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Dreams Deferred? A Study of Casting and Representation of Black Theatre Professionals on Broadway and the West End, 1985-2024



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Submission in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Guildhall School of Music and Drama

April 2026

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* Cover Photograph, London’s West End, Shaftesbury Avenue, taken by the author, October 2024.

Acknowledgements

I am greatly indebted to those who agreed to be interviewed early on for this project (Beverly Andrews, Jennifer Bradford, Stephen McKinley Henderson, Sharon Jensen, Julia Pascal, Nefretete Rasheed, and Tatiana Weschler) for their time, candour and generosity. I would like to acknowledge the support from my PhD supervisors, Dr. Andy Lavender and Dr. Nicole King, and the Guildhall School of Music and Drama (GSMD) research faculty, staff and postgraduate researchers. Library personnel, especially Kate Eaton at GSMD, the British Library research staff and those at the New York Public Library for Performing Arts were unfailingly friendly, helpful and their expertise incalculable. The personnel who work security and check guests' bags and coats are truly the unsung heroes of libraries worldwide and deserve a special shout out. The concierge staff at Manhattan Loft Gardens, Stratford always responded quickly and unquestionably to my all-too-frequent emails containing the subject line: 'Please print for Dolores.'

Dr. Alex Mermikides was an early and enthusiastic supporter, as were Dr. Michael Hanchard, Matt Wolf and Dr. Julie Wheelright. Lennox Goddard and Emily Orley, my upgrade external examiners, provided useful feedback and broadened my perspective. Finally, thanks to my siblings, Debra Brown, Ed Beasley III and Donna Beasley and to my friends who provided encouragement, admittedly biased opinions and unconditional love.

Declarations

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Abstract/Summary of Research

This dissertation's title revises a line from the poetry of Langston Hughes to root it in an on-going discussion of racial justice and creative responses to repressed ambitions within the commercial theatre communities of New York City and London. The motivation for this research project was a desire to consider how casting has been used in the United States and England to deliberately advance dialogue on racial issues. I argue that casting practices and the historical exclusion of Black theatre professionals have had social, ethical and political impacts which have affected the commercial landscape of London's West End and New York's Broadway. As the focus is on how casting practices are structured by and intervene with cultures of representation, this dissertation is organised around the theoretical concepts of representation and intersectionality to increase the depth of the argument. These concepts are foundational to my thesis and will be referenced throughout the document.

Alongside the argument that the systemic exclusionary employment practices of commercial theatre in London and New York have contributed to social, ethical and political discourse in the United States and England I explore the following associated questions:

- What are the causes and ramifications of the casting disparities found in London and New York commercial theatre?
- How have productions which employed diverse casting practices contributed to society's discussion on systemic racial injustice?
- What role does/should the audience play in determining the success of 'non-traditional'¹ casting efforts?

While a growing body of scholarly research exists pertaining to diverse casting practices, the focus primarily tends to be on productions of Shakespeare plays, a specific country or region, or is concentrated on the twentieth century. This thesis contributes to the field of theatre studies through a comparative analysis of New York's Broadway and

¹ Defined by Actors' Equity as 'the casting of ethnic and female artists in roles in which race, ethnicity, or gender is not germane to the character's or the play's development.'

London's West End casting and hiring focusing on Black professionals in commercial theatre. I have confined the scope to approximately 40 years, starting in 1985, when non-traditional casting was first defined in contemporary terms and chose Broadway and the West End because of their similarities and frequent cross-over productions. Therefore examples in this dissertation primarily come from artists who perform in and audiences who attend major commercial venues. The West End, an area of central London, England, is used to refer to mainstream professional theatre staged in the large theatres of London. I am defining Broadway in New York City as theatres with 500 or more seats in the Theatre District, Lincoln Center and midtown Manhattan.

Acknowledging that people of South Asian origin, Latinos, Native Americans, women, the LGBTQ+ community and persons with disabilities have been subjected to exclusion and discrimination in casting and also have been celebrated in award-winning productions that employed innovative casting, a comprehensive study of the various types of casting practices across all ethnic groups and in all performance areas is beyond the scope of this dissertation. While the histories and experiences of various groups across performance areas such as cinema, television, opera and dance deserve rigorous scrutiny, the focus of this research is on Black theatre professionals in commercial theatres on Broadway and the West End. A contemporary investigation into the casting, hiring, promotion and retention of these two world famous locales as well as their tendencies to cater to predominantly wealthy, white audiences despite changing demographics has yet to be undertaken in depth and adds to existing scholarly investigation. This dissertation aligns itself with and contributes to research conducted by Ayanna Thompson (2006), Brandi Catanese (2007), Angela Pao (2010), Lennox Goddard (2016), and Farah Karim-Cooper (2023) adding new knowledge to the field of study of casting practices and the representation of Black theatre professionals at all levels in commercial theatre spaces in the United States and England.

Analysing the London and New York theatre scene from 1984 to 2024 allows for a critique of racial prejudices within commercial theatre on both sides of the Atlantic in historical and contemporary contexts. Utilising detailed analysis of selected successful and ground-breaking West End and Broadway productions as well as research gleaned from a range of sources including academic journals and books, theatre reviews, news articles, interviews and historical archives, this project employs a variety of different research

approaches, generating both qualitative and quantitative data. Case studies of productions which ran on both Broadway and the West End are employed to investigate how unconventional casting has impacted social discourse, the ramifications of those debates and how casting is used to advance issues concerning representation facing society. The focus is on what casting practices reveal, attempt and achieve when employed for the inclusion or exclusion of Black theatre professionals and the ramifications of those choices. The underlying aspect of my argument is that casting practices used to address issues of inclusion and diversity as a response to historical omission and exclusion illuminate problematic issues impacting commercial theatre.

Prologue

The matronly music teacher Miss Westfall announced to our fourth-grade class the local high school was staging *The Sound of Music* and auditions for the seven von Trapp children would be held on Saturday. The youngest children would be chosen from the elementary schools in our small Kansas community. I thought, 'That's for me.'

I had never auditioned before and had no ambitions for show business, but I loved musicals, could hold a tune and knew all the songs. I was a pretty confident kid and I felt I had a shot.

My mom drove me to the audition, which was held in a musty, pale green community hall at the Presbyterian church down the street from the high school. I did not recognise any of the other children, but noticed several carried their own sheet music and one girl with a large plastic bag looked like she brought props. I was one of the first to go.

When my name was called, I stepped forward and the balding man seated at the battered piano asked what I would like to sing. 'The first number—the hills are alive,' I said softly. He played the opening notes for the introduction of the movie and I stopped him and asked for the Broadway version ('*My day in the hills has come to an end I know...*'). I sang clear and strong. I was thanked and escorted from the makeshift stage to the door and after a short wait I met my mother in the parking lot. I told her I thought I did fine.

In class the next week Miss Westfall said she had heard from the high school director and was pleased several of her students had auditioned. Then, in a measured tone devoid of emotion, she began talking about families. 'If you have brothers and sisters you probably look like them,' she started. 'Or maybe you resemble your mother or your father. Families look alike. In real life, in movies—and in plays.'

She may have said more before we started singing what we had rehearsed the previous week, but I do not remember. It had slowly dawned that her speech was exclusively for me. A nine-year-old, brown-skinned Kansas girl should not aspire to be an Austrian von Trapp.

With a large cast and an already beloved story, I imagine it was a well-attended amateur production. But that is a guess. I did not inquire who was selected; I did not attend the play and don't know if I knew anyone who did.

My child self also did not know that by auditioning I was proposing the director engage in non-traditional casting—the practice of casting without considering the actor's ethnicity, skin colour and/or gender.

One reason for assuming I could be a von Trapp was because Black people playing traditionally 'white' roles seemed normal. During my childhood both my parents raised four children while working full-time and attending school to get their advanced degrees. During a particularly hectic, cash-strapped five-year period, in addition to teaching American history, my dad, Ed Beasley, also coached basketball, sold encyclopaedias and directed plays at Sumner, our segregated high school. Bringing his children to rehearsals was cheaper than hiring a babysitter.

Since its inception in the early part of the twentieth century, Sumner consistently had a high percentage of public-school teachers with graduate degrees, primarily because over-qualified Black educators were discouraged from applying for positions elsewhere. In 1954 the United States Supreme Court decreed racial segregation in public schools unconstitutional. So, while white children *could* attend Sumner, it was just generally understood that none *would*.

But before forced integration, sitting in a darkened theatre I witnessed Black youth as singing Italians toiling in the Napa Valley California vineyards in Frank Loesser's *The Most Happy Fella*. I watched people who looked like me in lead roles as a New York psychiatrist and a reincarnated nineteenth-century English noblewoman in Alan Jay Lerner's musical *On a Clear Day You Can See Forever*. I took it all in my stride.

Musicals were my childhood soundtrack. On Saturday mornings our family cleaned house to recordings of *South Pacific*, *West Side Story*, the aforementioned *The Sound of Music* and my personal favourite, *My Fair Lady*. I was four when Rex Harrison taught me my first curse words when, as Henry Higgins realizes his attraction to Eliza Doolittle he exclaims, 'Damn, Damn, Damn, Damn—I've grown accustomed to her face.'

So naturally I was thrilled when told we were finally going to see *My Fair Lady* at Starlight, an outdoor theatre in Kansas City, Missouri that featured touring Broadway and local productions. Even with a limited income and three children under eight years old my parents saved enough so that each summer we all attended at least two shows. The much-anticipated evening arrived and for a reason I could not comprehend, we were not going to go. I cried inconsolably. Plays I understood, but Mom going into labour to produce my youngest sister was not only unfathomable, it was unfair. They have heard this story multiple times and Donna is well aware her birth was a major hindrance to my play-going schedule.

The next inconvenience occurred when I was ten. We were on a family holiday in Washington, DC and the next stop was New York. At last I was going to attend a real Broadway play! However, fate intervened and my parents called my brother, sisters and me into their adjoining hotel room. 'Your grandfather has passed,' Dad began. 'We will start packing after dinner and leave for Omaha tomorrow morning.' I loved my grandpa, but I could not help myself. My first words after hearing the news were, 'So, we're not going to New York!?' I saw grief etched on my dad's face and knew enough to be ashamed of my outburst. But still...

When the time came for college, my two older siblings opted for more expensive, out-of-state universities. I chose to stay close to home, but I had a plan. For two years I attended Washburn University in Topeka, Kansas. But, my third year, with student loans and money saved while working summers and weekends, I headed to London, England for my junior year—and the theatre. Every Friday after dinner at the residence hall I dashed to the West End with three like-minded friends to see whatever was available with a student discount. Elaine Paige in *Evita*. Tom Conti in *Whose Life is it Anyway*. Carol Channing in *Hello Dolly*, and I certainly was not about to miss *My Fair Lady*. I barely passed my exams that year, but it was heaven.

Bottom line: I love plays. My 'happy place' is sitting in a cushioned velvet seat with a clear view of a stage. On average I probably attend at least one a month. On holidays, it is not unusual to see two a day—taking in matinee and evening performances. Although I have not counted, I imagine I reached the one thousand mark years ago and I had no intention of slowing down until the 2020 Coronavirus pandemic forced me—and theatre lovers

everywhere—to seek alternative sources of comfort. Now, after a great deal of research gleaned from a range of sources including academic journals, theatre reviews, news articles, historical archives and extensive interviews with front and backstage experts, this theatre-adoring, non-acting African-American writer feels ready and compelled to tackle the subject of non-traditional casting.

