. The question that remains to be explored is how and why we make distinctions about who can play a role based on the actor's physical appearance. The idea of physiognomic distinction could be applied to several different categories: gender, age, body shape, sexual preference, and race. It is the category of racial physiognomic distinction that this research will address, as it has been a strong focus of the multicultural debate. Strangely enough, it seems as though the convention of cross-cultural casting has actually reinforced stereotypes. Marvin Carlson wrote in his book *Theatre Semiotics; Signs of Life*, "in any theater, even when it is highly realistic, the degree of iconic identity of different elements will vary. The one element which almost invariably involves iconic identity, no matter how stylized the production, is the actor, a human being who represents a human being." (Carlson, 77) Cross-cultural casting has demanded that the audience ignore racial difference when, in fact, they cannot forget that the actor's identity does not fit their preconceptions of the iconic identity of the role. But instead of opening their eyes to a wider interpretation of racial identity, the practice forces audience members to focus on what does not fit with their idea of reality and then risks their excusing it under the premise of being politically correct. What remains to be explored is whether or not the practice of cross-cultural casting has been fully applied to its potential in creating social change in our attitudes about the meaning of race, and whether it can redefine the difference between racial physiognomy and ethnic identity.

By what means do artists determine the identity of a character in a play? The playwright inscribes his or her vision of the character in the choice of

descriptive words spoken by and about the character. Some write parenthetically about the physical identity of the character as each one enters the play in an attempt to make the visions in their heads a reality in the casting choice. The director, through pre-production reading and conceptualization of a play, creates a vision of who the character is and how that character will fit in the total mise-en-scene. More often than not, the mise-en-scene of a production follows the playwright's intention (with the obvious exception of modern productions of Shakespeare) and the play's characters are cast in accordance with the playwright's original conceptualization of the play. Productions of *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) are almost always loyal to what is perceived as being Tennessee Williams' original intention in regard to text, character, and mise-en-scene, even though he is no longer alive to inform the conceptualization process. The trap that a lot of modern plays fall into is following the inscription of style that the original production of the play set in record. The extreme case of this results in the actors' failure to develop their own senses of the character, relying instead on the interpretation of the actor in the original production. This problem is evident in many productions of *Streetcar*, where it is clear that the actor is not playing Stanley Kowalski, but rather Marlon Brando playing Stanley Kowalski.

Actors may play Brando playing Kowalski, and audiences will accept this telling of the tale, however uninspiring it may be. But what would be the audience's response to the play if Stanley Kowalski was portrayed by an African American, Asian or Hispanic actor? Generally, this would not be done in the theater unless this production of *Streetcar* was cast as an all African American, Asian or Hispanic troupe of actors. It is felt that such a production

would create confusion for the audience, who would then be trying to understand this racialization of character rather than following the narrative. What the audience is left with is theater that adheres to its country's historical sense of the racial identification of character. In the case of *Streetcar*, there is also the risk of angering a minority ethnic population; how would an African American audience respond to Blanche Du Bois' ape speech when it is directed at an African American Stanley Kowalski? If the character of Blanche is portrayed by an African American actress rather than a Caucasian one, would the speech be less incendiary? Does the audience need characters in plays to be representative of entire ethnic groups or can they see them as the representation of the individual, exploring the universals of humanity?

Traditionally, there has been a problem for minority actors finding roles to portray because the majority of Anglo-European plays as written do not include a variety of racial identities. Non-traditional casting was originally used to include minority actors, but its use was restricted to changes that would not interrupt the meaning of the narrative. As more minority playwrights have entered the theater arena, the variety of racial identities represented on the stage has increased, but another problem has emerged. Spectators now have, as August Wilson has declared that it should be, white theaters, African American theaters, Asian theaters, gay theaters, Chicano theaters, deaf theaters, and feminist theaters, each representing a different cultural voice, neatly segregated from each other. While experiencing the creative work of any of these theaters is beneficial to a growing appreciation of cultural difference, it is strange that spectators accept this quality of segregation in American theater when legislation has been issued to fight it in other fields of work. From what

kind of plays will be presented, to who will appear upon the stage, to who the audience will be, the theater depends on type casting. This is one of the more frustrating points about American theater today; it is more culturally diverse in the range of performances produced than ever before in this country's history, and yet this type of theater does not effectively reach across racial barriers in the make-up of its audience. There is a large sense of playing to the converted rather than drawing in a variety of different racial identities. How will the theater be able to become socially instructive toward tolerance and understanding if it cannot draw new and different people into its arena?

In *The Paradox of Color*, an article in Alain Locke's anthology *The New Negro* originally published in 1925, Walter White wrote prophetically about the segregation of African Americans during the Harlem Renaissance, which is a good illustration of the limitations of segregated theater today:

Upon most the acquisition of education and culture, of wealth and sensitiveness causes a figurative and literal withdrawal, as far as is humanly possible or as necessity permits, from all contacts with the outside world where unpleasant situations may arise. This naturally means the development of an intensive Negro culture and a definitely bounded city within a city. Doubtless there are some advantages, but it is certain that such voluntary segregation works a greater loss upon those within and those without the circle.

Upon those within, it cuts off to a large extent the world of music, of the theater, of most of those contacts which mean growth and development and which denied, means stagnation and spiritual atrophy. It develops as well a tendency towards self-pity, towards a fatal conviction that they of all peoples are the most oppressed. The harmful effects of such reactions are too obvious to need elaboration. Upon those without, the results are equally mischievous. First there is the loss of that deep spirituality, that gift of song and art, that indefinable thing which perhaps can best be termed the over-soul of the Negro, which has given America the only genuinely artistic things which the world recognizes as

distinctive American contributions to the arts. (364-365)

While White was addressing the specific problems that arose during the Harlem Renaissance -- significant artists restricted to a segregated black community -- the warnings of cultural limitations can be applied to our modern reality of race and ethnically specific theaters. The primary reason that public and private arts foundations have been advocating audience diversity is that the majority of American theater companies, no matter how important and aesthetically pleasing is their art, have not reached across the racial and ethnic barriers of this society.

Moving against this quality of segregation, cross-cultural casting became blind casting, setting the actor's identity in tension with the inscribed character of the author. This practice has firmly taken root in the production of classical plays, particularly in the performance of Shakespeare. It has now become rare to find a production of a Shakespearean play in Elizabethan dress, for directors see these plays as a canvas on which to paint another level of identification. Cross-cultural casting has become a modern convention over thirty years of implementation, and, as such, has lost some of its impact. The issue of identity, of who can play what role, is frustrated by the fact that the audience has adapted itself to this aesthetic choice by ignoring it in order to follow the story.

What does the actor's body signify when it is set in tension with the author's description of the character? The body, seen as a sign system, must be ignored to some degree by an audience which views a performance that has been cast blindly with regard to traditional type. Does the disregard of the audience actually open its eyes, by asking it, in effect, to close its eyes against

culturally imposed images of type? What an actor looks like determines how the spectator reads the character. There is an old adage that says casting is ninety-nine percent of the job; if you have the "right" body in the role, the audience will recognize the character regardless of the acting ability of the actor. When a director makes changes in type, is it blind casting or deliberate manipulation of the image to alter the view of the audience? What is the risk of blinding an audience? Do directors ask it to shut its eyes to one body so that it may see another, or should directors be underlining the difference in order to effect a real change in the way this society views identity? After ten years of debate on multiculturalism, what has the theatre community accomplished? Right now, the general opinion of this sort of casting is dismissal by the audience, which sighs and says, "Oh, they are doing that thing." Dan Sullivan, a theater critic, wrote in the 1992 issue of *New Traditions* :

Now, wait a minute. Clytemnestra's black, Agamemnon's white, Electra's Asian American? Who are they kidding? This wasn't some country bumpkin talking. It was my friend, the New York super-agent on the horn from 57th Street. She had heard about the Guthrie Theater's latest go at Greek tragedy and she was convinced it had to be some kind of politically-correct stunt...[But] this is what turns me as a critic on about "color-blind casting". It's so theatrical. It illustrates so well the double nature of theater. Mask and face. Sign and signified. Eye and inner eye. (Newman, 20)

The style of Realism became dominate in the American theater early in this century and has remained the primary mode of mainstream theatrical expression. The average audience is comfortable with this type of work because it is straightforward and readable. Unless a director is willing to accept the label of "avant-garde," there has been little room for creative interpretation or cross-cultural casting in this country. The work of JoAnne Akalaitis and its

critical reception is a good example of this limitation. She had been a part of the avant-garde theater scene since the 1960s, and moved into the mainstream theater world in 1983, when she directed a production of *Endgame* at the American Repertory Theater in Cambridge, Massachusetts. This production reflected her abstract and anti traditionalist approach to theater. She set the play in a decrepit subway station and cast the characters multiculturally. According to Mary C. Henderson, author of *Theater in America*, "No one has expected her productions to be accessible to a wide audience...Her choice of environment [for *Endgame*] brought loud objections from the playwright himself from across the Atlantic, but she defended her right to interpret it through her own sensibilities." (Henderson 308-309)

In 1990, Akalaitis again challenged the barriers of American realism again with her production of *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* at the Goodman Theater in Chicago. Herbert Blau wrote of this production in his book, *To All Appearances*, saying that the play's sexual politics were upstaged by Akalaitis' use of mixed racial casting.

For the unavoidable liability of mixed casting (ethnic as well as racial) in the psychosexual morass of the drama was that certain characters inevitably aroused emotions divided between the assumption of colorblindness (out of approval of the casting) and the inability to sustain it, not at least without the risk of an invidious identification. If we're specifically attentive to the local siting of perception, this was the more true...for a predominately white audience seeing the play amidst the charged racial politics of Chicago... When the misogynist Soranzo was savagely beating his pregnant wife... one might have preferred not to notice that the actor was...black. As there were probably few in the audience who really overlooked it, there were also no doubt those who might have preferred that this particular actor were unambiguously white. (Blau ,146)

Is the sign of skin color stronger than the sign of the character? When an audience sees that an actor is black or Asian or Hispanic, does his appearance preclude them from being able to see anything else? Akalaitis' production of *'Tis Pity* should be praised for its daring the audience to confront these uncomfortable fears and stereotypes, yet Blau seemed to suggest that the audience may not want to be forced to do so. Blau questioned whether theater should be so racially dangerous, but perhaps it is more dangerous that the color of one's skin could mean so much in this country.

If cross-cultural casting is intended to expand society's understanding of identity, the first step in this research must be to try to understand the process by which audiences determine identity in their reception of the physiognomic image of the body. Chapter one of this research will focus on understanding the issues of cross-cultural casting as it has been historically received in terms of the physiognomy of racial identification in the theater. The August Wilson/Robert Brustein debate on multicultural representation in the theater and the responses that it generated will be analyzed in order to better understand why cross-cultural identification continues to fall short of its expectations. The aftermath of the debate will also be explored to better understand how Wilson's continuing rhetoric is shaping the sentiment in the African American performance community.

As this issue is not simply a black and white issue, the chapter will also explore the protest that surrounded the production of *Miss Saigon*, where it became evident that the principles guiding the use of cross-cultural casting have been limited to minority inclusion. American Actor's Equity tried to stop Jonathan Pryce from portraying a Eurasian character when the musical was to

be brought to the United States, demanding that an Asian actor be hired in his place. This episode in the American theater illustrates the main limitation that cross-cultural casting has produced; theatre producers are willing to accept the convention as it benefits minority actors, but they do not extend the same latitude to white actors. Can audiences expand their perceptions of identity if theater is perceived as only letting non-white identities into the mainstream community or should this practice be applied to all actors, regardless of race?

The protests that surrounded the casting of Luis Valdez and Lupe Trujillo Valdez's film project *Frida and Diego* will also be explored. As this problem is not only a question of black and white iconic identity, it is also not an issue solely debated in the theater. The film industry suffers from this same limited perspective of cultural and racial identity. In the case of the *Frida* project, the Hispanic community in Los Angeles waged an ugly protest with a endless stream of hate mail and threats against Valdez for his failure to cast a Hispanic woman in the role of Frida Kahlo. In the end, Valdez dropped the whole project, saying that he "will not be intimidated into making my vision of America coincide with whatever is politically correct at the moment. I have helped to define the Latino identity in America through my plays and films, but I will not be coerced into limiting my artistic choices in violation of basic human principles. My social objective has always been to counteract racism in the world, not to reinforce it." (Valdez, 2)

Chapter two will focus on the tension between personal and historical iconic identity. Terence Penelhum, in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, wrote that personal identity has two main competing definitions:

One is that the criterion of the identity of a person is the identity

of the body which he has -- that it is either necessary or a sufficient condition of saying correctly that this person before us is Smith that the body which this person before us has is the body Smith had. The other answer is that the criterion of the identity of a person is the set of memories which he has -- that it is either a necessary or sufficient condition of saying correctly that this person before us is Smith that he should have memories of doing Smith's actions or of having Smith's experiences. (95)

Penelhum's observations of identity point to the reason why spectators are comfortable with stereotyping body identification in the theater. It preserves their sense of historical identification because it is safe and readable, but it is from this type of identification that some leap to assume that all people of a particular race share the same experiences in life.

W.E.B. DuBois once wrote that "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line." (Webster, 385) He attributed the need to draw a color line with the need to allocate labor, so that imperialists could maintain and justify the subjugation of people of color, all non-white colors, so that they might hold on to economic and military power. Thus, people of a ruling class began to use the color of a person's skin to determine their worth. This legacy has remained to some degree or another, and even though the American society has realigned itself through the Civil Rights Movement and anti-discrimination laws, the country insists on a system of racialized identity. Yehudi O. Webster agreed with DuBois' analysis of the limitation of the American culture, when he wrote in *The Racialization of America* that:

There is no color line, only lies about color. Indeed, DuBois writings demonstrate that the problem is not color but an absurd racial classification. Races are not produced by a simple observation of color differences. People may notice these differences, without allocating persons to races. In studies of race relations, it is claimed that actors attach significance to certain

physical differences to make race a social reality. What is not exposed is the reasons for and sources of this attachment. Attempts at such an expose would be suicidal. They would have to address the practices of social scientists, community activists, foundations, corporations, lobbyists, and journalists. (73)

The problem is not an issue of race, color, or ethnicity, but one of where the line of differentiation is drawn and how the allocation of quality or characteristics assigned to either side is acknowledged and recognized as such by involved parties.

As American society moves into this period of new historicism and the rewriting of history becomes more inclusive of a variety of people and experiences, the ease of identification becomes confused. In allowing different voices to be heard, theatre producers must rethink the sign of the body. This rethinking is complicated even further by the entrenched feelings of racial prejudice that stand as dividing walls in American society. Vernon Williams, in *Rethinking Race*, discusses Robert E. Park's analysis of prejudice:

The "chief obstacle" to the assimilation of blacks and Asians, he said, was "not mental traits but physical traits." African Americans and Asians were prevented from sharing in the social life of most white Americans because they were "distinguished by certain external marks" that furnished a "permanent physical substratum upon which and around which the irritations and animosities, incidental to all human intercourse, tend to accumulate and so gain strength and volume." (94)

What are these "distinguishing external marks?" A system could be set up to sort racial difference by physiognomic characteristics, but it would be difficult to successfully fit all people into such a stratification, as South Africa's failed system of Apartheid so aptly demonstrates. Where would light-skinned African Americans and dark-skinned Caucasians be placed? We easily use the

umbrella term of Asian to describe a diverse group of people, but do Koreans have the same set of physical characteristics as the Japanese? Where are Eurasian, Creole and Mulatto people placed? The problem of setting up categories of "white," and "non-white," is that there are so many people in America that cannot be so categorized due to assimilation and their mix of heritages.

In *Breaking Down The Barriers*, an interview with Richard Stayton, Anna Deveare Smith spoke of the problem of not being "black enough." She said that she had problems getting work when, in the 1970's, it was not fashionable to be light-skinned. She recalled an agent telling her that she couldn't be sent out for roles because her appearance would antagonize the clients, as she did not look like anything, white or black. Casting agents do make these sort of racial distinctions when looking at an actor for a role. This suggests that physiognomy is the key issue that allows for or prevents inclusion in casting.

Chapter three will focus on the how we might take the quality of blindness out of cross-cultural identification. Janelle Reinelt, in her article *Rethinking Brecht*, draws parallels between the dramaturgy of Brecht and post-modern feminist theater.

The task of Brecht and also of feminism is to interrupt and deconstruct the habitual performance codes of the majority (male) culture -- their stance is always adversarial vis-a-vis the prevailing hegemony. Both Brecht and feminism emphasize the possibility of change, that things might be other, that history is not an inevitable narrative. Feminism is and Brecht was historically embattled in the struggle to make art which dismantles the political and artistic status quo. (Reinelt, 99)

Reinelt applies her argument with the comparison between Brecht's *A Man's A Man* and Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine*. Could not the same correlation

be made between Brecht's work and the goal of cross-cultural identification, where racial identity stands in tension to the playwright's intention? Patrice Pavis, in *Theater at the Crossroads of Culture*, wrote:

We ought to imagine...semiotics that would concern itself not with the results and visible signs, but with cultural reinterpretation in which we can still see the old under the new, the rough sketching which indicates traces of other movements and features all around the fully worked out figure, like traces in which one sees both what has just been expropriated and what is appropriated, deculturation as well as acculturation. (169)

This chapter will apply Brecht's theory of Estrangement to the cross-cultural body signifier. Perhaps the only way for this type of identification to produce change in societal views is to draw stronger attention to it, pointing out this nineteenth century conception of racial difference rather than erasing it. This chapter will center on an examination of Robert Alexander's play, *I Ain't Yo' Uncle*, in terms of theme, script and the casting choices made in three separate productions of the piece: the San Francisco Mime Troupe's original production, the Hartford Stage's production and San Jose State's interpretation of the piece. Alexander's intention in writing this play was to tear apart the racial stereotypes created by Harriet Beecher Stowe's book *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and by George Aiken's adaption of it for the stage. Alexander uses a Brechtian approach of Estrangement to challenge the perception of the archetypal character Uncle Tom by having the various characters step in and out of the play's world to comment on it. But does this play and its casting go far enough? Alexander wrote that he wanted to show Uncle Tom as a whole man, but the play keeps him locked in the role of the perpetual victim of oppression. This chapter will explore the unique one hundred and fifty year history of the play

Uncle Tom's Cabin, (1852) which was cross-culturally cast not only in terms of race, but also in terms of gender, body type and age identification. Against such a colorful history of production, it becomes clear that Alexander's play has only succeeded in equating the modern stereotype of the inner city black with the nineteenth century archetypes of black identity. This chapter will suggest how a bold application of cross-cultural casting could free the African American identity from the perpetual role of the oppressed.

Chapter four will be focused on the analysis of classical theater productions and their use of cross-cultural casting. Do we see the tension between the actor's body and the character's identity or do we choose to be blind to it? This chapter will also try to understand why it is acceptable to go against type in classical theater but more troublesome when done in modern plays. Is *Hamlet* (1606) a play about Danish royalty, or is it better defined as a framework open to interpretation centered on the exploration of the human condition? Why is this play allowed to be culturally unspecific, while *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) is seen as a play specifically about African Americans? Is the main theme of this play the specific nature of segregation in the Sixties or is it a play about coming of age and taking adult responsibility for one's own life? Even if the interpretation of the play is based on its theme of segregation, has not this problem been a reality for many diverse groups of Americans? At one point in history, the Irish were considered the underclass of society, followed by the Italians, the Jews, the different groups of Asian immigrants, and the Hispanics. Could not this production have meaning with any group of people cast as the Youngers? Can a white cast do a black play? Playwright Jean Genet once said, when asked to write an all black play, "what exactly is a

black?" (Blau, 146) The Shakespeare Theater in Washington, D.C. recently undertook the production of *Othello* in what the director, Jude Kelly, has termed "photo negative" (Zinman, 13). British actor Patrick Stewart played the role of Othello, without the usual black make-up. The other actors in the production, with the exception of the actress playing Bianca, were African American. This production, although it offers employment for a large group of minority actors, was deemed controversial. It seems that it is not enough that minority actors are employed in the production, but a protest arose over the casting of Stewart. This is very similar to the *Miss Saigon* argument, where the sense of protectionism of particular lead roles attempted to preclude the casting of white actors.

Comparative performance analysis will be done in order to better understand the effect and limitations of cross-cultural casting in classical and modern plays. Perhaps one of the problems with cross-cultural casting is that American plays are often written specifically about race relations, while plays from other countries are not necessarily structured in this way. An example of this difference can be seen in the ease of audience acceptance of the production of Pinter's *Betrayal* (1979) at the Intiman Theater in Seattle in 1995. The play is about a love triangle between a man, his wife, and the man's best friend. In this production, the character of the wife was played by African American actress Gail Grate, while the male roles were played by actor Frank Corrado and another Caucasian male. The issue of racial difference apparently did not come into focus during the rehearsal process for this production. Whether or not it actually had an impact on the audience is up to speculation, but Grate herself has said that she often feels that during the first few minutes of

her performances her race is an issue for the audience until she wins them over with the power of her performance. (Newman, 2) Perhaps the reason for this acceptance of Grate's performance in the case of *Betrayal* was that the play is a British play, which tend to be more concerned with the issues of class stratification than with racial problems. Does this then suggest that we must wait for playwrights to write a different kind of play in America for multicultural casting to work? Or should we, instead, forge ahead, casting the most qualified artist rather than the stereotypical choice in order to make a change in the way we perceive identity in this country?

The fifth and concluding chapter will attempt to apply this theory of racial cross-cultural casting to a broader application of American identity. The focus of the research has been, thus far, on the body signs of racial identification, but there are other categories in which this theory could be applied. Racial difference and minority voice has been the center of this debate, as anything about racial conflict gets front page coverage in our society. But when we consider the body as a sign system, there are other more subtle prejudices that dictate the type of body on the stage. How might cross-cultural casting be applied in the grayer areas of body size, age, gender, sexual orientation and our sense of what is beautiful?

Brecht wrote in his article *Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting*:

In setting up new artistic principles and working out new methods of representation we must start with the compelling demands of a changing epoch; the necessity and the possibility of remodeling society loom ahead. All incidents between men must be noted, and everything must be seen from a social point of view. Among other effects that a new theatre will need for its social criticism and its historical reporting of completed transformations is the A-effect. (Willet, 98-99)

Brecht's desire to challenge the archaic perceptions of the society by estranging the accepted archetypes holds the same promise for the deliberate application of cross-cultural casting. Disney and ABC's recent presentation of *Cinderella* was cross-cast racially, and yet it still held to the mythic construction of the characters. Cinderella is beautiful, but one stepsister is plump and the other is tall, thin and gawky and thus undesirable. Do spectators really need this adherence to the archaic ideas of beauty? Would Cinderella be less desirable if she was the plump one and the stepsisters were society's idea of beauty? What are the possibilities of this type of application of cross-cultural casting? There seems to be a fear of examining the process of how different societies determine the aesthetic quality of the body, both in racial identification and the other areas of physiognomic distinction. Feminist theory has made progress in the depiction of women in performance, although there are still not enough challenging roles. Women have moved beyond being cast as props and love interests for male characters, and there are very few "June Cleaver" type roles being written anymore except as satires. Should audiences not expect the same for all artists? Does a large person have to be typed as a character actor and does an Asian actor have to wait for the right race specific role to come around in order to work?

Progress has been made in terms of cultural diversity, but it still falls short of equal opportunity for all artists in the entertainment industry. As long as theatre producers hold on to the idea of physiognomic identification defining character, there is little hope for change. The limitations of stereotyping identity need to be addressed in order for all artists to have an opportunity to contribute their valuable voices in a changing world. The spectator's reading of the signs

of the body is perhaps the most significant criteria in the process of casting, yet this is rarely articulated. This thesis seeks to gain a better understanding of how we read racialized bodies in performance and to explore how cross-cultural casting affects the spectator's perception of race. This paper poses the question of whether it is desirable to risk confusing the process of storytelling in a production by casting the "wrong" race or should the authority of the playwright stand in determining the identity of the characters in a play. What are the advantages and disadvantages of this method of casting? Does it actually expand the spectator's perception of racial identity or does it negate cultural differences in order to appear politically correct? Through an exploration of past debates on cross-cultural casting, racial theory and performance analysis, this thesis will try to come to a better understanding of the power of the visual signs of the racialized body in performance.

Chapter One

The Color Line

The racial politics of the American theater in the nineties have re-codified what is meant by the term non-traditional casting. Originally the term signified the casting of minorities in traditionally white roles as a means of creating more opportunities for actors that had formerly been barred from work because of their race. But now, due to certain headline making events, the term should be redefined to state that this form of casting applies only to minority actors and discriminates against white actors. It has become completely acceptable to have a multitude of racial identities cast in various productions from Shakespeare to musical theater, but white actors, in this political climate of reverse racism, should not expect to be cast in African, Asian or Hispanic American plays or roles. It is understandable that, after years of complete exclusion from the performing arts, minority artists in America have adopted this attitude, but, unfortunately, it does little to challenge the racial barriers that continue to plague this country.

Instead of treating it as colorblind (colorblind to all non-white identities but exclusionary to all white identities), this type of casting has a remarkable potential to challenge our societal beliefs as to what is meant by race by deliberately casting against it in what director Benny Sato Ambush calls color or culture-conscious casting. (Shirley, F46) Does our skin really define who we are, or is identity more elusive and fluid than this limited means of characterization? When the question of identity is applied to an actor whose job

it is to play someone other than himself, do we need this physiognomic marker to understand the role? There are three incidents chronicled in this chapter that debate the necessity of casting the racial identity of the actor to match the racial identity of the role: the 1988 *Miss Saigon* production as it attempted to move from London to New York, Luis Valdez's attempt to cast his unrealized film project, *Frida and Diego*, in 1992, and the ongoing debate about black theater in a white world, originated by August Wilson's June 1996 speech at the Theatre Communications Group conference, entitled "The Ground on Which I Stand." By exploring these theoretical debates and performer exclusions, it becomes evident that non-traditional and race specific casting as it is currently practiced has placed artistic freedom at risk and has done little to expand our perception of identity.

In the summer of 1990, after a successful run in London, Cameron Mackintosh was preparing to bring his award-winning production of *Miss Saigon* to New York. This was by no means a unique move for a successful show; often after a profitable and artistically acclaimed show has played London, plans are made to move the show to Broadway. Like most shows that preceded this one, Mackintosh planned to move *Miss Saigon* to New York with the lead actors who brought the original production its critical acclaim. The standard agreement between British Equity and Actor's Equity in America is that a company from either country can move a production across the ocean with the starring actors intact, recasting the supporting roles in the guest country. The only stipulation in this agreement is that the actors that are brought over be recognized as international stars, otherwise the entire show must be cast from the host country's population of actors. If the actor does not qualify to be

recognized as an international star, he or she can still play the role on the actors exchange program. One British actor can come to the United States to work while one American actor is allowed to perform in England. (Rothstein, *Producer Demands*, C11) This situation is valuable to both parties as it gives young up and coming actors a chance to build international recognition for their work. This was precisely Mackintosh's plan: to bring Jonathan Pryce, who won the Olivier Award for best actor in a musical for his role of the Engineer in the London production, and Lea Solanga, who originated the role of Kim to critical acclaim in the same production, to reprise their roles in the New York production under the star and exchange actor programs, respectively. All other roles, as well as subsequent replacement roles were to be cast in America. This meant thirty-five roles open to American actors, and limitless roles to be cast as the show moved to tour the country in first, second, and possibly third touring companies. The show also had a remarkable twenty-five million dollars in advance ticket sales before plans were finalized to move the production.

It was at this point that the Actor's Equity Committee on Racial Equality voted to deny permission for Jonathan Pryce to play the role of the Engineer in the United States. This decision was made due to protests by Asian American actors, notably B.D. Wong, and playwright David Henry Hwang. They raised the protest because they felt it was wrong for Asian American actors to be denied the opportunity to audition for the role and that a specifically Eurasian role should not be played by a Caucasian actor. In defense of this decision, Actor's Equity "said it could not condone the casting of a Caucasian in the role of a Eurasian" and cited "the lack of employment opportunities for ethnic minority actors" (Rothstein, *Producer Demands*, C11) as their chief concern. In

response to this decision, Mackintosh decided to cancel the production.

If the lack of employment opportunities was the chief concern for Equity, denying Pryce permission to play this one role would result in losing thirty-five other minority roles. Clearly, employment opportunities was not the only reason for their decision. What seems to be the real crux of the problem is that a starring role, which has the capacity to launch a career out of obscurity, was given to a Caucasian actor. The odd part of Equity's decision was that they were not requesting that the role be played by a Eurasian actor, or even a Vietnamese one, but by a generically Asian actor. If racial specificity was their goal, they should have acknowledged that to be Eurasian is different than to be Asian. In the case of the Engineer, the character is half Vietnamese, half French, so, by the logic put forth by Equity, Pryce had the same right to play the role as an actor who was Asian but not specifically Vietnamese. As Pryce said in defense of his portrayal of the character, "if the character is half Asian and half European, you've got to drop down on one side of the fence or the other, and I'm choosing to drop down on the European side." (Rothstein, *Equity Will Reconsider* , C3)

After Actor's Equity issued its verdict to deny Pryce permission to play the role on Broadway, Mackintosh placed a newspaper advertisement that gave presold ticket holders information about how to obtain a refund. Ticket holders began to contact the Shubert Organization to inquire as to whether they could hold on to their tickets in hopes that Equity would reverse their position. The pressure to resolve this case then came from New York Mayor David Dinkins. It was clear that the potential audience desired to see Pryce play the role, and Dinkins became involved in order to salvage the city's potential revenues from

the tourism the show could produce. Pressure also came from Broadway actors themselves, who began a petition process to bring Pryce to New York. Craig Dorfman, owner of the New York agency which handles many Broadway performers as clients, started the petition process. Although Dorfman felt that it was wrong to cast a non-Asian in an Asian role, he felt that it was more damaging to lose the show because of the vast number of jobs that it would bring to New York. Beyond economic concerns, it soon became clear that the New York actors' community feared the precedent that this case could set would be damaging to their future opportunities. What this case set at risk was the artistic freedom of the director and producer to create the best show possible with what they felt was the best talent available for the job, regardless of the race of the actor.

In his column in the *New York Times*, Mervyn Rothstein recorded the response of the actor community to the Equity ban on Pryce. Willy Faulk, an actor in *Les Miserables*, said "No actor should have to take a blood test or show his lineage in order to get a part." (Rothstein, *Equity Reverses*, A1) Cynthia Madison wrote to Equity that "she was ashamed to be a member of an organization that not only contradicts its own bylaws, but contradicts theater itself." (Rothstein, *Equity Reverses*, C1) On the other side of the issue, Rothstein reported that Margaret Fung, the executive director of the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund, said that "the casting issue was a political one that must be viewed in the context of the American civil rights movement and the importance of expanding employment opportunities for Asian Americans." (Rothstein, *Equity Reverses*, C3) Fung's argument, however, only acknowledged this one aspect of the Civil Rights Movement, the

fight to open the doors to economic opportunities and ignores Martin Luther King's most important words "don't judge me by the color of my skin but by the content of my character." King realized that this fight for inclusion would always be impeded by the American society's perception of stereotyped racial identity. Unfortunately, judging by the color of their skin was precisely what the Asian community was calling for, and the fallout from this type of approach could have been more damaging to the future employment of the Asian American community than the loss of this one job. To make race the deciding factor in the case of this one role in *Miss Saigon* could have produced a climate that would forever limit the potential for any artist to play any role. The minority acting community complains about the availability of challenging roles for ethnic minorities, and yet, in the same breath, they limit their actors' opportunities by making them wait for an interesting race specific role to come along. Perhaps the most dangerous precedent that could have been set by this event in the American Theater is that Asian actors would be limited to only play Asian roles, which serves to reemphasize nineteenth century mythologized ideas of what race means. In the case of *Miss Saigon*, no one was arguing about the question of ethnicity, for no one was insisting that a Eurasian of Vietnamese descent play the role. Instead, by requiring that an Asian of any ethnic identity be cast in this role, what was being reemphasized was an antiquated and stereotyped idea of racial identity.

