

Color Conscious Directing: Three More Questions to Ask

Lavina Jadhvani originally wrote about color-conscious casting for HowlRound [here](#), in which she suggested three specific questions to ask about how considerations of casting and race impact the story you are trying to tell: 1) What story does this racially conscious casting tell? 2) Is the new story appropriately complex? 3) Do I have the right players to tell this story?



The Duchess of Malfi with Erika Miranda and Jalen Gilbert. Photo by Michael Brosilow

I had a breakthrough about color-conscious directing at when I attended [Two Pence Theatre Company's](#) production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* back in June. In the middle of Act III, Scene II, we came to this moment:

DEMETRIUS

I say I love thee more than he can do.

LYSANDER

If thou say so, withdraw, and prove it too.

DEMETRIUS

Quick, come!

HERMIA

Lysander, whereto tends all this?

LYSANDER

Away, you Ethiopie!

After that offensive jab at Hermia (delivered by an Asian American Lysander to a white Hermia), I instinctually took in a deep breath. Then, the African American actor playing Demetrius (Martel Manning) stormed back on stage with a well-placed line break:

DEMETRIUS

No, no; he'll []

Seem to break loose; take on as you would follow,

But yet come not: you are a tame man, go!

Manning briefly halted the action of the play, using his “No, no” to respond to Lysander’s use of the word Ethiopie, rather than their conflict over Helena. And then he continued with the scene. It was, in my opinion, a totally brilliant move—a moment of acknowledging the play’s charged language through a contemporary lens, then returning to the story as written.

My breakthrough was not about the moment, but rather my response to it. I laughed raucously at Manning’s choice—heck, I wanted to slow clap. But I stopped myself because I realized I was the only person responding in that way. I glanced around the room and spotted only one other non-white face in the audience. I shrunk back in my chair, worried that I had done something wrong. *Am I watching the same play as everyone else?* I wondered. *Am I looking for something that isn’t there?*

On the bus ride home, I reversed my thinking. *I know that it’s super boring to watch actors onstage who are worried about “getting it right,”* I thought. *Why would I do that to myself as an audience member?*

Since I first wrote about color-conscious casting, I’ve learned—by directing my own productions as well as casting plays that I did not direct—that color-conscious casting doesn’t guarantee a color-conscious production. Diverse casting is a cause; a more challenging and/or inclusive conversation is not inherently an effect.

To recap, I believe that “color-conscious” casting means casting a production with a lens for how race factors into the story of the play. It’s treated as an additional given in the fabric of the production. For me,

“color-blind” casting doesn’t work because audiences are not blind to how diverse casting changes their view of the story. I think sometimes, during casting, we put blinders on and then forget to take them off when we enter the rehearsal room.

Here are a few questions I found helpful to ask, with regards to color-conscious directing. I’m sure there are more; please leave yours in the comments!

What Are My Personal Biases?

So often, I’ve been rehearsal rooms where the assumption is that, because we all work in theatre, certain political or social beliefs are shared. (“Everyone here’s cool, right?” I remember someone saying in undergrad. Any potential conversation about differences in beliefs stopped there.) And yet, conflicts about respect and personal boundaries (physical or emotional) frequently flare up in those rooms, due to a lack of a shared understanding.

Here’s the thing: *we all bring our personal biases into the rehearsal room, and the goal of a productive rehearsal process is not to get everyone to agree to a set of shared beliefs.* It is to *acknowledge* the differences; the acknowledgement of specific predispositions opens up the whole room for a larger conversation.

I often cast plays that include a mixed-race romance and/or a mixed-race bromance. A mixed-race Romeo with a black Mercutio and a Latino Benvolio as pals; a white Duchess of Malfi opposite an African American Antonio; a black Valentine who’s friends with a white Proteus and a black Speed. This is in part a statement about inclusivity on my part, but it’s also a result of the fact that I grew up as a South Asian American in a predominantly white suburb of Chicago. Growing up, most of my friends were white, and I only dated white men. When deciding what relationships to put onstage, I ask myself, “Do those friends look like each other? Or do they look different?” It’s an ingrained part of how I view relationships, and to ignore that would not only be dishonest, but also a missed opportunity.

I believe we should acknowledge these backstories in the rehearsal room, early and often. Stating “this is where I’m coming from and what I see as a result” opens up the conversation for your collaborators to share where they’re coming from and what they see.



The Two Gentlemen of Verona with David Keohane and Michael Pogue. Photo by Johnny Knight

How Can I Create a Safe Space?

I fell down on this one recently, big time. I walked away from writing this piece for about three months as a result. I directed a production where I allowed myself to be verbally abused by a member of the company, and wasn't able to create a safe, inclusive environment for the whole group as a result. This individual used an abrasive tone with me from the beginning of the process; it was noticed by other company members right away, but we all tried to brush it off instead of addressing the issue. It escalated to the point where I felt humiliated, publicly berated in front of the entire cast, and, at one point, physically unsafe. I shut down as a result.

We're super conscious about sexual harassment in the Chicago theatrical community at the moment and are proactive with our language around that issue. But what I experienced was a different kind of harassment. It wasn't until I was working on my next production that I realized what had happened: I was cut off mid-sentence by another collaborator, and instantly found myself on the verge of tears. That wasn't a proportional response. I then realized that the trauma from the abuse I had suffered on the previous production (including frequently being cut off and shouted at) had been triggered.

My takeaway (with a little bit of distance) is twofold:

- 1) Conflict in process will happen, especially in this kind of work. And that's okay— healthy conflict can

move the process forward. But if someone is communicating with *anyone* in the company in a way that makes them feel unsafe, it needs to be addressed immediately. I didn't say anything because I thought what I was experiencing fell into a "grey area." It didn't.

2) As directors, we set the tone for the design and rehearsal process, and we cannot create a safe space for others if we do not feel safe ourselves. We don't have a deputy the way actors do, but I could've approached my stage manager or producer about this issue right away. I didn't. My lack of response not only signaled that the abuser's behavior was OK, but also prevented me from communicating effectively with my team. I was rattled and scared—but I didn't have to be. I learned a hard lesson: I can't create a safe working environment for an entire company without making sure that I am safe and supported myself.

How Can I Create Room for Others?

One of my day jobs involves working as a standardized patient, role-playing doctor-patient scenarios with medical students. At the Feinberg School of Medicine (Northwestern University), we are taught to "reward" the open-ended question. If someone asks, "How would you rate your pain on a scale of 1 to 10?" we answer simply that; if asked, "How would you describe your pain?" we tell them everything that's related to that symptom.

I've found that modeling this behavior in the rehearsal room is incredibly helpful. At [Shakespeare & Company](#), teaching artists use a series of three questions: "What surprised you? What delighted you? Where did you hit a little wall?" Viewpoints practitioners might ask, "What's new?" The question has to be asked by someone who's truly open to collaborative feedback—leading questions ("Did you feel X?" as opposed to "What came up for you?") aren't as successful.

That being said, there are limits to this tool. When I directed a production of *The Duchess of Malfi* that was set in the Reconstruction Era, I found that asking open-ended questions didn't factor in the givens of the period. As a company, we needed help wrapping our brains around the racial charge of North Carolina in 1885. We brought in a team of experts—dramaturges and acting coaches—to help us sink into those givens and their implications in our production.

It's a delicate balance between asking a racially-conscious question and pushing an agenda. I think sometimes we're shooting for the former, but end up with the latter when we fail to listen to our collaborators. Lead firmly, but stay open: everyone deserves to be heard.