Let's begin.

Chapter One: Introduction

*What happens to a dream deferred?
Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun? Or fester like a sore— And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat? Or crust and sugar over—like a syrupy sweet?
Maybe it just sags like a heavy load.
Or does it explode?²*

In this 1951 poem, Langston Hughes poses the question: *What happens to a dream deferred?* and hypothesizes the consequences of unjustly denied aspiration (*‘Maybe it just sags like a heavy load. Or does it explode?’*). Facts reveal a lengthy tradition of theatre professionals being subjected not only to deferred dreams but prejudice, exclusion and thwarted careers by virtue of being the ‘wrong’ skin colour. Casting Black actors in roles that have traditionally gone to whites could be considered one method to address disparities. Such choices also result in shining new light or providing an insightful twist on classics. It can preserve a play’s vitality and heighten its relevance. And occasionally it has the added advantage of making money for a production’s backers, ensuring that the practice continues.

This dissertation addresses casting practices and their impact in relation to the exclusion of Black theatre professionals in the commercial theatres of London and New York. Using representation and intersectionality as theoretical frameworks I critique the historical and contemporary context of racial prejudices within commercial theatre in the United States and England. This dissertation furthermore contributes to the current scholarship by engaging in the debate around the theatrical community responses to protests and how casting practices are used to advance dialogue on racial issues facing society.

The origins of my interest are addressed in the prologue and go back as far as early childhood in a 1970s community in the midwestern United States. Viewing theatrical performances over several decades invites questions of how those that were ‘non-traditionally’ cast contributed to or provoked discussions on race. As a Black woman I take special notice whenever I view actors who look like me portraying characters typically

² Hughes, 1986, p. 275

imagined or written as white or male. Should I ignore this or celebrate these nods to diversity? Did casting a Black actor in a 'white' role change the play's meaning? Should this casting be construed as a political or cultural statement? This PhD dissertation explores these questions through case studies of selected successful and ground-breaking West End and Broadway productions and aims to address these relatively unexplored questions and how such casting, as well as the dearth of Black artists in leadership and other positions has affected the modern-day theatrical commercial landscape.

Key Definitions

At several junctures and central to this investigation and argument is contested terminology as it relates to casting definitions and the interpretation of race. This is discussed in detail in the next chapter. The ongoing debate on singular definitions for the casting terms is investigated in the context of representation and intersectionality—two concepts which are defined and dissected and are also discussed in greater detail in later chapters. As my argument centres around Black theatre professionals, it is important to define how race is used in the context of this dissertation. While all terms will be explored in depth as part of this thesis, for introductory purposes the following are basic definitions of terms that are employed throughout this document:

Race and Ethnicity: Biologically speaking the concept of grouping humans on the basis of physical characteristics is spurious. As a legitimate, scientific means of differentiating people racial categorisation has been debunked by biologists, sociologists, historians and psychologists including Gates (1986) and Smedley and Smedley (2005) as a socially constructed mechanism of human variation, yet the idea of racial difference continues to robustly figure in everyday life. In their article 'Race as Biology is Fiction, Racism as a Social Problem is Real: Anthropological and Historical Perspectives on the Social Construction of Race,' the Smedleys write that the idea of race distorts human differences and as one of its components is the belief that differences are permanent and cannot be overcome.³ Ethnicity refers to individuals who share a common cultural background. 'People who share a common language, geographic locale, or place of origin, religion, sense of history, traditions, values, beliefs, food habits, and so forth, are perceived, and view

³ Smedley, Smedley, 2005, p. 22

themselves as constituting an ethnic group.’⁴ ‘Black’ is capitalised in this document in a racial, ethnic or cultural sense, conveying a shared sense of history, identity and community among people who identify as Black, including those in the African diaspora.

Non-traditional casting: This term refers to the practice of casting without considering the actor’s ethnicity, skin colour and/or gender. Variations of casting practices, including race-conscious, colour-blind, conceptual and cross-cultural, are further defined and dissected in Chapter Two. In *Casting a Movement: The Welcome Table Initiative* (2019) Daniel Banks writes, ‘As language changes, thought and practice can expand.’⁵ The question of the continued use of these terms and their ambiguity is also explored.

Representation: This is the way in which meaning is given to the things which are depicted through the images or words which stand for what one is communicating. It is defined as standing in for a group or bearing the remit of conveying the views or experiences of a group. The term ‘representation’ is most traditionally defined as something that stands for something else, or if a depiction of something is an accurate or distorted reflection.

Intersectionality: This term was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 and the concept’s premise is that people experience discrimination differently depending on their overlapping identities. Intersectionality looks beneath the prevailing conceptions of discrimination to describe how race, class, gender, and other individual characteristics ‘intersect’ with one another and overlap.

Broadway and the West End: Contrasts and Comparisons

An examination of similarities and differences of Broadway and the West End is provided to address the secondary question regarding the causes and ramifications of casting disparities in London and New York. Spending more than four decades witnessing hundreds of plays both on Broadway and the West End has afforded me numerous opportunities to view productions which transferred from one continent to the other, including three of the four case studies in this dissertation. This has facilitated the ability to

⁴ Ibid, p. 17

⁵ Syler, Banks, 2019, p. 13

make a comparative analysis and examine how the two locales relate in relation to multi-racial casting and representation of Black theatre professionals. I concluded that while key differences exist, which are outlined below, the commonalities present in London and New York commercial theatre provide glaring examples of why efforts to address disparities in representation remain at a slow, or even glacial pace.

There are several contrasts between Broadway and the West End with the most significant being financial. First, a minor but significant detail for many theatre goers is the cost of a programme. Playbills are available in New York for free to all to audience members. In contrast, West End audience members are typically charged five pounds and in 2024 could pay as much as 12 pounds for oversized programmes. This is worth noting in relation to multi-racial casting as these production guides contain biographic information about actors, the production team and often include contextual background regarding directorial or design choices as well as relevant historical material. A disinclination to spend additional funds to purchase a programme results in a greater potential for London theatre goers to miss opportunities to educate themselves about the significance of a casting choice as well as the chance to learn about diverse creative teams or actors they are unused to seeing as lead characters on a major stage.

Ticket prices are significantly higher on Broadway than London and one reason for the discrepancy is salary. According to the Society of London Theatre (SOLT) ticket sales data, the average ticket price was £48.11 in 2022 for all the commercial West End and London's major subsidised theatres, compared to more than double that in New York. In the United States pay is established by the Actors' Equity Association and in May 2024 the current Equity weekly minimum salary for Broadway actors was \$2,439 per week (£1916), with celebrities earning vastly larger amounts. In addition, earnings might be impacted by the size and scope of the role, the actor's reputation, the production's budget and an actor or agent's savvy negotiation skills. In comparison, as of February 2024 UK Equity rates for the West End actors began at £720 (\$917 US) per week. Given these figures it is not surprising the audience ultimately pays the price of high salaries as they are offset by ticket prices. Audience sizes in both cities are similar in relation to population. In 2022 there was a slight (7.1 percent) increase in attendance in the West End, with attendance at 16.42 million from 15.31 million in 2019, SOLT noting that

theatre audience levels have not fully recovered since the onset of the Covid pandemic.⁶ In comparison, Broadway recorded 2023-24 attendance at 12.3 million, down 17 percent from 2018-19, the last full season before the industry shutdown due to the pandemic. This could be attributed to the high cost of a ticket in a stressed economy.

In addition to the high ticket prices—taking into account play selection, marketing and frequently casting decisions—there is the perception that commercial theatre is exclusive which is dissected by Kirsty Sedgman (2018) and Helen Freshwater (2009) in their research on audiences. As Sedgman writes, ‘People of colour, women with children, working-class audiences, disabled and neurodiverse people: we know that these are people who tend to be made to feel most unwelcome in high-cultural space, their presence when they do cross the threshold more likely to be subject to surveillance and castigation.’⁷ When one takes into account the elite few who control commercial theatrical venues it is unsurprising that most productions are not geared toward the groups listed in the above citation and catering to those who are made welcome in these spaces results in preserving, promoting and perpetuating white culture. The history and legacy of preserving and promoting ‘whiteness’ on Broadway is explored by Andrea Most in *Making Americans – Jews and the Broadway Musical* (2004) where she notes that ‘racial imagery was often used in plots as a deflecting tool, highlighting the ability of ethnic Americans to become white and distancing ethnic immigrant characters from the dangerous tar of the racial brush.’⁸ Techniques for encoding otherness and how racial and ethnic difference is represented on commercial stages in New York and London is investigated in the *Oklahoma!* case study.

To conclude comparisons of the two locations and in regard to actual productions, in my experience the West End seems to have a greater propensity for risk—with a more varied selection and a higher number of non-musicals. For example in early 2025 of 50 Broadway theatres, 35 housed musicals. During the same time period of the 45 West End productions, 27 were musicals. However productions in both locations continued to have a dearth of Black talent on stage, with the West End staging nine productions having Black

⁶ SOLT, 2023

⁷ Sedgman, 2018, p. 137

⁸ Most, 2004, p. 26

leads or predominantly Black casts⁹ and Broadway having 10 productions with predominately mixed-race casts.¹⁰ This under-representation came to the fore as a result of 2020 during protests which are addressed in Chapter Four.

Chapter Outline

Each chapter of this dissertation explores the theoretical and conceptual implications of the representation of Blacks in commercial theatre on both sides of the Atlantic. Drawing broadly from examples from literature, social movements, Broadway and West End productions and lived experience, what follows is an exploration of the themes of representation and intersectionality to investigate contemporary issues and debates on casting practices and the disparities that exist for Black professionals in not only acting, but in all levels of management and decision-making. Following this introduction, Chapter Two focuses on terminology and has three sections. The first details how theatre practitioners, scholars, and enthusiasts have explored and deconstructed the rich and varied assortment of casting practices—designated as colour-blind, diverse, inclusive, multi-racial, and non-traditional—to name just a sample. An overview of the origins of the terms, which were first defined and gained wider currency in 1985 through the United States’ union Actors’ Equity, and a discussion of their applications, along with their ambiguity, is introduced and critiqued. The next section in this chapter contains a more detailed explanation of how race is interpreted which is followed by an exploration of the evolution of the themes of representation and intersectionality and investigates how the concepts are construed by various scholars. Stuart Hall’s work on representation (1997) demonstrates how the field of cultural studies questioned traditional subjects and methodologies while Kimberlé Crenshaw’s work on intersectionality, which altered the understandings of the landscape of how race, class, gender, and other individual characteristics ‘intersect’ with one another invites scrutiny of how intersecting identities are impacted by a multitude of social justice and human rights issues. Both concepts are used as theoretical frameworks for this dissertation.

⁹ *Cabaret* (Billy Porter); *The Devil Wears Prada* (Vanessa Williams), *Hadestown*, *Hamilton*, *MJ The Musical*, *Tina*, *The Lion King* and *Six*.