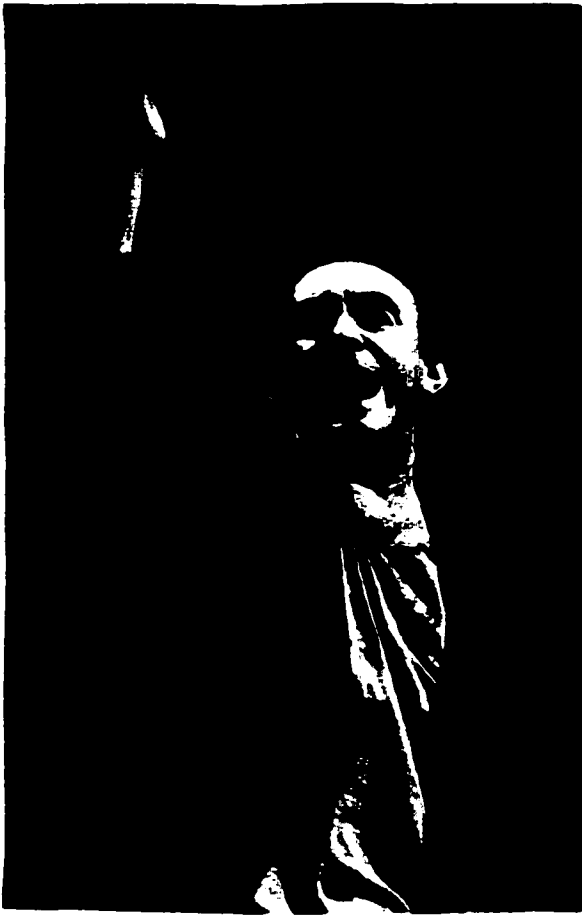
Under pressure from its own membership, the Equity council reconvened to vote on whether to uphold its original ban of Pryce. The council reversed its decision saying that it had "applied an honest and moral principle in an inappropriate manner." (Rothstein, *Producer Demands* , C11) The original

decision was made in a 23 to 18 vote, with only half of the council membership casting a ballot. For such an important vote, this was not a very impressive showing from the membership. The second vote that resulted in the reversal was cast by 54 artists out of the 79 member council, with members calling in their votes from all the major theatrical centers around the country. When asked by Mervyn Rothstein of the *New York Times* whether the reversal meant that Equity had withdrawn its condemnation of the casting of Pryce, Allen Eisenberg, Equity's executive secretary, answered indirectly that they were "very, very unhappy about a lot of things: the lack of opportunity for an ethnic Asian actor to audition for the role and for the mixed signals sent out (by Cameron and his casting director, Vincent G. Liff) as to whether the role would be available to an Asian actor. Many of us would have been happier had it been an Asian, but we deferred to the contract, Mr. Pryce's talent, and Mr. Mackintosh's desire to have Mr. Pryce play the role." (Rothstein, *Equity Will Reconsider* , C3)

Mackintosh sent a letter to Equity detailing his remaining concerns which, if left unanswered, would keep him from bringing the show to Broadway in spite of Equity's reversal. He felt that this battle had created a damaging political atmosphere in the Broadway community, one into which he still would not bring the production unless he could get confirmation of his future rights to artistic freedom. On September 17, 1990, Equity and Mackintosh reached a final agreement on the terms under which the production would come to New York. (Rothstein, *Equity Reverses* , A1) Their agreement gave Mackintosh the right to bring two non-American Asian actors to New York, securing Lea Solanga and her understudy, both of whom are Filipino, their original roles in the show, along with the permission to bring Jonathan Pryce to play his role of the Engineer.

Mackintosh agreed to work with Equity on the future casting of the show and to make every possible effort to publicize auditions in the Asian community. He also agreed to open the casting opportunities in his other two Broadway shows, *Les Miserables* and *Phantom of the Opera*, for minority actors. In making this one compromise, Equity gained more for the diverse population of Broadway actors than they would have by banning Pryce's performance. Lastly, Mackintosh agreed not to use any sort of yellowface make-up or eye prosthetics for any actor in the show. Pryce had already stopped using specialized make-up in his performances, and no one in the London audiences seemed to mind seeing his Caucasian face in an Eurasian role. In some ways, this is a good theatrical choice for the character: the Engineer is a product of the American force in Vietnam, representing a crude and demonic sort of materialism that encapsulates the Third World opinions of what it is to be an American. He is, like Joel Grey's role in *Cabaret*, more of a theatrical device that personifies the spirit of the production than a realistic character. (Figures 1, 2, 3) Because of this, Mackintosh also secured the right to be able to cast an actor of any racial identity in the role of the Engineer, making this one casting choice dependent on the talent rather than the race of the actor.

After all the turmoil and negotiations, the production finally did come to Broadway with Jonathan Pryce and Lea Solanga in the leading roles. To date, the show has played for seven years, both in the United States and abroad. It has given numerous employment opportunities to a host of actors, propelling many new actors of all races to a new level of recognition. The current casts in London, New York and on tour in the United States follow the racial specificity of the roles, reinforcing Mackintosh's agreement with Equity to employ minority



**Fig. 1, 2 and 3. Jonathan Pryce as the Engineer
in the 1988 London production of *Miss Saigon*.
Photographer Michael Lepoer Trench.**

actors. Interestingly, the show's web site publicizes its multi-national casts: the actors are from the Philippines, China, Sweden, France, Japan, Italy, America, and the Netherlands; but none of the actors are from Vietnam. Looking at the resumes of the actors in the recent productions, it is clear that they all have benefited from cross-cultural casting. Leo Valdez, who is playing the role of the Engineer in the London production, is Filipino, but lists among his credits the role of Jean Valjean in a 1993 production of *Les Miserables* and the role of Freddie Trumper in *Chess*. Joana Ampil, a Filipino actress who is currently playing the role of Kim in London, also played Mary Magdalene in a 1996 production of *Jesus Christ Superstar* and the role of Eliza Dolittle in *My Fair Lady*. Gumilla Backman is now playing the role of Ellen, an American, in the London production although she is Swedish, and lists the roles of Maria in *West Side Story* and Fantine in *Les Miserables* among her credits. The point is that the primary criterion for any of these actors to play any of these roles is their abilities as actors, not their race or ethnicity. Audiences may be able to believe in the identity of the characters as Vietnamese based on a limited physiognomic delineation of race of an Asian actor, but ethnically they are not Vietnamese. They are actors pretending to be the character, just as Jonathan Pryce pretended to be the Engineer. After all, theater is not reality, and actors are not literally the people that they play. It is only necessary that the actors have the ability to analyze and empathize with a character's plight in order to play it. It is our reliance on a perception of realism that prevents other body identities to be used in casting. To say that an American actor who is of Asian descent is more qualified to play a Vietnamese role solely on the basis of their almond shaped eyes is ridiculous, for to a Vietnamese person living in Vietnam that person is

perceived as American by a process of acculturation. Their physical features do not make them Asian but Asian American. Ethnicity is different from race.

In 1992, two years after the *Miss Saigon* casting incident, Luis Valdez began to cast his film *Frida and Diego*. This film was co-written by Valdez and his wife, Lupe Trujillo Valdez, and was to be made as a cooperative effort between America and Mexico, with New Line Cinema serving as producer. Initially, Valdez planned to hold nationwide auditions for an unknown Latina actress to play the role of Frida, but the studio would not approve of this plan due to financial considerations. New Line Cinema was concerned with finding an actress with star power who could sell the film to a wider audience. Auditions were held over a three month period in Los Angeles, and a diverse group of actresses from all racial backgrounds sought to win the role. Talented Latina actresses in Los Angeles applied, as did Native American, African American and European American actresses. Because there is a limited number of interesting female roles in Hollywood, competition for the role of Frida Kahlo, an artist who has been newly celebrated for her work and her painful life, was intense. After three months, Laura San Giacomo was given the part. For Valdez, she not only had the acting ability to play this emotionally challenging role, but San Giacomo also resembled Kahlo, which he felt was crucial to the film's artistic needs. (Figures 4,5)

The decision to cast San Giacomo brought on a protest by the Latino community. A storm of hate mail was sent to Valdez, accusing him of turning his back on the Chicano people. This case was very similar to the *Miss Saigon* battle except for one significant factor: the Asian community was fighting what is seen as the white theater establishment in the *Miss Saigon* case; but in the

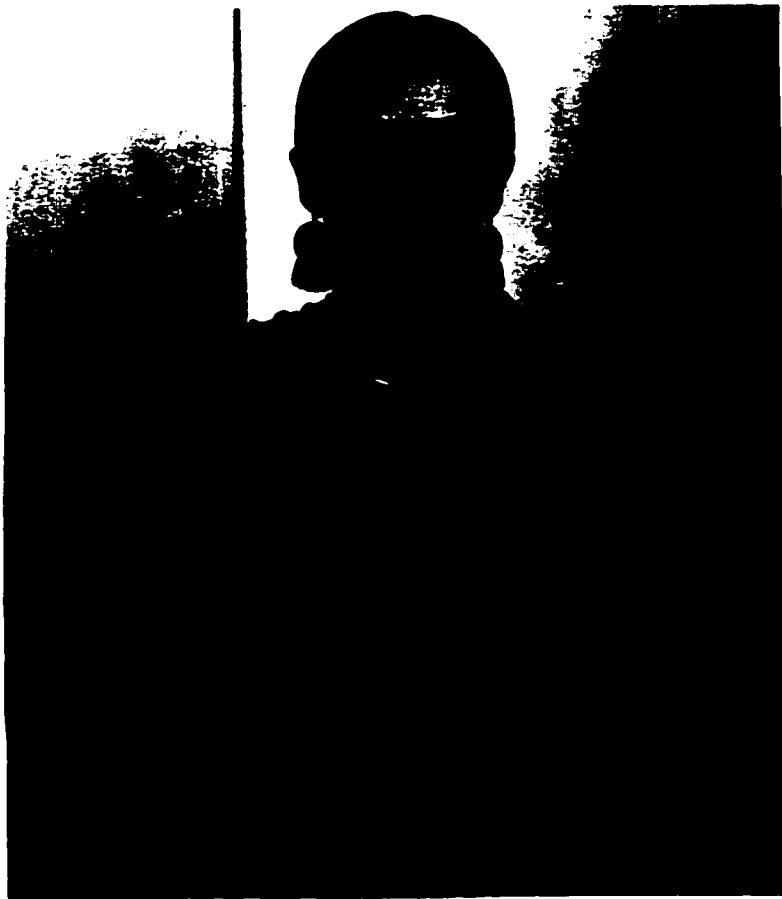


Fig. 4. Frida Kahlo in 1931 at age twenty-four, from the Imogen Cunningham Trust. Photographer Imogen Cunningham.



Fig. 5. Publicity photograph of Laura San Giacomo, from the Laura San Giacomo Page website. Date and photographer unknown.

Frida project, the fight was about a Chicano filmmaker joining with the white establishment in denial of his race. How could a Chicano man cast an “Anglo” actress in this particular role and where was his sense of duty and pride for his community? This is perhaps the most difficult demand on minority artists: they aren’t allowed to merely be artists, they must also be political activists for their racial or ethnic community; a position that is not demanded of white artists.

In this case, Valdez courageously chose to protect his integrity as an artist, even if it meant enduring attack on both his character and his family’s. Instead of making concessions to racial pressure, he dropped the film project. In the 1992 September-October edition of the *El Teatro Notes*, the quarterly newsletter of Valdez’s theater company, El Teatro Campesino, Luis Valdez wrote a brave and passionate letter about his feelings regarding the *Frida and Diego* protest.

I will not be intimidated into making my vision of America coincide with whatever is politically correct at the moment. I have helped define the Latino identity in America through my plays and films, but I will not be coerced into limiting my artistic choices in violation of basic human principles. My social objective has always been to counteract racism in the world, not reinforce it. So long as there are Hispanics who are basically, genetically European in background, I will consider it my right as an artist to cast Europeans as Hispanics. If the characters call for African, Asian, or Native American Hispanics, I will cast accordingly. Laura San Giacomo is a human being, and she has as much right to play Frida as any other human being who is right for the role.

(2)

In the case of the identity of the real Frida Kahlo, Laura San Giacomo, aided by her resemblance to this historic figure, was perhaps an interesting theatrical choice. Frida Kahlo was the daughter of a German Jewish immigrant father and a Spanish Indian mother. She was light skinned, mixed race, and

her upper class social status afforded her the ability to be both a revolutionary Mexican nationalist and part of an international social set. She may have dressed herself as a Tehuana, but she did not live in that community. The arguments against casting San Giacomo in the role claimed that she had no right to play the role because the actress had no Mexican blood. Does an actress have to submit a letter of ethnic heritage along with her resume in order to be cast? It is odd that there should be an insistence that a Mexican actress should be the only one qualified to play the role based on bloodlines and a sense of racial purity. The Hispanic population is not of one race, but a mixture of Indian, European, African and Asian. No one was arguing that a biracial actress be found to play the role. This was the chief limitation of the Asian community's argument in the *Miss Saigon* case as well: it was deemed acceptable to generalize minority identity within the categories of black, brown, Asian and Indian regardless of the actor's ethnic identity, but this method of casting based on physiognomic markers of race does not represent the rich diversity of cultural ethnicities within the broader categories .

The truth of Valdez's devotion to a sense of a larger humanity beyond these narrow racial lines was evident in the casting choices that were made for all of the major roles. Raul Julia, who was Puerto Rican, not Mexican, was to play Diego Rivera. Edward James Olmos, a Hispanic actor, was to play Leon Trotsky, a Russian. Claudio Brook, a Mexican actor, was going to play Henry Ford, an American. A Latino actress was cast in the role of Frida's sister, Cristina. All of these roles were leads, all cross-culturally cast, with the exception of the role of Cristina, based on the individual actor's ability to create the character. The Russian American community did not protest Olmos playing

Trotsky, and the white American community, usually accused of excluding minorities, was not protesting Brooks playing Ford. This was a fictional film, not a documentary, and the individual actors involved in the project could have brought their own unique perspective to these historical figures. The film could have been ground-breaking in its use of cross-cultural casting, allowing for talent rather than race to decide who should play a role. Valdez has, through his life's work, fought to break the stereotype of Chicanos in America, and this could have been a vital next step towards letting Chicanos be actors, writers and directors within and beyond racial lines. It is unfortunate that the personal attack brought about by this one casting choice should have ended the project. Valdez did not betray his race, rather his racial community betrayed him. The opening of new opportunities would have been more important than controlling this single role, and the choice of who to cast should have remained with the director. The protest left Valdez in a "no win" position, as the current racial politics often do.

What is perhaps more important, if we were to examine the racial and ethnic make-up of the entire film industry, is to make room for a more diverse population of actors, screenwriters and directors, and to allow these artists to produce works that cross the racial divide. In 1995, the Screen Actors Guild, the Writers Guild and the Directors Guild of America compiled statistical figures on minority and women's representation in the film industry as compared to their portion of the general population, based on the current U.S. census reports. (Table 1) The percentages of minorities and women working in various capacities in the film industry did not correlate evenly with their percentage of the overall population of the United States and it is this under-representation

that Valdez was fighting to overcome.

Table 1

| | ACTORS | WRITERS | DIRECTORS | U. S. (general pop.) |
|------------------------|---------------|----------------|------------------|-----------------------------|
| Female | 35% | 24% | 20% | 52% |
| Black | 12% | 3% | 2% | 12% |
| Latino | 3% | 1% | 2% | 9% |
| Asian | 2% | 0.5% | 0.6% | 3% |
| American Indian | 1% | 0.2% | 0.1% | 0.8% |

(Puig and Braxton, p. A22)

Although the argument has been that not enough minority actors have been offered opportunities, statistically they are represented more proportionately to their percentage of the overall population than the other categories. The groups that are the most disproportionately represented are the writers and directors, the very people who shape what type of opportunities there will be for all actors. There is, however, a margin of error in interpreting these statistics because of the nature of work in the film industry. An artist may identify herself as a writer or an actor in the unions, but this does not necessarily mean that that artist is actually employed in that field. These percentages also do not take into consideration that a minority actor may be cast in the role of another race, and that minority writers are not necessarily limited to writing about their own racial group. Regardless of these statistical limitations, the above table is useful in understanding how the attack on Valdez was short sighted at best, for what is needed to expand the cultural diversity of the whole film industry is to get a more diverse population in the producing, writing and

directing positions. These are the real positions of power that direct the market, and currently these positions are primarily held by white males.

This under-representation in producing, directing and writing of minority artists was the same issue that was the centerpiece of August Wilson's June 1996 speech, "The Ground on Which I Stand" presented to the Theatre Communications Group conference. In his speech, Wilson was calling for more black theaters that would represent the rich culture of the black experience in America. At the time of his speech, only one theater group out of the sixty-six theater companies in the League of Resident Theaters, the Crossroads Theater Company in New Jersey, was a specifically black theater, producing African American plays with African American directors and actors. What is significant in this group of regional theaters is the financial backing that it can attract, and the LORT contract for actors in these companies approaches the level of a living wage for the artists. According to Wilson, "black theater is vibrant, it is vital -- it just isn't funded. It doesn't share in the economics that would allow it to support its artists...The economics are reserved as a privilege to the overwhelming abundance of institutions that preserve, promote and perpetuate white culture." (Shirley, F46) There is no denying the legitimacy of Wilson's complaint: black theaters, like so many other theaters that are not mainstream, are underfunded. The whole theater community fights for grant funds in a political atmosphere that seeks to limit or eradicate such institutions as the National Endowment for the Arts. This situation has resulted in the loss of the Negro Ensemble Company, which recently closed its doors when \$750,000 could not be raised to keep it afloat. Interestingly, when corporate funding could not be secured, the black community also wasn't there to bail out the theater group, and it closed, as do

many smaller theaters, regardless of the racial make-up of the company. This is not a black/white issue, but an issue that plagues the entire theater community: how do artists keep a theater going in a techno-crazed society?

Wilson lost some of the support of the black theater community when he called for the end for what has been known as color-blind casting. Wilson was calling for a segregated theater community, where only black directors could direct black plays, and where black actors should refuse to play anything but black roles. Wilson said that color-blind casting was "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. To cast us (African Americans) in the role of mimics is to deny us our own competence...color-blind casting is the same idea of assimilation that black Americans have been rejecting for the past 380 years. For the record, we reject it again." (Shirley, F46)

This is not an uncommon sentiment among the African American community who, despite the struggles of the Civil Rights Movement and the ground won, are still fighting deeply rooted prejudices based on mythologized racial stereotypes. The reaction to this struggle has often been to self-segregate themselves, exemplified by Afrocentric schools which have been developed to teach African American children pride in their culture in a race exclusive atmosphere. Wilson's proposal was not shocking if seen in that context, but the fact remains that his career would not be the same without the mainstream Broadway theaters who have produced his work. It is one thing to call for this utopian African American theater, it is another thing to live it.

The reaction to this speech was varied. Some African American artists

applauded his honesty in presenting his ideas, but ultimately cast Wilson in a minority position in the African American Theater community. Director Benny Sato Ambush, in two ad hoc sessions that followed the conference, said that he found Wilson's words wonderful in their reflection of the historical struggles of African Americans, but would not support his position on color-blind casting. Ambush would rather envision a tradition of color and culture-conscious casting, where minorities may play traditionally white roles but their ethnic identities are not erased. Most of the artists at the ad hoc sessions agreed with Ambush; after all, many of them owed their careers opportunities to this method of casting.

The one representative of the white theater community that Wilson attacked in name during his speech was the American Repertory Theater artistic director, Robert Brustein. This attack drew Brustein into the argument in a print debate that lasted for six months. This ultimately brought the two face to face in a debate at the Town Hall in New York in January 1997. *American Theater Magazine*, which had printed Wilson's previous speech in their September 1996 issue, sponsored the debate. It was moderated by Anna Deveare Smith, who was a very interesting choice in consideration of the style of her own work in speaking across racial lines.

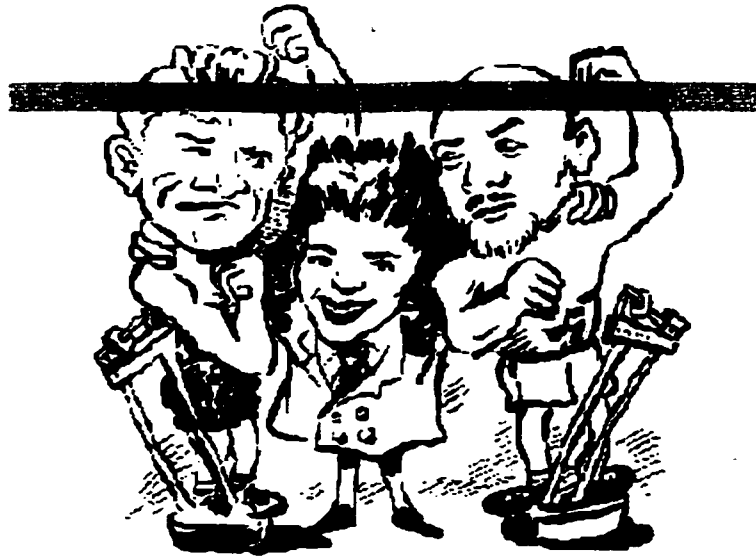
American Theatre Magazine promoted this debate as the "weigh in on cultural power" and as "The Great White Way slugs it out with The Great White Hope." Advertisements for the debate showed a cartoon caricature of Brustein and Wilson dressed as boxing contenders literally weighing themselves and flexing their biceps in a show of physical power, while glaring at each other over the head of Anna Deveare Smith. (Figure 6) Smith appears much smaller than

AMERICAN
THEATRE

presents
Weigh In on Cultural Power

The August Wilson/Robert Brustein Debate
Moderated by Anna Deavere Smith

Monday,
January 27, 1997,
8PM
The Town Hall
123 West 43rd Street
New York City



Tickets
at \$10 and \$20
available now through
TicketMaster
(212) 307-7171
or at The Town Hall
box office as of
January 13.

"The Great White Way" slugs it out with "The Great White Hope"

Fig. 6. Advertisement for the Wilson - Brustein Debate, from the American Theatre Magazine, Jan. 1997. Artist unknown.

the two "contenders" and smiles straight out at the perceived audience. Her look is reminiscent of the style of many television talk show hosts who get a thrill (and ultimately higher ratings) by egging on spurious foes. Smith is dressed ambiguously in an oversized man's suit jacket and tie, and perhaps this is meant to reflect her own work in portraying many voices, across racial and gender lines through her female body. Interestingly, none of the participants are depicted with dark skin, but all appear the same: white. This advertisement was prophetic of what was to come. Una Chaudhuri, the Chairperson of New York University's Department of Drama, wrote in her response letter to the debate, printed in the May/June issue of *American Theatre* :

A lot of people left the Brustein-Wilson debate frustrated and disappointed. I got depressed going in. As I was being carried forward in the clogged stream of anxious ticket-holders, all wondering if we'd get into the auditorium in time, a man next to me joked: "Let's hope it's not a quick knock-out!" The sports metaphor depressed me because it asserted the continuity between this event and the one that has preoccupied the country for the past two years, the one whose real nature the Rev. Jesse Jackson identified forthrightly in his phrase "race entertainment." For me, the structure of that "entertainment" had emerged in the polls that the network news show conducted and reported throughout the (O.J. Simpson) trial. The answers were always presented in racial breakdown: It was always blacks and whites -- and *only* blacks and whites -- whose responses were recorded and reported.

Night after night, as I watched this self-fulfilling prophecy of racial division, I couldn't help wondering what would have happened to this developing picture of a literally black-and-white opposition had others -- such as Asian Americans, or Latinos, or Native Americans, for example -- been included into the surveys. Quite apart of how they were excluded and what this might say to them and others about their participation American culture, the absence

of other groups signaled a willingness ... to have to highlight a starkly agonistic, white-versus-black scenario. But why? Why would anyone want this? Whom does it benefit? What does it yield? What cultural work does it do? (16, 60)

Chaudhuri concluded that everyone present at this debate had longed for a genuine exchange of ideas, but as Brustein and Wilson spent their time arguing over who had the right to receive funding, it did not occur. In fact, the great debate was quickly renamed a mere discussion, with many wondering what had been achieved. Brustein took the patriarchal stance that his theater represent “high art” and that his allowance for minorities to take part in his productions makes up for the shortage of ethnic centered theaters; Wilson took the segregationist approach to the argument, calling for funding of exclusively black theater and fighting the participation of black artists in other venues.

Both men seemed to play the historical race card. Brustein claimed to make up for history’s past inequalities in artistic representation by allowing others in while retaining the power to determine how they will be let in. Brustein is angered by the fact that grants have rewritten their requirements for allotment, rewarding companies that represent minorities and those that reach a diversified audience. His position was clearly outlined in his 1995 article for the *Partisan Review* entitled “Cultural Politics and Coercive Philanthropy.” In this article, Brustein takes on the position of reverse racism: grants are now rewarding diversity rather than supporting “an artistic goal.” (Brustein, 253) After quoting a laundry list of the Lila Wallace-Readers Digest Fund’s social goals to expand the Asian American, Latino, African American representation in both the audience base and in the performing artists, Brustein states that “only one award last year went to an institution proposing a project with any artistic

dimensions”(253), but he declines to elaborate on what makes that one project more meritorious as opposed to the other projects that were funded. That has been the major problem in his writing as well as in the debate: Brustein seems to have a criteria for ranking productions (high art, popular, ethnic minority) but never qualifies this ranking by giving examples of productions. Do August Wilson’s plays fit into the category of “high art,” the pinnacle of expression which Brustein seems to think is the only art worth funding?

Wilson played on the ugliness of the slave history and continued racism in America to make his argument. Instead of defining black theater, he played on the natural sympathies of the audience by invoking the images of slaves and masters, even including his own physiognomy in argument. Wilson credited his light skin as being the result of white masters visiting the slave quarters, when actually it is the result of his having a black mother and white father. This is not necessarily a unique position for someone to take in this society, where we are continually asked to name our racial identity, and, in the case of biracial identity, to choose one. But this sort of claim of racial miscegenation played so causally is dangerous when one considers the amount of silent guilt this country continues to carry over the social legacy of slavery. It sets Wilson in the role of the oppressed, the suffering black or the tragic mulatto, when in truth he is as much a member of the mainstream theater as is Brustein. Don Shirley of the *L.A. Times* had reported after Wilson’s first speech that “a reader of his first speech might conclude that Wilson plans to turn to black theaters for future productions of his own plays. Not so, Wilson insists. “I have carefully worked out a relationship with various theaters that have supported my work.” He said he doesn’t plan to change that relationship.” (Shirley, F46) During the debate,

Wilson stated that he had no interest in funding or helping to establish a black theater himself. So, outside of grandstanding on the part of both men, Brustein and Wilson, what was this debate really all about?

In the end, it seemed to relate best to the t.v. talk show or sporting event categories that had first been used to promote the event. Like most talk shows, a lot of fighting went on, spurred on by the blood lust of an audience, but little ground or understanding was actually achieved. Hopefully, to use Chaudhuri's sport's analogy, this is only round one. Perhaps the debate will eventually evolve into a much needed discussion about the difference between integration (different cultures coming together in an even exchange, broadening each group's knowledge of the other) and assimilation (the loss of nuance of one culture as it disappears into another). Michele Wallace, an author and cultural critic, in her response letter to the debate in *American Theatre*, succinctly pointed out the major weaknesses in the event:

To summarize the best of it, (Wilson) claimed that the mainstream theatrical establishment is racist (true) because it has imposed its own cultural hegemony in all areas indiscriminately (true) and because it doesn't support "black theatre" (also true) Of course, the major black hole in Wilson's argument that made it so strangely provocative is that nobody begins to know what "black theatre" is. Is it the so-called Chitlin Circuit, the black dinner theatre of *Mama I Want to Sing* and its other various clones...or a dignified regional theatre such as Crossroads, the source of hits like *The Colored Museum* ? or the political theatre of Emily Mann (with productions like Ntozake Shange's *Betsy Brown*) ...at the McCarter in Princeton? Is it Wilson's series of magical realism/historical plays so successful among matinee audiences on Broadway? or Ed Bullins and the New Lafayette Theatre crowd of the 60's who wouldn't permit whites in the audience?...or is it rather George C. Wolfe's Broadway musical extravaganzas? What exactly makes black theatre black? Radical politics? working class orientation? links to African cultural precedents

and aesthetic models?

If it is gay or feminist or biracial, is it still black? If it is black aboriginal from Australia or black as in Papua, New Guinea, does it still qualify as black? If it is also Mexican or Columbian, or Asian or Native American, can it also be black? Must one choose? Or could it be all of these things and more?...One must keep in mind that race is a construction -- not a biological or biochemical reality, but a stupendously successful myth that hasn't yet begun to go into serious decline...Indeed, I believe that the whole matter is ultimately about re-territorializing American culture to fit a dramatic, emerging demographic shift, and this pseudo event doesn't begin to plumb the depths of the changes that are to come. (14, 56)

Wallace's writing truly reflects what was lacking from this debate: there were points made about the reality of racism in the theatre, the new emerging difficulties in getting funding in a political climate that devalues theatrical expression altogether, all put forth by two guys who are both part of the theater establishment. The lack of performance evidence discussed left huge holes in both sides of the argument, both in the depiction of "high art" and of black theater. Wilson's persistence in pitting black theater against a white, Eurocentric, colonialist hegemony is inaccurate in that it fails to realize that black theater is American theater, produced out of the experience of living in this American culture. American culture is not just the representation of one ethnic group, as Wilson assumes in his vilification of whites, but a strange inter-mixing of many ethnicities. Wilson's assumption that white is one thing in America denies the fact that there are many ethnicities represented within the larger group: German Americans differ from Italian Americans, Irish Americans are not the same as Polish Americans. To reduce all these groups and others into one is to deny them their own rich cultural heritage. This irony seems to

have eluded Wilson.

Since the time of this debate, Wilson took part in the National Black Theatre Summit at Dartmouth College in March 1998. The summit began with a closed-door session followed by a daylong conference entitled "African American Theatre: The Next Stage." No one at the conference questioned the call for an exclusively African American theater this time, rather the conference was centered on reeducating the black community so that it will fund and attend an exclusively black theater, which, in recent times, it has failed to do. One wonders whether Wilson's intention for this theater movement will restrict the audience base as well: black theater for an all black audience; or whether he will recognize the benefits of a system of open cultural exchange in which race-divided communities could come together and grow in their knowledge of the other. The conference seemed to dismiss the theater that has come out of the Chitlin Circuit as not being black enough. Playwright Joe Walker said of this type of theater that "anything that looks like it represents us, just throw a little gospel in there, put a little controversial love story and boom!" (Ards, 52) This level of discrimination of one type of theater against another within the black community is really no different than Brustein's categories of high art and popular dramas.

Summarizing the effect of the conference on the black theater, Angela Ards reported that "it is hard to say what came out of the conference since official results were announced before the event began." (52) For a group that is seeking black funded, black only theater expression without the influence of white society, it is interesting that the conference itself was funded by the Ford and Rockefeller foundations, Dartmouth College and the National Endowment

for the Arts. Wilson, William Cook and Victor Walker will be publishing a book on this conference and the follow-up conference in Atlanta that took place in the summer of 1998 through a fellowship at the Getty Research Institute. This funding seems in direct conflict with the rhetoric of the conference. Perhaps it would be better to recognize that instead of separating into cultural artistic enclaves in America it would be more advantageous to come together in a new way that celebrates all ethnicities. To vilify one or the other, black or white, is to take our country backwards into a world of ignorance.

In all of these chronicled debates, *Miss Saigon*, the Frida Kahlo casting, and the rhetoric of Brustein and Wilson, there are similarities that reflect the past's exclusion of minority identity in the arts. Before Joseph Papp, few minorities were cast as themselves, much less as anything else. This history has rightly fueled the casting struggles explored, but it does little to shape the parameters of casting in the future. What is left to explore is the mythic proportions of racial identity and the power of the theater to be not only reflective of the society but also a proponent of change. Una Chaudhuri wrote in *American Theatre* that had Wilson's "argument for black theatre rested exclusively on the merits and values of black *culture* , rather than on the principles of 'blood', and had he proposed to Brustein that his cherished principle of non-traditional casting be now extended to all actors, including white actors, we might have had a discussion with a future... By creating culturally specific theatres for our actors (all of them) to inhabit and for our audiences (all of them) to enjoy, we would be realizing the promise of multiculturalism as a true celebration of diversity, which means, surely, of *everyone's* and *each other's* 'diversity,' not just one's own" (61). Chaudhuri's

ideas are reflected in David Williams's article on transcultural theater in *The Intercultural Performance Reader*, a book that embraces cultural exchange without the limitations imposed by the current American theater politics. Williams writes that "perhaps it would be possible for actors in a multicultural theatre group -- others-to-each-other, and to themselves (to their 'other' possible selves) -- to become cartographers of 'other' ways of feeling, seeing and representing, to rewrite the map of difference. And, in the process, to locate the dynamic parameters of their own difference, their individuality -- to become more themselves in relation to an evolving 'culture': a culture of becoming" (72). To do this, we must first work to understand the perceptions of racial identity from within the group and from without, from the social to the personal, challenging the mythic signs of the racialized body in performance.

Chapter Two

Redefining The Color Line

In the lower east side of New York City, a street musician plays his electric violin with his instrument case open before him, hoping to gather donations from passersby. The musician is in his mid-twenties, Chinese American, dressed in retro-60's clothes highlighted by a few 90's style body mutilations. The music he plays is jazz. Another young man, in his early twenties, blond, blue-eyed and dressed as a Midwestern tourist, stops to listen to the music, makes his financial contribution to the violin case and politely asks directions to a street in Chinatown. The musician, Ronnie, explodes in anger at the assumption that this white tourist, Benjamin, has made: he is Asian and therefore, by virtue of his skin, should know all about Chinatown. Benjamin responds to this burst of outrage by saying:

Brother, I can absolutely respond to your rage. Righteous rage, I suppose would be a more appropriate term. To be marginalized, as we are, by a white racist patriarchy, to the point where the accomplishments of our people are obliterated from the history books, this is cultural genocide of the first order, leading to the fact that you must do battle with all of Euro-America's emasculating and brutal stereotypes of Asians -- the opium den, the sexual objectification of the Asian female, the exoticized image of a tourist's Chinatown which ignores the exploitation of workers, the failure to unionize, the high rate of mental illness and tuberculosis -- against these, each day, you rage, not as a victim, but as a survivor. (Hwang, *Chinatown* 108)

Benjamin tells Ronnie that he got all his knowledge about Asian oppression by studying Asian American studies at the University of Wisconsin, and then he reveals that he is in New York to explore his Asian roots. The

dialogue between the two strangers continues:

Ronnie: I don't know what kind of bullshit ethnic studies program they're running over in Wisconsin, but didn't they bother to teach you that in order to find your Asian "roots," it's a good idea first to be Asian?

Ben: Are you speaking metaphorically?

Ronnie: No! Literally! Look at your skin!

Ben: You know, it's very stereotypical to think that all Asian skin tones conform to a single hue.

Ronnie: You're white! Is this some kind of redneck joke or something?

Am I the first person to tell you this?...

Ben: No, of course, I...I see where your misunderstanding arises.

Ronnie: Yeah. It's called, "You white."...

Ben: It's just that -- in my hometown of Tribune, Kansas, and then at school -- see, everyone knows me -- so this sort of thing never comes up. I forget that a society wedded to racial constructs forces me to explain my very existence... You see, I was adopted by Chinese American parents at birth. So, clearly, I'm an Asian American --

Ronnie: Even though they could put a picture of you in the dictionary next to the definition of "WASP."

Ben: Well, you can't judge my race by my genetic heritage.

Ronnie: If genes don't determine race, what does?

Ben: Maybe you'd prefer that I continue in denial, masquerading as a white man?

Ronnie: Listen, you can't just wake up and say, "Gee, I *feel* Black today." (Hwang, *Chinatown* 109-110)

To some readers, this bit of text probably appears too self-consciously politically correct, and yet it raises a central question about the parameters of the effectiveness of cross-cultural casting: does race equate to ethnicity? Could someone who doesn't have Asian physiognomy, as in the above text, claim to be Asian? This dialogue about the limitations of racial identity codes in our modern American society is from David Henry Hwang's ten minute play *Trying to Find Chinatown*, which was performed in 1996 at the Humana Festival at the

Actor's Theatre of Louisville. For Hwang, identity is a fluid rather than a fixed code, and he recognizes that our perception of identity has reached the point where it needs to be redefined. Our society's tendency to perceive identity in terms of visual signs has been called into question for some years now, with the women's and civil rights movements actively working to expand the definition of who Americans are as a people. Unfortunately, casting directors don't always see the connection between roles in a script and the truth of individual roles in life.

Hwang's writing also recognizes the separate forces of nature or genetics and nurture or societal conditioning. In *Trying to Find Chinatown*, his character Benjamin defines identity in terms of nurture rather than nature: his skin is white but he was raised in an ethnically Chinese household, and thereby sees himself as Chinese. Hwang's character Ronnie determines his ethnicity by his choice in artistic expression: he is Asian in his physiognomy, yet he finds his sense of community with the world of jazz musicians. It is music that is the driving force that shapes his life, and thus he rejects the assumption that his skin determines his identity. This play illustrates the point of contention between those artists who, like August Wilson, are pushing for segregated minority artistic expression defined by antiquated codes of racialized identity and those who want to pursue the convention of cross-cultural casting. Individual identity does not necessarily conform to the historical racial codes of identity, and the more Americans continue the dialogue about race and prejudice, the more we find that the stereotypes no longer fit. The fallacy of logic found in all the debates chronicled in the previous chapter about multicultural artistic expression is that physiognomy is no longer a reliable

marker of ethnicity or identity.

In May 1999, the Eureka Theatre in San Francisco produced the play *Stonewall Jackson's House*, written by Jonathan Reynolds, accompanied by a symposium entitled "Racism, Political Correctness and the Arts." The play *Stonewall Jackson's House* began with a play within a play, oddly played against amateurish scenery, coarsely painted to suggest rooms within the historical house. The characters of the play within the play were two couples of tourists: one couple represented as white trash, the other as comfortably middle-class. Both couples were being led on a tour of Jackson's house by a disgruntled, down on her luck African American tour guide. Through the tedious descriptions of the artifacts in the Jackson house, all of which are replicas and not the original articles, the tour guide breaks down over the state of her life. The middle-class couple offer her refuge with them at their home, where the tour guide could live freely without the burden of making her way in the world. She jumps on the opportunity, offering herself as their slave, which seems appealing after a life of struggles. The white trash couple begin to think that this is not such a bad idea and beg to be their slaves as well. Seemingly everyone gets what they want as the play breaks for intermission. If it seems politically incorrect to have an African American character opt for servitude, it becomes understandable when it is taken as an indictment against the failed welfare state in America. After all, the middle-class couple insist that they could never treat these people harshly, and the meaning of slavery loses its historical context. The play makes the point that the real slavery that persists in America is life in the welfare system, which fails the individual by not offering viable opportunities.

After the intermission, the play within the play falls away to expose the backstage greenroom of the fictitious theatre, and launches into a debate about artistic directorship, the idea that plays should be racially specific to their authors, and the nature of what is acceptable to perform in the theatre. It turns out that this seemingly racist play within a play is being sold as the work of a white male playwright, but he is really only a front for the African American woman who is vying for the position of artistic director of the theatre company. The idea that a playwright can only write from their historically appointed perspective is raised, and that this African American character could write such a play is presented as a betrayal to her race. After many other issues about the state of the American theatre are raised, debated and, in some cases, made to seem trivial, the play within a play begins again, and this time the character of the tour guide is played by an older white woman, and the tourists are now played by men in the women's roles and women in the men's roles. As produced, it makes the convention of cross-casting seem ludicrous, for the men are not only playing the women's roles but they are doing it in women's clothes, and the women have adopted stereotypical swaggers to go along with their ill-fitting trousers. This production of *Stonewall Jackson's House* reinforces codes of difference, of what is male and what is female, what is black and what is white, by making it seem as though these codes are fixed ideas. The play seems to suggest that actors cannot transcend the historical codes of identity. But what would happen if director Amy Glazer had taken a different approach to the end of the play? What would the audience think if the men had assumed the women's lines but stayed in men's clothes? And what would the audience think if the older white woman had honestly played the role of the African

American tour guide instead of playing it as though it were an absurd idea? Could the audience then begin to see beyond racial and gender codes to understand something greater about our common humanity? As seen in Hwang's play, what the audience thinks it perceives about an individual's identity is often based on codes that stratify the population by physical cues, but that stratification does not necessarily relate to the individual. This would have required true daring on the part of the Eureka Theatre, to risk being politically incorrect in a more substantive way. But for all the rhetoric about the plays subversiveness, the actual production of it was rather pedestrian.

The panelists at the symposium seemed to agree with this. Dr. Ronnie Washington, when questioned about his response to the play, said that he didn't think that the play made any particular statement about politics and the theatre, and that he didn't see it as particularly risky in terms of racism and political correctness. If the PhD.'s on the panel seemed to be largely unimpressed by the play, the audience at the symposium took on the usual split on the topic of race in the theatre. One woman kept insisting that it was wrong to have an African American character want to be a slave, and that the theatre must be bound to exploring our historical relationship to each other, especially in terms of black and white identity. This position was countered by a middle-aged African American actor in the audience, who said that he wanted to be seen as a part of the theatre community, not just the black theatre community. He asked rather plainly why he could not play the role of Willy Loman in Miller's *Death of a Salesman* if he wanted to? If he could empathize with the role, which is what actor training teaches us to do, why should his skin color stand in the way of his playing the role? His question was answered by the first woman,

who said that it wasn't a black role. But what is a black role? We divide roles easily into categories of racial identity, in fact the playwright often does that for us, but how do we draw the conclusion that some roles are white and others are not? Why couldn't Willy Loman be portrayed by an African American actor? Willy Loman is a man whom the idea of the American dream has failed. Does that not fit the historical identity of an African American man as well as a white man? What would be the risk of casting the role that way, except that the playwright, Arthur Miller, did not conceive the role in that regard? The production of *Stonewall Jackson's House* seemed to suggest that our roles are something clear and definable, and that to challenge these codes of identity is ridiculous. But at what time do we stop insisting that historical identities should prevail and allow a trained actor to work? David Henry Hwang makes this point quite clear in his play *Trying to Find Chinatown*, that personal identity is not as simple as we have historically thought it to be, and the perceived codes of difference defined by physiognomy are not reliable markers of identity.

And yet, this very assumption that physiognomy determines the codes of identity is prevalent in the process of casting. If a playwright has a character say that he is Chinese, the casting director will look for an actor with Asian physiognomy to play the role. The actor does not necessarily have to be Chinese, but must have a certain set of physiognomic features that read as Chinese. The actor could be Korean, which is ethnically different from Chinese, but we will, as an audience accept this actor in the role if his racial marker matches the character. It is not necessary for the actor to understand the specifics of Chinese culture in order to play the part, the signs of his body allow us to assume that this is his identity. A white actor can, likewise, play a variety

of ethnicities, as long as those ethnicities fall within the category of whiteness. Meryl Streep's work is a prime example of this phenomenon. We know that she is American, but suspend our disbelief to allow her to take the role of a Polish woman in *Sophie's Choice* (1982) or that of a Danish woman in *Out of Africa* (1985) or an Irish matron in *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1998). Streep's training as an actress allows her to change her voice and dialect and her physical dynamic so that we are convinced that she is the character that she is playing. No one would suggest that only a Polish, Danish or Irish actress could play those roles; any actress could play them as long as she fits into the category of whiteness. However, a producer would not cast an African American actress in these roles, regardless of her skills in adapting to another accent, because the reading of her physiognomy tells us that she is not of these ethnicities. Racial codes are stronger than ethnic codes.

There is also another phenomenon at work in interpreting who can play what role. If a role specifically states that a character is African American or Asian, a casting director will look for the right racial type to fit the role. But if a role is not specified racially, the casting protocol is that the role is white. If the playwright does not define the character's racial identity, but is a minority writer, the assumption is that he or she is writing from their own particular cultural or racial identity and that the roles match accordingly. August Wilson writes black plays, therefore whether the character is pronounced African American or not, there is the assumption that the roles are all black. But what would happen if the roles were not cast in that manner? A student of mine, a blond, fair skinned girl performed a monologue in the studio from Wilson's play *Fences*. Without her being African American, the monologue was simply about a woman being

betrayed by her husband. If she were African American, we probably would have read the piece differently, being overly aware of statistics about philandering African American males and abandoned African American women. And yet the heart of the piece is something far simpler, more personal and more universal than our reading of racial codes will allow. Our perception of racial identity is the balance between those who are marked and those who are unmarked historically. Ross Chambers, in his article entitled "The Unexamined," states that

The invisibility of whiteness, however - its ability to elude examination - depends on the further dichotomization of the white/nonwhite relation, one that inverts in an apparently contradictory way the relation of white singularity to the pluralized other. Whereas the other is pluralized in order to produce whiteness as indivisible and singular, the groups that compose this pluralized other are homogenized in this new relation, through what is called *stereotyping*, that is, the belief that "all Xs are the same" (where X refers to the members of marked, examinable groups and perhaps, at a certain horizon, to the whole set of members of all such groups). (192)

So for my white student, the translation of a monologue from *Fences* through her white "unexamined body" is perceived as an individual struggle in a failing marriage, whereas the same monologue performed by a racially marked body would carry the weight of history behind it. Chambers defines the reason behind this phenomenon by writing that:

The indivisibility of whiteness ensures that white people doing what is in effect their own brand of special-interest politics look like so many individual agents getting on with the business of expressing, exploring, negotiating and even settling their legitimate differences - differences that define them not as white people (a classificatory identity) but as "people." Identity politics is alien to white people as white people (I'm obviously not talking about white women as women or white

gay men as men) because whiteness is not a classificatory identity but just the unexamined norm against which such identities are defined, compared, and examined. Their whiteness being too in(div)isible to define them they have only the self-identities of individual agents. Whereas others may have group identities, white people as a group are just the unexamined. But there is more strength in that than in all the identity politics in the world. (197)

It is necessary to have a basic understanding of the evolution of the theories of race and its social impact in order to understand the way we have unconsciously read the racialized body in performance and why some bodies are marked and others are not. According to Michael Banton, a Professor of Sociology at the University of Bristol, the word 'race' did not even appear in European languages until the beginning of the sixteenth century. (xi) Banton's writing explores many phases of racial theory development, the first phase being the recognition of difference between people with the emergence of the term 'race' and the attempt to classify these varying groups according to outward appearances. The problem facing most racial theorists in this early period was the necessity to explain racial difference without contradicting the idea put forth from the *Bible* that all humans were descendants from Adam and Eve. Linnaeus (1707 - 78) developed a system of classification in his *Systema Naturae* which "divided the species *Homo sapiens* into six diurnal varieties: ferus (four footed, mute and hairy); americanus (red, choleric, erect); europaeus (white, ruddy, muscular) asiaticus (yellow, melancholic, inflexible); afer (black, phlegmatic, indulgent); monstrous (further subdivided to include deviant forms from several regions)." (Banton, 4) The significance of Linnaeus' system of classification is that it not only attempts to separate people by racial features but it also assigns emotional qualities to the physical differences. The limitation in

Linnaeus' theory of classification was the assumption that the "various sets of individuals to be classified were stable, for how could they be classified if they were changing?" (Banton, 5) The theory of how environment creates organic change in racial classification was put forth by Immanuel Kant (1724 - 1804), who supposed that "human stock had been endowed with latent powers which could be evoked or suppressed in new circumstances." (Banton, 5) Johann Freidrich Blumenbach (1752 - 1830), who was a German anatomist, was the first to advance the fivefold classification: Caucasian, Mongolian, Ethiopian, American, and Malayan. Blumenbach maintained that human form changed by mutation, what he termed 'degeneration' as one generation arose from another, but he also recognized that the various human forms only differed in degree. Blumenbach's theory supported the underlying theory of race as lineage, that all various forms of human physical structure originated from one species.

The racial thought of the early nineteenth century in Germany was known as *Naturphilosophie*, which was part of the Romantic Movement. This philosophy "sought a unification of all knowledge about nature through such transcendental beliefs as that which saw the history of the universe as the history of the spirit." (Banton, 18) It was during this period that Carl Gustav Carus (1789 - 1869), being dissatisfied with the earlier classifications of races based solely on the human external characteristics, developed his own symbolic theory of the meaning of racial differences in his essay *On the Unequal Capacity of the Different Divisions of Mankind for Higher Spiritual Development*. Carus classified the divisions of mankind into day people (Caucasians) Eastern twilight people (Mongolians, Malayans, Hindus, Turks and Slavs) Western twilight people (American Indians) and night people

(Africans and Australians) Although Carus employed metaphorical language to describe the variations of human form, the main thrust of his writing was to legitimize the theory of white superiority. In response to Carus, Hermann Blome wrote:

Just as (Gustav) Klemm thought it was from the "marriage of peoples" and from the penetration of the passive by the active peoples that humanity starts upon a general cultural development, so Carus saw the inequality of human races as Nature's summons to interaction, to give-and-take, whereby humanity as a total organism might be served. The tribe of day peoples was "entitled to regard itself as the true flowers of humanity," but for Carus that signified not only that this tribe was the bearer of civilization but also that, because of its superiority, power, resoluteness and perseverance, it had the duty to lead the weak and less favored tribes by lighting their path and assisting them along it; in doing so it would prove true to itself. To the question exactly how this task was given to the day peoples or active tribes, both Carus and Klemm give extensive answers. They see the whole of humanity as one great organism; its unequal parts, the races, have to stand in an inter-acting relationship of exchange and progress, so that under the leadership of the white race the "idea" of humanity can be realized. (Banton, 21)

Perhaps the most bizarre racial theory to arise in this same period was based on the embryology work of Robert Chambers, who asserted that embryos go through stages resembling the evolution of primitive animals. After moving through the fish and reptilian stages, the unborn fetus "passes through the characters in which it appears in the Negro, Malay, American and Mongolian nations, and finally is Caucasian. The face partakes of these alterations...The leading characters, in short, of the various races of mankind, are simply representations of particular stages in the development of the highest Caucasian type...The Mongolian is an arrested infant newly-born." (Banton, 25)

What encapsulates all of these theories of the meaning of racial difference in this period is the use of science, in cranial measurements, to place an order of hierarchy on racial features. But the evidence of this scientific approach is itself flawed by the need of the researchers to legitimize racial inequities and our emotional response to difference by assigning physical characteristics to perceived intellectual capabilities. At a time when the economic and educational opportunities of racial minorities in America were severely limited, to attempt to equate intellectual capacities to cranial measurements denies to the force of nurture or societal conditioning on the perceived identity of the individual. In fact, all of the previous theories mentioned here are limited in understanding race in that they attempt to stratify identity on the basis of physiognomy, attaching mental traits arbitrarily to physical ones without the benefit of anthropological understanding of ethnicity. The need to organize society into a ranked order, placing white-skinned individuals at the top of the order, is the main thrust of these theories. Why should white skin hold this high rank? Centuries of dominance by colonialism supports this ranking, but does it really have any meaning other than legitimizing past inequities?

Banton's next phase of the development of racial theory deals directly with the force of societal conditioning with Robert E. Park's (1863 -1944) work on racial division. For Park:

As members of society , men act as they do elsewhere from motives they do not fully comprehend, in order to fulfill aims of which they are but dimly or not at all conscious... Under the influence of the mores men act typically, and so representatively, not as individuals but as members of a group. (Banton, 88)

Thus, for Park, this meant that, when distinguishing the political from the cultural, "politics were concerned with matters in regard to which there was division and difference, but the 'political process, by which a society or a social group formulates its wishes and enforces them, goes on within the limits of the mores.' This meant that every time a Negro appeared in an unaccustomed situation it provoked comment as to something contrary to the mores." (Banton, 88) Park's writing contends that social status is accepted by subject groups, but he does not explore the conditions present, as in slavery, when status is thrust upon such groups. The force of prejudice is not addressed in his writing, and this is, perhaps, its chief limitation. But the force of prejudice should be considered in how we stratify individuals based on their physiognomic markers. Banton points out that:

In 1921, it was not generally appreciated ...that racial prejudice was a disposition towards other groups that children learned as they grew up. Perhaps only a minority claimed explicitly that prejudices were biologically inherited characteristics of a group, but many took prejudice for granted as something scarcely requiring investigation. This was the background of stereotyping. In the early 1920s an American educational research worker gave some classes of school children the following silent reading test:

Aladdin was the son of a poor tailor. He lived in Peking, the capitol city of China. He was always lazy and liked to play better than to work. What kind of boy was he: Indian, Negro, Chinese, French or Dutch?

To his amazement, he found that many children...were so impressed by the statement that the boy was lazy that they answered that he must be Negro. From his...observations grew a series of enquiries into the promotion and function of set ideas, followed later by psycho-analytic studies of prejudice. (89)

Prejudicial stereotyping is, perhaps, the strongest influence at work in

defining our personal and social identities. Centuries of racial theory have reinforced social stratification based on certain physical traits, and rarely does it distinguish the individual from the group. Robert E. Parks observed that assimilation of African Americans and Asians was limited because of their distinguishing physical traits, not their mental ones, and that a physical substratum has been established in direct relation to this, thereby preventing their full assimilation into the American society. (Williams, 94.)

The question that needs clarification is how is it that we assume an understanding of the mental traits of an individual based on their physical traits, and, more specifically, why do we continue to attach meaning to the color of one's skin after so many centuries of racial theory have produced relatively little evidence to support this stratification except as a means to empower one group over another? To take this problem one step further, why is it that certain minorities are judged by their racial and ethnic difference and are always perceived as being a representative of a group, while others, who are equally diverse ethnically but have white skin, are perceived not necessarily as representatives of a group but as individuals? Why is it that we have hyphenated titles for some people: African American, Chinese American, and Mexican American; but we do not usually refer to others who have white skin as French American, German American or British American? It is a curious phenomenon, which Ross Chambers categorized as the difference between marked and unmarked groups, that seems to suggest that racially marked groups, no matter how long they have lived in this country, are not really considered to be fully American, but something other. This condition is what playwright David Henry Hwang calls being "the perpetual foreigner" (*Okay To*

Be Wrong 4) Hwang elaborated on this idea at a lecture at MIT saying:

(This) leads to a discussion of the whole issue of the tyranny of appearances and how it is that the way we look establishes to a large extent the way that we're perceived, at least on first notices. Every minority group, I think, and every group in general, has their particular burden to bear. I think that among Asians, we have to deal with the idea of being the perpetual foreigner. One's family can have been in this country five or six generations but people still go, "Oh, you speak really good English," whereas it's not necessarily assumed that someone of Swedish descent speak Swedish.

Similarly if I'm walking on Christopher Street for instance and someone yells, "Go back where you came from," I assume that they're not expressing their distaste for Californians. The perpetual foreigner status I think leads to various harms, some of them minor irritants but others are more significant. (*Okay To Be Wrong* 4)

There is a remarkable difference between how we perceive ourselves and how others perceive us. In terms of race, our societal conditioning plays a key role in the reading of race. In the opening scene of the film *Black Like Me*, the camera follows the dividing line of a highway, and the shot crisply shows the line's edges, clearly separating it from the dark asphalt although it is passing underneath the bus with some speed. This shot is repeated throughout the film, although as the narrative progresses, the lines begin to lose their definition, melting into one another until it is difficult to discern which side of the line the camera is focused on. This shot serves as a metaphor of the main character John Horton's journey across the early 1960's racial dividing line on a quest to understand what it is to be a black man in the Jim Crow Era South. Horton, played by James Whitmore, is a journalist who becomes obsessed with trying to understand the harsh racism in this pre-civil rights society, and chemically alters

his skin and hair in order to cross the line and experience life as a black man.

The film succeeds in portraying the extreme and frightening level of racial hatred that was prevalent in this era in the way it shows the faces of white people pursed with contempt and the various black faces either cowering in fear or raised in quiet defiance. To the film's credit, black people are not shown as simply one thing, but as individuals. They are shown as the working and middle classes, as both educated and illiterate. Some are generous and kind spirited, some are not. Some are hard working and hopeful, others are shown as angrily bowing under the pressures of the segregated society. In spite of all this, Horton's journey actually reveals more about himself as a white man and about societal conditioning than it does about what it is to live in black skin.

Armed with the mutability of white skin, Horton anxiously pursues his chemical transformation with drugs and a sun lamp, ready to get on with his experiment. But when he finally finishes this transformation, the film shows him looking in his bathroom mirror with dread and horror written across his face. He changes from a man with a quest into a man who loathes his very appearance in the mirror. The only thing that remains unchanged is his blue eyes, which seem to stand as a reminder that his soul is white although it looks out through dark skin.

When his journey begins across the Southern states, he is shown walking with a sense of ease about his body, and casually making eye contact with passersby. Convinced by other black men that this is dangerous, he gradually begins to change his body language to avoid being noticed. Although he encounters many different, decent black people along the way, and is lodged in their comfortable homes and entertained with intelligent

conversations; Horton becomes increasingly anxious. His face is always shown covered with perspiration. He begins to resemble a hunted animal rather than a man. He starts drinking heavily and presumes that all white people will approach him with anger and contempt. In this state of paranoia, Horton becomes a raging aggressor against every white person that he encounters, even when they have given him no reason to respond in such a manner. Eventually the camera shot returns to the dividing line of the highway and, once again, it is clearly defined. The camera then shows Horton, in a series of flash backs, thinking back over all the individuals he met along the journey. After a moment, he very deliberately steps back over the line and continues to walk with determination back into his comfortable white suburban world.

Although *Black Like Me* makes an honest attempt at understanding racism, the message that it really produces is that white people and black people are of separate worlds and that to be black is to be something that is underclass, regrettable and worthy of pity. It is understandable in this pre-civil Rights time, before black was proclaimed as beautiful, that Horton's character should feel such anguish about being black. What is missing in the film is an understanding of the common humanity that all people share and that codifying color into a bipolar sign system of individual identity: white superior, black inferior; is not based in any sort of genetic terms, but only exists as a construction of societal conditioning. C. Eric Lincoln wrote in his paper on color identity in the United States:

In the United States where the enduring problem in social relations is between whites and Negroes, skin color is probably the most important single index for uncritical human evaluation. It is paradoxical that this is so, for color is notoriously unreliable

as a tool for determining any substantial qualities of the individual, particularly his "race." And it is with race that the question of color is ultimately concerned. Despite this obvious unreliability color is made to function as a cultural index for racial determination whenever it is conceived of as a valuable external symbol of supposedly intrinsic qualities. The presence or absence of these qualities determines whether a person belongs to an "inferior" or "superior" social group, and whether his life chances are circumscribed or maximized in terms of his group membership. (Franklin, 249)

It is interesting, however, that what we now consider to be white was not always the case. Through different periods of heavy immigration, the fear of economic and political displacement caused the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant majority to regard the Jews, the Catholic Irish and Italians as equivalent in identity to blacks. (Dyer, 52-53) In this case, blackness did not necessarily relate to the color of the skin but to the lowest station in life. The Irish were described as simian and riotously drunken, and were linked to Africans in their physiognomy in an attempt to explain the perception of their behavior. (Figures 7, 8, 9) The Italian immigrants were described as swarthy, greasy, dark and dirty, obviously something lower than white. The Jews held a more ambiguous position, sometimes seen as dark and sometimes not, but were clearly regarded as something other than pure white. Blackness, as the symbol of baseness and the primitive, is seen as the polar opposite to whiteness, which symbolizes purity and refinement. White has also meant political power in America, in so much as those with white skin excluded others from governing control of their destinies. Clarifying the concept of polarization of color identity into two groups, black and white, Richard Dyer wrote:

If there are only two colors that really count, then which you belong to really becomes a matter of the greatest significance...

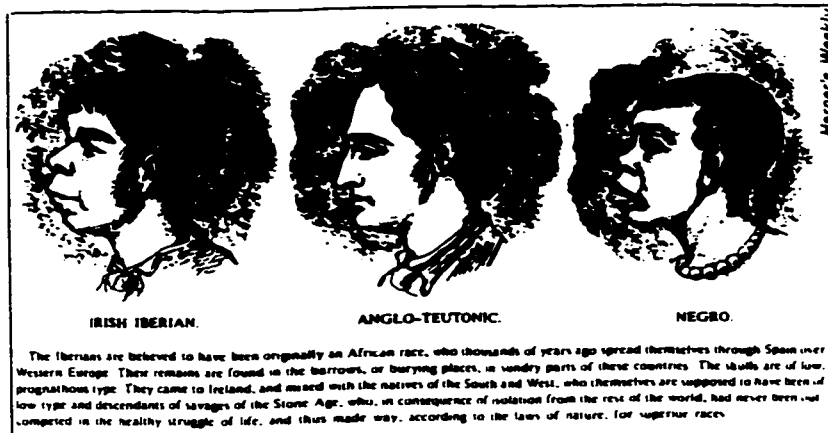


Fig.7. "Irish Iberian, Anglo-Teutonic." Harper's Weekly, mid-nineteenth century. From Richard Dyer's *White*. 1997.

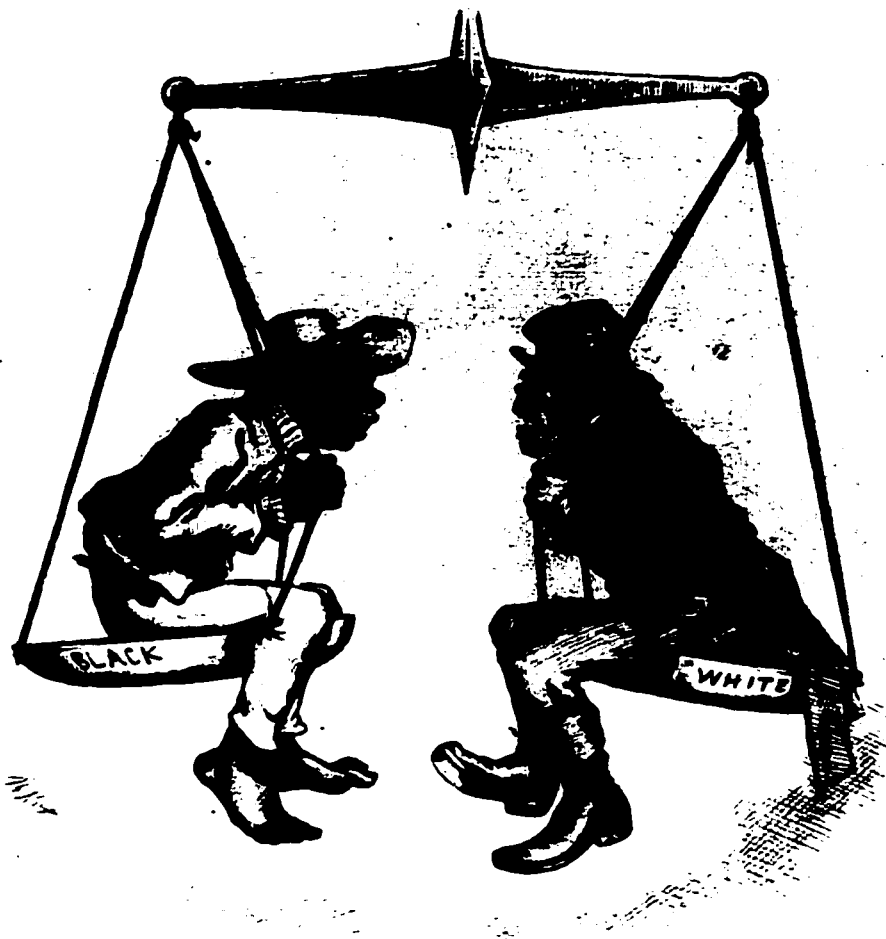


Fig. 8. Thomas Nast "The Ignorant Vote: Honors are Easy." Harper's Weekly, 9 December 1876. From Richard Dyer's *White*. 1997.



Fig. 9 James A. Wales "The Simian Irish Celt."
Puck, 3 November 1880. From Richard Dyer's
White. 1997.

Given the overwhelming advantage of being white, in terms of power, privilege and material well-being, who counts as white and who doesn't is worth fighting over -- fighting to keep people out, to let strategic groups in, fighting to get in. Two examples of peoples who have counted as white under particular historical circumstances are the Irish and the Jews. In both cases, their treatment has involved an appeal to 'color'. (52)

Over time, the barriers to inclusion for these white ethnic groups has subsided, and where they were once segregated into separate communities; this is no longer the case. In some strange way, these groups have, through time and assimilation become more white. The idea of being white and the attempt to assimilate one's identity into the accepted parameters of whiteness has long been the definition of what it is to be American. But this American dream is a myth for it ignores the individuals who are marked racially but who, nevertheless, are a vital part of the community.

French sociologist Roger Bastide noted in his paper for the Copenhagen Conference on Race and Color in 1965 that "color is neutral; it is the mind that gives it meaning." (Franklin, 34) The problems of racial prejudice in this country may be insurmountable as long as we continue to accept the idea that the color of one's skin relates to the content of one's character, which is an attitude that has long been a part of American and world culture. What exactly is it that we are conditioned to perceive when we see different colors of skin? Bastide suggested that it is the symbolism of color in Christianity that subconsciously controls our reading of racial difference.