¹⁰ New York Theatre Guide, 2025

Chapter Three introduces the history of Black actors, directors and playwrights in the United States and England, including Ira Aldridge, Paul Robeson, C.L.R. James and Mustapha Matura, and examines the theoretical framework upon which this thesis is built. This chapter explores the history of racially-diverse casting beginning with William Shakespeare's activity as a playwright in the 1590s through Joseph Papp's advocacy of the practice with the founding of New York's Public Theatre in the mid-twentieth century. The historical information regarding trailblazing artists is used to illustrate some conceptual and procedural shifts in casting practice, marking a difference from actors, whose ethnicity was critical to specific performances (Paul Robeson, for example who was 'authentically' cast as Othello) to 'colour-blind' casting. I summarise what the historical instances demonstrate and the development of casting assumptions and practices over time and explore how casting maps onto ideas of how power is unequally distributed.

Chapter Four is shaped through a lens of social protest at key moments of the twenty-first century and continues the analysis with exploration regarding the escalation in theatrical voices for change, including the advocacy work of groups like Black Theatre United and other organisations which sprang up following the rise of Black Lives Matter. The efforts of non-profit organisations, including their approaches and outcomes to address racial injustice as well their advocacy of multi-racial casting and increased advancement of Black theatre professionals to executive levels is dissected and evaluated. The next section is an exploration of statistical research studies and surveys which have been commissioned since the 1980s to assess ethnic disparities in New York and London theatre casts, crews and management. The third section begins by evaluating the role of the audience in advancing discourse and promoting change in theatre's commercial landscape. I consider the role the audience performs in contributing to a more inclusive theatre experience and the organisational efforts in England and the United States to make audiences and theatre professionals more reflective of current demographics. In the final section I survey the recent changes in the New York and London commercial theatre landscape through interviews with practitioners and productions which were considered harbingers of change and provide analysis in terms of representation and linking developments to the current social, economic and political situation. To conclude, I map back to the other histories

discussed in Chapter One showing connections with the central themes of intersectionality and representation.

Chapter Five introduces the four case studies. I provide insights that arise from these productions in relation to the key themes and trajectory of the thesis. I establish a line of argument that emerges through the various productions highlighted and use examples of related productions and performances in relation to the same key terms and theoretical concepts briefly defined above. The case studies outlined in brief are:

***Othello*:** Analysis of *Othello* productions and portrayals of the title character are pertinent to my research question as throughout history they have contributed to discussions on race and revealed various assumptions and customary practices in both casting and theatrical representation and on multiple occasions have advanced social, ethical and political dialogue on both sides of the Atlantic. This case study is used to showcase understanding of race as socially constructed with shifting meanings in different historical periods and cultures. I conclude with exploration of the connections between the theoretical concepts and analyse how they coalesce in Shakespeare's *Othello*.

***Death of a Salesman*:** Arthur Miller's 1949 drama, specifically the 2019 West End revival, provides a gateway to investigating racial politics and how the intentionality of casting can contribute to racial, societal and political commentary. The Young Vic's revival, directed by Marianne Elliott, which featured an African-American Loman family, is contrasted with the Broadway production which opened three years later. These productions are scrutinised against the backdrop of playwright August Wilson's searing indictment of 'colour-blind' casting as an aberrant idea lacking validity and his now famous 1996 talk, 'The Ground on Which I Stand: A Speech on Black Theatre and Performance,' in which he remarks that staging an all-Black production of this particular Miller drama would in effect deny Blacks their humanity. I analyse how his remarks and the subsequent debate, culminating a year later in a showdown with his most ardent and famous detractor, critic Robert Brustein, in a sold-out Carnegie Hall event, are relevant and still debated three decades later. How both Wilson and Brustein assert and defend their positions as well as those of other scholars who weighed in on this issue are measured against my own viewpoint and analysis.

Oklahoma! : As a result of viewing Rodgers and Hammerstein's 1943 musical *Oklahoma!* at three different venues over a five-year period (Oregon Shakespeare Festival, 2018; Chichester Festival Theatre, 2019; and in 2023, a Broadway revival which transferred to the West End), I am able to provide a first-hand analysis of how three directors reimagined this classic to include the previously excluded. I examine each production as it relates to the key theoretical concepts, specifically representation in order to ascertain how shifting attitudes to and possibilities arising from casting choices change over time to reflect current societal trends.

Hamilton: This musical is a vehicle by which the implications of alternative casting practices can be studied in depth. The race-conscious casting and the enduring popularity of *Hamilton* ensures its place in any exploration of the systemic, structural changes required for inclusiveness in theatres. While *Hamilton's* entrance to the musical theatre canon made theatre practitioners and academics question the variety of ways to consider casting as a mechanism of providing more access to opportunity and broader representation on stage, it also made them, along with audiences, the general public and even United States government officials, examine the politics of those choices.

Throughout the dissertation I address how lived experience and perspective inform my research and my responses ethnographically. Through critical evaluation of a range of sources, including academic journals, articles, critical reviews of productions, seminars and presentations, I describe how diverse scholarship has shaped my arguments and summarise the concepts, debates and disparities of the key authors and scholars with the goal of providing a coherent view of the state of knowledge as it pertains to my argument that systemic racism faced by Black theatre professionals has structured the landscape of commercial theatre. Interviews are also a key part of the methodology as discussions of racial prejudice and the emotions that arise from experiencing discrimination are suited to the engagement of practitioners' voices as well as to text-based scholarship because of the unique insights provided by the interview subjects. Access to first-hand experience adds an additional layer of richness to my argument that the ramifications of systemic exclusion of Black artists continue to reverberate socially, politically and ethically in commercial theatre.

The final chapter in this dissertation returns to Stuart Hall's articulation of representation and Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality and finishes with an

examination of the central themes covered by reviewing the key findings. I will reflect on the methodology and analysis and the possible limitations that this has set for the research and summarise the defence of my argument that casting practices and the historical exclusion of Black professionals have had social and political impacts which have affected the commercial theatres of Broadway and the West End. I conclude by examining avenues for further research so that investigation of the casting practices and representation of Black professionals operating in commercial theatre spaces can be continued.

Theatre practitioners, scholars, and enthusiasts have explored and deconstructed the rich and varied assortment of casting practices—designated as colour-blind, experimental, diverse, inclusive, multi-racial, and non-traditional. How these practices are deployed on stage—in musicals and dramas—is the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter Two: Terminology

Although the label and definitions gained currency in the latter part of the twentieth century, 'non-traditional' casting is far from new. In this chapter I investigate the varied layers involved in understanding and defining casting terms as well as the historical and cultural context of the various definitions and, using examples from productions that employed what was considered unconventional casting, provide an overview of the terms. This chapter also addresses how race is defined and used in the context of this dissertation and provides a brief overview of the theoretical concepts of representation and intersectionality which are central to my argument that casting practices and the historical exclusion of Black theatre professionals has had social, ethical and political impacts which have transformed the commercial landscape of London's West End and New York's Broadway.

Defining Casting Practices

In 1985 the US Actors' Equity Association, the theatrical labour union founded in 1913, conducted a four-year study which revealed that 90 percent of all plays professionally produced were presented with all-white casts. Yet, at that time approximately 25 percent of the United States' population consisted of ethnic minorities and the majority of the plays produced were staged in cities where non-white populations often exceeded 50 percent.¹¹ The study also determined that ethnic minorities tended to avoid open auditions because they did not believe they would be seriously considered for non-ethnic roles, and those roles that were available were often considered stereotypes.

To address this disparity Actors' Equity took quick action and that same year devised non-traditional casting. The union defined the term as 'the casting of ethnic and female artists in roles in which race, ethnicity, or gender is not germane to the character's or the play's development.'¹² This definition was later expanded to include persons with disabilities.

¹¹ Newman, 1988, p. 55

¹² Ibid

In 1986 the Non-Traditional Casting Project (NTCP) was formed by Harry Newman and Clifton Turner Davis in New York to promote the inclusion of under-represented groups in all areas of theatre activity—performing, directing, designing, managing and producing. The advocacy group endeavoured to accomplish its objectives by organising national and regional conferences, forums, and seminars on casting and diversity, producing resource guides, a newsletter, *New Traditions*, and a national talent bank of artist files containing CVs, photographs of actors, directors, writers, designers, choreographers and stage managers of colour and disabilities. The NTCP, later renamed Alliance for Inclusion in the Arts, expanded the definition of non-traditional casting and divided it into four subcategories:

- Societal casting: Ethnic, female or disabled actors are cast in roles they already perform in society;
- Cross-cultural casting: The entire world of a play is translated to a different cultural setting;
- Conceptual casting: An ethnic, female or disabled actor is cast in a role to give a play greater resonance; and,
- Blind casting: All actors are cast without consideration of their race, ethnicity, gender or physical capability.¹³

Over time these categories have been debated, scrutinised and expanded and new categories have arisen. As NTCP's co-founder Newman noted, the definitions were developed to stimulate decision makers into thinking differently—and in the broadest possible terms. Additional nuances exist in addition to the above categories, including 'conscious casting,' which actively draws attention to the ways in which race or gender complicates or supports a production, thereby encouraging audiences to specifically notice an actor's race or gender and to think critically about its meaning and value in performance.

Although 'conceptual' and 'conscious' casting practices may seem similar, I interpret the first to be restricted to casting a single actor, for example the Royal Shakespeare Company's choice of Lucian Msamati as the first Black actor to portray Iago in their 2015

¹³ Catanese, 2011, p. 12

production of *Othello* which will be discussed in a later chapter. The musical *Hamilton* which was deliberately created to showcase a multi-ethnic cast could be construed as ‘conscious’ casting.

Non-traditional casting is used as a ‘catch-all’ category for what could be considered novel casting models. However, the term has its critics and is open to interpretation. Non-traditional casting has interchangeably been called colour-blind casting which I find problematic, as colour-blind assumes that the default is white and it can be interpreted that colour will not be seen or noticed. Even assuming that a director would be ‘blind’ to colour, it is highly improbable that the audience would be. Celia R. Daileader categorises this as a ‘Catch 22’.¹⁴ This terminological perplexity continues to be a problem for practitioners and scholars. When I began my research in 2018 I favoured the term ‘non-traditional.’ However, after extensive review of the existing literature I reconsidered applying non-traditional to casting practices, as the term underscores what audiences are accustomed to seeing on stage was not a truthful view of reality. Additional investigation revealed that the use of the term ‘inclusive’ implies that an individual or group has the power to exclude and to grant access to (include) and allow others in. The term ‘multi-racial’ implies casting practices that provide access to individuals from different races and ethnicities.

In England, according Evi Stamatiou in the 2020 article, ‘Inclusive Casting Debunked: Towards Holistic Interventions in Staged Performance,’ inclusive casting was the preferred umbrella term and was succeeded by ‘integrated casting.’¹⁵ In January 1968 a report published by the Actors’ UK Coloured Artists’ Advisory Committee alleged that Black performers faced greater difficulties than their white counterparts and advocated for widespread acceptance of integrated casting which was defined as ‘casting of actors on the basis of their ability as actors and regardless of their racial origins.’¹⁶ In *Alternatives Within the Mainstream: British Black and Asian Theatres* (2006), Dimple Godiwala notes that the portrayal of English society as white is implicit in the majority of texts written by white English playwrights and the neglect to showcase Britain as multicultural is evident in most

¹⁴ Daileader, 2000, p. 183

¹⁵ Stamatiou, 2020, p. 3

¹⁶ *The Stage*, 1968, p. 14

productions.¹⁷ The emergence of Black British theatre companies which is explored in the next chapter, provided a space casting Black actors and through productions which employed societal and cross-cultural casting allowed audiences to view realistic representations of Black British culture.

Daniel Banks, who with Claire Syler edited *Casting a Movement: The Welcome Table Initiative* (2019), has called for a re-examination of casting terminology noting that although the introduction of the terms 'colour-blind' and 'non-traditional' ignited a crucial process of change, the terms themselves have 'now ossified a collective imaginary within the theater, which works against their original progressive intentions and inhibits practices from changing.'¹⁸ A singular term encapsulating all manner of 'non-traditional' theatrical casting is elusive to those who research and write about it. While problematic, there is no consensus for a preferable replacement.

My opinion aligns with that of Kristin Bria Hopkins who, writing for the May 2018 issue of the *Journal of Sports & Entertainment Law*, suggests that instead of colour-blind casting, race should be taken into consideration during the casting process. Hopkins advocated for a change in terms from 'colour-blind' to 'colour-conscious' casting which 'requires casting directors and producers to accept that the country is growing in diversity, and the stage should reflect the changing demographic make-up of the United States.'¹⁹ The phrase 'colour-blind,' she maintained, ignores an essential part of a person's appearance in the casting process.

Having casts that reflect society not only has significant social implications but is also good business. Audiences who see themselves in theatrical productions will be more inclined to support commercial theatre as demographics change. In a presentation entitled 'Beyond Yellowface: Questions of Color and the Current State of Casting' (2008) theatre scholar Claire Conceison offered up yet another term—'total casting' which she defined as 'casting that is welcoming of all possibilities—of all races, bodies, ages, genders' and asserts that any production which does not allow for these possibilities is 'incomplete.'²⁰ While the

¹⁷ Godiwala, 2006, p. 5

¹⁸ Syler, Banks, 2019, p. 13

¹⁹ Hopkins, 2018, p. 134

²⁰ Scott-Douglass in Newstok, Thompson, 2010, p. 201

concept is laudable, it does not allow for culturally-specific casting that is essential to a play, which would include August Wilson's 10-play cycle. It also does not take into account authorial intent which will be explored in detail in the case study of Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton* in Chapter Five.

Lennox Goddard opts for interchangeably using the terms 'inclusive,' 'multi-racial' and 'culturally diverse' to describe the practice of casting Black performers in traditionally non-Black roles. Goddard further notes that whatever the term, the practice raises complex questions about when individuals are to see race or when they should ignore it.²¹ I concur with Goddard's solution to avoid restriction to a single term that encapsulates casting as it relates to race or ethnicity and 'multi-racial' and 'culturally-diverse' will be used throughout this thesis when describing casting practices. However, Goddard's preference for 'inclusive' is problematic as it suggests an unequal balance of power and as Banks writes, 'enacts microaggressions on populations that have historically been denied access to resources and advancement, while suggesting detrimental expectations of privilege and entitlement to others.'²² Although 'non-conventional' may appear to be similar to 'non-traditional' I believe the former emphasises more of a conscious choice or a deliberate departure from standard practice. My preference for the terms 'multi-racial' and 'diverse' are reflected throughout this dissertation when describing specific casting of Black actors in roles that were first conceived for white performers, as I have concluded that both terms reflect demographic shifts and allow for the consideration of authorial intent.

As stated above, while the practice of casting without considering the actor's ethnicity, skin colour and/or gender allows for a multitude of possibilities for actors, when plays are written specifically to highlight or challenge cultural or racial realities or disparities then I believe that tampering with casting, for whatever reason, should not occur. Casting Black actors in Ward's *Day of Absence* and Harris' *Tambo and Bones*, two plays referenced in the following chapter are examples of plays which are most impactful when cast as originally written. When productions do not specifically deal with race, gender or sexuality then directors should employ what is known as 'conscious' casting.

²¹ Goddard, 2016, p. 83

²² Syler, Banks, 2019, p. 25

In a 2014 special issue of *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 'Debating the Casting of the RSC's *The Orphan of Zhao*,' editors Amanda Rogers and Ashley Thorpe use Harvey Young's definition of 'colour-blind' casting which is anchored in the belief that talented actors will convince the audience to overlook any differences between their physical appearance and the characters they portray.²³ Meanwhile Sita Thomas concurs that the terminologies are 'unstable, contested and continually evolving.'²⁴ Jami Rogers considers colour-blind 'the dominant phrase' and uses the term 'in the spirit of equality fostered by Joseph Papp.'²⁵ As an avenue of opportunity for actors to be cast in roles not previously open to them, non-traditional casting is also used as a platform to explore issues and can be ideologically motivated and artistically inspired. Ayanna Thompson's 2006 research on race primarily explores the implications of non-traditional casting in terms of performing Shakespeare in a contemporary context. However, Thompson's work also provides a concise overview of the history of what she terms 'colour-blind' casting, the meritocratic model in which actors are cast without regard to race. Thompson asserts that the four delineations of alternative casting first outlined by NTCP (colourblind, societal, conceptual and cross-cultural) are all radically different conceptions of the semiotic meaning of racial difference onstage. Rather than addressing issues of exclusion and representation, Thompson further maintains that the various casting models actually replicate racist stereotypes because of society's inability to address the unstable semiotics of race, or when/how one sees race and how individuals make sense of what race means within a specific production.²⁶ Banks agrees with Thompson and goes further to assert that not only does the term 'non-traditional' obscure the extensive history of Black actors performing 'European classical roles' but that the terms persist for the benefit of audiences 'who experience integration as something unfamiliar, not part of their daily lives, and for whom seeing an integrated society onstage creates a kind of cognitive dissonance.'²⁷ However, in my experience while those who regularly attend commercial theatre productions are doubtless aware when the bodies on stage do not conform to a particular expectation or look different from actors they have previously

²³ Young, 2013, p. 56

²⁴ Thomas, 2014, p. 477

²⁵ Rogers, 2013, p. 407

²⁶ Thompson, 2011, p. 77

²⁷ Banks, 2019, p. 24

seen inhabit a character, little time is spent on contemplation of which specific name should best be applied to a particular casting practice.

The prominence Thompson gives to the argument that contradictory casting practices replicate society's anxieties surrounding defining race reaffirms my hypothesis that theatrical casting has wider implications than merely putting a Black actor in what was assumed to be a 'white' role. *Shakespeare, Race and Performance: The Diverse Bard* (2017), includes an interview with Thompson where she details her journey a decade after writing *Colorblind Shakespeare*. I felt vindicated in my own occasional bafflement over the various casting distinctions when I read Thompson's admission that she would now approach her 2006 collection differently after determining the casting terms as outlined were too confusing. This terminological perplexity is also an issue for audiences who might have difficulty determining not only which model is being employed but also the rationale underlining a director's decision. 'Everyone still uses the same terms even if they are not talking about the same thing,' Thompson stated. 'The dialogues about casting, race and their performance semiotics have not cohered in a clear fashion because the terminology is all over the place.'²⁸ Although some productions make their approach and agenda clearer than others, the range of definitions for when a Black actor assumes what was written or traditionally considered a 'white' role remains perplexing and difficult to pinpoint with specificity.

The casting subcategories are not widely understood, and when employed are used interchangeably and, the umbrella category of non-traditional begs the question: traditional to whom? Although it has certain advantages as being inclusive the term 'non-traditional' declares what audiences were accustomed to seeing on stage before was not a credible view of reality. As racially diverse casting becomes more of an established practice in theatres, the term 'multi-cultural' casting has become a favoured term. Promoting multi-cultural alternatives means having artists of different racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds actively contributing to the creative process.

Compositional casting is the indicator award-winning actor Stephen McKinley Henderson told me he often sees directors employing. 'Rather than disregarding the actor's

²⁸ Jarrett-Macauley, 2018, p. 49

particulars, the director is attempting to make a socio-political or philosophical statement by casting very specifically to illuminate and even reiterate a statement inherent in the text,' he said in a 2019 interview. Freckled with a light complexion, Henderson's first experience with multi-racial casting occurred early—as a teenage drama student in the late 1960s directed by my dad at Sumner High School in Kansas City, Kansas. 'It was my great fortune to have attended an all-Black high school in Kansas where we staged at least three theatre experiences each year,' he said. 'Although I played (white) Mr. Lindner in *A Raisin in the Sun* due to being a very fair skin African-American, I also played (Italian) Tony in *Most Happy Fella* and Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman*, and that was totally blind casting. We didn't think of it as anything but being in the play back then.' Henderson went on to add that if the audience forgets about it or accepts the casting choice as organically part of the story it is effective and that he believes in the right of theatre artists to make this attempt.

When queried about racism in the theatre, Henderson related a story from his time in a graduate school acting master class when the instructor asked the students to choose an animal to emulate. 'I took up the challenge of choosing an animal completely antithetical to my body type, a flamingo,' the heavy-set actor said. 'All of the students had an area of the room and we simultaneously behaved as we thought our animal would if alone in its natural environment. The teacher came close to my space and began throwing peanuts at my feet. When the exercise ended, she explained that she was trying to suggest that it would be more fitting for me to have chosen a monkey or some other primate.' He brought the incident to the head of the drama department and the instructor apologised. 'I was not obligated to return to her class. I didn't.' As will be noted throughout this dissertation, racist experiences of this nature continue to be all too common for Black theatre professionals, and are not alleviated by casting, and as explored in later chapters they have provided materials for creative output which have advanced dialogue on representation and racial injustice.

Henderson introduced me to Sharon Jensen, who for 30 years was executive director of the Non-Traditional Casting Project. In a February 2019 telephone interview she explained that non-traditional casting efforts—and the definitions—were developed to address the neglect of those who make the casting decisions and to encourage them to hire artists on the basis of individual talent and merit. However, where a particular ethnicity was

essential to a character or a play then the needs of the piece should be respected. In other words, creative teams should be responsive to accurately representing the cultural needs of a production and cast accordingly. 'Non-traditional casting was never intended to justify casting a Caucasian in a culturally-specific role, or casting a non-disabled actor in a disability-specific role,' Jensen said. 'To do so is a misappropriation of the term and practice, since the goal is to rectify exclusion.' I concur it is an injustice to deny actors who are non-white, female or with disabilities equitable professional opportunities. Multi-ethnic casting is an avenue of opportunity for actors to be cast in roles not previously open to them while addressing disparity and, as previously stated it also can be used to as a platform to explore societal issues. It can be both ideologically motivated and artistically inspired.

Another manifestation of an unconventional casting practice is when actors of colour are cast in order to make a statement, which could be interpreted as conceptual casting, such as the 2019 Globe's production *Richard II*, which was the first company of women of colour in a Shakespeare play on a major United Kingdom stage. Director Adjoa Andoh, who also played the title role, has said her goal was to use the African, Middle-Eastern, Asian and West Indian cultural heritages of the performers who embody the characters to make Richard's world like the empire of the actors' ancestors, who, she maintains, are often generally overlooked in present-day England. '*Richard II* is a great play about England,' she said. 'And I wanted it to be the people at the bottom of the empire telling the story. People of colour, and women, are always at the bottom of the heap, so women of colour get to tell that story.'²⁹ Andoh said *Richard II* was a universal story and that she wanted those attending to use it as an opportunity to reflect on their own lives.