The Christian symbolism of color is very rich. Medieval painting makes full use of it. Some colors are, however, more pertinent to this discussion than others. The color yellow, or at least a dull shade of yellow, has come to signify treason. When Westerners think of Asiatics, they unconsciously

transpose this significance to them, converting it into a trait of ethnic psychology. Consequently, they treat Asiatics as persons in whom they cannot have confidence.

But the greatest Christian two-part division is that of white and black. White is used to express the pure, while black expresses the diabolical...Whiteness brings to mind the light, ascension into the bright realm, the immaculateness of virgin snow, the white dove of the Holy Spirit, and the transparency of limpid air; blackness suggests the infernal streams of the bowels of the earth, the pit of hell. The devil's color.

This dichotomy became so dominant that it dragged certain other colors along with it. Celestial blue became a simple satellite of white in painting of the Immaculate Virgin, while the red flames of hell became a fit companion for the darkest colors. Thinking is so enslaved to language that this chain of associated ideas operates automatically when a white person finds himself in contact with a colored person. Mario de Andrade has rightly exposed the evils of this Christian symbolism as being rooted in the very origins of the prejudice of color. (Franklin,36- 37)

To follow this system of signifying skin color, ethnic groups who have white skin are at the top of the social order and are perceived as being spiritually pure, while all other groups whose skin is associated with the colors black, brown, red or yellow are at a lower level and are perceived as being primitively bound to the earth. It is, by this system, quite understandable how Native Americans came to be known as "red men," for the earliest European settlers were by no means anthropologists, and as a result of their ignorance, they reduced the identity of the two hundred diverse tribes of Indians to a blanket association with the devil's color.

The symbolic meaning of color has permeated our language as well as our perception of an individual's value. Phrases like "pure as the driven snow," "black hearted," "turned yellow and ran" are unmistakably linked to this

Christian hierarchy of symbolic representation, and have become an unquestioned in their use in English language. In her book *Codes of Conduct, Race, Ethics and the Color of Our Character*, Karla Holloway wrote about the trepidation felt when Anita Hill was to testify against Clarence Thomas in the Senate Confirmation hearings. Worried about how a black woman would fair in this forum, Holloway and her associates were concerned about what Hill would wear to the hearings. Hoping that Hill would not appear in a red suit, which would be a double negative: black skin, red dress; Holloway was much relieved when Hill wore a tailored blue suit, which to our Western sensibilities made her appear spiritually superior to Thomas.

Hiroshi Wagatsuma countered Bastide's observations on Christian color symbolism in his paper on the social perception of color in Japan. The stratification of color into a caste system has existed in Japan since recorded time. In this culture, whiteness relates to the highest social level; blackness the lowest, not because of any relationship to Christian symbolism but because of its relationship to the type of work one did. Those with darker skin were outdoor laborers and farmers, those with whiter skin were able to afford the leisure time to avoid the sun. Wagatsuma wrote:

Long before any sustained contact with either Caucasoid Europeans or dark-skinned Africans or Indians, the Japanese valued "white" skins beautiful and deprecated "black" skin as ugly. Their spontaneous responses to the white skin of Caucasoid Europeans and the black skin of Negroid people were an extension of values deeply embedded in Japanese concepts of beauty. From past to present, the Japanese have always associated skin color symbolically with other physical characteristics that signify degrees of spiritual refinement or primitiveness. Skin color has been related to a whole complex of attractive or objectionable social traits. It might strike one as

curious that the Japanese have traditionally used the word *white* (shiroi) to describe lighter shades of their own skin color. The social perception of the West has been that the Chinese and Japanese belong to a so-called “yellow” race, while the Japanese themselves have rarely used the color yellow to describe their skin. (Franklin, 129)

This social hierarchy of skin coloring placing white skin at the top of the order was further reinforced when suntanning came into vogue. The power of white skin was amplified by its mutable character, temporarily tanned as leisure and privilege allowed, but also reversible to pale coloring. This changeable nature of white skin put an even greater divide between blacks and whites.

Racial segregation has historically been the norm in our communities, as well as in our artistic representation. The color of the individual's skin or the relationship of an ethnic group to a color symbol has restricted movement through the society. This situation seems to be blindly accepted in America, and more often than not, even in this age of multiculturalism, racial and ethnic difference are perceived as insurmountable barriers. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. surmised that the ethnic upsurge that we are currently experiencing and the level to which we attempt to conform our attitudes into political correctness is creating a negative climate of disunity in America. He cautions, in his book *The Disuniting of America*, that this reinforcement of ethnic separatism is actually creating a new level of hatred and intolerance in the country. Where once whites were guilty of this negative behavior, now racial and ethnic minorities are, ironically, becoming guilty of the same degree of intolerance, defended on the grounds of racial pride and righting past injustices. The fact is that people are not just products of their race or ethnic groups, but are also individuals bound by a greater sense of humanity. This ethnic upsurge, according to

Schlesinger, is actually producing more segregation than educating ourselves to embrace and understand difference. This same sentiment is expressed by Kenan Malik in his book, *The Meaning of Race*. According to Malik our age of multiculturalism or as he terms it "the philosophy of difference is the politics of defeat, born out of defeat. It is the product of disillusionment with the possibilities of social change and the acceptance of the inevitability of an unequal, fragmented world. Unable to pursue the goal of equality, post modernists have simply refashioned its meaning and embraced difference. The consequence has been the celebration of marginality, of parochialism and indeed of oppression. Transcending such an outlook requires not simply intellectual conviction but political aspiration." (265)

Last year, the American College Theatre Festival held its annual week-long meeting at Humboldt State University. As part of the festival, there was a conference for educators and students entitled *Diversity in Theatre Arts: How Far Have We Come? How Far do We Need to Go?* The discussion placed the inclusion of minority written material as its first objective in diversifying theatre, so that a diverse population of students could be included in performance. The discussion didn't really touch on the inclusion of this same population of students by means of cross-casting roles, nor did it explore the political possibilities of expanding our fixed ideas of racial and ethnic coding. Maria-Tania Becerra, a young playwright, spoke out at the conference, relying on the idea of the politics of difference to substantiate herself and her work. Becerra claimed that she was a Chicana writer who dealt exclusively with the Chicano experience, and that only Chicano actors could do her work. This kind of statement is not unique, but a good example of the ethnic/racial split in the

theatre community, born out of the need to attract funding when there is not enough money to support all theatrical efforts. What was interesting about Becerra's point of view was that the actual production of her play had very little to do with a specific cultural reality but dealt with a universal struggle of motherhood and making sacrifice in a child's best interest. Her play, *Gate 68*, was produced as part of the Ten Minute Play Festival, and, a woman from San Jose State, Jennifer Fagundes, was cast in one of the Chicana roles. Fagundes is not Chicana, but Portuguese American. Evidently Becerra assumed that she was Chicana because she cast Fagundes after saying that only a Chicana woman could understand her play. With the exception of one line that stated an ethnic identity for the characters, the play could have been any mother's story, and Fagundes played the role beautifully out of the compassion that any good actress can find for her character. She did not need to be of any particular ethnicity to play the role, she simply needed to do the analytical and emotional work to fulfill the character's objective in the piece. The need to claim ethnicity or racial identity for a play seems to be driven merely by the need to claim special interest for funding rather than enlightening the community about the specifics of culture.

At the same festival, San Jose State produced part of its production of Luis Valdez' play *Los Vendidos*. Once again the perception of the actor's ethnicity came into play, but in this production, the costuming choices that were made were ironic to the message of the piece. *Los Vendidos* is a play specifically about ethnic stereotypes in the Mexican American community. Actor Sam Means was cast in the role of the Mexican American, one of the many varieties of Mexicans being "sold" at Honest Sanchez's used Mexican lot. What

made this play interesting was that Sam Means is a Mexican American actor, but he has reddish hair and a light complexion. In costuming this piece about breaking stereotypes, the choice was made to color Means' hair to black so that he would fit the role. What would have happened if they had not changed his look: would we presume that they couldn't find a "real" Mexican to play the role? Or would we be forced to look again at what we think we should see when we consider race and ethnicity. Interestingly, Means went on to do a very Hispanic version of Romeo in San Jose State's production of *Shakespeare's Shorts*, written by the School Touring Ensemble Program, without altering his appearance and the ethnicity of the character read just as well without the stereotyped image.

It is interesting to note that racial division seems to be in place in the Theatre Arts Department at San Jose State University, in spite of their pursuit of teaching from a multicultural perspective. This division is evident in who shows up to audition for what shows within the department. In the Fall 1997 semester, when the Department was casting the show *I Ain't Yo Uncle*, the retelling of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* written by Robert Alexander, there was a good mix of both black, white and Asian students at the audition call. These were a talented group of actors, who, in the end, produced a very interesting show. But at the next audition call for the Fall 1998 semester's production of Wendy Wasserstein's *The Heidi Chronicles*, this was not the case. The end production was a very white show, although it did not necessarily need to be cast in that way. In fact, the show is about the coming of age of the women's movement, which was not restricted to white women, but openly embraced all women. I assume that because the roles did not specify themselves as black or Asian,

that the director perceived the roles as white roles. This is usually the case in casting in the theatre, not only in the university, but also in the professional world.

If the opposition to cross-cultural casting has been the fear of erasure of identity, there is another possibility in this performance expression that is yet to be fully explored. This approach is what Vincent Parrillo, in his sociological framework, calls the integrative pluralist perspective, which seeks exposure to other cultural views to create a dynamic of dialogue and debate about the perception of difference. In the theatre, instead of white hegemony or a segregation of artistic expression, the integrative pluralist approach would embrace ethnic difference, but would also recognize that all of these ethnic differences are the definition of what it is to be American. The application of this perspective in terms of casting would demand a willingness to place the racialized body in tension with the written character, in order to expose the stereotypes of identity. It would also be necessary, if this type of performance approach is to have its full impact in redefining the color line in America, to cast not only non-white actors in white plays, but also white actors in non-white plays. In our overly sensitive politically correct environment, this is hardly ever done. It is understandable that, after years of exclusion from the mainstream theatre, minority artists should feel overly protective of what is considered race specific roles. Ellen Holly wrote in her article, "The Ideal World We All Long For Is Not the World We Live In," during the time of the *Miss Saigon* controversy that:

In an ideal world actors should be able to play any fictitious role they are capable of creating the illusion they are right for. Where a Hamlet or a Blanche DuBois are concerned, it is only

when a range of actors attempt them that we can see how richly universal these roles are or how brilliantly conceived. (Pryce) is a victim of a long and profoundly frustrating history in America in which, decade after decade, the ideal world we all long for has functioned so that whites are free to play everything under the sun while black, Hispanic and Asian actors are not only restricted to their own category, but forced to surrender roles *in their own category* that a white desires. (7)

But what would be the impact of putting the white actor in, for example, the Asian role without the Asian eye make-up? Pryce did do this in *Miss Saigon*, and not only did the audience not object or become overly confused by this, but it added another level of meaning to his role. Holly also wrote that she couldn't see Danny DeVito in the role of Abraham Lincoln or Danny Glover in the role of George Washington, but actually that sort of casting could be quite interesting in the dialogue it would create between the actor's body and the character's identity. We need to move beyond making some plays racially specific, like Wilson's *Fences*, and allow our common humanity to transpose the play from the written page to the stage. Americans as a nation have more in common than we express in our art. We need to challenge our perspectives of identity because the historical definition still blocks our view of the individual. Actors should be known as simply actors; not African American, Asian, or white. The job is to express ourselves through the identity of another. Instead of insisting on portraying ourselves in what is perceived as realism, we should dare to challenge the racial codes, especially when the actor's body cross-cast in another racial identity brings out the ugly truths of our adherence to the stereotypes of the color line, exposing ignorance, and embracing the larger humanity that encompasses us all. We should not have to wait for a writer like Hwang to write a play to challenge our perception of the parameters of identity,

and we shouldn't restrict such cross-casting choices to classical works, like Shakespeare. There is more to be gained by actively challenging the color line, and, from that, all lines that separate and codify the body in performance: gender, age and body shape. We should allow the actor's talent to transpose himself into the other, or remaining at odds with the other, so that we can challenge the societal conditioning that divides us.

Chapter Three

Estranging Racial Archetypes

In October 1990, Dan Chumley and Joan Holden of the San Francisco Mime Troupe mounted a production of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in collaboration with the Lorraine Hansberry Theater in San Francisco, California. Although the dramatic style of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was within the melodramatic acting style of the Mime Troupe (Figure 10), the company as a whole did not undertake the project. The group splintered because they usually write their own scripts from the current political happenings, and they could not come to an agreement about mounting another author's text. Chumley pursued the project anyway, finding a place for it with the Lorraine Hansberry Theater in their "Theater 1000" Festival. The play was actually presented twice at the Hansberry using the original George L. Aiken play script which was rewritten to include a modern black perspective. It was never Chumley's intention to simply mount the George L. Aiken play script, but to explore its meaning for a modern audience. He was curious to see what would happen if they performed this historically charged text; over the years, the character and the story of Uncle Tom have come to mean so much more than a mere piece of drama.

Chumley first approached Ntozake Shange to do the rewrite. Although she was interested in the project, she ultimately declined to do it, due to an inability to reach an agreement about her fee for the work. Robert Alexander, who was then working as playwright in residence at the Lorraine Hansberry Theater, was brought into the project in her place. Alexander was living in East

S.F. MIME TROUPE



or 'Civil Rights in a Cracker Barrel'

WRITTEN BY BOB LAMON AND E. G. DAVIS
FROM CLASSICAL, TRADITIONAL, AND DISCOVERED MATERIAL
DIRECTED BY E. G. DAVIS

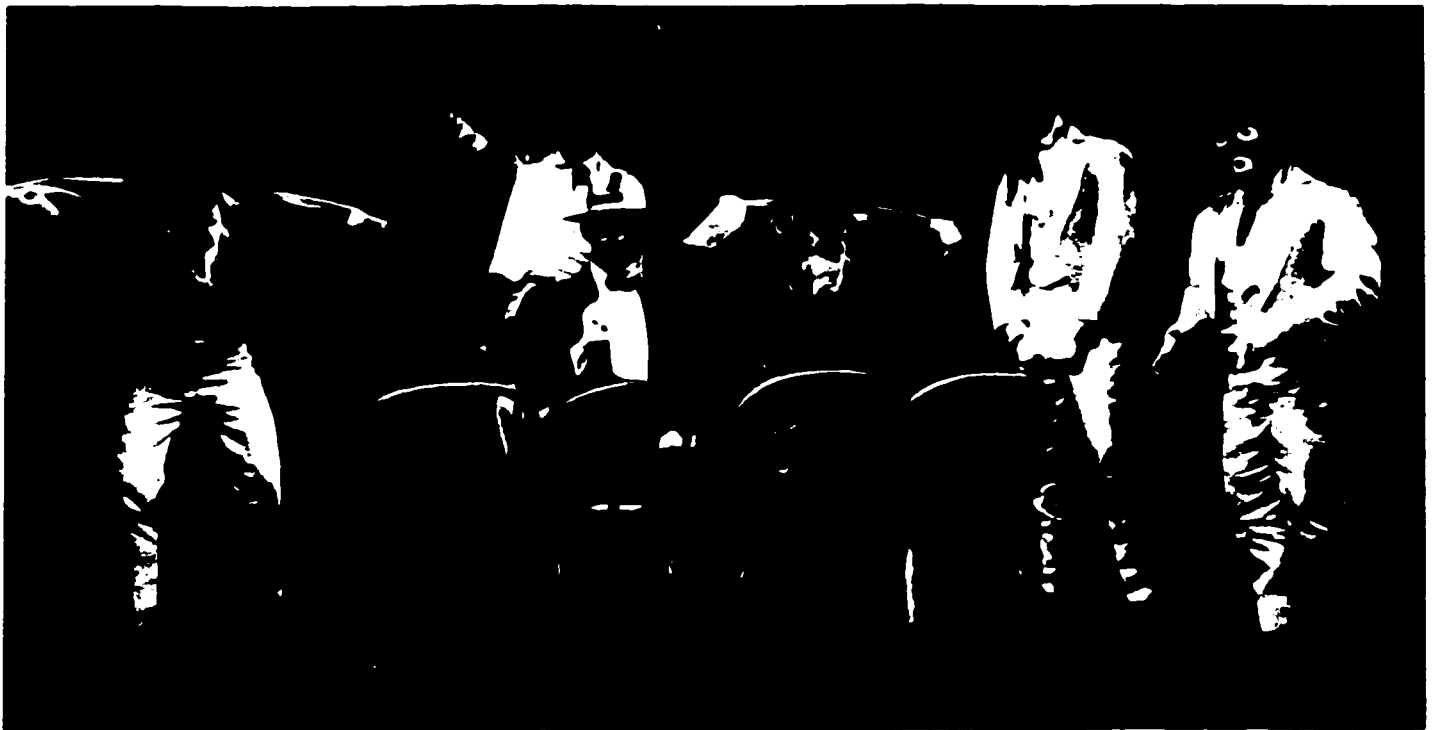


Fig. 10. Advertisement for the San Francisco Mime Troupe, 1965. Photographer Erick Weber. Black Magic. (Prentice-Hall, 1967) 32.

Oakland at the time. He referred to Oakland as “Soweto” in many interviews that followed the completion of the project. His feelings for Oakland and for the ongoing troubles of the black community there are present in his telling of the story of Uncle Tom.

When the play first opened at the Hansberry, it was produced under the original title. Not surprisingly, the black community largely stayed away from the play due to its history of portraying harmful black stereotypes. After this first production, Alexander incorporated more rewrites, and the play later opened again at the Hansberry, and then at the Black Repertory Company under the title *I Ain't Yo Uncle*. Remounted once again in 1991 at the San Diego Repertory, the play began an extensive tour, primarily in the Northern States. The Hartford Stage in Connecticut mounted its own revival production of Alexander's play in 1996 to mixed reviews. Chumley tried his directorial hand once again in 1998, when he mounted *I Ain't Yo Uncle* at San Jose State University as a guest director. Through its many incarnations, the play has been cast many ways, and, at times, the casting has been a source of tension between the director and the actors in various productions. Over the years, Chumley and the San Francisco Mime Troupe have always been strong supporters of multi-cultural theater. However, in the San Diego Repertory production, he was convinced by the black actors of the Troupe that he had to restrict his casting choices to conform to the black/white dividing line of the text. This raises the question as to whether the play *I Ain't Yo Uncle* really achieves what it attempts to do: the rewriting of Tom into a whole man rather than a stereotype. Chumley was convinced, or rather coerced, into believing that the power of the play lay in its attempt to resolve the one hundred and fifty year

black identity struggle brought on by the legacy of the original play, and consequently he changed the casting to “play it straight.” (Chumley) To fully understand this conflict and the limitations the straight casting places on the reading of the production, it is first necessary to understand the unique history of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* .

Prior to 1820, theatrical expression in the United States consisted primarily of imports from the European stage. In 1820, a new type of theater emerged in the form of Minstrelsy, which found its audience among the common people of the country, while the “legitimate” theater retained its hold on the social elite. This new style of performance was concerned with finding a uniquely American voice, differentiating itself from the English theater, which had dominated the stage with endless portrayals of Shakespearean plays performed by English actors. In this period, the first stock American characters emerged: the rustic and independent Yankee character, who served as a foil to the stock foppish English character; the Backwoodsman; the frontier character Davy Crockett, and Mose the B’howery B’hoy, who represented the common urban culture. At this point, drama transformed itself to represent American themes and mythologies, and, with this transformation, redirected its intent to create entertainment for the common working class people. In this new age of American entertainment, circus extravaganza became very popular under the guidance of P.T. Barnum. Added to the growing list of stock characters of American entertainment was the side show freak -- Barnum capitalized on the display of all manner of oddities in order to capture the attention of his largely under-educated audience.

It was in this climate of exaggerated expression that Minstrelsy was born.

White song and dance men of the variety show adorned their faces with burnt-cork make-up to create the image of the black slave in caricature. (Figure 11) The make-up was not realistic in its coloring: instead of naturalistic shades of brown to depict African Americans, they chose high contrast black. It was theatrical in its very nature, and it set up a dichotomy between what we think of as black and what we think of as white: evil and good, aboriginal and sophisticated. They were called "Ethiopian Delineators" and, with the use of plantation songs, dance, and crude jokes told with a stereotype of Negro dialect, they became a significant addition to the cast of folk characters in American popular entertainment. "But their lively performances were in no way accurate reflections of the life and culture of black people -- just as Brother Jonathan did not represent real Yankees, Davy Crockett did not represent real Frontiersmen, and Mose the B'howery B'hoy did not represent real urban firemen. Blackface entertainers were entertainers -- not anthropologists. All they wanted was to amuse their audiences. They cared nothing about accuracy for its own sake and about being fair to Negroes." (Toll, 82) It should be noted that although they performed in Blackface, not all of their face was blackened. Their white skin was left exposed around their eyes and mouth, so that their identity as white men was never in question. In an odd Brechtian sense, this was a predecessor of cross-cultural casting: the white man playing the black man's role, one culture representing the role of another and, in doing so, estranging what we consider to be true. The fact that their white identity was not hidden serves to refute any reading of the performance as realism but, rather, it underlines the white man's perception of black identity. Unfortunately, American society was so completely divided along black and white racial lines



Fig. 11. Images of Black Minstrels Charles Wilson and Billy Emerson. Photographer and Date unknown. Harvard Theater Collection. On With the Show. (Oxford University Press, 1976) 94.

in this period that this theatrical representation of black stereotyped identity was often read by white Northern audiences as accurate, for they had no other social involvement with blacks that would instruct them otherwise. The issue of slavery was becoming a political hotbed and the minstrel show offered white audiences:

A non-threatening way to work out their feelings about race and slavery. No one had to take the shows seriously. No one had to admit that the shows addressed important issues, which is why minstrel shows and other forms of show business could so effectively and fully address the public's deepest concerns and anxieties. But the minstrel show did not dominate show business because it was effective popular sociology, an outlet for anxiety and tension, or a kind of mass social therapy...it was a damned good show. (Toll, 84)

The minstrel act as a variety show entr'acte reached its peak in popularity between 1820 and 1840. By that time, this type of limited sideshow gag had maximized its capacity to engage the audience, so the minstrel show reinvented itself, becoming an extravagant show in its own right. (Figure 12) The format of the show consisted of skits, songs, dances and jokes, all self-contained units that could be changed to suit any audience and were driven by a sense of competition as to which unit would be the show-stopper. These shows were performed in their own houses, which made no attempt to compete with the grandeur of the "legitimate" theater and the opera houses.

The minstrel shows had their own stock characters: Brudder Tambo, Brudder Bones and Mr. Interlocutor, who performed the comedy sketches. Significant among these stock characters were the Old Uncle and Auntie (Figure 13), who symbolized the idealized plantation slave family. "The Old Uncle possessed what nineteenth-century romanticism considered the highest

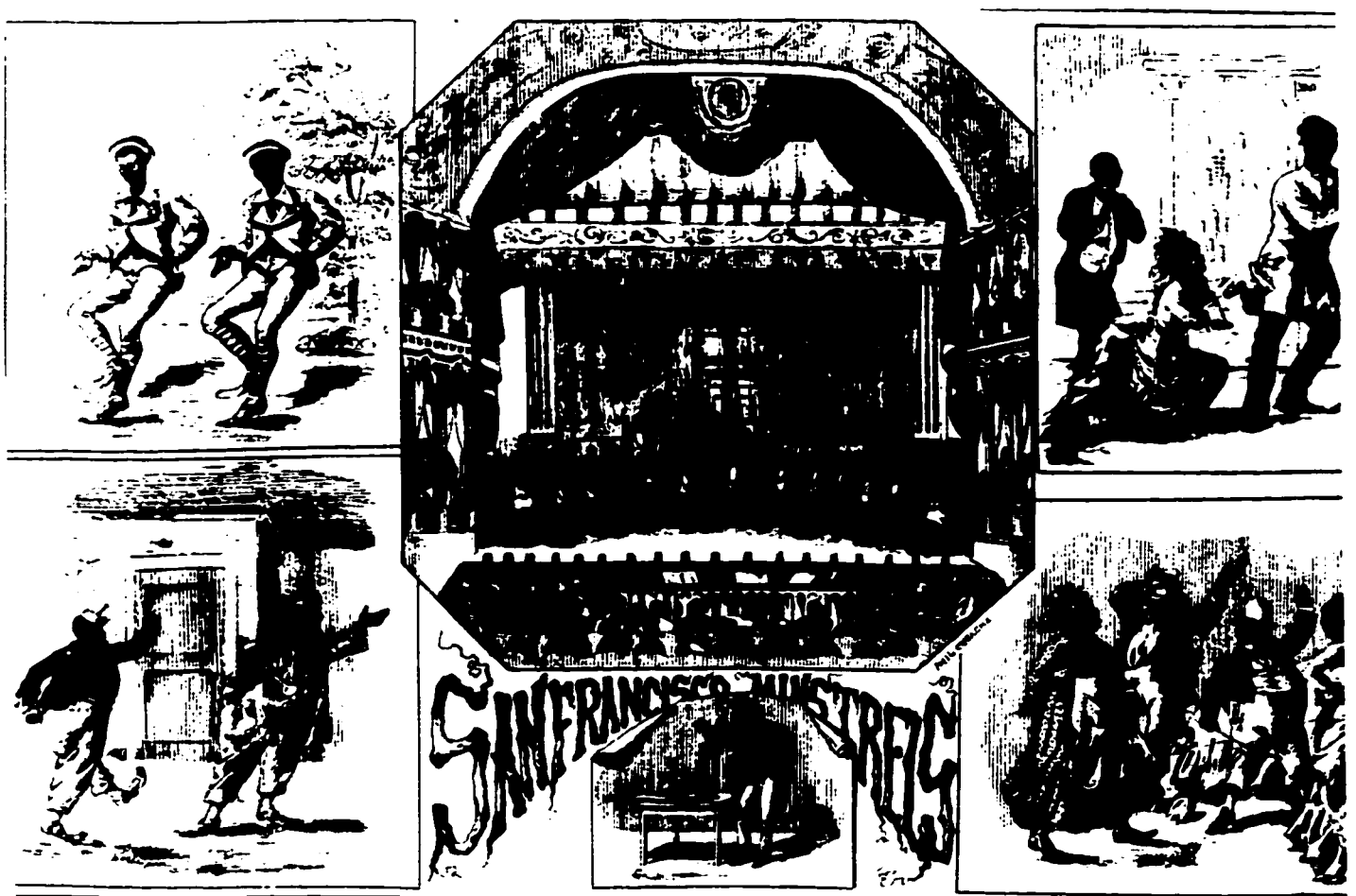


Fig. 12. Advertisement for a grand minstrel show in San Francisco, portraying the multiple format style. Artist and Date unknown. Harvard Theater Collection. On With the Show (Oxford University Press, 1976) 98.



Fig. 13. The Old Uncle was a minstrel show standard, remarkably similar to portrayals of Uncle Tom. Artist and Date unknown. Harvard Theater Collection. On With the Show (Oxford University Press, 1976) 103.

virtues -- the "womanly," sentimental qualities of the "heart" without the balancing "masculine" rational qualities of the mind. He represented feelings and emotions in their pure form, the traits so often felt lacking in Northern white men. No matter how aged these Old Uncles grew, they always remained basically dependent children." (Toll, 102)

Although the image of the Blackface characters dominates our collective memory of the minstrel show, it was not actually limited to one type of racial and ethnic parody. The minstrel show parodied every cultural group, from the Irish, depicted negatively as belligerent drunks with a brogue, to the Germans, depicted with a mocked "Dutch" accent as beer and sauerkraut consuming buffoons, to the Asians, depicted as a people with exaggerated and odd sounding language who ate strange food and wore pigtails. As this genre of theater expanded through the end of the nineteenth century, it began to include white males cross-dressed to portray a stereotype of the Victorian woman, politically pointed because the role of women in society was beginning to make a sharp change with the rise of the suffragette movement.

It was during this rise of the minstrel show format that Harriet Beecher Stowe began writing her novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The tone of the book reflected her religious Christian background, and she placed the women in the story as the catalysts of political change. It was a bold novel in 1852, at a time when abolitionist rhetoric was being debated, but had hardly found its way into popular culture. Stowe wanted to show the humanity and Christian dignity of the Black slaves, depicting them in a much more realistic light than had previously been done. The book was originally published between 1850 and 1852 in serialized form for the abolitionist paper, *The National Era*, resulting in

many subplots, each one reaching a very theatrical and sentimental rise and fall in action. The serialization was a tremendous success, and, in 1852, it was reprinted in book form. Within five years, the book had sold five hundred thousand copies internationally. Although it crystallized the militant antislavery sentiment in the North, Stowe's answer to the slavery question was not emancipation and integration, but, rather, repatriation to Africa. However convenient this ending was for Stowe, it does point to her remarkable misunderstanding of the slavery problem. The American blacks were just that, American, distanced by education and culture from ever fitting neatly back into Africa.

In 1853, Stowe published *The Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* in order to refute claims that she could not have possibly known or understood the black slave and his plight. It is interesting to compare her list of characters in this epic tale with the stock list of characters that were appearing in the minstrel shows. If she had not actually spent any amount of time among the slaves researching their lives, it seems that she must have had some idea of what was being portrayed in stereotypical form on the stage. Her characterization of the people in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* seems to rely on humanizing the theatrical stereotypes by attempting to explain their psychology. Being a romanticist rather than a social scientist, Stowe's conclusions have significant limitations. Stowe felt that the strength of the community relies on the strength of the Christian mother, who must be self-sacrificing for the good of her children. Indeed, her depiction of Tom is feminized to the point of emasculation. He is the soft male, the martyr, who rather than fighting, turns the other cheek to his masters so that the women and children might be saved. Perhaps Stowe's Christian upbringing prevented

her from seeing Tom in any other way, as a whole man both nurturing and sexually powered, but the rising conflict over the question of slavery may have also prevented her from empowering the character as a vital and aggressive male. Stowe's depiction of Topsy is limited and puzzling. Topsy is deprived of any sense of family and is truly a lost child. Yet in the novel, Stowe writes primarily of her wild dancing, and the reality of her grave situation is restricted by this limited explanation. It seems as though Stowe could not really understand the effect slavery had on the African American people in terms of long range psychological trauma, and her simple solutions to a vast problem are naive.

The only characters that receive more thorough development are Eliza and George, who through escaping to freedom are empowered to educate others and take back the sense of dignity and purpose that slavery had denied them. Augustine St. Claire is fully depicted as a man who must not only grapple with the ramifications of a loveless household, but with the reality of being a slave owner himself. He is given many scenes of soul searching and ultimately is reborn with a commitment to emancipation. Her depiction of Simon Legree and his slave, Cassy, is fully explored psychologically, although it retains Stowe's sense of romanticism. Both of these characters are suffering because of their loss of family: Cassy has lost her children; Legree, his mother. It is this loss that Stowe holds responsible for their fall into a world of cruelty and depravity. Cassy cares little for herself, as she is incomplete without her children, and is willing to prostitute herself until the young slave girl Emmeline resurrects her motherly instincts. Legree is depicted as a devil, lost into the darkness of both his plantation and his evil soul, who, without the childhood

guidance of a mother, commits grave acts of inhumanity against his slaves. Throughout this rambling tale, Tom is the only one who remains unchanged, holding fast to his “turn the other cheek” Christian ideals no matter what horrific situation presents itself. Over time, it is this quality of Tom’s character that has become the most misunderstood. Instead of celebrating his strength to persevere, we attack his character as a false martyr, a man who has betrayed the black community by his refusal to fight. The label “Uncle Tom” has been added to American popular slang to mean one who denies his own culture in order to pass into the dominant white culture, supporting the racial inequalities in order to simply get along.

In 1852, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was unsuccessfully adapted twice for the theater before the Howard Company made their attempt at it. The first two versions of the play adaptation ignored the problems of slavery that Stowe attempts to raise, omitted the characters of Tom and Eva, and ended on a happy note. This deletion of the dramatic tension of the novel resulted in failure on the stage. George Howard was motivated to have his own adaptation written, as he sensed that the story would be an ideal vehicle for his daughter, Cordelia. Cordelia Howard had made her debut in the company’s production of *Oliver* at the age of three, and her innocent presence in the play had made her a huge success. American audiences in this period were enamored of child actors, who were presented as an anomaly: the wisdom of an adult spoken through the body of a child. Howard employed his cousin, George L. Aiken to adapt the novel, which he originally did in two full length plays that were later combined into one. This was a departure in performance styles of the period. Usually a play was only one part of a night’s performance, with musical numbers and

burlesque acts rounding out the entertainment. But Howard produced the play as the sole performance of the evening, which sparked audience curiosity and heightened the sense of the story's importance. (Figure 14)

The casting of the Howard production produced tensions among the company members. The leading man of the company was assigned to play Tom, but G.C. German refused to don Blackface make-up as he thought this burlesque code of representing a black character would jeopardize his reputation as an actor. Howard convinced him to take the role by instructing him to play it straight with all the pathos and dignity of a leading man, with no parody of a Negro dialect but with the richness of a trained voice. Howard wanted the play to distance itself from the burlesque of the minstrel show so that the power of the story could be played to its fullest. This meant that the character of Tom would be played as a real man and not as a stereotype. The character of Topsy was originally written by Aiken to be played by a boy, but as no company member suited this part, the role was changed into a female part. Still, none of the female members of the company wanted the role because no woman in the theater had ever worn Blackface. Mrs. George C. Howard agreed to accept the role, embodying Topsy with a spirit of mischief that was so successful that she played the role for twenty years. (Figure 15) Cordelia Howard, at this time aged five, played Little Eva, and Howard capitalized on his daughter's previous notoriety by billing her as "The Child of Nature." (Birdoff, 37) For the audience, this bit of dramatic promotion of Cordelia's natural abilities as an actress at the tender age of five came to be thought of as the spirit of the role of Little Eva: a child whose natural innocence and naivete allows her to speak freely about the injustices of slavery. Although Cordelia Howard was

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Unprecedented! Twelfth Week of the Grand Drama.
The immense success attending the representation of the great Moral Drama of **UNCLE TOM'S CABIN** has induced the Manager to announce it for Every Evening during the month of October. The Youthful Wonder,

LITTLE CORDELIA HOWARD

Appearing in her original character of the Gentle Eva,
MR. J. J. PRIOR **MR. LINGARD**
As George Harris As Uncle Tom.
MR. G. L. FOX,
As Francis Fletcher.
MR. J. B. HOWE,
From the London Theatre, in St. John.

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Thursday Evening, Oct. 6th, 1853,
And Every Night (Sunday excepted) during October.

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UNCLE TOM'S CABIN

Or, Life among the Lowly.
MRS. HARRIET BEECHER STOWES
From a manuscript sent by G. L. Allen Esq.
IN SIX ACTS
Eight Tableaus & Thirty Scenes.
EMBRACING THE WHOLE WORK,
in which will be introduced the original songs, composed and written expressly for the piece by
G. C. Howard, entitled
TO LITTLE EVA IN HEAVEN, and
UNCLE TOM'S RELIGION.

Published by Levee Station, Boston, and for sale by Perry & Co., Fifth and Pearl, and all the principal
Booksellers in New York.

LITTLE CORDELIA HOWARD,
in her original character of EVA, as performed by her own TWO SUCCESSORS
MR. J. J. PRIOR as . . . George Harris

| | |
|---|-------------------------------|
| Uncle Tom, the faithful Slave..... | Mr. J. Lingard |
| George Harris, a Fugitive..... | J. J. Prior |
| Francis Fletcher, the Yankee..... | G. L. Fox |
| St. Claire, the Southern Gentleman..... | J. B. Howe |
| Legree, the Proud Slave Dealer..... | M. S. Clark |
| St. George, the Quaker..... | W. G. Jones |
| Samuel Pery, the Quaker..... | L. Fox |
| Grady, the Lawyer..... | Samson |
| Old Shanty, the ignorant Planter..... | Samson |
| Green Shanty, the son..... | Mr. Howe |
| Tom Labor, the Slave Hunter..... | G. Lingard |
| Easy, the Slave Trader..... | Samson |
| EVA, the Sower of the Seed..... | LITTLE CORDELIA HOWARD |
| Tommy, the Out that never was here..... | Mrs. West |
| Anty Opatic, the Womaneer..... | Mrs. Brodshaw |
| Shan, the fugitive wife..... | Mrs. W. G. Jones |
| Quay, the Quaker..... | Mrs. Bannister |
| Shandon, the Quaker Slave..... | Miss Shaver |

The Play is beautifully interpreted with Singing and Dancing.
Uncle Tom
Dance and Song
To Little Eva in Heaven, words and music by G. C. Howard
Uncle Tom's Religion, words and music by G. C. Howard

TABLEAUX IN THE DRAMA.
1st. THE ESCAPE OF EVA.
2nd. THE TRAPPER'S ENTRAPPED.
3rd. THE FREEMAN'S DEFENSE.
4th. DEATH OF LITTLE EVA.
5th. THE LAST OF ST. CLAIRE.
6th. TOMMY BUTTING THE YANKEE.

Fig. 14. Advertisement poster for the Howard Company's first production of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in New York. Artist and Date unknown. Harvard Theater Collection. Black Magic (Prentice-Hall, 1967) 35.



Fig. 15. Mrs. George C. Howard as Topsy. Promoted as the original Topsy, she played the role for twenty-five years. Photographer and Date unknown. Harvard Theater Collection. The World's Greatest Hit (S. F. Vanni, 1947) 52.

not a blond but a brunette and, reportedly, she never wore a blond wig while portraying Eva (Figure 16, 17), the role became known as the golden child, dressed in virginal white, surrounded by golden angels on her ascent to heaven. This whiteness of the character, in its theatrical portrayal of spiritual purity, stood in sharp contrast with the blackened skin of the actor portraying Tom. In doing so, the Aiken play questions the dichotomy of black and white that is found in the color symbolism of Christianity: white as pure and good and black as base and evil. Tom is not evil, but is sainted by his experiences. He and Eva are brought together because of their equality in spirit. Evilness is found in slavery and its white masters, namely Legree. For a society that had debased blacks in order to justify their enslavement, this was a powerful message.

Once they began touring the show, the Howards also instituted the practice of a parade to announce their arrival in town . These parades showed the characters outside of the theater in order to promote the show, but this advertising had a much broader effect on potential audiences, who saw the characters independent of the text. George C. Howard often went through town on daily errands dressed as Augustine St. Claire. While selling the show was clearly the company's intention, over the years it actually brought the characters a sense of realistic identity that allowed them to sustain their power through endless adaptations of the play. The original production was enormously successful, playing one hundred performances in its first venue, which was a landmark for an American play.

The play of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* soon swept over the country like wildfire. Seemingly overnight, other companies began to produce the play, some

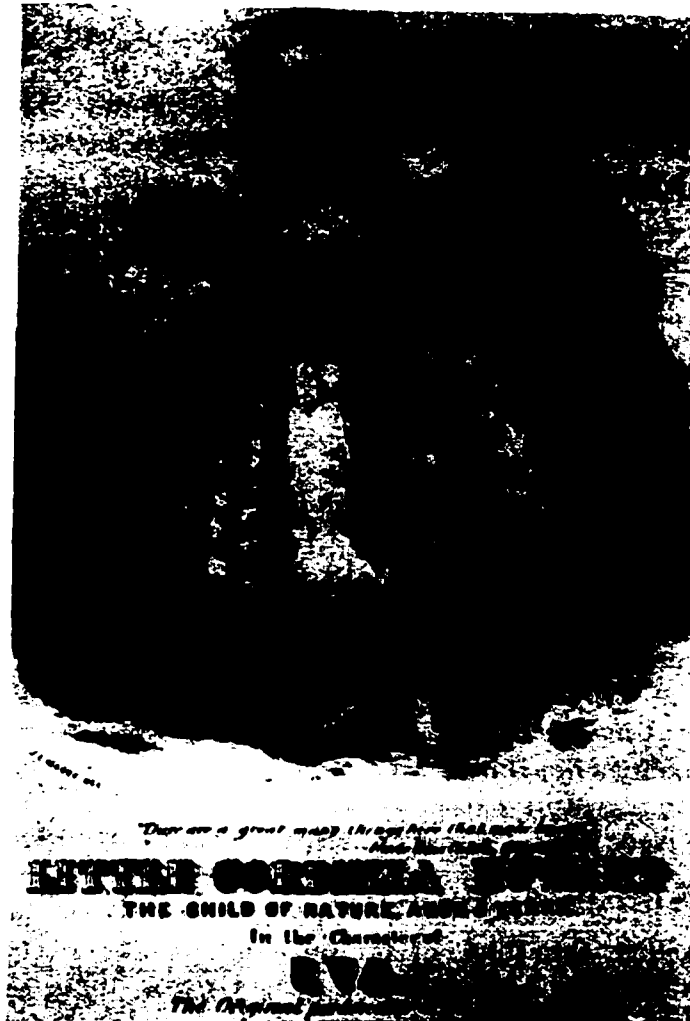


Fig. 16. Cordelia Howard as Little Eva. Photographer and Date unknown. Harvard Theater Collection. The World's Greatest Hit (S. F. Vanni, 1947) 55.



**Fig. 17. An older Cordelia Howard as Little Eva.
She played in Tom shows for fifty years. Photographer
and Date unknown. Museum of the City of New York.
Pictorial History of the American Theater (Crown, 1977) 17.**

holding to Stowe's ending, others played through the tragedy to find Tom reunited with his family in the end. As there was no copyright protection in existence in this period, anyone could adapt the novel to suit their own ends. (Figures 18, 19) Northern versions held to Stowe's politics, while Southern versions used the text to support their continuing position on slavery, depicting Tom as happiest when commanded by his white masters.

The plot of the play was appropriated by disparate ethnic groups to grapple with their own political and social inequities. "Along with the serious dramatizations were many take-offs. Mr. and Mrs. Barney Williams made an Irish holiday of it in H.J. Conway's *Uncle Pat's Cabin*. Another, also put together with a shillalah, was *Uncle Mike's Cabin*." (Birdoff, 121) The authority of the text survived these cross-cultural adaptations, that placed the Irish in the role of the blacks, for the intolerance expressed against the Irish immigrant likened him to the position of the black American. The black/white dichotomy was not restricted to African Americans subordinated by white European Americans, "for much of British history, the Irish have been looked down on as black." (Dyer, 52) Although the process of assimilation into the mainstream of American culture changed the Irish identity from black underclass to white majority, in the middle of the nineteenth century, the Irish still suffered from an underclass, stereotyped identity. The plot line of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, drawn to separate the oppressed class from the oppressor, illustrated the Irish immigrants struggle for freedom in Britain and the United States as well as it did black oppression.

Europe had caught Uncle Tom fever at approximately the same time as America did, due to the book's immense popularity worldwide. Britain began

Ed. F. Davis
UNCLE TOM'S CABIN
COMPANY-



-TOPSY-

Fig. 18. Early Image of Topsy, the mischievous imp.
Artist and Date unknown. Museum of the City of New
York. Black Magic (Prentice-Hall, 1967) 39.

UNCLE TOM'S CABIN
NO. 2
THE SLAVE MOTHER



BALLAD
" "
GEORGE LINLEY

Fig. 19 . Early Image of Eliza, who appears more white than black. Artist and Date unknown. Museum of the City of New York. Black Magic. (Prentice-Hall, 1967) 38.

producing its own versions of the play in 1852, but slanted its productions to insult America. With their play, the British proclaimed superiority over the U.S. because they had ended their own system of slavery long before. Productions were done with exaggerated Yankee stereotypes, and yet Tom and Eva were spoken with cockney accents, while George Harris' character was depicted as though he hailed from Oxford.

In 1857, the Howard company brought their version to England and Scotland, enjoying a very successful tour. Mrs. Howard's interpretation of Topsy was a large departure from how the English Topsies had performed (Figure 20): she was not the wholly ignorant stereotyped Moor that the audiences expected, but cunning, stubborn and ungovernable, a demon because she had grown up without family. The Howard production enlightened many to the consequences of slavery, taking the sense of morbid curiosity out of the spectators' desire to see depictions of black slaves.

By the end of the Civil War in America, the play had been interpreted in many different ways, casting many different types of actors in each of the roles. The exception to this was that there had not yet been black actors cast in the black roles. That tradition changed in 1878, when a popular black minstrel performer, Sam Lucas, was cast in the role of Tom. (Figure 21) Unfortunately, the show eventually failed to entice audiences because the actress playing Little Eva was so heavy and large that she nearly prostrated the actor playing St. Claire every time she sat on his lap. Howard Weston also claimed to be the first black man to play Uncle Tom. He played the role not in America but in England, which is perhaps the reason both men claimed to be the first. Weston's production was very successful, and the show moved on to tour



Fig. 20. The English Topsy as a Moor. Artist and Date unknown. Harvard Theater Collection. The World's Greatest Hit (S.F. Vanni, 1947) 154.

SAM LUCAS' GREAT SONGS.



- | | | | | |
|----|---------------------------------------|-------------|--------|--------|
| 1. | DAFFNEY DO YOU LOVE ME? | 4. | PLAIN, | 3 1/2. |
| 2. | OUT IN THE COLD, SHIVERING & SHAKING. | 4. | PL | 3 1/2. |
| 3. | OLD UNCLE JASPER. | C. A. WHITE | 4. | |
| 4. | I'SE GUTNE IN THE VALLEY. | SAM LUCAS. | 4. | |
| 5. | HANNAH, BOIL DAT CABBAGE DOWN. | " | " | 3 1/2. |
| 6. | DE DAY I WAS SOT FREE. | " | " | 10 |

1847-1871 D.M.

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L. KHAMMER.

Fig. 21. Sam Lucas, the first black Uncle Tom. Artist and Date unknown. Harvard Theater Collection. On With the Show (Oxford University Press, 1976) 119.

Berlin, Breslau, Vienna, Hamburg and several cities in France. The inclusion of black actors in the productions was an important change. They were no longer a curiosity known only by their portrayal by white men in Blackface, but were able to intone the role with their own sensibilities based on a lifetime of struggles.

The play's popularity reached across Europe as far as Russia in the 1880's. The Russian version of the play transferred the plight of the American black slave to that of the serf's virtual enslavement by the Cossacks. Germany's version held to the American tradition with a few exceptions in the dialect interpretations of the characters. Productions in France concentrated on the story of George Harris, the revolutionary, often omitting Tom and Eva's storyline altogether. George became a national hero for the French because he so closely resembled the French's revolutionary spirit that carried them through so many coup d'etats. The play was also performed in remote countries like Australia, Hong Kong and South Africa, countries that struggled with their own racial problems. The audiences in these countries were primarily white, for racial segregation in the Nineteenth Century was fierce due to the effects of colonization. One company performing in South Africa had a difficult time convincing locals to join the play, which the company needed in order to round out the cast in a few important roles, specifically that of Topsy. It was scandalous for white women in South Africa to entertain the idea of blackening their faces to play the role. When a woman was finally found to fill the role, she performed a wild dancing, vibrant Topsy but insisted in speaking the lines in Dutch. The Eva of this production was actually performed by a local boy. Although this may seem like a bizarre stretch in the production of *Uncle Tom's*

Cabin , it was only the beginning of what was to come in the later part of the Nineteenth Century.

Just when the American theater patrons began to believe that 'Tom Shows' were dead, the play mutated into odd forms all around the country, regaining the public's interest. The metropolitan areas saw the effects of economic competition play out in the theater as the play transformed from the Aiken script to a theater extravaganza. At first, changes to the productions were made by the addition of animals to the stage. It started with live dogs chasing Eliza across the ice (Figure 22), tricked into the act by the actress carrying meat wrapped in her shawl instead of her baby son, Harry. From there, horses were added: a Shetland pony for Little Eva and a donkey for the character, Marks, who was the comic relief in his role of the lawyer. The shows also added Jubilee Singers to the performance to sing between acts. The Jubilee Singers were troupes of freed slaves singing spirituals, and, in some instances, they were the major attraction of the show. Show managers boasted of their number of dogs and Jubilee Singers - in some troupes, there were as many as three hundred singers - and the advertisements were written to proclaim that the shows were the "real" or "ideal" Uncle Tom. (Figure 23)

In the rural areas of the country, low budget Tom Troupes, or 'Tommers', were on the rise. (Figures 24,25) These shows departed significantly from the Aiken text, sometimes excluding major characters, with whatever sets, costumes and props could be carried by caravan. They rode the small town circuits, where they were often the only entertainment offered. The play suffered from this 'anything goes' mentality, and, although the country still hungered to see Uncle Tom, a lot of troupes lost everything with their cheap productions and

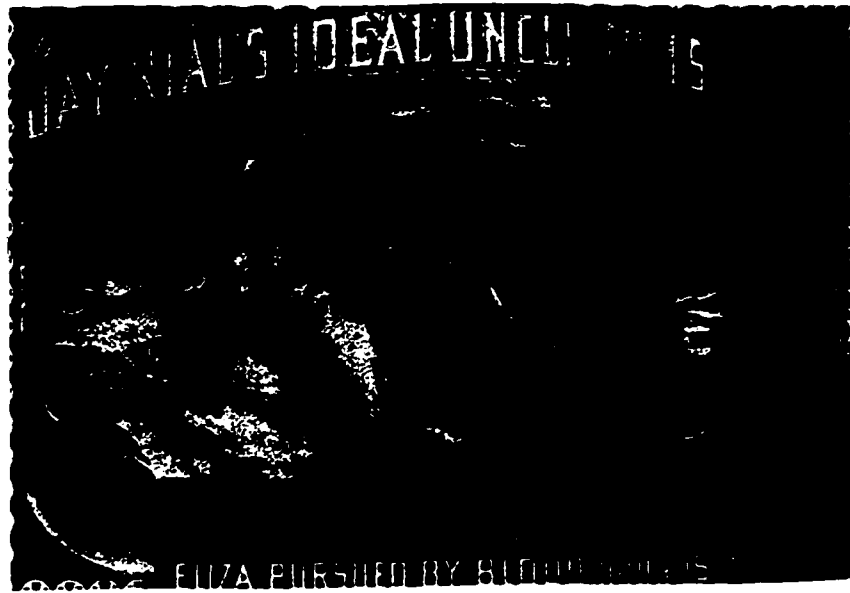


Fig. 22. Poster for Jay Rial's Ideal Uncle Tom show, with live bloodhounds chasing Eliza. Artist and Date unknown. Museum of the City of New York. American Entertainment (Billboard Pub., 1978) 35.



Fig. 23. Poster for one of the many Tom Troupes.
Artist and Date unknown. Museum of the City of New
York. Black Magic (Prentice-Hall, 1967) 36.



Fig. 24. Lotta Crabtree as Topsy. Photographer and Date unknown. Albert Davis Collection. The World's Greatest Hit (S.F. Vanni, 1947) 203.

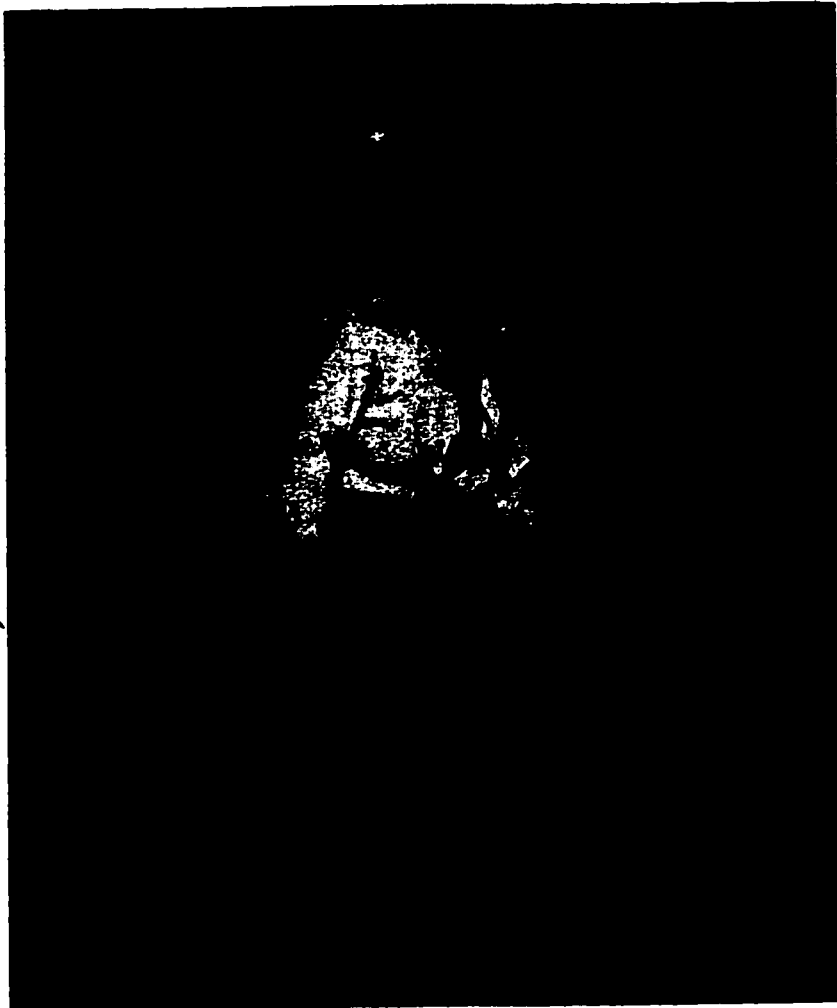
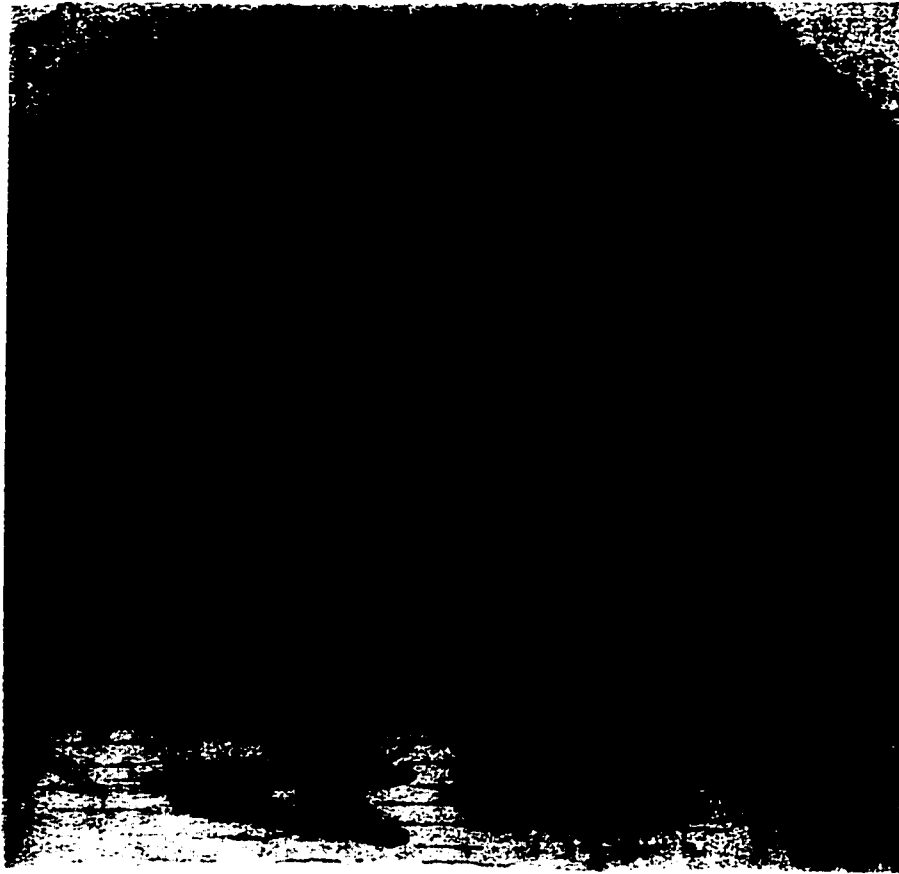


Fig. 25. A twenty year old David Belasco as Uncle Tom in 1873. Photographer unknown. Museum of the City of New York. The World's Greatest Hit (S.F.Vanni, 1947) 210.

poor acting. (Figure 26) Double and triple casting was often necessary because the Tommers could not support a large cast. The necessity of double casting meant that the actors spent their time between scenes washing off or applying Blackface so that they could play two racial identities. This, of course, made soap the most crucial element of the show. The most extreme example of double casting occurred in 1885 in Amherst, New Hampshire, when T.F. Stratton performed the play with only three actors, installing the property man in non-speaking roles. This performance saw Mrs. Stratton playing not only the female roles of Chloe, Eliza, Topsy and Emmeline, but also the role of George Harris. T.F. Stratton had perhaps the easiest time, playing the male roles of Marks and St. Clair, while the other actor in the troupe, H. Blanchard performed as Fletcher, Aunt Ophelia and Legree. This left the talentless property man to play Haley and Uncle Tom, who in this production spoke no lines at all. The troupe also filled in the offstage effects of the barking dogs and the Jubilee Singers. Fortunately for the actors, this troupe only played one show, but were nevertheless successful in pleasing their audience.

At the same time that Tommers were sweeping through the American back roads, the "Double Mammoth" Tom shows rose in popularity in a variety of theater venues. These shows boasted about having two of everything, for if one Topsy was a crowd pleaser, two would be even better. C.H. Smith was the first manager to introduce this bizarre format with two Topsies, two Marks, three donkeys and ten Mammoth Siberian hounds for Eliza's run across the ice to freedom. "The uniqueness of twin Topsies and a brace of knockabout Markes appealed to audiences, and other managers seized upon C.H. Smith's idea. The 'barn scrubbers' (Tommers) had many bitter experiences in the past



The "Uncle Tom's Cabin" Season

Manager—Look here, Mrs. Simpson, if you don't stop bringing that grandson of yours here, we'll have to get someone else to play "Little Eva";—the rules of this theatre must and shall be observed!

Fig. 26. Cross-casting was a significant part of the history of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Puck. Date unknown. The World's Greatest Hit (S.F. Vanni, 1947) 345.

booking a one-night stand...only to find the town covered with a rival's still-wet posters; now they could combine troupes into an elaborate affair, treating the town to two Evas, two Topsyies, twin Elizas and a duplex whipping by a bloodthirsty Simon Legree to a couple of clogging Uncle Toms." (Birdoff, 310) This doubling of Tom characters in C. H. Smith's production was unique in that one Tom was black, while the other one was white. Another company that toured in this format was Sutton's Grand Double Company. (Figure 27) Their casting of the show consisted of two teenage brothers in the double Topsy role and a undersized boy of fifteen playing Eva in a golden curled wig. Apparently, anything was acceptable in terms of the casting of this show so long as it turned a profit.

After fifty years of performance in every possible format, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* could still draw an audience. With the turn of the century, Tommers continued to tour the small towns aided by continuing theatrical invention and the play's ability to communicate to people even though slavery had ended thirty-five years before. In 1901, the play was performed at Glickman's Theater in Chicago:

...where one persecuted race portrays the hardships of another. An exiled Russian Jew, Ellis F. Glickman, was the burnt-cork Uncle Tom in a Prince Albert coat, pleading for deliverance from the knout of the muzhik owner, Simon Legree. The patriarchal Tom took the Oriental-looking Little Eva on his knee, caressed her golden curls, and read sonorously of the New Jerusalem - - from the Talmud. Eliza and Harris resembled new arrivals at Castle Garden, and recounted their sufferings in a curious melange of Russian, German, Yiddish and English. Marks was a typical "shyster" lawyer of the police courts, and St. Claire's wife presented the startling apparition of a Levantine Beauty in hoop skirts. Simon Legree, in red Russian boots, swaggered in, booming out Yiddish expletives in a deep bass voice. Topsy,



Fig. 27. Poster for Sutton's Double Mammoth show. Artist and Date unknown. Museum of the City of New York. The World's Greatest Hit (S.F. Vanni, 1947) 256.

blinking and rolling the whites of her eyes, her Israelitish countenance shining through the burnt-cork, intoned deeply, and lapsed into English, that she was never born -- then sang "coon" songs in Yiddish. (Birdoff, 369-370)

The play continued to be appropriated by different ethnic groups in America and abroad through the turn of the century. The play was also translated into film at this time, as motion pictures began to replace the theater as the popular entertainment form for the American working class people. Edwin S. Porter was the first to adapt the play text for film in 1903 (Figure 28), followed by Lubin's version in 1907. Every major film company soon had their own version, each boasting that they had the better adherence to the story. In 1914, the seventy-two year old Sam Lucas returned to the role of Uncle Tom for a five reel film of the story done by World Film Corporation. Lucas was at that time a much older man than the script calls for, although he is called "old Uncle Tom," the character is supposed to be in his forties with a wife and small children. When they were shooting the scene of Eva's fall from the riverboat, the undercurrent was so strong in the river that Marie Eline, the actress playing Eva, actually had to hold up Lucas instead of the other way around. In 1918, the Famous Players-Lasky studios made their version of the story with Frank Losee, a stage actor known for his portrayal of Simon Legree, in the role of Tom. Marguerite Clark played both Eva and Topsy, utilizing the double exposure technique.

The characters had a remarkable authority beyond the original textual treatment of them, and soon they began spinning off to have further adventures of their own. In 1927, United Artists produced the film *Topsy and Eva* (Figure 29), as a vehicle for the Duncan Sisters. In this film, Eva is not only a more



Fig. 28. The death of Little Eva from the Porter film in 1903. Photographer unknown. Museum of the City of New York. The World's Greatest Hit (S.F. Vanni, 1947) 301.



Fig. 29. The Duncan Sisters in *Topsy and Eva*. in 1924.
Photographer unknown. White Studios. The World's
Greatest Hit (S.F. Vanni, 1947) 311.

physically mature woman, but she also doesn't die while pleading for Tom's freedom. The film is focused on the adventures of Eva and Topsy, and in the famous moment of ascension, it is Topsy that steps in and prays for Eva's recovery, offering herself instead. Eva lives and the film closes on a close-up shot of Eva and Topsy snuggled up together on the bed. Topsy may be mischievous, but in this film adaptation she has the same angelic appeal as Eva. Advertisements for this film called the two characters "an irresponsible li'l imp of Satan an' the angelic daughter of wealth...Burnt cork vyin' with blond curls, the licorice an' marshmallow pair...One Black, one fair -- both noble 'neath rags and laces" (Birdoff, 405)

Also in 1927, Universal Pictures made a film of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, this time giving the story a stronger dramatic reading. Charles Gilpin was originally cast as Tom, but he quit in protest, disagreeing with the director's sentimental interpretation of the role. James Lowe replaced him in the role, and he was able to present Tom with the same sense of militancy that Gilpin had wanted. (Figure 30) In this still photo from the film, we can see the very familiar depiction of Little Eva, with her golden curls and ruffled dress. Virginia Grey's fair skin and light colored clothing stand in sharp contrast to that of James Lowe, so much so that Lowe's hand becomes invisible underneath Grey's. Although Grey is looking at him with tenderness and sympathy, Lowe does not return her gaze. His face shows tension and strain, with his brow furrowed and his eyes looking off and away from Grey. There seems to be a lot of anger in his eyes, and he does not appear to be passive or defeated. This is not the Tom who is happy to be a slave, content to care for the little white girl. In this photo, Lowe seems to be showing us a man who is forced to be where he is, and his pairing



Fig. 30. James Lowe as a militant Uncle Tom, with Virginia Gray as Eva in Universal's 1927 film. Photographer unknown. Culver Service. Black Magic (Prentice-Hall, 1967) 300.

with this little girl seems to be humiliating. For all the gray haired, shuffling, happy Toms that were being portrayed in this period, Lowe's Tom is very striking. There is a different sense of realism at work, showing Tom as a whole man, not a feminized martyr.

Movies made in the Thirties continued to include the *Uncle Tom* characters, primarily Tom, Topsy and Eva, in a variety of different plots. In 1936, Twentieth Century Fox made the film *Dimples*, which dealt with the early history of the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in fictionalized form. Shirley Temple plays the little street waif who wins the heart of a young producer, who then casts her in his new play as Little Eva. The actual plot of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is not the focus of the narrative at all, but there are glimpses into their interpretation of how the play was done. The scenes showing Temple as Eva are focused solely on her rather than the other characters in the scene. Topsy appears as a wholly ignorant, yet happy slave, as do the other slave characters. It is difficult to say whether the actors playing these slave roles are actually black or white, because of the way the Blackface is drawn. Regardless of the race of the actors, the white ring around their mouths is drawn to look like a simpleton's smile, making the slave characters appear as buffoons. In the still photo from this film (Figure 31), the blocking as well as the lighting focuses on Temple, dressed in virginal white ruffles, like so many Little Evas before her. Unlike the still photo with James Lowe, all the slave characters are in a semi-circular formation around Temple, with their gaze fixed on her. Tom is sitting so that he is on the same level with Temple, while the white characters remain at some distance from the group. This staging places these adult black slaves on the same level as the child, and the ever present smiles suggest that they are



Fig. 31. Shirley Temple as Little Eva in *Dimples* in 1936.
Photographer unknown. Twentieth Century Fox. The World's
Greatest Hit (S.F. Vanni, 1947) 400.

actually beneath her in terms of mental capabilities.