Anticipating a transformative *Richard II* production, I climbed the stairs to my seat on a wooden bench in the Globe's upper gallery and glanced around the candle-lit Sam Wanamaker Theatre which was ringed by large canvas portraits of the casts' female ancestors—the mothers, grandmothers, great-grandmothers and aunties symbolically there to bear witness. Those visual representations were present, Andoh said, to acknowledge that the actors were 'standing on the shoulders of our ancestors and that we're part of the conversation they've been having for a long time.' Ancestor worship would have been

²⁹ *Richard II* Programme, 2019, p. 8

popular in Richard's day, she added. 'It was a huge part of who they were, and these resonances are really alive to us. The 23 photographs surrounding the theatre space included Mercy Hagan, Andoh's grandmother; Olga Arthus, co-director Lynette Linton's great grandmother, and Asha Gulati, mother of actor Shobna Gulati ('Duke of York').



Figure 1 The Globe's production of Shakespeare's *Richard II*, with images of the actors' ancestors displayed around the stage

Shakespeare wrote about the social situations and politics of his time. Throughout the performance I watched mesmerised while a company of multi-hued women depicting kings, lords and dukes commanded the stage. African drums and Middle-Eastern rhythms emphasised action. Shakespeare's words, which told of won and lost power, identity and exile and political intrigue were distinctively resonant 400 years later. This *Richard II*

production could be interpreted as employing conceptual casting, where an actor's race is emphasised to enhance a play's social resonance, as well as cross-cultural casting which translates a play to a different cultural setting. The *Guardian's* theatre critic Michael Billington declared it a first-rate production reflecting the world's current chaos, adding that the diversity made audiences view the play afresh and gave the characters a distinctive life.³⁰ Andoh said that it was important to her to create a space for women of colour—not just actors, but artists in all departments, including musicians, stage managers, designers, voice coaches and fight directors. She added that she thought it ridiculous that it had taken this long for this to be the first Shakespeare company comprised entirely of women of colour on a major British stage. During a May 2019 panel discussion at the National Theatre I attended on women directors in the twenty-first century she said most art institutions are 'millions of years' away from gender parity. Andoh praised the Globe's Artistic Director Michelle Terry for agreeing to the idea but added that she wished other artistic directors were as welcoming. 'We've not crossed the horizon into Wonderland yet, not by a long, long, long way,' she noted. Shakespeare's plays should be used as a forum for artists to flex their muscles, Andoh said. 'We've got all these superb actresses, and we're all at different stages in our careers, but there are people in this room who've never had the opportunity to play these great parts, because of their gender and their colour, and nothing to do with their skill set.' There is a comparison to be made in regard to the primary characters in this Shakespeare drama with the actors on stage in this particular production in regard to deferred dreams of success and equitable representation. In real life, the women actors on the stage wage battles in the face of innumerable barriers that were systemically erected by those in power who make the casting decisions; the *Richard II* production provided an empathetic outlet for waging war.

In November 1986 the NTCP sponsored the First Symposium on Non-Traditional Casting in an effort to facilitate the discussion and encourage more organisations to engage in the process. The symposium, held over two days at the New York City's Shubert Theatre brought together approximately 1,000 producers, directors, artistic directors, agents, playwrights, actors, critics and educators. During one of the sessions American actor and

³⁰ Billington, 2919, *The Guardian*

playwright Anna Deavere Smith stated that she hates the term non-traditional. 'I believe the kind of casting we're talking about is traditional casting. Casting that comes out of the great tradition of this country. I would propose a change of terms. I would prefer to isolate what 90 percent of our theatres are doing as non-traditional casting since it does not represent what America is—the American people.'³¹ Smith's point is valid but fails to address the racial casting disparities rampant in commercial theatre which led to establishing the definitions. Theatre at the time of her comments at the symposium and also as outlined in Chapter Four, is not representative of the general population of the United States nor England. Although, as I outline in Chapter Four, there has been some progress in casting diversity on commercial theatre stages in the United States and England and a small amount of growth in the numbers of Black people attending performances, representation disparities persist.

There are numerous cases of how theatrical casting was shaped by the prevailing social environment. Attitudes and practices change over time and terminology shifts accordingly. Classification discussions in the mid- to late twentieth century were rampant, as generational shifts in Black communities were occurring. For example in the United States the word 'Negro,' previously used to describe persons of sub-Saharan-African heritage, fell out of favour and gave way to 'Black' and later in the 1980s to 'African-American.' In 2020 *New York Times*' editors and their colleagues in other United States news outlets made the decision to capitalise Black when describing people and cultures of African origin, adding 'Although it may seem like a minor change, the capitalization of that one letter is the difference between a color and a culture.'³² One possible explanation for the term 'multi-ethnic' casting gaining prevalence over what previously would have been called 'race-conscious' casting is changing demographics. The 2020 US census was the first to offer respondents the option of identifying themselves as belonging to more than one race. In the 2010 US Census, the multi-racial population was measured at 9 million people. A decade later the number was up to 33.8 million.³³

³¹ Pao, 2010, p. 1

³² Coleman, 2020, *New York Times*

³³ US Census data, 2021

As previously noted, the range of casting definitions can be confusing and hard to pin down. An ideal example of this is the phenomenally successful musical *Hamilton*, which I use as a case study and which will be investigated at length in a later chapter. *Hamilton*'s casting draws upon various non-traditional casting definitions while also remixing them in specific ways to suit the particular theatrical and storytelling needs of the show. In his 2018 essay 'Looking at *Hamilton* from Inside the Broadway Bubble,' Brian Eugenio Herrera labels *Hamilton* creator Lin-Manuel Miranda's casting a textbook case of conceptual casting 'for its assignment of minority actors to presumptively white roles in ways that reinvent, reimagine, and reinterpret a familiar narrative.'³⁴ Herrera further states the show also employs colour-conscious casting strategies in the choice of only white actors portraying the role of England's King George, while the chorus, with its male and female Revolutionary War soldiers of various races is an example of 'gender-blind' casting and 'colour-blind' casting. Herrera takes the definitions a step further and claims that the show adds a casting technique he calls 'compositional casting' in which the playwright scripts casting as a constitutive part of the show's composition, thereby making how the show is cast subject to copyright and other intellectual property protections, and cites that as a pre-emptive defence by the playwright to 'resist the bad habits of casting convention that so persistently privilege whiteness and maleness.'³⁵ Compositional casting is not only applied by playwrights but also directors. An example of this is the previously cited 2019's *Richard II* at Shakespeare's Globe. In Chapter Three of *Casting a Movement*, entitled 'Nevertheless, Whiteness Persisted', Herrea writes that these casting practices prioritise the directors' authority to deploy actors of colour to 'rehabilitate an otherwise exclusive canon.'³⁶

Complex and mostly non-verbal negotiations may occur among directors, actors and audience members when these casting definitions are employed. The anxieties that pervade contemporary American and English cultures about the significance of race and ethnicity are made manifest in the slipperiness of the casting definitions and practices, and casting should not be considered to be a panacea for larger societal tensions. As Thompson writes, 'instead the various and often contradictory practices of colour-blind casting merely replicate the

³⁴ Herrera in Romano, R., Potter, C., 2018, p. 232

³⁵ Herrera, 2018, p. 233

³⁶ Hererra, in Syler, Banks, 2019, p. 53

anxieties society has about defining race.’³⁷ Fluidity in defining terms is reasonable while acknowledging the disparities that necessitated the reasons for creating the terms and why the need for classification exists. However commercial theatre management teams involved in the casting process could be walking a fine line. The term multi-cultural may appear less threatening to appease those who may be wary—especially paying audience members—that diverse casting is not being used as a political statement, while simultaneously allowing those who view it as such to have an alternative opinion.

The 2023 Broadway production of *Shucked* is an example. This musical love story situated around a small American town’s failing corn crop, was nominated for nine Tony awards and a detailed search did not reveal any reviews or news articles that brought attention to the fact that two Black actors (Alex Newell and Ashley D. Kelley) were stand-outs in an ensemble musical that takes place in rural America. I wondered if audiences were expected to accept this multi-cultural casting choice without comment. As an African-American raised in America’s heartland, I found it strange that the prospect of segregation or racism was not addressed in *Shucked* or mentioned in critics’ reviews. Based on those reviews and articles I read I surmised this as not only a missed opportunity to use multi-ethnic casting as a way to advance discussion of race issues in society but also an example of the complicity of critics disinclined to raise the topic. In 2025 *Shucked* arrived in London and in late May I attended a performance at Regent’s Park Open Air Theatre. Six of the 19 cast members were Black and race was addressed very briefly near the start of the first ensemble number (‘Corn’) when the Black actor Monique Ashe-Palmer, as the character called Storyteller One, asks the audience to think of small towns as places ‘...filled with people no different from you or me,’ then correctly assuming the audience composition in a commercial theatre would be majority white sings ‘Well... more you.’ At the show’s conclusion the inhabitants of the isolated farming community realise the importance of inclusion and allow an outsider in. According to the playwright, Matthew Horn, that is a primary message of *Shucked*—‘The idea that unless you open your hearts to people who are different than you, you don’t grow... as a person, as a community, as a nation.’³⁸ Jack O’Brien, the director for both the *Shucked* New York and London productions and the

³⁷ Thompson, 2006, p. 8

³⁸ *Shucked* programme, 2025, p. 9

show's creative team used 'conscious' casting to actively draw attention to race by having the Storyteller One sing the single line in the '*Corn*' number as a joking reference to the persistent lack of audience diversity of commercial audiences. Yet, despite the obvious multi-ethnic nature of the actors I do not believe audiences were encouraged to notice race or critically explore societal issues. This and other missed opportunities on London and New York stages will be explored in Chapter Four.

'Non-traditional' casting is a way of consciously choosing to be inclusive in casting choices—meaning placing actors in works which previously marginalised, excluded, or erased them. If 'non-traditional' casting requires non-traditional thinking, can or *should* audiences ignore these choices? In 1997 Whoopi Goldberg replaced Nathan Lane as the central character, the enslaved Pseudolus, in an already successful Broadway revival of *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*. Did a Black woman taking over the role from a white male actor constitute colour-blind casting and did said casting change the play's meaning? Both Broadway and the West End have a long-standing tradition of replacing stars in long-running commercially successful shows for several reasons, including to keep the productions fresh, increase the possibility of repeat customers and ensure profits continue after a star's contract runs out. Goldberg, like Nathan Lane, was a hit in *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, with the 1997 version being one of the most popular revivals of this musical, running for 21 months and closing after 715 performances. When the announcement was made that Goldberg would be taking over the lead, her popularity seemed at its peak. After beginning as a stand-up comedian, she became well known to audiences as Celie in the Steven Spielberg movie of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1985); had won an Academy Award for the romantic fantasy film *Ghost* (1990) and received a Golden Globe award two years later for the comedy *Sister Act*. By 1993 she was among the highest paid actors in the United States. *Forum* was Goldberg's first Broadway appearance since her one-woman show in 1984. It is possible this revival's success had little to do with Goldberg being non-traditionally cast and can be more easily attributed to the fact she is a famous and popular star. Her Pseudolus was not a case of 'non-traditional' casting as much as it was 'profile' casting, which is when a well-known actor appears in a production presumably because he/she has a reputation that can be used to aid ticket sales.

The majority of the reviews with Goldberg were glowing, but not all. The *Variety* critic Greg Evans proclaimed that as a female, her portrayal as the male slave Pseudolus at times seemed nonsensical, noting that ‘a female slave who acquires her freedom in ancient Rome is still, unenviably, a female in ancient Rome.’³⁹ But, the *Washington Post*’s Chip Crews declared Goldberg to be ‘sly, cheerful, and sweeter’ than any of her predecessors.⁴⁰ In *Theatre & Race* Harvey Young writes that on Broadway and the West End actors’ celebrity status can make it easier to overlook colour-blind casting and cites Goldberg’s joining the cast of *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* as an example. ‘Goldberg, a Black woman, played a role envisioned for, written for and previously performed by white male actors, showing that the appeal of colour-blind casting is that it treats the theatre as a place where universal stories can be embodied by any person...It offers a glimpse of a utopian future in which not only racial assumptions but also the prejudices and discriminatory beliefs that can serve as social obstacles no longer exist.’⁴¹ But, did a show about servitude change in meaning due to Goldberg’s casting? In his *Washington Post* review Crews observed that although the production remained bright and entertaining, the unconventional casting carried ‘some dangerous freight,’ specifically taking issue with Goldberg looking a white character in the eye and declaring, ‘I hate being a slave,’ which he claimed released a dramatic resonance the light-hearted comedy was unable to support.⁴² While the comedian’s casting may have caused theatre critics and perhaps some audience members discomfort, Josephine Lee in *Race and the American Musical Theater* (2023) maintains it also demonstrated the power of a casting choice to change the impact of a revival.⁴³

Like Goldberg, award-winning Black actors such as Adrian Lester, Sharon D Clarke, Denzel Washington or Audra McDonald will attract audiences regardless of the roles performed because of their acknowledged ability and star quality. Goldberg presumably was well aware of the financial advantages of profile casting and, as one of the *Forum*’s

³⁹ Evans, 1997, *Variety*

⁴⁰ Crews, 1997, *Washington Post*

⁴¹ Young, 2013, p. 58

⁴² Crews, 1977, *Washington Post*

⁴³ Lee, 2023, p. 31

producers, knew that her taking over a coveted role would be a savvy and profitable move. Her decision could also have been driven by the fact her career began as a comedian and she had a genuine desire to perform a hilarious part in a Broadway musical hit. It is possible audiences seeing Goldberg as the lead made them think about enslavement in a more profound manner. I have no problem with that. Casting can be used to inform plays in stimulating ways by challenging preconceived ideas about race. Goldberg was not the first and certainly will be far from the last woman, or the last Black person to step into a previously presumed male or presumed 'white' role in a successful West End or Broadway production. When done well, such casting as that which occurred with Goldberg can raise awareness and assist audiences in seeing the world in a new light.

In 2018 theatrical casting again made the news when director Gregory Mosher quit a Broadway revival of Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* after a dispute with the Miller estate over the cast's racial makeup. Mosher wanted to cast a Black actor to play George Deever and was scouting around to find a Black actress to play his sister Ann. However, Rebecca Miller, a film director and screenwriter who runs her father's estate, intervened, questioning the choice of making the Deever family Black when the play's other central family, the Kellers, had already been cast as white. In this case the disagreement was not over whether to diversify the cast, but how. As the Miller estate had already approved a Black Loman family for the 2019 West End revival of *Death of a Salesman*, the issue was not 'non-traditional' casting. Miller's daughter was advocating for 'colour-conscious' casting where roles are open to different races, but the production considers how the audience will react to the choice. *All My Sons* is a tale of two families in 1947 Ohio whose relationship is torn apart by post-World War II scandals. According to Miller's daughter, the estate's concern was that, as there is a romantic connection between the two families, if the Deevers were Black, it could introduce the concept of an interracial relationship in a time and place where that was highly uncommon.

'My concern was that to cast the Deevers as Black puts a burden on the play to justify the relationship in the historical context,' Rebecca Miller said in an interview with the *New York Times*. 'Since the script does not address race I was worried that it would whitewash the racism that really was in existence in that period by creating this pretend-

Valhalla-special family where no one would mention this.’⁴⁴ Mosher said that although Miller offered to allow the director’s choice for George Deever if the character Ann was cast as a different race than her brother, he was already auditioning Black actresses, and the Black acting community in New York was aware of his search. ‘I didn’t know what to say to these actors,’ Mosher said. ‘I’ve decided to hire a white girl. I couldn’t find somebody? What am I supposed to say?’ He added that to change course would be ‘breaking faith with a community that I didn’t want to break faith with. I’m afraid it comes rather quickly to “you just have the wrong skin color for this part.”’ Mosher concluded that the disagreement put him in an impossible bind. He resigned and was replaced by *Tony* award-winning director Jack O’Brien.

In productions where race is germane, appearance matters and it would be difficult not to use race in the casting process. Casting notices identify the age, race and gender of certain characters because it reflects authorial intent. One example is the comedic drama *Emilia* first performed at Shakespeare’s Globe in 2018. Playwright Morgan Lloyd Malcolm specified that male characters be played by women. Another example is the successful musical comedy *SIX*, which tells the stories of Henry VIII’s wives in pop concert style and opened at the Vaudeville theatre on the West End in 2019 then transferred to Broadway and received 23 awards in the 2021/2022 season. According to a hiring notice the musical is ‘dedicated to fostering diversity and inclusivity throughout its casting processes’ and ‘welcomes performers of all ages, ethnic backgrounds, sexual orientations and gender identities to audition for this project.’⁴⁵ While the production team endeavours to embrace inclusivity, it cannot ignore this is a show about women, and employs compositional casting and colour-blind casting.

Interpretations of Race and Ethnicity

As previously stated, no set definition for ‘colour-blind,’ ‘integrated,’ ‘compositional,’ ‘colour-conscious,’ ‘non-traditional’ or any of the other categories mentioned above appears to exist; they overlap and interact in a variety of ways, defying rigid boundaries. Since the occurrence of NTCP’s 1986 symposium, discussions around which definitions to

⁴⁴ Harris, E. (2018) *New York Times*, 19 December 2018

⁴⁵ West End Best Friend, 2025

apply to the various interpretations have been infrequent and if they occur at all they do not appear to happen across disciplines. Similarly, the way 'race,' 'ethnicity' and 'diversity' are used is inconsistent and varies from one situation to another. Race and ethnicity get used interchangeably. The Non-Traditional Casting Project's definition of 'non-traditional' casting ('the casting of ethnic and female artists in roles in which race, ethnicity, or gender is not germane to the character's or the play's development') is a demonstration of this. As Angela Pao observes in *No Safe Spaces: Recasting Race, Ethnicity and Nationality in American Theater* (2010), 'The first adjectival "ethnic" serving to qualify the type of actor would seem to subsume race, which is contrary to popular American usage, which sees ethnicity as a subcategory of race.'⁴⁶ This separates race and ethnicity as distinct characteristics. Pao adds that the flexibility of the terminology is typical of the language used to talk about casting practices and the inclusion of artists, administrators and audiences who cannot be identified as 'white.'

In reviewing the origin and history of the idea of race Audrey Smedley and Brian Smedley note that the consensus among most scholars is that racial distinctions 'are not genetically discrete, are not reliably measured, and are not scientifically meaningful.'⁴⁷ Henry Louis Gates in *Race, Writing and Difference* (1986) concurs by writing that 'Race, as a meaningful criterion within the biological sciences, has been recognized to be a fiction.'⁴⁸ However, racism exists when individuals generalise about a predetermined trait of effect thought to be shared by all members of a physically defined group and an individual treats him or her accordingly.

The concept of race goes beyond an individual's physical appearance. It is defined as a construct that is historically, socially and culturally determined. In exploring the intersections of race, theatre and performance, Harry J. Elan Jr., and David Krasner in *African-American Performance Theatre History: A Critical Reader* (2001) argue that analysing African-American theatre and performance can offer insight into how race operates and continues to impact American society.⁴⁹ In the book's introduction, editors Elan and Krasner

⁴⁶ Pao, 2010, p. 10

⁴⁷ Smedley, Smedley, 2005, p. 16

⁴⁸ Gates, 1986, p. 4

⁴⁹ Elan, Krasner, 2001, p. 3

note that 'definitions of race, like the processes of theatre, fundamentally depend on the relationship between the seen and unseen, between the visibly marked and unmarked and between the real and illusionary.'⁵⁰ One's racial identity is 'real' not least because it is a vehicle for one's cultural identity and a sense of collective heritage. However, racial difference can be perceived differently in different locations, such as in New York, London, Nairobi, Kenya and Sao Paulo, Brazil, and interpretations can shift over time. For example, the 2011 UK Census expanded its descriptions of 'Black British' for self-designation beyond Black to Black-African, Black Caribbean or 'any Other Black/African/Caribbean and in 2021 it added a write-in response for the 'Black-African' group.⁵¹ This socio-cultural civic exercise of the census allows for self-identification which acknowledges diverse histories and expressions of ethnicity.

'Race' is sometimes used to stand in for national, religious, ethnic and cultural identities. Racism and its effects are also very real but, again, felt and deployed differently depending on the circumstances, such as location, gender, age, class or historical era. In this dissertation, Black is capitalised in a racial, ethnic or cultural sense which aligns with the capitalisation of other racial and ethnic identifiers, including Latino and Native American. When referring to Black people as a racial identification, I specifically mean persons of Sub-Saharan African descent.

As the Smedleys note, ethnicity and culture are related. Culture and world events have always been connected with the theatre, and theatre is often used as a vehicle to rethink a multitude of concepts, ideas and activities including race relations and human interactions. It illuminates the world as the world illuminates the theatre. Everyone involved, from playwrights, producers, directors, actors, critics to the audience sometimes collectively, but often individually, determine how race is interpreted on stage and make conscious and unconscious decisions about what they choose to see and how they wish to construe it. Similar to the discussion surrounding casting terminology, ethnicity categories are flexible and subject to change. They are often, but not always self-defined. It is my position that detailed and continuous dialogue around the complexities and ambiguities of

⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 4

⁵¹ Office for National Statistics, 2021

race, ethnicity and casting as they relate to Black actors on commercial stages in London and New York is required for sustained change and ultimately benefits management, creatives, critics and audiences. This is explored in more detail in Chapter Five in the discussion regarding critics and audience responses to casting diversity.