In 1956, Twentieth Century Fox produced its film, *The King and I*. The film is set in Hollywood's version of Siam in 1862, and is the story of Anna, a teacher who comes to educate the children, and incidentally the wives, of the King of Siam. This film is housed succinctly within the performance code of Hollywood films of this era, and would be viewed as pointedly politically incorrect to our Nineties sensibilities. Yet its depiction of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in the form of a quasi-Oriental ballet is strangely moving. In the plot of the film, Anna gives a copy of Stowe's novel to Tuptem, cross-cast in a pre-politically correct form with Rita Moreno in the role, a wife of the King who has been forced to marry him against her will. Tuptem performs her own version of the novel, focusing on Eliza's escape, which informs the King of her feelings as well as foreshadowing her attempt to run away to freedom. The dancers portraying Eva and Topsy are distinguished by their hair color alone, with both dancers appearing in white face. The character of Tom is presented with a very dark mask, reminiscent of Asian theater. However, the ballet is not focused on these characters, but rather on Eliza's flight. Eliza is portrayed by a dancer in Asian white face, holding a doll to represent her child. The perils of Eliza's escape are beautifully depicted through abstract forms: ribbons represent rain, she climbs over the backs of other dancers to show her struggle over mountains, and dancers carrying branches embody the forest through which she flees. Simon Legree is depicted by a dancer wearing a brown and copper mask with grotesquely long fingernails on his hands and holds a twisted saber. This depiction shows Legree as more of a monster than a man, and it is very stirring. The ballet is assisted by percussive music and the repetitive voices of a female

chorus. Eliza's escape across the river is done with billowing fabric, calmed to let her pass but aggravated in order to entrap Legree. Tuptem then recites Topsy's famous line that she's so wicked, but quickly refutes this by saying that anyone who is held against their will has the right to fight for their freedom. The ballet becomes completely personal to Tuptem at this point, for it is not about fictional characters but about her own plight. This section of the film is the most dramatic and moving, for it not only shows the character's struggles, but also informs us about the power that this play, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, had historically to move people of other cultures. It simply is not only the black man's story, but the story of anyone who has ever been oppressed. No one would deny the limitations of the Hollywood performance code in depicting Asian culture, but, nevertheless, this small piece of the *King and I* provides us a window into a performance history that made this play such an inspiring piece of theater worldwide.

The representation of black identity in many films made in the Thirties and Forties, both with Blackface portrayals as well as with performances by black actors, remain a significant source of tension in the black community today. (Figures 32, 33, 34) There was no choice in the type of role a black actor could portray, and in order to work, they had to accept what was offered. It seems that this is the period of theatrical representation that remains the most devastating to the modern African American community: Uncle Tom was set in the country's collective memory as a shuffling, self-deprecating Steppin Fetchit type of character. It was at this point that the African American community began to protest that Uncle Tom should be put to rest. James Baldwin wrote passionately about the damage that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had done to the image



Fig. 32. Jane Withers with a happy Uncle Tom in *Can This Be Dixie?* in 1936. Photographer unknown. Twentieth Century Fox. The World's Greatest Hit (S.F. Vanni, 1947) 406.

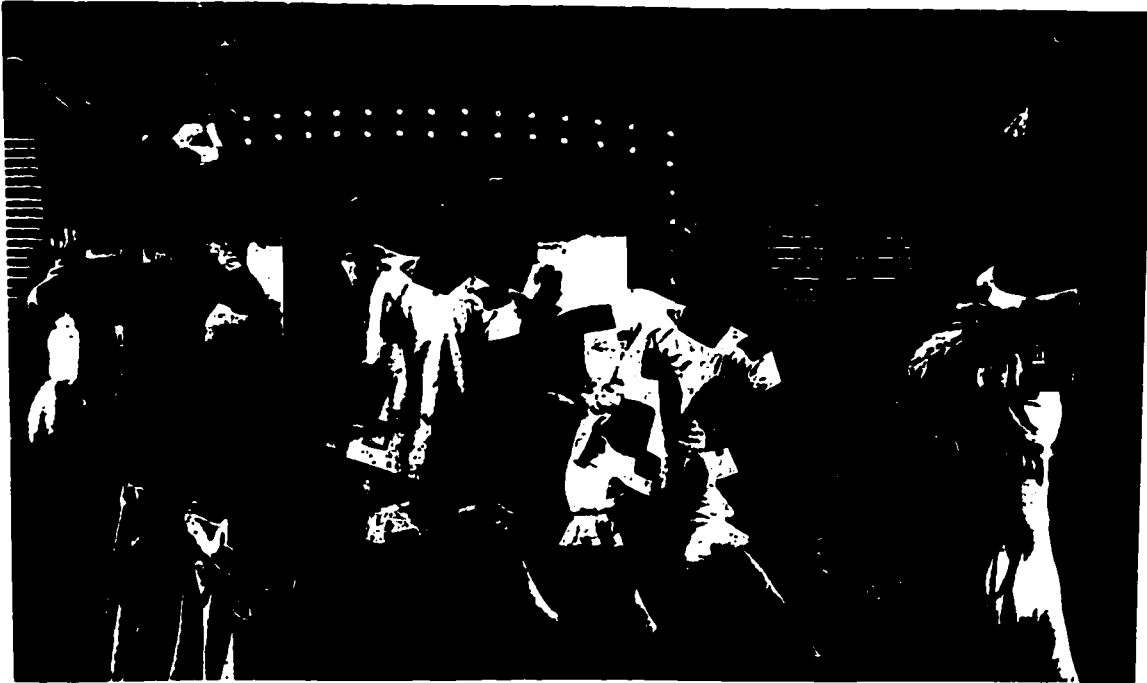


Fig. 33. Betty Grable and June Haver as double Topsies in *The Dolly Sisters* in 1945. Photographer unknown. Twentieth Century Fox. The World's Greatest Hit (S.F. Vanni, 1947) 405.



Fig. 34. Judy Garland as Topsy in *Everybody Sing* in 1938. Photographer unknown. Metro Goldwyn Mayer. The World's Greatest Hit (S.F. Vanni, 1947) 408.

of African Americans in his article, *Everybody's Protest Novel*. Baldwin writes:

It is the peculiar triumph of society -- and its loss -- that it is able to convince those people to whom it has given inferior status of the reality of this decree; it has the force and the weapons to translate its dictum into fact, so that the allegedly inferior are actually made so, insofar as the societal realities are concerned. ..Now, as then, we find ourselves bound, first without, then within, by the nature of our categorization...We take our shape, it is true, within and against that cage of reality bequeathed us at our birth; and yet it is precisely through our dependence on this reality that we are most endlessly betrayed. Society is held together by our need; we bind it together with legend, myth, coercion, fearing that without it we will be hurled into that void, within which...the foundations of society are hidden.

It must be remembered that the oppressed and the oppressor are bound together within the same society; they accept the same criteria, they share the same beliefs, they both alike depend on the same reality. Within this cage it is romantic, more, meaningless, to speak of a "new" society as the desire of the oppressed...What is meant by a new society is one in which inequalities will disappear, in which vengeance will be exacted; either there will be no oppressor at all, or the oppressed and the oppressor will change places. But, finally, as it seems to me, what the rejected desire is, is an elevation of status, acceptance within the present community...The failure of the protest novel lies in its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, in its insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended. (15-17)

Baldwin's writing eloquently reflects the ongoing limitations of race relations in the United States, nearly one hundred and fifty years after Stowe penned her protest novel. Stowe was remarkable in her attempt to bring the slavery conflict to the forefront of consciousness of common white Christian people, primarily women, in order to challenge their perspectives on the problem. Howard's play of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, although limited over the years in its inclusion of black actors in production, did a lot to educate its audience

worldwide about the humanity of the American slaves and moved people to take a stand against the institution of slavery. Uncle Tom, George and Eliza Harris and Topsy represented the oppressed for many people, across the boundaries of many cultures. It was not their blackness alone that was important, for this has not been exclusively a black/white issue in world culture. Baldwin's statement that the failure of this protest novel, and thus of the play script, "lies in its rejection of life" and "in its insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real and cannot be transcended" (17) is the problem brought about in *I Ain't Yo Uncle* when it is cast according to the black/white dividing line of oppressed and oppressor.

The first production of Robert Alexander's version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* stayed narratively close to Aiken's text. The play begins with the primary slave characters putting Harriet Beecher Stowe on trial for creating painful stereotypes. After the character Tom boldly proclaims that "I ain't yo uncle," (Alexander, 8), the black characters proceed to put on the play again with all the scenes that Stowe left out, thus reclaiming who gets to write this history and what this history will say. The play text relies heavily on the original Aiken text, but adds modern commentary on the scenes as they are played, sometimes creating comedy, while at other times creating dramatically moving revelations about the horror of the slave's life. There are four scenes that stand out as moving the furthest from Stowe's intention: the seduction scene between Marie St. Claire and Tom, the scene between Tom and Topsy in which he educates her about the culture of Africa and her true identity, and both of Topsy's rapper scenes. But for all of Tom's desire to be shown as a whole man, Alexander's script and Chumley's casting of the play keep Tom categorized as a man who is

victimized because of his blackness, which he cannot transcend. It is as though this role of victim is legitimized by Alexander's script, and no other possibilities are entertained beyond the telling of this tale once again, adding the modern stereotype of the inner city Black to the list of stock characters.

The first production of the play at the Lorraine Hansberry Theater made only a few changes to the perceived physiognomies of the characters. Sophie Chumley played Eva without the golden curls, using her young age and soft voice to portray the angelic innocence of the character. Edris Cooper appears in the early Topsy scenes in a ragged dress but with her hair smooth (Figure 35), showing that it is her situation in life rather than her inherent wickedness that drives her behavior. This is a large departure from earlier portrayals of the character that seem to propose that this behavior is part of being black (Figure 36). And yet, Cooper reverts to an updated image of Topsy with modern dress (Figure 37) and the signature wild hair when she appears as the rapper Topsy of the nineties.

In October 1991, the production moved to the Black Repertory Group in Berkeley. Mime Troupe regular Keiko Shimosato replaced Sophie Chumley in the role of Little Eva. This was an interesting change to the earlier portrayal in that Shimosato, an Asian actress, played the role in the traditional blond wig. In this interpretation of the role, we can see the fallacy of the myth surrounding the character of Eva. It is not her whiteness, her youth or her political innocence that allows her to stand against slavery, but rather her mature sense of morality. Seeing both the Asian identity of the actress and the iconic imagery of the character at the same time skillfully estranges our perception of Eva, thus questioning the stereotyping of all racial identities. It is this type of casting that



Fig. 35. Smooth-haired Edris Cooper as Topsy, with Sharon Lockwood and Lonnie Ford. Photographer Howard Lipin. The San Diego Union 1991.



**Fig. 36. Queenie Smith as the pickaninny Topsy.
Photographer and Date unknown. Museum of the City
of New York. The World's Greatest Hit (S.F. Vanni, 1947) 435.**



Fig. 37. Edris Cooper as the modern rapper Topsy. Although the lighting obscures this, her hair is pulled up in a wild fashion reminiscent of Queenie Smith. Photographer unknown. San Francisco Mime Troupe. 1990.

holds the power to break the Uncle Tom stereotypes, both black and white. Unfortunately, it was to be short lived.

When the Mime Troupe brought the play to the San Diego Repertory later that same year, dissension in the cast forced Chumley to recast the role of Little Eva. (Figure 38) Lonnie Ford, who was to play the role of Tom, actually quit the show until Chumley agreed to replace Shimosato. The rest of the company had been in favor of the cross-casting of this role, but were eventually persuaded to take up Ford's side of the argument. A compromise was reached by putting a white actress, Greta R. Bart, in the role of Eva (Figure 39), while Keiko Shimosato was moved to the double role of Marie St. Claire and Emmeline, the quadroon slave. Somehow, the company felt that it was acceptable for her to play these roles, but playing Eva was unthinkable. Alexander was obviously only interested in tearing apart black stereotypes, and had little concern for attacking the white stereotypes of the play. In casting Shimosato as Marie St. Claire, the stereotype of the self-absorbed, white Southern belle is combined with the stereotype of the sexual exoticism of the Asian woman. Reviewer G. Weinberg-Harter remarked in the Drama-Logue that "Greta R. Bart (played) an angelic brat of a Little Eva, with much owed to Shirley Temple, (while) Keiko Shimosato (did) Kabuki fan work as a Southern belle." (4) His misperception that Shimosato's fan work was Asian may have more to do with the actress' cultural identity than with a precise knowledge of the language of fans, for this display was not done in a Kabuki style but followed the American custom of fan language. Asians have actually lived in Louisiana for roughly two hundred years, so that the white Southern appropriation of this custom was inevitable.

Roles were doubled in all the four casts that the Mime Troupe put



Fig. 38. A tense Daniel Chumley on the set of *I Ain't Yo Uncle*.
Photographer Linda Hecht. Los Angeles Times 1991.



Fig. 39. Lonnie Ford with the replacement Eva, Greta R. Bart. Photographer unknown. San Francisco Mime Troupe. 1991.

together for the three year tour of this show, but cross-casting, with the exception of Shimosato, was limited to the actor's ability to pass for the race represented by the role. They adhered to the play's notion of the significance of the gradations of blackness in casting dark skinned blacks as Tom, Chloe and Topsy, while lighter skinned blacks played Eliza and George. (Figure 40) Hispanic actors were included in minor roles only, as though their particular racial identity could be transposed between being more white or black as the roles necessitated. This narrow use of cross casting reveals the productions' limitation: adding modern black images to the pool of black stereotypes while retaining the white stereotypes may have seemed to be revolutionary to the artists involved, but, actually, it only propagates the problem into modern consciousness. It hardly solves the black image problem; it only excuses it as unsolvable because of the legacy of slavery. Without daring to break all of the stereotypes produced from the one hundred and fifty year history of this play, the problem of racial stereotypes persists. Misha Berson, in a review for the *Seattle Times* wrote that "the iconic white characters come out pretty lame -- except for vicious slave-owner Simon Legree, who looks far worse. Even Little Eva is sort of a dork." (C2) This reading of the play keeps black Americans forever as the victimized, oppressed class, and white Americans as the oppressors, a common but dehumanizing characteristic of America's ongoing racial conflict between blacks and whites. It is as though the cause of this problem is the result of the color of their skin and that we cannot imagine a society without this dichotomy. But to forever envision the black man as a victim is to refuse him the right to his full humanity.

This dichotomy of racial distinction was pertinent, however, when the



Fig. 40. Casting with attention to shades of blackness in *I Ain't Yo Uncle*. Photographer unknown. San Francisco Mime Troupe. 1991.

play was produce in Augusta, Georgia. The performance usually included a discussion period with the audience after the play's conclusion, but, in Augusta, this segment was pointedly avoided. It turned out that members of the National Security Guard were included among the crew hired by the theater owners to load the show in and out of the theater. When the performance concluded, the lights of the auditorium mysteriously went out, but there just happened to be enough large flashlights on hand so that the cast's safety was not jeopardized. In a few moments after the audience was cleared from the house, the lights came back on without explanation. No explanation was given to the cast, but it seems that community leaders did not want to risk any discussion of the play's meaning after the show. Whether they feared black or white anger is not known, but it is clear that show was bringing up subjects that were precieved as threatening the peace in the community. Slavery has a strong emotional legacy in this country, encompassing anger, silent guilt and racist hatred. Perhaps this strict adherence to a black and the white dividing line continues to hold meaning for its audiences in particular communities, but it does not free the black image from that of the victim.

The Hartford Stage revived the play in 1996, with a slightly more daring interpretation of it. The setting reflected a mirror vision of the auditorium itself, with raised seating and an exit light framing the stage floor. This production was cross-cast both racially and in terms of gender. In this production, black actress Kena Tangi Dorsey played the roles of Phineas, Marie St. Claire and Cassy. When stepping into the role of Marie, she was dressed in the usual hoop skirt, but it was cut away to reveal a modern image of dominatrix leather pants, showing who really was in command of the St. Claire household. In this

character, Dorsey wore a mask that covered her face, but the rest of her body was uncovered to reveal her black identity. Performed in this way, the black perspective of the white character was clearly evident, in much the same way that Blackface claimed that the portrayal was couched in the white perspective. This interpretation gives a different resonance to the character Harriet's line "Jungle fever, Tom," in that it reflects Spike Lee's 1991 film of that same name more accurately. In the film *Jungle Fever*, it is no longer just the white characters that have fears of the biracial sexual union, but the black characters have the same take on it. With Dorsey in dominatrix clothing, this interpretation goes one step further. Now, white women are not only having illicit relations with black men, but are seen as predatory in the act. And yet, for all this invention, *Variety* still remarked that the production was amateurish. Markland Taylor wrote in his review that "the most persuasive scenes are those that stay closest to Stowe" and that, when Legree announces that he is going off to join the LAPD that "these are patently obvious shots. Cheap, too. *I Ain't Yo Uncle* may be an honest attempt at dealing with strained race relations in this country. But the visible result is so amateurish that in theatrical terms it does more harm than good." (91)

Chumley worked as guest director at San Jose State in 1998, once more "playing it straight" (Chumley) with *I Ain't Yo Uncle*. Although this production was a success for the SJSU Theater Department, drawing a more diverse audience and selling to capacity, it still had its limitations. Casting, once again, adhered to the black/white line, with a few exceptions of actors who could pass for the designated race. Matt Tondag, a Hispanic actor, was cast in the roles of Loker and Skeggs. They are both marginal roles and he had no Hispanic

accent that would impede his believability as a white slave trader. Yanin Perez was cast in the role of Emmeline. She was also Hispanic, but with a thick accent, so that it would be more believable casting her as black rather than white. There was a bit of internal controversy when Michelle Jones was cast in the role of Topsy. The costume and make-up crew, along with Chumley, saw Topsy as a particular dark shade of blackness, but Jones' skin was not the same tone. Could a black actress not be black enough to play Topsy? Apparently the production staff was of that opinion, for they special ordered black make-up to darken her skin tone. Jones protested, for this meant not only darkening her face but also the rest of her exposed skin. After all, is it the color of her skin, or her attitude acquired after years of abuse, that makes her so angry? (Figure 41) Eventually, as Jones persisted in showing her distaste for the idea, the issue of the depth of her blackness was dropped.

The idea that ultra-dark skin is a sign of being primitive is not a new one. In a recent edition of *Newsweek*, the super-model, Alex Wek, was criticized by the American black community for being too black. According to Allison Samuels, "many applaud the fashion industry's departure from the white norm in promoting Wek. She also shatters the accepted look among black top models such as Tyra Banks and Naomi Campbell, who tend to have more European features, lighter skin and straightened hair. But some African-Americans complain that Wek is a demeaning stereotype of black features: wide nose, full lips, natural hair and ultra-dark skin. Ironically, at a time when many African-Americans thirst for African culture, some are suspicious of Wek's fame." (68)

In the play *I Ain't Yo Uncle*, a lot of significance is given to the gradations



**Fig. 41. Michelle Jones as Topsy in *I Ain't Yo Uncle*.
Photographer Pat Kirk. San Jose State University. 1998.**

of blackness and their meaning. Eliza can escape because she is essentially white, called "high yeller" and "Snow White" (Alexander, 14-15) by the other characters, but Tom cannot run, although he has a pass to come and go freely, because he is black as midnight. George escapes due to his ability to pass for a Spaniard, but is tortured by the fact that he is not as black as his politics. He cannot bear the fact that he is not all black but mulatto, and eventually returns as a fugitive to America to prove how black he can be. In this, blackness becomes not just a skin color but a political mind set, fueled by anger. In the case of Topsy, the text has other black slaves ostracizing her because of her dark skin and nappy hair, showing the problem of segregation exists in the black community as well as the white community. This is where the casting of the actors in accordance to this idea of gradations of blackness has severe limitations. Cross-casting against this code of color would challenge its validity. If all the black actors had the same skin tone while they spoke the lines about the privileges associated with being lighter, the audience would be forced to rethink this value system. Historically, we have given advantages to people based on their degrees of whiteness, but this is an illogical determination of a person's worth. Cross-casting could show us how absurd it is to give privilege to those who are the whitest. The limitation of this casting choice is that it would give voice to the extreme racist position that no matter what color black people are, lighter or darker, they are all still black and, therefore inferior to whites.

There are many ways in which the casting of *I Ain't Yo Uncle* could achieve something more than this reemphasizing the dichotomy of black and white. By casting it according to a sense of realism, which is by no means revolutionary, based on the history of play production of this story, all that is

achieved is a reinstitutionalization of anger and blame for slavery in America. That this anger still exists in the modern consciousness of black Americans is understandable, but merely stating that there is still a problem through the addition of modern icons to the pool of stereotypes does not elicit societal change. It seems as though it is generally unthinkable to entertain the idea of reverse casting the play, with black actors playing white slave-owner roles and white actors portraying slaves. The Hartford Stage version of the play comes the closest to this, but their use of masks on the black actors when they play white roles limits this interpretation. What they achieve is the black perspective of the white character (Figure 42) , reclaiming the ability to be the ones who write the history. But the roles of oppressed and oppressor are not challenged. Apparently, they felt that the audience would be confused without the masks, which are meant to tell the audience that the actor is taking on the role but he really isn't the person portrayed. Why do we insist on casting blacks as victims and whites as oppressors? Alexander was only interested in breaking up the black stereotypes, and seemed to be quite content in reinforcing stereotypes out of the white characters. (Ewell) Perhaps this is where their dramaturgical work failed them, because all of these characters, white and black, have suffered through the years by being dehumanized into theatrical icons. Thus, the play only adds the modern rapper Topsy to the list of stock characters.

Other possibilities in cross-casting this play would include an all black cast without the use of masks. This interpretation would be limited, also, unless the text would allow for more psychological development of all the characters. A stronger choice might be to carefully consider how the play is double cast. Double casting has almost always been necessary in the production of both



Fig. 42. Black actors in whiteface was not an original idea. This parody was done in 1965 in *Day of Absence*. Photographer Unknown. Author's Collection. Black Magic (Prentice-Hall, 1967) 235.

Uncle Tom's Cabin and *I Ain't Yo Uncle* due to its number of roles and the economics involved in supporting so many actors. The pairing of characters was primarily determined by the similarity of the character's personality and needs, with thought given to the logistics of being able to make costume changes between scenes. Occasionally, women and men have been cross-cast, but this was done in the marginal roles, with little impact. What would happen to our perception of the oppressed and the oppressor if this doubling was done with more political bite? The characters of Eliza and Miss Ophelia could be doubled, as both are concerned with taking a liberal position of reeducating the populace to produce change, guided by their strong sense of the power of motherhood. Chloe and Eva could be doubled, for both characters have the ability to speak the truth and their ultimate concern is for Tom's spiritual well-being. The characters of Harriet and St. Claire are also well matched, for they both take a liberal stance about the need for abolition, yet neither is equipped to follow through in any real terms. The most interesting and daring pairing of characters could be doubling the roles of Legree and Topsy. Both are outside of society, and, in their exclusion from a larger sense of community, they have developed such a dangerous anger that they feel no guilt with regard to their actions. While Legree acknowledges no remorse at beating Tom to death, Topsy admits that she "burned down Uncle Tom's condo with the nigger still in it." (Alexander, 68-69) These characters may be on different sides of the racial line, but they also exist on the same side of hatred against peace, tolerance and understanding. This casting of the production, regardless of which roles would be assigned to black or white actors, with the inclusion of other racial identities, would not allow us to continue categorizing racial conflict

on the black and white line, but would force us to understand the psychology and choices of the individual; that hatred can make an oppressor of anybody.

This raises the question of why we continue to accept the mythologized meaning of the color of our skin? This belief is so strong that even a play that seeks to humanize the black identity cannot see beyond the significance of skin color. But the significance that we place on skin color is a manifestation of our society, not something based in science and geneology. Until we dare to challenge this perception of identity, it will retain its hold on our social consciousness. Theater has the ability to not only reflect what is present in society, but to force us to rethink what we believe is true. For African-Americans to move beyond the limited status of the oppressed and underclass, we need to begin to show them as whole men, with the potential to do wrong as well as good. Alexander's script and the various productions of it fail to move Tom beyond the stereotype, because it refuses to challenge the category of racial classification. Alexander may want us to see Tom as a whole man, but he has not allowed us to see Tom without the societal label of "black" in front of his name. In doing so, one wonders if he has achieved more understanding of the man, Uncle Tom, or if he merely furthered the same limited perspective as did Harriet Beecher Stowe, categorizing and stereotyping modern black identity?

Chapter Four

Erasing the Barriers for Cross-cultural Reinterpretation

In 1987 Joseph Papp launched the Public Theater's Shakespeare Marathon, which was a commitment to produce all of Shakespeare's plays in six years. The Marathon actually extended over ten years, concluding with the 1997 production of *Henry VII* at the Delacourt Theatre in New York's Central Park. The basic principle that applied to all the various productions of this ten year Marathon was to produce Shakespearean texts with "American style...which was varied, provocative and stimulating." (Public Theater Archives, 1) Remembering the first production of the Marathon, a charter member of the Public Theater said "I was a Shakespeare novice when I signed up for the Marathon. I believed in traditional casting and staging; that was all I was exposed to. When I heard the first play, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, was to be staged in Bahia in 1909, I thought it would be a mistake. But when I saw it, I was thrilled from the first line. That production taught me about nontraditional casting and staging -- how the most important thing is the words." (Public Theater Archives, 1)

Joseph Papp died before the completion of the Marathon, and George C. Wolfe, the Public's new Artistic Director saw the project through to its completion. It is interesting that the leadership of the Public Theater should pass from Papp to Wolfe, for this transfer of power seems to personify the very nature of theatre production through the history of the Public Theater. As mentioned in the introduction to this paper, Joseph Papp began opening the

interpretation of theatre production in casting and staging in the Sixties, when this type of work was revolutionary in the way plays were produced. That this style of producing plays should pass in leadership from a white artistic director to an African American one is encouraging when viewed against the current wave of separatist theatre politics, chronicled in chapter one. The Public Theater seems to have proven the fact that there is no limitation to the possibilities of casting and staging for classical texts, particularly Shakespeare. But can this freedom of play script interpretation be extended to the production of contemporary texts as well?

Although it may seem that Shakespearean texts lend themselves easily to cross-cultural casting and staging, as evidenced in the productions of the Public Theater's Shakespeare Marathon, this is not necessarily the opinion held by all scholars. In the fall semester 1998, Dr. Errol Hill, a Shakespearean scholar from Dartmouth College, addressed the English multimedia class at Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia on this very topic. The question posed to this class was whether African American actors should be chosen for major roles in Shakespearean works. Six questions were composed as guidelines for discussion:

1. Does having a non-white actor play major roles besides Othello discredit the work of Shakespeare?
2. Were the original works meant exclusively for white actors?
3. Does color casting inhibit an actor from successfully performing a Shakespearean character?
4. What does having non-white actors add to the work?
5. Can the color of an actor overshadow the work?
6. Can color casting interfere with the audience's expectation of the work?

(Shakespeare in Color, 1)

The overall opinion of the Spelman students was that cross-cultural casting of racial identities followed the same standards the Elizabethans had in terms of the suspension of disbelief on the subject of the actor's gender in tension with the character's identity. One contributor to this Spelman web site, Larry Weiss, disagreed with colorblind casting for Shakespearean plays because "it was not what William Shakespeare had intended" (Shakespeare in Color, 3) How can anyone presume to know what a four hundred year old English playwright would have intended in terms of casting and staging if he had lived in this contemporary American society? This is precisely the freedom that Shakespearean texts offer theater producers: beautifully expressed language, immortal characters, and stories that extend beyond the barriers of specific cultures, ripe for reinterpretation because there is no playwright to get in the way of a theatre company's imagination.

The Spelman web site used several productions, both in the theatre and in film, of African American actors in various productions of Shakespearean plays in their exploration of whether this type of casting should occur. Among the performances listed were Morgan Freeman playing Petruchio in the Public Theatre's production of *The Taming of the Shrew*, Denzel Washington playing Don Pedro in Kenneth Branagh's film of *Much Ado About Nothing*, and Laurence Fishbourne playing Othello in Oliver Parker's film of *Othello*. Looking at the actual performances by these actors, an analytical perspective oddly missing from the Spelman web site, it is hard to imagine that anyone would object to these actors' inclusion in the performances.

Morgan Freeman was quoted in the Public Theatre's retrospective on the Shakespeare Marathon, that after seeing director A. J. Antoon's production of A

Midsummer Night's Dream that he was "very excited about (Antoon's) vision, so you can imagine my excitement when A.J. offered me the role of Petruchio opposite of all people, Tracey Ullman!... I can only describe the whole experience as an absolute hoot." (Public Theater Archives, 3) Antoon's production of *The Taming of the Shrew*, reinterpreted in a wild west setting, was a hoot for the audience as well. Kate, played by Tracey Ullman, was a rough and tough gunslinger who enjoyed taking potshots at her bound target of a sister Bianca, played by Helen Hunt. Ullman's Kate couldn't be bound by any man, mostly because they feared the fate that she imposed so easily on Bianca. The comedy of the situation is broken with the arrival of Freeman's Petruchio, who enters the scene dressed as an elegant landed gentleman of the American frontier. He is markedly different from the other proposed and reluctant suitors of Kate in that he is African American. But what was riveting about his performance was not that Freeman is African American, in fact that dynamic is really irrelevant in this production, but the degree of eloquence and grace in which he played the role. If anything, Freeman's age marked his Petruchio more than his race, his being beyond the average leading man age range of twenty to thirty years old gave the character a sense of wisdom that allowed him to be amused but not threatened by Kate's escapades. It was much easier to accept Kate's speech at the end of the play, which generally seems antiquated in light of feminist politics, because of the intelligent way in which this Petruchio tamed his shrew. If anyone was to dispute this production's casting choices in terms of a sense of realism of frontier American society, it might be difficult to find examples of wealthy African Americans in this historical period. But this is the strength of modern productions of Shakespeare: the power of the individual

plays and their characters transcend the society's codes of historical identity, allowing the individual artist to find the universal within the particular. The audience was not reminded of old fears of racial miscegenation when a black Petruchio conquers a white Kate because the play's core is not about sexual conquering but about spiritual connection. Through all the wild antics that Antoon's production of *The Taming of the Shrew* provided, the most pivotal moment was the passionate kiss of Petruchio and Kate, which brought the audience to its feet in cheers. Perhaps historical codes of identity are not as powerful as moments of brilliant acting in the theatre. After all, the audience goes to the theatre to be entertained, enlightened and taken away from their daily existences for a few hours of magical transformation, which the theatre uniquely provides in its communication between live actors working in the moment and the expectations of an audience.

The Spelman web site also noted Laurence Fishbourne's portrayal of Othello in its questioning of African American actors inclusion in the roles of Shakespeare, which was actually a rather traditional interpretation of the role. Set in realistic scenes of Venice, Oliver Parker's 1995 film held onto the identity of Othello as the sole black man in a wealthy and powerful white society. Its only sense of departure from an idea of the traditional portrayal of Othello was that Fishbourne is black. Historically, Othello has been played by white actors more often than not, like Olivier and Wells, in black face make-up. Although these are not the only actors to have played this role; Paul Robeson played the role very successfully in 1943, followed by Earle Hyman in 1953, as well as James Earle Jones for the Los Angeles Center Theatre Group in 1971 (Blum, 298,344,411), it seems that the image of a white actor in black make-up is

prevalent when thinking of portrayals of the role of Othello. But rather than focusing on Fishbourne's work in Othello, the Spelman group might have explored a more controversial approach to the play, as it was performed at the Shakespeare Theatre in Washington in 1997 with white actor Patrick Stewart in the role of Othello with no make-up employed. Can the role of Othello be reinterpreted as a white man in an all black Venetian society? Would a racially charged Washington D.C. society accept this interpretation of the play?