In Broadway and London commercial theatre venues, casting directors may choose not to share with actors their ideas on how race should be interpreted; actors desiring employment may be reluctant to raise the topic and theatre critics witnessing the silence of directors and production teams often do not mention it in their reviews, which trickles down to readers and audiences. I concur with Thompson's concluding thoughts in *Passing Strange* where she revisits her previous writing on non-traditional casting, that this silence has had a chilling effect and that 'while it is clear that non-traditional casting practices are common enough now to be considered traditional, we still have not had widespread debates about the significance of these traditions.'⁵² Although it is true that in 1984 through to 2024, the time period which is the focus of this dissertation, Broadway and West End casts, especially those featuring Black actors are more diverse than at any previous point in history, until theatre practitioners acknowledge and communicate the intentionality of their choices, rather than preferring to ignore (or 'be blind') to cast diversity and how the representation of others entail consequences, ambiguity will prevail. This ambiguity has not been ignored by academics, which is evident in the writings of several scholars including Catanese (2011), Jarrett-Macauley (2018), and Young (2013).

Key Concepts: Representation and Intersectionality

Stuart Hall's *Representation* (1997) is an introduction to the theories and politics of meaning and representation and invites readers to examine whether meanings constantly shift depending on the culture, community or historical context. Hall's investigations of how racial, ethnic and sexual difference have been represented has applicability to performance studies, particularly how one's perspective affects meaning and the implications of power in interpreting meaning and representation.⁵³ It also applies to how artefacts such as plays and narratives are arranged to convey particular meanings and assumed norms. Hall defines

⁵² Thompson, 2011, p. 95

⁵³ Hall, Stuart, Evans, Nixon, 2013, p. 2

culture as a set of distinctive practices and shared values of a people, community or social group which allow them to interpret the world in roughly the same ways and express themselves, their thoughts and feelings about the world in ways that will be understood by each other. The term 'representation' is most traditionally defined as something that stands for something else, or can be used to examine whether a depiction of something is an accurate or distorted reflection. Representation is the way in which meaning is somehow given to the things which are depicted through the images or words which stand for what we're communicating.

Through the use of wide-ranging examples from popular culture, art and films, Hall asks his readers to examine whether things—objects, people, events in the world—carry a distinct, true meaning or if meanings constantly change depending on the context. Investigating how racial, ethnic and sexual difference have been represented by examining modern, well-known visual examples taken from United States and United Kingdom culture, Hall addresses the essentialising of difference through stereotyping and delves into how violence and fantasy play into representational practices, making their meanings more ambivalent. For example in his essay 'Black Men, White Media' (1974) Hall noted that the media has a close relationship to power and establishes values catering to the privileged and transmits stereotypes of one group to another and Blacks are predominantly outside the consensus. Yet this exclusion from access is at 'considerable peril to society as a whole.'⁵⁴ This could also be applied to the current state of commercial theatre in New York and London.

The exclusion of Native Americans explored in the case study of *Oklahoma!* and Nicholas Wright's *8 Hotels* which is discussed in the *Othello* case study are two examples of playwrights choosing to eliminate or dismiss non-white characters thereby allowing a represented culture to use its power to place white characters at the centre of the narrative. Power dynamics can negatively influence the exploration of diverse voices and perspectives which have the potential to result in impactful storytelling. The lack of visibility and representation of those with multiple intersecting social identities, including race, class and gender can influence audiences and actors and notably creative teams, where power

⁵⁴ Gilroy, Gilmore, 2021, p. 52

resides. The imbalance of power of those holding leadership positions in commercial theatre will be examined in more detail in Chapter Four.

The concept of representation is key to my argument as the politics of representation concern not only the understanding of the power inherent in the visible representation of Blacks but also ‘recognising the mechanisms of production which dictate dissemination of those images.’⁵⁵ The stereotyping and fetishism of Black males through racial ‘othering’ in relation to Hall’s writings on representation is discussed in detail in Chapter Six, specifically the case studies of *Othello* and *Oklahoma!* where white directors, playwrights and theatre critics display racial bias through their interpretation of choices, and preconceived notions of hypermasculinity.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality is used as one of two key concepts in my argument as a means to understand and analyse the complexities involved in casting and management decisions that historically have adversely impacted Black theatre professionals in London and New York. While exploration of how oppressions of race, gender and class are interconnected have previously been articulated by others including Black feminists Sojourner Truth (1797-1883), and bell hooks (1952-2021), Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 laid out her theory of intersectionality in a paper published in the University of Chicago Legal Forum titled ‘Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex.’ Intersectionality, she wrote, was a prism to bring to light dynamics within discrimination law that were not being appreciated by the courts. , Crenshaw wrote. ‘In particular, courts seem to think that race discrimination was what happened to all black people across gender and sex discrimination was what happened to all women, and if that is your framework, of course, what happens to black women and other women of color is going to be difficult to see.’⁵⁶ Crenshaw’s theory, which challenges complacency and encourages individuals to look beneath prevailing conceptions of discrimination went mainstream and in 2015 was added to the Oxford English Dictionary. The concept’s premise is that people, specifically Black women, experience discrimination differently depending on their overlapping identities. To illustrate, Crenshaw noted that

⁵⁵ Elam, Krasner, 2001, p. 6

⁵⁶ Coaston, 2019, p. 7

discrimination—like traffic through an intersection, can flow in both directions and should an accident occur, it can be caused by vehicles traveling in any number of directions or even perhaps all of them. ‘Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in the intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination.’⁵⁷ Crenshaw further noted that Black women’s intersectional experiences are considerably more expansive, and involve looking beyond and challenging the prevailing conceptions of discrimination.

While Black women may experience discrimination in ways that are similar to and different from those experienced by white women and Black men, they often also experience double-discrimination. Crenshaw maintains that both feminist and civil rights scholars have treated Black women in ways that deny the unique ‘compoundness’ of their situation and their experience is absorbed into the collective experiences of either group. Crenshaw concludes that both feminist theory and antiracist politics have been organised around the equation of racism with what happens to the Black middle-class or to Black men, and the equation of sexism with what happens to white women. ‘This adoption of a single-issue framework for discrimination not only marginalizes Black women within the very movements that claim them as part of their constituency but it also makes the elusive goal of ending racism and patriarchy even more difficult to attain.’⁵⁸ Basically, feminism should include an analysis of race if it hopes to express the aspirations of non-white women and any Black movement must include an analysis of sexism and patriarchy—with neither ignoring the intersectional experiences. Struggles should not be categorised as unique issues, and placing the currently marginalised in the centre is an effective way to resist efforts to compartmentalise experiences and undermine potential collective action.

Conservative commentators such as Ben Shapiro who contends that intersectionality creates ‘a hierarchy of victimhood’⁵⁹ objected not to the intersectionality term but to its application, believing that intersectionality could be used against white men, making them the victims, which could be interpreted as a new form of oppression. To these commentators intersectionality is not just describing a hierarchy of oppression but an

⁵⁷ Crenshaw, 1989, p. 149

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 152

⁵⁹ Mohr, 2023, *Christian Science Monitor*

inversion of it, threatening the current power structure with white men at the top who are more concerned about losing their spot than they are with eliminating those hierarchies altogether. This fallacy of the perception that additional access for some will ultimately result in a loss of power permeates all levels of society. Another criticism is that intersectionality fosters separatism, overemphasises cultural recognition and exaggerates victimhood.⁶⁰ In Jane Coaston's 2019 *Vox* article, 'Intersectionality Explained,' Crenshaw notes that contrary to her critics' objections, intersectionality is not an effort to create the world in an inverted image of what it is now, rather, the point is to make room for increased advocacy and remedial practices in an effort to create a more egalitarian system.⁶¹ Put another way, Crenshaw does not advocate for replicating existing power dynamics and cultural structures with the objective to give people of colour power over white people, but to get rid of those existing power dynamics altogether — changing the very structures that undergird politics and culture with the goal of levelling the playing field. Intersectionality requires that efforts to address one form of oppression take others into account. Efforts to fight racism would require examining other forms of prejudice (like anti-Semitism, for example); efforts to eliminate gender disparities would require examining how women of colour experience gender bias differently from white women.

In *Intersectionality* (2020), authors Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge write that there are six core ideas within intersectionality: social inequality, intersecting power relations, social context, relationality, social justice and complexity. 'As an analytic tool, the concept views categories of race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, ability, ethnicity, and age—among others—as interrelated and mutually shaping one another.'⁶² In this dissertation I use examples from several West End and Broadway productions that not only employed racially-diverse casting, but where race, gender, sexuality, and culture intersected to show these practices advance discussion of societal issues and shed new light on contemporary productions as well as revivals of plays written in centuries past.

In *Blackness at the Intersection* (2024), editors Crenshaw, Andrews and Wilson contemplate the reasons why intersectionality has become 'such a foundational concept

⁶⁰ Collins and Bilge, 2020, p. 185

⁶¹ Coaston, 2019

⁶² Ibid., p. 2

underpinning how we understand the world.’⁶³ Through engagement with the standpoints of Black women, intersectionality can be utilised to view how racialised power operates through the intersections of different identities. Its power lies in its ability to be applied across a wide array of positions to see society—and in the case of this dissertation, theatre, with new eyes. This is particularly applicable in instances concerning casting choices where the intersection between class and race is especially pertinent. Applications of intersectionality including instances where women are cast in what were traditionally considered male roles and Black actors portraying characters written as white, are examined using examples from both West End and Broadway productions in the chapter exploring the four case studies.

Conclusion

This chapter provided an overview of definitions of casting, intersectionality, representation and interpretations of race which are central to this dissertation and my argument about the social, ethical and political implications of exclusionary practices in Broadway and West End commercial theatre in relation to Black theatre professionals. I examined the emergence and development of the term ‘non-traditional’ casting and investigated the array of casting practices which come under its umbrella and the discrepancies regarding how they are defined and their use was analysed and critiqued. It was shown that terms are ambiguous and frequently overlap. This chapter also included an overview of the origins of the casting terms, which were first defined in 1985, and a critique of their applications. In light of the research conducted, a choice was made to employ the terms ‘multi-racial’ and ‘diverse’ to describe casting practices the NTCP first described as ‘non-traditional’ as both terms reflect changing demographics.

Summaries of Stuart Hall’s work on representation and Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality were provided as central concepts that underpin my argument that debates that have arisen regarding the under-representation of Black theatre professionals have ultimately raised problematic issues impacting commercial theatre that extend beyond casting. Hall’s research demonstrates the various meanings and ways to question and demonstrate how subjects, individuals and groups are represented while Crenshaw’s work

⁶³ Crenshaw, Andrews, Wilson, 2024, p. 1

on intersectionality, which altered the articulation of how race, class, gender, and other individual characteristics ‘intersect’ with one another, invites scrutiny of how intersecting identities are impacted by a multitude of social justice and human rights issues. Throughout this dissertation I provide a more detailed explanation of how Hall, Crenshaw and other scholars, as well as viewing opportunities and lived experience, have influenced my research. The next chapter continues its investigation of the theoretical framework upon which this thesis is built by exploring the history of racially-diverse casting from the fifteenth to the twentieth century.

Chapter Three: Historical Perspective

This chapter provides a brief history of Black actors and theatrical pioneers in the United States and England. The historical information regarding these trailblazing creatives is used to illustrate conceptual and procedural shifts in casting, marking a difference from actors whose ethnicity was critical to specific performances. I summarise what the historical instances demonstrate and the development of casting assumptions and practices over time and explore how casting maps onto ideas of how power is unequally distributed. After beginning with accounts of the origins of opportunities for Black theatrical professionals in the United Kingdom and the United States, from Shakespeare's time through to the mid-twentieth century. This chapter concludes with an account of the origins of blackface as a means to provide actors opportunities to illustrate the implications of exclusionary practices of commercial theatre in New York City and London.