Craig Herndon of the *Washington Post* interviewed Stewart on about this production on the eve of its opening in November 1997. The role of Othello has been marked as an ultimate challenge for any actor because of its emotional weight from passionate love to the deepest levels of jealousy and despair carried over a three plus hour time period. It is a role that requires not only intense training in Shakespearean style, but also an extreme level of physical endurance to be able to see the play to its conclusion emotionally and vocally. It is a role that Patrick Stewart had always wanted to do, for it is a hallmark in any actor's career if done successfully. But, wrote Herndon, "according to the dictates of the times, Othello is not a role Stewart should be playing. The character, a Moor from North Africa, is the lone black in the opulent society of Venice. And Stewart, who was born in a tiny Yorkshire village, the son of a career soldier, is white... In another age, actors like Orson Welles and Laurence Olivier simply blackened their faces for the part. But in our post-civil rights era, that practice has been discredited. Ironically, even as the proponents of nontraditional casting have done much to break down racial barriers in the theater, Othello has become a role for blacks only." (Herndon, DO1)

Stewart wanted very much to play the role, but was reluctant to attempt to portray the role as a North African for he felt it would be not only politically incorrect but against his own sensibilities as an actor seeking the truth of the character. However, he could not give up his desire to play the role, even at the risk of betraying the tenants of political correctness. Theatre is about transformation, the actor is never the character, but transforms aspects of his or herself to fulfill the demands of the psychology of the character. The actor may be able to highlight different aspects of personality to fit the character, but the degree to which actors can transpose their appearance, especially their race, is limited. For Stewart, the answer to playing Othello was not to try to impersonate a North African, but to play the role as a white man living in a black society. (Figures 43, 44) This reversal of race, what director Jude Kelly termed as the “photo negative” production (Herndon, DO1) was the central idea governing this production of *Othello*, although it did take some searching on Stewart’s part to find a theatre company willing to take on the production. Michael Kahn, the artistic director of the Shakespeare Theatre was more than willing to take on the production, feeling that it was a perfect exploration of power, politics and race for his Washington D. C. audience. Apparently, the force to govern ourselves by the politics of racial correctness did not put a damper on this production; it was sold out by mid-September 1997 for a run that would conclude in January 1998.

What did this role reversal of Othello’s racial identity accomplish other than allowing Stewart to play the role without guilt? The character of Othello is isolated not because he is black and there is prejudice in the Venetian society against all black people. He is isolated because he is racially marked as different and he becomes too successful for a jealous Iago. Othello could easily

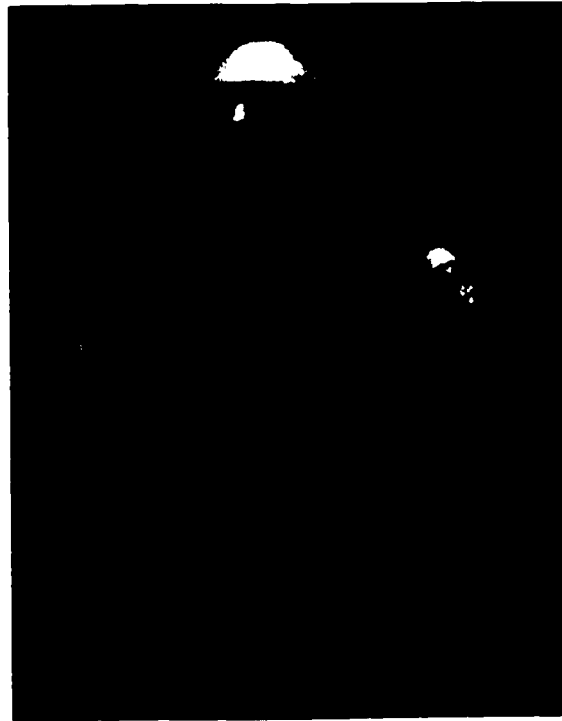
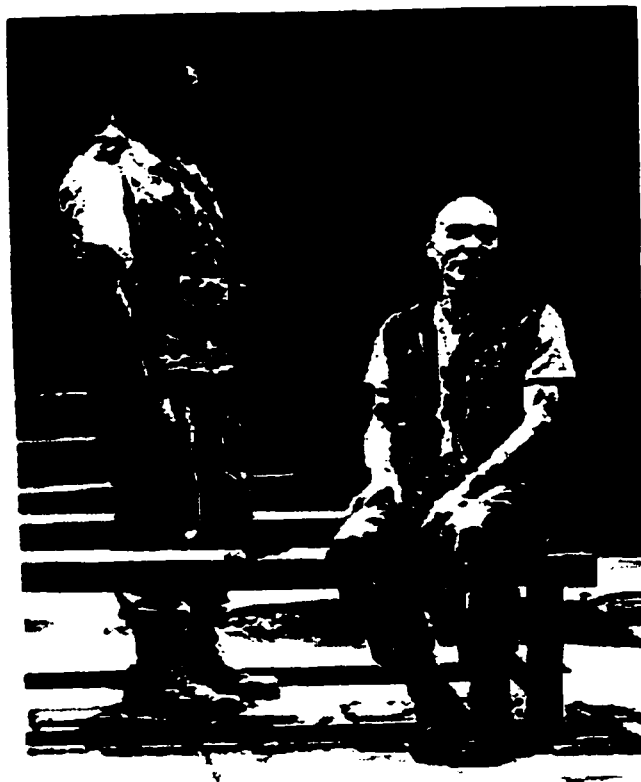


Fig. 43. Patrick Stewart as Othello. Photographer unknown. The Shakespeare Theatre. Washington D.C. 1997.



**Fig. 44. Ron Canada as Iago with Patrick Stewart.
Photographer unknown. The Shakespeare Theatre.
Washington D.C. 1997.**

be any race other than that of this imagined society and it would have the same impact. The play is about racial separation, but it doesn't really matter which race is separated from which. It only matters, perhaps, to those who can never admit to the fact that racial intolerance can work in many ways by many different groups of people; it is not only a force of a white majority oppressing a black minority. Director Kelly responded in the *Washington Post* interview on this issue of race reversal by saying that:

I don't think we're trying to make any more major a point than Shakespeare himself was trying to make. We're just making it differently. What's fascinating for me is that you have 22 African American actors onstage who know what racism is about, and one white British actor who may know the effects of racism but has never experienced it the way they have. So the images of racial hostility flip back and forth. What it all means, I think, will depend very much on the color of the person who's watching.
(Herndon, DO1)

Reviewer Richard Gist seemed to question the power of theatre as a sociological tool in his response to the play. Gist wrote that:

Nowhere is the weight and force of the risk more evident than when Patrick Stewart, in the role of the Moor of Venice, with brilliant white light glistening from his reflective alabaster pate, steps downstage almost defiantly to utter Othello's powerful lines in the middle of Act III, "Haply, for I am black,/ And have not those soft parts of conversation/ That chamberers have... Two acts later, when Othello serve as Desdemona's final judge and executer in her chamber, his lines "...I'll not shed her blood,/ Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow,/ And smooth as monumental alabaster..." run so counter to what our eyes clearly perceive on-stage, there is the inherent risk of destroying what is arguably the most powerful moment in the play (if not Shakespeare's entire canon)

To actor Stewart's great credit, and to the entire team that conceived and executed this theatrical *tour de force*, the lines provided nary a twitter in the packed opening night house, though

it must be reported that there was an audible gasp from somewhere in the theatre when white Othello made his first physical amorous contact with the black Desdemona (Patrice Johnson) in an earlier scene. (1)

Risking political incorrectness for a more meaningful sociological lesson, perhaps it was ultimately desirable to make an audience member gasp at the amorous embrace between a white man and a black woman, dredging up old fears of white masters and subjugated black slave women. (Figures 45, 46)

Having Stewart say Othello's lines about his blackness and Desdemona's white purity may be biting, but it also calls into question how we have read skin color historically. It recalls the endless theorists chronicled in chapter two of this paper, who not only tried to understand racial difference, but imposed a social and mental hierarchy based on skin color. Black has not only been a reference to skin color in American society, but also a term to mean moral and mental poverty as opposed to the idea of white meaning spiritual purity. In the case of Othello and Desdemona, applying this usage of racial terms, Othello has fallen to a level of blackness not because of the color of his skin but because he has believed in Iago's web of lies about Desdemona. This is his tragic failing, a fate which could apply to anyone regardless of race. Desdemona remains faithful and loyal to Othello in spite of his mounting doubts about her, she is spiritually pure as alabaster. The line thus refers to her state of mind, not the color of the actress' skin.

It will probably take a lot more than a progressive production of *Othello* to change the way language is understood referentially in the American idiom and the way racialized groups are perceived. Nevertheless, this production is a vital start in forcing the audience to look at prejudice, the current obsession with



Fig. 45. Patrick Stewart and Patrice Johnson embrace in the "Photo Negative" *Othello*. Photographer unknown. The Shakespeare Theatre. Washington D.C. 1997.



Fig 46. Patrick Stewart and Patrice Johnson's shocking kiss. Photographer unknown. The Shakespeare Theatre. Washington D.C. 1997.

political correctness to gloss over old wounds, by daring to put the uncomfortable on stage for the audience to consider and debate. Racial intolerance and exploitation are not the burden of only African Americans in this country. It effects everyone. Showing a white Othello as a victim does not discredit the years of hatred and suffering that African Americans have endured; it underlines the fact that this history is not rational in the reading of racial difference but a product of ignorance.

Can this type of cross-casting, reversing racialized roles, be as effective in contemporary plays as it was in the Shakespeare Theatre's production of *Othello* ? Contemporary plays are significantly different from Shakespearean ones because they do not have four hundred years of production behind them creating archetypal characters and situations, and often are not free from the primary interpretation of the playwright. In terms of casting, roles are generally labeled ethnically and racially in contemporary plays, and those roles which are not specifically labeled are presumed to be white roles. What would happen to the audience's perception of a piece if this categorization were not adhered to?

In the Spring term of 1999, the San Jose State Theater Department mounted a production of Arthur Miller's play *All My Sons*. The roles of Joe and Kate Keller were precast, so that the callback auditions were centered on rounding out the other roles of the son and the neighbors in relation to the already chosen father and mother. Breton Nicholson was cast to play Chris, giving this character a sort of cliché all-American look. What became interesting in this casting process was the search for the right actress to play Anne Deaver, the all-American counterpart to Chris, the ingenue girl-next-door love interest. Many different women read for the part, each imparting different

qualities to the role based on their own interpretations of the role. The obvious standout at the auditions was a young woman named Lilly Small, tall and gangly in body type, who somehow brought a quality of innocence to the role in an almost clumsy way. She captured the director, Dr. Bob Jenkins' attention in her reading of the role because she came the closest to the image of 1940's romantic love, like someone out of an old movie. There was another actress, Renee Cunha, who most would have bet on being cast because of her obvious beauty and the ease in which she read the role. Still, Lilly Small was cast as Anne Deaver, because Jenkins was more captivated by her odd qualities than Cunha's beauty. What was also notable about casting Small in the role is that she is of mixed race, part Thai and part German. Gene Carvalho, who is Portuguese American, was cast as her brother, George Deaver, and it did not seem necessary that he bear any particular resemblance to Small in order to play her brother. (Figure 47) Through the rehearsals, this physical disparity became unnoticeable as each actor focused on creating the complex life-long relationships of the play.

The play *All My Sons* is set in middle America in 1945 and deals with the devastation of a family who has lost a son in the Pacific in World War II. Both the Keller sons and their neighbor, George Deaver are categorized as idealistic patriotic American young men, who enlisted in the services to serve their country overseas in the war with Japan. Chris and George return from the war, surviving the battle front but are devastated personally by their respective fathers' shady industrial dealings in the manufacturing of airplane parts during the war. As the play unfolds, it becomes apparent that the real enemy was not the Japanese overseas, but the American dream of profit at all costs. This is a



Fig. 47. Lilly Small as the All-American Ann Deaver.
Photographer David Lepori. San Jose State University.
1999.

common theme in Miller plays, the exploration of the effects of the American dream on common people and the devastation that occurs in a family when the desire for wealth overshadows personal relationships.

With this theme in mind, it was interesting to have a Thai-German actress in the role of the ingenue love-interest in the play instead of the typical blond-haired, blue eyed girl-next-door type. Anne Deaver was the fiancee of Larry Keller, but when he is listed as missing in the war, she turns to his brother, Chris. They discover their love for each other, and although this becomes a difficult relationship for the Keller parents, they begin to make their plans for a life together. Watching this tender and somewhat innocent relationship develop onstage between an all-American looking, sandy-haired Nicholson and a mixed race Small subtly adds to the thematic message of the play.

The German and Asian enemies of War World II pale in comparison to the betrayal of one's own father, and this is the tragic revelation of the play. The real enemy was Joe Keller's greed and willingness to lie to insure his own exoneration from his deeds.

The audience probably did not pick up on this subtle reinforcement of theme through the body of Lilly Small. It may have been more noticeable if the production were performed in a professional theatre company rather than on a university stage, where the limited student population is a factor in the available casting pool. This factor almost begs the audience's forgiveness, as though no other actress might have been available for the part. This, however, was not the case, as mentioned earlier. Also, Small was costumed to look like an innocent in a wig that made her look more like a tall, gangly Snow White, which subdued her Asian physiognomy. Director Jenkins did not make this casting choice with

this outer message in mind, either; he was simply looking for the right dynamics between actors who could build the emotional relationships of the play. But, however subtle, this extra layer of meaning adds an interesting element to the production.

The casting choices made for *Die, Die, Diana*, which was also performed by San Jose State's Theater Department, in the Fall 1998 term, were anything but subtle. *Die, Die, Diana* was a very biting and bawdy musical comedy about the death of Diana, Princess of Wales. Playwright Scott Sublett held absolutely nothing sacred in writing this satire on the British royal family and their sexual exploits, the pandering of the paparazzi and the infamous relationship between Queen Elizabeth and media darling Princess Diana.

Most of the casting choices aided costumer Betty Poindexter in creating fairly good look-a-likes of the characters. In a wig and the appropriate costumes taken from tabloid photos of Diana, actress Renee Cunha bore a striking resemblance to the ill-fated Princess. (Figure 48) Breton Nicholson carried off his portrayal of Charles, Prince of Wales, by relying on a study of gesture more than copying Charles' physiognomy. The costumes and wigs for the Queen Mother and for Queen Elizabeth focused on the archetypal characteristics of these women, with a dowdy flowered hat and gloves for the Queen Mother, and the ever-present matronly purse and gloves offset by a gaudy display of diamond jewelry for Elizabeth. A sense of Brechtian Estrangement was added to all of these characters: the Queen Mother and Elizabeth wore the archetypal gloves and purses, but their queenly housecoats carried out the estranged image of these historical characters. (Figure 49)

The character of Dodi, Diana's Egyptian boyfriend, was played by a



**Fig. 48. Renee Cunha as Princess Diana.
Photographer Pat Kirk. San Jose State University.
1998.**



**Fig. 49. Laura Long Patterson and Kathryn Salsbury
as the Queen and Queen Mum. Photographer Pat Kirk.
San Jose State University. 1998.**

rather young actor, David Legois. David was cast for his singing ability, for the part required the actor to carry off quite a few solo musical numbers. Tempting any idea of good taste, David was costumed more like John Travolta in *Saturday Night Fever* than made to resemble the historical character.

Poindexter dressed him in a white disco suit with his black shirt opened to reveal taped-on chest hair that looked as though it had been striped from a gorilla costume. David also spoke with an accent closer to the film image of Dracula than to an Egyptian accent, but within the over-the-top, estranged style of this pseudo historical, avant-garde piece his choices seemed appropriate.

The sons of Diana and Charles, William and Harry, played by Mike Tandecki and Matt Tondag respectively, were yet another level of estrangement in this piece. Both twenty-something actors were dressed in a take-off on British private school uniforms with matching caps. Both were put in blond wigs that resembled the hair styles of the real life Princes, with cheruban rosy cheeks painted on. Their first entrance nearly brought the house down in laughter, as they pranced on the stage to worship their Princess mother with adoring hugs and kisses. (Figure 50) Tandecki's William, a young boy seen through the body of a grown man, resembled at once the image of both a Hitler youth and that of Diana herself. This strangely perverted androgynous image was played upon by both Tandecki and Cunha as they implied a rather Oedipal relationship between the two characters. Tondag's Harry, costumed in the same manner as William, brought up a very different image, however. Tondag's short and stout Mexican American body seemed to contradict his blond wig and Eton uniform in a stronger fashion than Tandecki's tall, slender boyish limbs. Had the costumer allowed Tondag to retain his usual goatee for the part, the difference would

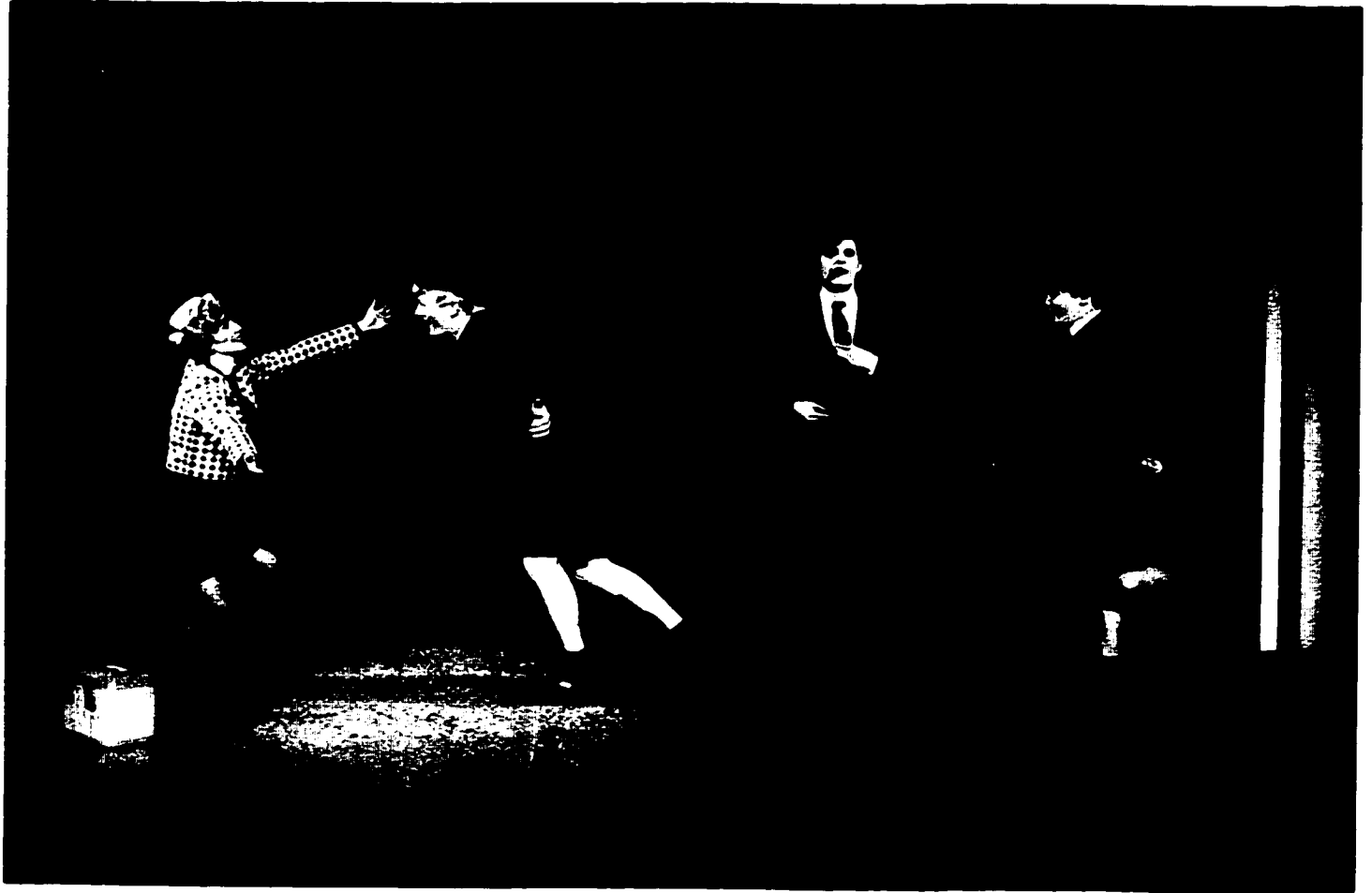


Fig. 50. Mike Tandecki and Matt Tondag as William and Henry. Photographer Pat Kirk. San Jose State University. 1998.

have made even more of an impact.

Beyond their costuming, Tondag's and Tandecki's physical identities had a particularly biting irony in their relationship to who stood in line for the throne. Tandecki's William, who had answered his mother in one scene with a "Ja wohl," (Sublett, 39) stood in a stark physical contrast to Tondag's Harry. In another scene, where William sarcastically offers Harry the crown and Harry says "No thanks, I don't want it," (Sublett, 46) the actor's bodies added another layer to the play's meaning. Beyond the literal narrative value of their lines, the actor's differing racialized bodies alluded to the endless racial theorists who strategized their writings to claim social superiority and rank on the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant body. It was then ironic for a Mexican American Harry to refuse the jewel in the crown from the Aryan William, for years of social theory has convinced the American populous that minorities really want to be white, and to have the power that whiteness allows. But in one brief moment on the stage, one actor's darker skinned body refusing the assumed privilege and power that is assured the white skinned, blond haired actor calls into question the bias behind such an assumption that it is more socially desirable to be white.

Perhaps the most estranged character of all in the casting of this play was found in Michelle Jones' portrayal of Camilla Parker Bowles. Jones was actually called back for both the role of Queen Elizabeth and for Camilla, but was cast as Camilla because that role required a lot more in vocal singing ability than did the role of Elizabeth. Jones, who was trained in musical theatre, was easily able to carry the singing and dancing required for the role of Camilla. Camilla Parker Bowles was the infamous mistress of Charles, his true love,

although socially he could never marry her and still retain his right to the throne. In the tabloid press, she was often held in contempt next to the beautiful and betrayed Princess Diana. Because of their social standing as royalty, Camilla could never be seen as an equal for Charles, and their true life romance had an ironic sadness about it. Sublett expounded on this real life situation to reinvent Camilla and Charles' relationship as a sadomasochistic one, with Camilla as dominatrix. Poindexter had a field day in costuming this pair: they began the show in English riding gear only to later strip down to rather kinky leather bondage gear. (Figures 51, 52)

The costuming alone would have been enough to parody this forbidden relationship of Camilla and Charles. But there was one other factor at play in this parody. Michelle Jones is African American. No attempt was made to alter her appearance other than the absurd blond wig put upon her head. If Tondag's Harry had another level of social commentary to it, Jones' Camilla had even more. In their first scene together, Camilla and Charles discuss their level of potential acceptance if their relationship were made public:

Camilla: Do you want to know what I think?

Charles: Yes.

Camilla: That they will never accept us and they'll never even get the chance to, because you won't be king.

Charles: I will.

Camilla: Would it be so terrible if you weren't?

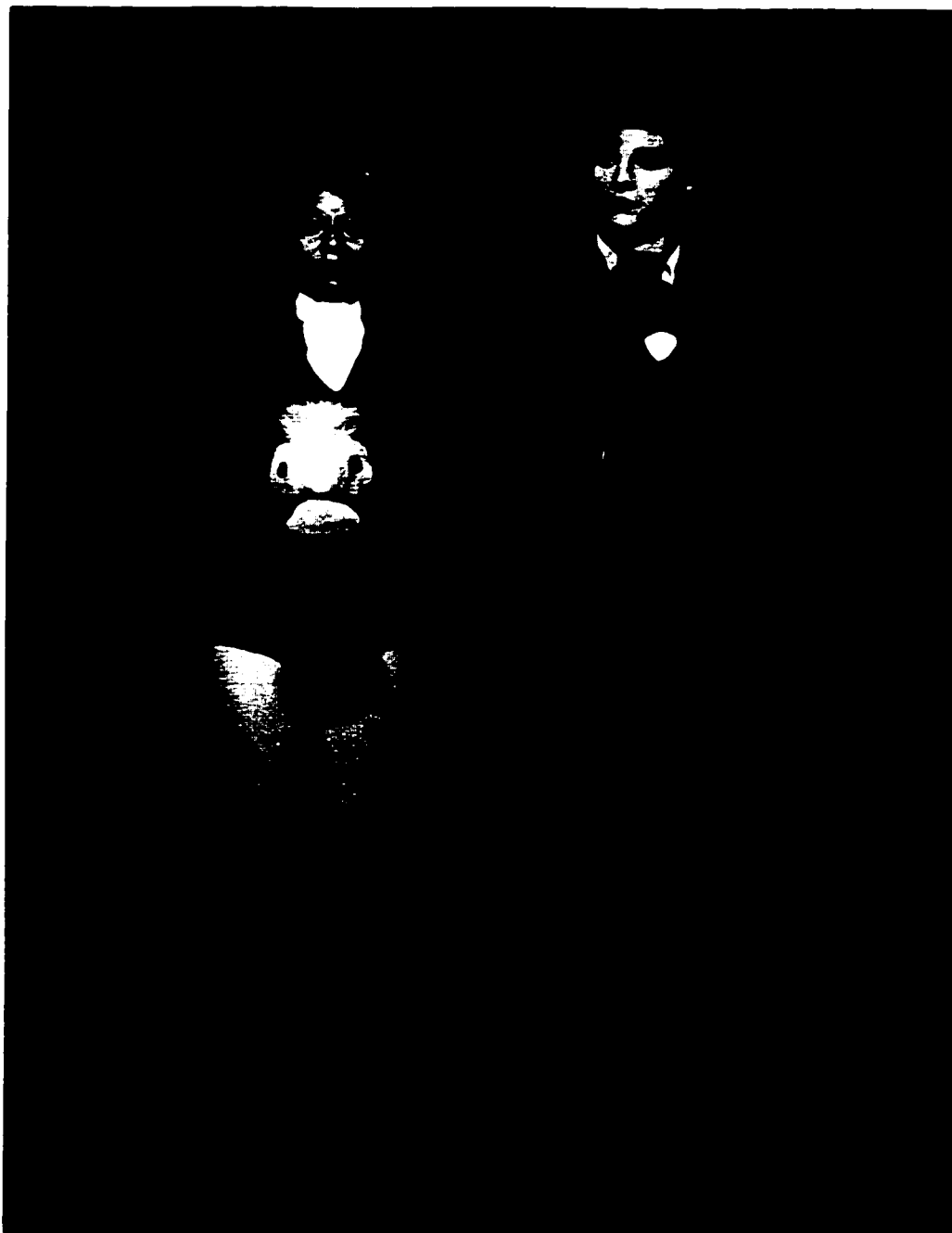
Charles: I will be king. I will not be publicly ridiculous.

Camilla: Even to be privately happy?...

Camilla: They prefer someone pop, while you, my love, are stubbornly high-church. And unapproachable and unemotional.

Charles: I'm very emotional.

Camilla: I meant PUBLICLY unemotional. The public wants someone superficial. Someone telegenic. Look at your poor old mother -- years of self-sacrificing service to the



**Fig. 51. Michelle Jones and Breton Nicholson
as Camilla and Charles. Photographer Pat Kirk.
San Jose State University. 1998.**

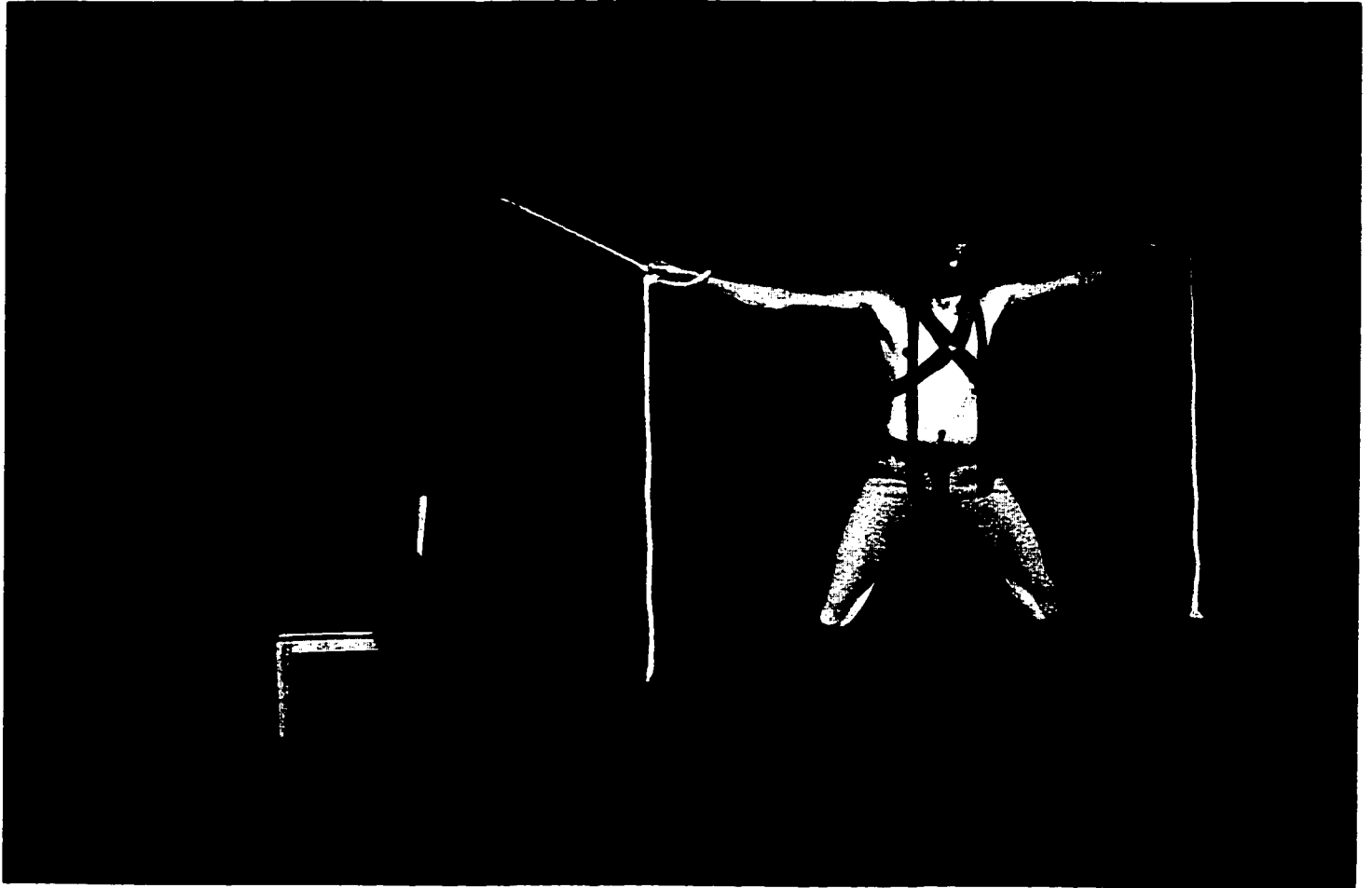


Fig. 52. Charles and Camilla go sadomasochistic. Photographer Pat Kirk. San Jose State University. 1998.

state, and still people prefer Diana.
Charles: But why?
Camilla: Have you watched the television lately?
Charles: Of course not. Have you?
Camilla: Enough to see that only pretty people are allowed to be on it. And Elizabeth is no longer pretty.
(Sublett, 26 -28)

If these lines were not biting enough politically when said by an African American actress to a white actor, a later scene in the play pushes the comfort zone of political correctness even further. In this scene, Charles and Camilla are dressed in skimpy leather gear and are in the midst of kinky sexual play. In spite of the titillating scenario, their lines in this scene have a very sharp political edge when said by this biracial pair of actors:

Camilla: I don't think I should marry you.
Charles: Why not?
Camilla: Because I want you to be accepted by the public.
Charles: I don't care if I'm accepted by the public...
Camilla: If someday you are king, they will never accept me as queen.
Charles: What's the alternative?
Camilla: I remain your mistress.
Charles: You know I hate that word. You are not my mistress, you're my friend.
Camilla: I know, Charles, really I do. But to the public I'd be your mistress and that would have many advantages.
Charles: Name one.
Camilla: As your mistress I am pathetic. "Poor Camilla. Can't marry Charles because she's divorced and isn't suitable. Well, serves her right for breaking up that marriage. Let her stay a mistress like the back-door trollop she is."
Charles: Why would people think that?
Camilla: They want me to be humiliated, and they want you to do penance. And they don't want you to ram down their throats a wife who could never compare to Diana.
Charles: Why, you outshine her in every way.
Camilla: No, you're forgetting television and the looks thing. She's good casting, I'm bad casting. If you would watch

television even just a little bit, as an experiment, you would know that.
(Sublett, 72-74)

When he was writing these lines, Sublett could not have known the impact they would have when spoken by these two actors. The words would have enough satire in them when spoken by two white actors costumed to look like replicas of Charles and Camilla. But when spoken by Jones, their meaning echoes beyond the play's narrative structure to put old prejudices about racial difference on the line. If it struck the audience as politically incorrect to have a African American Camilla, jarring them into facing interpersonal taboos, then the play succeeded in doing something more politically and socially necessary than merely parodying the British Royal family. The production of *Die, Die, Diana* was aimed at tearing down media icons with bawdy humor, but, because of the casting choices made, it also attacked our prejudices about racial identity. This was not a identified motive behind the inclusion of these different racial bodies in the production, but because of director Danny Scheie's open-minded attitude in casting, these choices added a significant layer of social commentary beyond the narrative structure.

The Spelman media class probably would have been shocked by this production. If they could question Morgan Freeman's eloquent portrayal of Petruchio, what would they have thought about Michelle Jones as Camilla Parker Bowles? What is the limit to including differing racialized bodies in productions? If both the director and the audience can easily justify cross-casting in Shakespeare, can the same case be made for contemporary theatre? The subtle usage of cross-casting in San Jose State's production of *All My Sons* probably slipped by the audience's recognition of change to Arthur

Miller's interpretation of the character. When asked about his interpretation of the play at an informal talk at the University, Miller could not even recall much about it at this point in his life. He did say that he wanted to give the audience hope with the play, that the young characters of the piece would rise beyond the tragedy of their parents. But he did not express any limitation as to what bodies could be included in the piece, even after meeting actress Small. He merely wished her well with the role.

With a production like *Die, Die, Diana* absolutely nothing was left as sacred or untouchable. The social message expressed through the racialized bodies cast in the play made an impact, but the Brechtian style of the piece made it acceptable to do so. More often than not, contemporary plays are cast according to the character description prescribed by the playwright. The examples of performances analyzed in this chapter provide a wide range of possible applications for cross-casting a variety of works, creating an avenue for inclusion beyond the playwright's vision of the character and a means to explore the ways in which this society reads bodies. Are there limitations to this practice? The next chapter will attempt to answer that question, looking at cross-casting within the family structure in play texts. It will also try to understand whether or not the ground gained for racial inclusion can be applied to other areas of physiognomy, in the way this society reads body size, age and gender.

Chapter Five

Rewriting the Codes

Are there limitations to what an audience will accept in the casting of different racialized bodies in performance? Thus far, this thesis has examined the political arguments regarding multicultural inclusion against racial and ethnic segregation in theatre practices, and has concluded that these arguments are short-sighted in allowing the actor to work to his or her full potential as interpreter of a playwright's textual ideas. The meaning that this society attaches to racial bodies is not a finite idea but changes as the society changes. The evidence presented on racial theory in Chapter Two has shown that the codifying of bodies into racial categories has been primarily economically motivated in order to stratify the power structure of this society. While there are many different races, as well as many different body types, what those bodies mean to this society is subjective rather than objective. The meaning of racialized bodies in this society is not a fact of genetics, rather it is a product of politics and prejudicial thinking. So as politics change and prejudices subside, the manner in which American entertainment producers represent these differing racial types in performance has also changed. Television is not an all-white landscape any more, nor is film or theatre. But even though more minorities are now represented in entertainment, how their bodies are used in performance is still limited. Casting practices are still limited by the idea that a "right" body must be found for a particular role, even though racial minority bodies are now included in this category. Roles are still racially defined and those that are not are generally presumed to be white roles.

Progress has been made, but not nearly enough has been done if entertainment is to be truly reflective of the mosaic of American identity.

Chapter Three explored the bizarre history of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and has found that this play's theme of oppression has meaning beyond its identification as an African American story. The productions of *I Ain't Yo Uncle* may have succeeded in reclaiming the authority of the perspective of this story, now mediated from a black perspective rather than a white one, but fell short in their refusal to recognize that this isn't just a story of the oppression of African Americans. The piece has had meaning across many different cultures, all of whom have had issues of oppression and subjugation, although the identification of the oppressed and the oppressor has sometimes been expressed by bodies coded by social station rather than racially.

Chapter Four explored the application of cross-cultural casting in both classical and contemporary plays, finding that Shakespearean plays offer a more open context for casting a variety of bodies due to the archetypal nature of the characters and the predominant style of reinterpreting the mise en scene in production. The two contemporary plays discussed, *All My Sons* and *Die, Die, Diana*, offered differing approaches to cross-cultural casting: one in the subtle layering of external message as expressed through a racialized body, and one that stands directly in opposition to political correctness in its bold application of casting choices. The question still remains as to whether there is a limitation to the practice of cross-casting in the understanding of a play and what does the casting of the "wrong" body do to the audience's expectations of a production? Are some plays untouchable? If the play centers around the dynamics of the family, are there limitations as to what bodies can represent the family?

It is common to find productions of plays, like A.C. T.'s 1999 production of *Tartuffe*, cast as all African American, but it is still rare to find productions that deal with family politics cross-cast racially. It seems that production companies cannot imagine biracial couples or the off-spring that they would produce unless it is a dynamic of the play that the playwright endorses. What would happen if cross-casting racially were taken to this extreme? Is the fear that the audience would be repelled by this type of casting preclude its practice?

In November 1997, Whitney Houston produced a significantly cross-cast version of *Cinderella* for Disney. This was quite a departure for the Disney company, who over the years have produced a large canon of fairy tales for young audiences. To their credit, the Disney company had already begun to develop its own sense of multiculturalism with the animated films *Pocahontas*, *Aladdin* and *Mulan*. However mythologized in terms of historical detail, these films added new racial faces to Disney's previous stock of European American heroes and heroines. This was an important step in offering children, who previously were limited to the fantasy of blond heroines like Cinderella, a chance to see their own racial identity on the screen. To date, Disney hasn't offered Hispanic children a culturally specific animated film, and before Houston's *Cinderella*, African American children could only look to the animal images of the *Lion King* for a sense of cultural identity.

Houston's *Cinderella* was quite different from Disney's other multicultural films in that it was cross-cast with many different races and was not animated. The live bodies on the screen are much more dynamic than Disney's usual Barbie doll type of animation for its heroines, which has produced an unreal sense of beauty for the viewer: Pocahontas' girlfriend may look Native

American, but Pocahontas herself looks like a impossibly long-legged Barbie doll whose hair has a life of its own. There was also no reliance on cute, talking animal subplots; the focus in this *Cinderella* is in the tension between the characters' reality and their longing for love to transport them beyond their lives' limitations.

For Houston's production, pop-star Brandy, who is African American, was cast as Cinderella. She is beautiful and black, with long corn-rowed braids through most of the film. This was a dramatic departure from the previous image of Cinderella put forth by Disney. (Figures 53, 54) Veronica Chambers wrote in her November 3, 1997 *Newsweek* article that "the casting of Brandy as Disney's latest Cinderella is especially significant because for many black women, the 1950 animated Disney Cinderella with her blond hair and blue eyes sent a painful message that only white women could be princesses." (75) Chambers goes on in her article to quote Whoopi Goldberg, who said that "its hard when you don't fit the traditional view of beauty. I've gotten letters from people that say if I'd just get my nose done or if I wasn't so dark, I'd be OK-looking. That's why I love this Cinderella, because Brandy is a beautiful, everyday looking black girl." (75)

The casting in this film takes cross-cultural racial casting to a new level. This film is not merely the all African American version of the myth, but is representative of the multitude of identities within the American culture. Whitney Houston plays the Fairy Godmother to Brandy's Cinderella, which really doesn't push the audience's comfort level too far in the roles' African American reinterpretation. However, the casting of the other roles in the film do ask the audience to suspend their disbelief quite a bit more. Bernadette Peters



Fig. 53. Brandy and Whitney Houston in the cross-cast *Cinderella*. Photographer unknown. Disney. 1997.

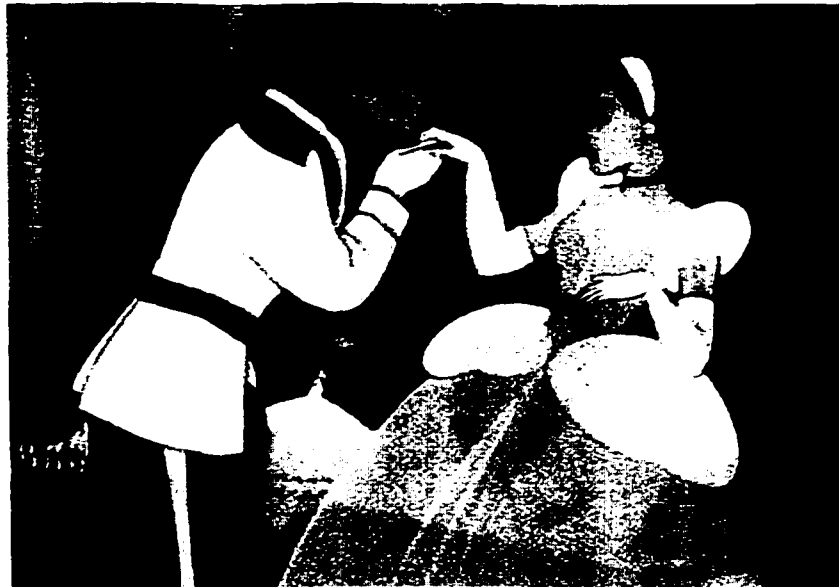


Fig. 54. The original Disney Cinderella, the white ideal of femininity. Artist unknown. The Everett Collection. Disney. 1950.

played the role of Cinderella's stepmother, which is an interesting choice when one considers the history of the oppression of African Americans by European Americans in this society. At one point in the film, Peters' character accosts Cinderella, whom she suspects to have attended the royal ball, by saying that the Prince would never choose to be with a girl like her. In response to Cinderella's questioning of this statement, the stepmother says that it is because she is, and at this moment she pauses, and then finishes the line with the word "common." In that moment of hesitation, one wonders whether the stepmother will say that it is because Cinderella is black, but the film steers away from making any strong statements regarding racial inequities.

The stepsisters, Calliope and Minerva, were played by Veanne Cox and Natalie Desselle, respectively. Veanne Cox, a red-headed woman reminiscent of Carol Burnette, is tall, awkward-moving and white, while Natalie Desselle is short, heavy-set and black. They are polar opposites of each other, but both marked by a stereotypical sense of undesirability. No one would suppose that a Prince would fall for a gawky red-headed woman who snorts when she laughs or for a short fat woman who scratches incessantly when nervous. It is interesting to note that at no time does the film attempt to explain how these two women could be Peter's children. The audience is asked to look beyond genetics and to focus on the narrative.

If it is jarring for the audience to understand how these women are related, the idea of a mixed race family is further supported in the casting of the Prince and his parents. Filipino actor Paolo Montalban played the Prince to Whoopi Goldberg's Queen and Victor Garber's King. With these choices, the audience is asked to look beyond how a white king and a black queen could

have a Filipino son, and once again focus on the story.

The casting choices are made palatable for the audience with their placement on production designer Randy Ser's fantasy set design. The kingdom set is vaguely reminiscent of an old Bavarian town, but it is better suited for a Disneyland theme park area than representative of the real world. Ser said that the producers wanted him to create a *Wizard of Oz* type design, with a flow of music to the set. The designers used the work of Gustav Klimt and turn of the century children's illustrator, Edmund Dulac for inspiration. The result of their efforts was "more art than scenery. The sets became as if you were standing in a virtual reality version of a pop-up fairy tale. You're in a real world, but it's illustrated." (Calhoun, 1) John Calhoun, writer for ED - Roll Camera, said that there was "a rounded surreal quality to the sets, which was nearly devoid of right angles." (1) The set's bright colors and ambiguous time period are further enhanced by the multi-racial extras who populate this world. There is apparently no social hierarchy based on race; social order is structured solely on economic advantage. One would have to wonder what would the reception of this piece be if it were set in a realistic place or time period: would the audience be able to accept the casting choices if they were in a bleak urban 1990's world or at an upper class country club in the 1950's? Would a specific setting outside of the fairy tale world preclude the mixed race casting choices? One can only imagine that this would not only shift the focus of the story to dealing with historical issues of oppression and greed, but it would also highlight the odd casting choices of genetically impossible families.

No one seems to be suffering any great hardship in this fantasy world, with the exception of the Prince and Cinderella, who both feel that they are

trapped by their responsibilities to their families. They are soul-mates, and neither seems to think that their being of different races makes any difference to their being together as a couple. In fact, at one point in the film, the Prince looks to his black and white parents and says that he wants to be in love like they are when he gets married. This sort of sentiment, which runs throughout the film, invites the audience to consider the individual without the burden of a historical racial category placed upon them. But this consideration is probably only possible because the design is telling the audience that this isn't a real world, so there isn't any need to focus on the historical implications of these bodies.

It is interesting to note that African American men are virtually absent from this film: African American women are linked in love relationships with white and Asian men. The only African American men are found in the crowd scenes, without any particular character identity. Whitney Houston said of the casting choices in the film that "I want children of all colors to be able to watch this program, enjoy it and know that they, too, can have their dreams come true." (Souza, 3) But apparently young black males are left out of this dream, and the message sent to them does not appear to be of any concern to the production staff. The message did attract the interest of *Newsweek's* Veronica Chambers, who wrote that:

Disney's politically correct version is sure to spark controversy in the black community. "I'm genuinely bothered by the subliminal message that's sent when you don't have a black Prince Charming," says Denene Millner, author of "The Sistahs' Rules." "When my stepson who's 5 looks at that production, I want him to know he can be somebody's Prince Charming." But this "Cinderella" does mirror, unwittingly, a growing loss of faith in black men by black women. Just as Brandy's Cinderella falls in love with a prince of another color, so have black women begun to date and marry interracially in record numbers. In 1980 there

were 27,000 new marriages between black women and white men. By 1990 that number had doubled, to 54,000. While black men still marry outside the race in greater numbers, interracial marriages involving black women are growing at a faster rate. "Some of it is backlash because there are a lot of women who feel that black men have done them wrong," says Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Rita Dove. "It's also a way of taking charge and saying, 'I'm waiting for Prince Charming, but the important thing is that he's charming, not that he's black'." There's an irony here: for white women the Cinderella myth is about passivity, but for black women it's about actively seeking a partner who's their equal.
(75)

If the exclusion of African American males is troubling for the audience of this film, there is another level of body identification that is equally disturbing. Both Brandy and Paolo Montalban, although representative of different races than in Disney's 1950's all-white version of the fairy tale, do fit into this society's 1990's category of what is beautiful. Perhaps thirty years ago, when the country was actively fighting for the civil rights of disenfranchised minority groups, a black Cinderella would be more of a challenge to the audience's perception of beauty. But today, with commercial advertising selling the idea that any woman of any race is beautiful so long as she's physically fit with unblemished skin and glossy hair, it is not a stretch of the imagination to fit Brandy into this category. Although she is simply costumed in beige-toned clothes topped with a head-wrap, she still possesses a well-proportioned body, glowing brown skin, perfect teeth in her broad smile, with large brown eyes looking alluringly at the Prince. When dressed in her ball gown, she is even a closer replica of the animated blond Cinderella, and the only difference seems to be the color of her skin. Khimberly Maarshall, director for the Celebration Arts Theatre in Sacramento, said of this production that "having an African American Cinderella on TV can

mean the difference between self-esteem and self-loathing for little girls of color. Hopefully, children who see a multicultural "Cinderella" won't grow up with the idea that princesses have to be blond and blue-eyed. They will know that beauty and magic can happen to anyone." (Souza, 3) While race does not have to be perceived as a barrier for beauty and magic, the film does reinforce the idea that this magic is only possible for women with certain body types. There probably isn't a casting director in Los Angeles who would for one moment consider switching the casting to have Natalie Desselle play Cinderella while Brandy played Minerva, or, for that matter, casting Jason Alexander as the Prince to Paolo Montalban's courtier Lionel. The relatively narrow codes of what is deemed beautiful in this society would preclude such casting choices. In fact, Jason Alexander has a line of dialogue in the film that goes right to the heart of this limited perception of beauty. While the Prince is complaining that he wants to have a normal life with the freedom afforded to "real" people, Alexander responds: "Real people aren't all that they're cracked up to be. I'm a real person. Does that not tell you anything?" (Cinderella, 1997) At this point, the camera shot seems to highlight the fact that Alexander is balding with a paunch, the antitheses of Paolo Montalban's physique.

The stepsisters also reinforce this limited idea of beauty. Ellen Mirojnick's costumes for the stepmother and sisters are ridiculous in their ornamentation, and Natalie Desselle's tight-fitting dresses make her appear to waddle instead of moving gracefully across the set. Veanne Cox doesn't fare much better in her clothes which make her look like an awkward peacock. The stepsisters have a song in the film performed while they are spying on the Prince and Cinderella at the ball. They sing while stumbling through the

shrubbery and while Desselle attempts to wedge her round body through a narrow opening: "Why would a fellow want a girl like her, a girl whose truly lovely? Why can't a fellow ever once prefer a girl whose just like me?"

(Cinderella, 1997) The answer for the audience is simple: the film's portrayal of these women reinforces the idea that short and fat or too thin, too tall and red-headed are not desirable qualities for a woman.

What would the audience perceive if the casting choices for Cinderella and the stepsisters retained their cross-casting racially, but had women of equal physical qualities? In 1998, Twentieth Century Fox produced their own rendition of the Cinderella tale, *Ever After*. In this film, the Cinderella role, played by Drew Barrymore, is of equal physical beauty as her stepsister, Marguerite, played by Megan Dodds. What distinguishes the desirability of these two women is not their physical attributes, but their intellectual ones. Barrymore's character is principled, liberal-minded and more scholarly than her stepsister, and these qualities are what attracts the attention of the Prince. It probably would not have mattered if these roles were cross-cast racially or if Barrymore was African American and Dodds was white. The audience would still perceive that true beauty is within a person, reinforcing Martin Luther King's plea that we should judge a person by the content of their character. Houston's *Cinderella* seems to suggest the opposite. In this film, dreams only come true for physically beautiful people, and the way the film is cross-cast racially underscores this idea. While the film does bring black and Asian physiognomy into the category of desirability, it also reinforces the stereotype that only certain shapes of the body are beautiful. Perhaps no film can attack all of the negative stereotypes that this society contains, and Houston should be saluted for at

least challenging racial categories. But does this sort of casting do enough to challenge the society's perceptions of identity? While it rewrites one category, it reinforces another. If this is only a first step in expanding perceptions of identity, what else should be done in the way bodies are cast in performance?

What would happen if this type of cross-cultural casting were done in a contemporary play? *Cinderella* is, after all, a story that has archetypal power behind its characters and cross-casting it is about as risky as cross-casting Shakespeare, which doesn't really challenge an audience's reading of the piece anymore. There is a Cinderella story in most cultures, with different twists to the plot, so it isn't a huge leap to create a cross-cast American 1990's version of the tale. We have become accustomed to this practice with certain types of plays. Actually, if the play had never been produced before, the audience would not necessarily recognize cross-casting unless a character stated their race, gender or ethnicity, even if the playwright conceived of the play in a manner different from its casting. Certain musicals, such as *A Chorus Line*, could be cast with any type of race, gender or sexually oriented bodies, so long as those actors could dance. A casting director probably wouldn't include a sixty year old actor or a heavy set actor in this casting, unless they were cast in roles that didn't survive the cut in the play. The dance world is probably the harshest of any in the theatre because the performance is all about watching a body move. In this society, it seems to be assumed that the audience does not want to watch an old or heavy-set body dance, not matter how good their technique.

If multi-racial casting is something new, cross-gender casting is as old as ancient Greek theatre. Before women were allowed on the stage, men played

all of the roles. Women have long suffered a lack of significant roles in the entertainment industry, but that has changed as the Women's Movement has empowered women to think beyond a subservient role to men and as women have moved into the roles of producers and directors. A woman taking on a role conceived by the playwright to be male does change the play, but not beyond the audience's ability to understand it. Unlike the concluding image created by director Amy Glazer in her production of *Stonewall Jackson's House*, which suggested that it was ridiculous to put a woman in a man's role or vice versa, such a change may make the play more interesting in its complexities.

In 1996, San Jose State University did a production of Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, ironically also directed by Amy Glazer. This production was set in an ambiguous modern world, textually referred to as Vienna, but the angular set did not produce any certain place in reality. The play is about sexual politics in a world that punishes those who have sex without benefit of marriage. The Duke, in this production played by Frank Corrado, is ambivalent about this law, and so sets up his second in command, Angelo, played by Gene Carvalho, to implement these laws. I played Escalus, who is written to be the old male sage in the play. But as I am a white, thirty-something female, the role became something very different. Dressed in stacked heels, trousers and a Nehru jacket with hair in a French twist, I was anything but an old male sage. (Figure 55) Separated from the other women in the production, who were dressed either as nuns or as prostitutes, I was representative of the corporate government structure dominated by men. In this modern telling of the tale, the audience becomes more aware of the corporate structure of this government and ideas like the "glass ceiling" come into play as Escalus is passed over so



Fig. 55. Laura Long Patterson as Escalus in *Measure for Measure*. Photographer Pat Kirk. San Jose State University. 1997.

that Angelo can take charge. This, to our modern minds, immediately pits Escalus against Angelo, and they become adversaries although they must work together. In later scenes, Escalus becomes a very ambiguous character, fighting for leniency because she herself is manipulating the law. The play has a very small scene, written to facilitate an exit, between Escalus and a judge. The lines are very simple: Escalus invites the judge to his house for dinner. But in our telling of the play, considering that Escalus was now female and the judge was cast as male, we did a little reinventing so that the judge and Escalus were romantically linked, which would be against the law that they are supporting. The message was not too subtle for the audience, who were caused to stop and reconsider all that they thought that they knew: in this world, no one was simply good or evil. The politics of an unfair law played out against those without political power in the government and the government itself was corrupt on many levels. None of this would be viewed the same if Escalus had been cast as male. This one casting choice, although made specifically to add another character which would increase the female students' opportunities to work, actually intensified the play's meaning.

If a single casting choice can intensify a play's meaning for the audience, what would happen if an ethnically specific play like Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* were cross-cast racially? This would probably be unthinkable to most theater directors because the play has become a classic representative of African American theater. Amiri Baraka wrote in his 1986 article, *A Raisin in the Sun's Enduring Passion*, prefacing the Vintage Books publication of the play, that *Raisin* had joined the inner circle of a handful of great American dramas along with *Death of a Salesman*, *Long Day's Journey*

into Night, and *The Glass Menagerie*. (9) Does this inclusion into the classification of great American drama make it untouchable or would the greater risk of being politically insensitive preclude any tampering with the casting?

Baraka wrote that:

For many of us it was - and remains - the quintessential civil rights drama. But any attempt to confine the play to an era, a mind-set, an issue ("Housing") or set of topical concerns was, as we now see, a mistake. The truth is that Hansberry's dramatic skills have yet to be properly appreciated - and not just by those guardians of the status quo who pass themselves off as dramatic critics. For black theater artists and would-be theorists especially, this is ironic because the play is probably the most widely appreciated - particularly by African Americans - black drama that we have.
(10)

But is this play only an African American story? On one level it is about the transference of power within a family and the coming of age of the character Walter Younger. On another level it is about democratic rights and equality. Neither level of interpretation makes the play a specifically black play; it is only through the bodies of the actors in the performance that the audience makes this association and through Hansberry's repeated use of the term "colored." Could "colored" mean another race besides black? What if the family were Asian or Hispanic? Do we not use the term "people of color" in the American idiom to refer to any persons not deemed to be white? Asian and Hispanic people have also been marginalized in this society in job opportunities and in choice of neighborhoods; this isn't a problem solely faced by African Americans. The risk in cross-casting the play as all-Asian or all-Hispanic would be the possibility of the Black theater artists protesting their ownership of the play as a piece of the African American experience and potentially, as happened with the

Miss Saigon case, of shutting the project down.

Baraka wrote that “*A Raisin in the Sun* is about dreams, ironically enough. And how those psychological projections of human life can come into conflict like any other product of that life...We Speak of the American Dream. Malcolm X said that for the Afro-American it was the American Nightmare.” (13-16) The failing of the American Dream is not just a situation felt by African Americans, though. Many different groups have experienced its failings, including white Americans. Cross-casting other racial groups into the play could be a means of drawing this society together, in recognition that we all struggle toward dreams of a better future, and also suffer through oppression and ignorance and hopes unfulfilled.

To take this question of casting a step further, what would the audience perceive if the play were cross-cast within the dynamics of the family? If Disney could look beyond genetics in its casting of *Cinderella*, could the same approach work for a play like *A Raisin in the Sun*? What would happen to the audience's reading of the play if Mama and Walter were kept as African American characters, but Ruth was cast as a white woman, Travis, their son, was cast as Asian, and Beneatha was cast as Hispanic? The inherent risk in this approach to casting would be its prevention of the audience's ability to follow the narrative and the reinforcement of racial stereotypes. The audience, without a fantasy *mise en scene*, would probably be forced to wonder why one character is one race and one is another, and racial difference would be enhanced rather than disregarded. The audience would look for meaning expressed in these different bodies because this casting would not fulfill their expectations of the play. There probably is not a theater company who would

experiment with the casting in this manner, even though the story could have meaning for other racial groups, because the play is seen as an African American story and the political backlash to this type of production could mean an end to the company's financial viability. Whereas it is permissible to experiment with Shakespeare; politically sensitive plays, especially ones that deal with specific ethnic struggles, have the greatest risk involved in terms of cross-casting. Even if this type of radical casting could make a difference in the society's perception of racial difference and actually bring people together to understand our common human bonds, it probably won't ever be seen on the American stage. The historical struggles of certain racial groups, even if they are shared by other racial groups, seem to preclude this application of casting other bodies in ethnic plays.

If cross-casting ethnic plays would be politically sensitive, what would happen if an equally weighty play about white identity were cross-cast racially? Going back to the African American actor in the audience at the *Stonewall Jackson's House* Symposium who asked why could he not play Willy Loman, one wonders if this type of casting would be as politically sensitive as cross-casting *A Raisin in the Sun*? Arthur Miller's play *Death of a Salesman* is also an American classic dealing with the failings of the American Dream, but is considered to be specifically a white man's play. However, Miller's plays are not meant to be performed realistically but expressionistically. Originally titled "The Inside of His Head," the play represented Miller's attempt to formulate a "philosophy for the kind of Cubist stage pictures that would become his new style." (Lahr, 4) Miller wrote in his notebook for the play that:

Life is formless - its interconnections are canceled by lapses

of time, by events occurring in separate places, by the hiatus of memory. We live in a world made by man and the past. Art suggests or makes interconnection palpable. Form is the tension of these interconnections: man with man, man with the past and present environment. The drama at its best is a mass experience of this tension. (Lahr, 4)

Acting on these principles, what would be the audience's perception of the play if it were to be radically cross-cast racially? Willy Loman, the man who the American dream of success evades, is cast as African American. Linda, his wife who is both dutiful and overlooked, is Asian. Biff, the son who drifts from job to job as a ranch hand, is Hispanic. Happy, the son who is always seeking approval and boasts of his womanizing while scratching his way toward financial success, is both Jewish and portly. When Willy dreams of the past, or the past as he would like to remember it, white actors take these actors' places on the stage to act out this memory. This type of casting would be radical and challenging to any audience because it would place racial stereotypes brutally in front of them. It would force the audience to rethink the image of American identity, which is generally considered to be white and male, (S. Smith, 3) by placing minority actors in direct tension with white actors. It would cause the audience to question centuries of racial and class stratification and to make them wonder what the American Dream is all about to begin with. What is it in this country that has caused society to marginalize some groups while opening the doors to others? Lahr wrote that:

Death of a Salesman caught the spirit of self-aggrandizement being fed by what Miller calls "the biggest boom in the history of the world." Americans had struggled through the Depression, then fought a world war to keep the nation's democratic dream alive: that dream was, broadly speaking, a dream of self-realization. America, with its ideal of freedom, challenged its

citizens to see how far they could go in a lifetime - " to end up big," as Willy says... Miller was not the first to dramatize the barbarity of American individualism; but, in a shift that signaled the changing cultural mood, he was the first to stage this spiritual battle of attrition as a journey to the interior of the American psyche.

(4)

Taking this message and layering it further with racial stereotypes juxtaposed against the paradigm of the American white male would make quite a statement in the battle over cross-casting racially in the theater. It would put the great question of assimilation on the table: can we really look beyond race or is racial categorization too much of our American psyche to permit an audience to be blind to difference? Is it desirable to lose a racial group's identity in the mythic melting pot, thus creating a homogenized American identity that equates to whiteness or, as Ross Chambers' terms it, invisibility? (192) At the same time, racial identity is no longer what it was one hundred or even thirty years ago. Perhaps there is no answer to this philosophical question: it is impossible to do more than speculate on the message such a radically cross-cast version of *Death of a Salesman* would have on its audience. The truth is we as an audience will probably not have the opportunity to see this application of cross-cultural casting, whether in *A Raisin in the Sun* or in *Death of a Salesman*, because the political implications of it would be too explosive. It wouldn't adhere to a form of easy-to-follow narrative structure, and it would risk either confusing an audience or angering it. In this age of political correctness, there are some things that theaters simply won't do for fear of protest. But perhaps they should be done and old prejudices should be placed uncomfortably on the stage so that society can make a step forward, not towards homogenization; but towards a better understanding of difference.

Racial identity is not a fixed state but a fluid one. In casting, directors tend to regard race as a fixed idea, and generally do not experiment with putting the “wrong” body in a role. Small steps have been made, but the debate will probably continue on for sometime without any conclusive answers. D’Vera Cohn, writer for the *Washington Post*, reported on the findings of the 1999 Census, which predicts that “the growth of the nation’s minority groups will outstrip that of its non-Hispanic white population” by the year 2100. The Census also predicts “that the nation’s racial and ethnic groups will grow more alike in time. For one thing, intermarriage will blur identification lines, possibly making today’s racial categories irrelevant.” (2-3) In light of this prediction, perhaps it is time that the performing arts and its casting directors give up the idea that there is a “right” or “wrong” body for a role. Art is, after all, about transformation and imagination.

The main constraint against cross-cultural casting has been theatre’s adherence to codifying bodies in a realist esthetic, presenting racial identities as they have been perceived historically. When the “wrong” body is placed in a specific time and place in a realistic play, the audience’s perception of identity is challenged dramatically. The audience is generally not blind to such changes but is forced to reconsider the meaning of the racialized body. Physiognomy does have a political identity, and the political perception of the body of the actor presents a stronger message to the audience than the actor’s talent in performing a specific role. Cross-cultural casting detaches the body from the set of values that are represented by the realist esthetic, directly challenging political codes of racial identity. Although the meaning of race is often accepted as a fixed idea, it is really only a mask that obscures the inner being of the

individual. This thesis has shown that the meaning of race is not genetic or scientific but a product of the current politics of the society. Cross-cultural casting of racial identities has the unique ability to challenge those societal perceptions and recategorize identity in a way that no other medium can. Placing the body of the actor in direct tension with the playwright's intention for the character is the most persuasive method for redefining the codes of identity. The problem of minority inclusion in the theatre cannot be solved by merely creating more ethnic opportunities; the body of the actor must become more than it is ethnically and racially. While ethnic theatre does explore the various nuances of minority expression, it is limited in that it codifies those ethnic bodies as the other, marginalizing their place in American society. Cross-cultural casting is not an attempt to colonize minority racial identity into unexamined whiteness, as it is often feared, but its purpose is to expose prejudicial thinking and stereotyping of identity.

Theatrical performance, although called realism, does not always reflect the changing realities of American society. What seems to be the "wrong" body to the older generations of theatre directors and audience members is not necessarily perceived the same way by younger generations. In the San Jose State Theatre Arts Department, the professors have shown a commitment to multiculturalism in the selection of playwrights for production, but that practice should not mean that they categorize the student actors for inclusion in these productions by racial or ethnic identity. The students do not perceive themselves as bound by these codes, they identify themselves as actors whose job it is to explore and become a character, regardless of whether their body matches the playwright's perception of the role.

Perceptions of identity, racial and otherwise, have changed, and theatre must reflect the new definitions of who we are as an American society rather than relying on outdated historical categories. The meaning of the body, as expressed by the society's codifying physiognomy, is the strongest code in performance. Cross-cultural casting is the only theatrical convention powerful enough to expose stereotypes and prejudicial thinking because it does not allow the audience to be passive in its reception of a play, but forces it to reconsider the meaning of the racialized body in performance.

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