William Shakespeare to Ira Aldridge

Although the term and definitions gained currency in the latter part of the twentieth century, 'non-traditional' casting is far from new. More than 400 years ago William Shakespeare's company consisted of white, male English actors portraying characters of both sexes, with boys or young men inhabiting female roles. However, during this period in history this would have been seen as traditional casting with women actors being the more unorthodox choice. In 1662 King Charles II legalised acting as a profession for women. The first woman to play Hamlet, in 1776, was England's most famous tragic actress of the eighteenth century, Sarah Siddons. There have been scores of female Hamlets since, including Sarah Bernhardt at the end of the nineteenth century, and more recently British-Nigerian actor Cush Jumbo in a 2021 *Young Vic* production.

In the summer of 2023 I witnessed the embodiment of intersectionality and thought of the rich legacy of women inhabiting male roles while viewing Nina Bowers and Isabel Adomakoh Young—two Black women—portray the lovers Rosalind and Orlando alongside women actors in the typically male parts of Adam, Oliver and Touchstone in *As You Like It*, a production at Shakespeare's Globe directed by Ellen McDougall. That such unconventional casting in a play prominently featuring disguises and cross-cultural interactions should occur during the 400th anniversary year of Shakespeare's First Folio felt like a deliberate choice to

illuminate how far theatre has come. I found the mix of ethnicities in the cast seemed natural and attribute the reason for this to the fact that, while acknowledging a few notable exceptions, the plots in Shakespeare's plays do not depend on racially identifiable characters. 'His characters speak to all of a common humanity and a shared destiny,' wrote Errol Hill in *Shakespeare in Sable: A History of Black Shakespearean Actors* (1984). 'Black actors and actresses have shown that they, like their white counterparts, have the *skill and power* to re-create these magnificent personages and, often, to throw a new light on our understanding of the human condition.'⁶⁴ The Globe's *As You Like It* production is an example of the NTCP classification of 'non-traditional,' but also could be considered 'colour-blind,' which is another example of the ambiguity of these terms. Colour-blind casting assumes that an actor's race and skin colour can be overlooked. Harvey Young in *Theatre and Race* argues that audiences eager to view new interpretations of classic plays may be more receptive to colour-blind casting.⁶⁵ Monique Day, writing for *Contemporary Theatre Review* disagrees with Hill and argues that casting Black actors in Shakespeare plays to showcase Black artistry provides a superficial representation of a diverse world and ignores the culture and politics that ultimately 'keeps whiteness intact.'⁶⁶ This line of thinking is comparable to August Wilson's assertions of 'colour-blind' casting as an aberrant idea that denies the validity of Black values and culture. Wilson's outlook and the controversy surrounding his stance regarding casting is examined in detail as part of the *Death of a Salesman* case study.

From the very earliest portrayals the 'skill and power' of Black actors to recreate classic roles which Hill alludes to has rarely been enough to overcome prejudice, discrimination and occasional violence against those desiring to perform Shakespeare publicly. For example, in New York City, The African Company, which started in 1821—six years before New York state abolished enslavement—was the first Black American company to present Shakespeare and was forced to close just three years later when hostile white competitors persuaded the New York police to take action. Playwright Carlyle Brown explored the company's history in his 1994 play *The African Company Presents Richard the*

⁶⁴ Hill, 1984 p. 192

⁶⁵ Young, 2013, p. 58

⁶⁶ Day, 2021, p. 345

Third, which retold a pivotal event in the company's past when it staged a production of Shakespeare's *Richard III* in a Manhattan theatre only doors away from a competing white venue. In August 2011 I attended Brown's pre-performance talk about this work at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in Ashland, Oregon. The playwright maintained that The African Company actors possibly appropriated *Richard III* for their own purposes as free Blacks in New York during that period and may have chosen to perform Shakespeare because it gave them cover from being accused of rebellion.⁶⁷ During this period in the United States, anyone of African descent who possessed a dark or brown skin tone had the potential to be labelled a 'slave' regardless of whether the individual was actually enslaved. Slavery was a key institution in the development of New York, with those enslaved performing almost all of the heavy labour of building the city's infrastructure. During this period as many as 20 percent of colonial New Yorkers were enslaved Africans.⁶⁸ The actors in the African Company, by virtue of physical appearance, conjured thoughts of and associations with enslavement. One of the messages Brown said he wanted to convey in writing a play highlighting the tribulations and triumphs of this historic all-Black company was 'if Shakespeare belongs to anybody, it belongs to everybody.' That evening I attended the performance and enjoyed the quickly-paced dialogue which was at turns funny and touching. For example, in the company's stage manager's speech admonishing actors bickering about how to 'properly' elocute the Bard's dialogue the stage manager exasperatedly concludes with, 'Say ya Shakespeare like ya want,' which elicited hearty laughs from the audience in attendance that evening. Brown's play showed the impact of the visible representation of Black actors in the African Company as well as the unequal power structure that dictated and ultimately hampered its dissemination, duration and success.

In England, 50 years before the formation of New York's The African Company, the first Black person to appear on an English stage may have been Ignatius Sancho in the 1770s. Sancho, who had been enslaved and was a former attendant to the Fourth Earl of Montague, acted the role of Oroonoko, and reportedly performed in *Othello*. Colin Chambers in *Black and Asian Theatre in Britain* (2011) notes that Sancho was said to have

⁶⁷ Brown, 2011

⁶⁸ New York Historical Society, 2006

been employed briefly ‘in the theatre company of his acquaintance [David] Garrick, who apparently asked him to act at Drury Lane.’⁶⁹ However, Marshall and Stock in *Ira Aldridge: The Negro Tragedian* (1958) citing accounts from that period of Sancho’s speech impediment, write that reports vary as to whether he performed as Othello, declined the role, or if his lisp ended his pursuit of an acting career.⁷⁰ In 1774, with assistance from Montague, Sancho retired and opened a grocery shop in London’s Mayfair. A published author and composer, he became involved in the British abolitionist movement and as a financially independent male householder living in Westminster he qualified to vote in the parliamentary elections of 1774 and 1780. Sancho is now best known not for his acting but as the first person of African origin to vote in a British general election. Although it is not definitively known whether Sancho appeared as Othello, his short-lived acting career is an example of a shift in casting paradigms and opened the door to casting other Black professionals in roles previously restricted to white actors.

The first all-Black and Black-produced Shakespeare in the United Kingdom may have been staged in 1814 by Americans interred in Dartmoor Prison in Princetown, Devon during the War of 1812. During the war, which lasted until February 1815, approximately 6,000 Americans were imprisoned at Dartmoor and segregated by race. One of the prison’s seven blocks, ‘Prison Four’ contained approximately one thousand Black prisoners and offered several diversions including gambling, fencing, boxing and dancing, as well as a Methodist preacher and a choir. There was also a theatrical society, one of two in Dartmoor in this time period. According to prisoner accounts *Romeo and Juliet* and *Othello* were performed by one of the two theatrical societies at the prison. Inmate Richard Crafus, aged around 25, who at 6 feet, 7 inches, was also known as ‘King Dick,’ ruled over everything in Prison Four and according to one prisoner’s account may have played the title role in *Othello*.⁷¹ Harvey Young (2013), citing race theorists Michael Omi and Howard Winant, noted that individuals use race to provide clues about who a person is.⁷² Most likely the physical appearance of Crafus was given primacy in the determining of his identity alongside the imagining of his

⁶⁹ Chambers, 2011, p. 37

⁷⁰ Marshall, 1958, p. 54

⁷¹ Clark, 2019, p. 40

⁷² Young, 2013, p. 5

likely behaviour as a prison leader. Just as with Ignatius Sancho, in effect, Crafus' appearance as Othello was a form of traditional casting, with a Black man portraying a character described as a 'Moor.' In the case study chapter I explore the representational aspects of actors performing this iconic role in detail through analysis of various *Othello* productions.

Ira Aldridge and Nineteenth-Century Pioneers

When discussing the early history of Black actors and Shakespeare the most notable actor is Ira Aldridge (1807-1867), who in the nineteenth century was the first Black actor to achieve fame and international acclaim performing major Shakespeare roles. He was considered among the most accomplished actors in England and Europe and one of the finest Shakespeare interpreters. Aldridge made his acting debut in 1821 at age 14 with New York City's aforementioned The African Company. In 1824, at age 17, he set out for England, believing it to be a more hospitable setting than America and the teenager was determined to become a professional actor in a country where he hoped his skin colour would not prove an insurmountable obstacle to theatrical success. Aldridge made his London debut in 1825 in *The Revolt of Suriname, or A Slave's Revenge*, an adaptation of Thomas Southerne's play *Oroonoko*. Early reviews were not favourable and were in a similar vein to the following excerpt from the 11 October 1825 issue of *The Times*:

'This gentleman is in complexion the colour of a new half-penny, barring his brightness; his hair is woolly, and his features, although they possess much of the African character, are considerably humanized. His figure is unlucky for the stage... and [with] the shape of his lips it is utterly impossible for him to pronounce English in such a manner as to satisfy even the unfastidious ears of the gallery. He played the part of Oroonoko probably as well as was necessary, because it is full of bombast and affectation.'⁷³

It should be noted that Aldridge's critics were writing about an 18-year-old with minimal training or experience. Also, despite the poor reviews, the production ran for an additional six weeks. However, the negative critiques by influential newspapers had a detrimental effect and Aldridge left London for the English provinces. The growth of playhouses in London was discouraged by the Licensing Act of 1737, which provided the

⁷³ Marshall, 1958, p. 62

Lord Chamberlain with extensive powers to censor all plays. This led to the spread of theatres in provincial towns outside London which became valuable training grounds for young actors. That trend worked particularly well for Aldridge, where he grew in popularity with the provincial public and used the distance from London critics to further develop his talent.

Aldridge returned to London and in 1833 at age 26 he appeared as Othello at the Theatre Royal in Covent Garden, marking the first time a Black actor had performed the role in a West End theatre. Although his performance was generally well-received by audiences, *The Times*' critic commented that his portrayal 'wanted spirit and feeling. His accent is unpleasant, and we would say, vulgarly foreign; his manner, drawling and unimpressive.'⁷⁴ Undaunted, Aldridge continued to perform and his fame increased with each performance and in 1865 he played Othello, this time to great acclaim at London's Theatre Royal, Haymarket. Aldridge's career has been called a curiosity with his acclaim being attributed to the novelty of his being the first Black actor to assume major Shakespeare roles. As Marshall suggests, 'Ira Aldridge was the first to show that a black man could scale any heights in theatrical art reached by a white man—and recreate with equal artistry the greatest characters in world drama.'⁷⁵ As I will elaborate during the examination of the career of Paul Robeson, Aldridge's career was viewed as unique and non-traditional because of the time period and the culture at this point in history.

At the time of his death at age 60 in 1867, Aldridge had performed more than 40 roles in 30 cities across Europe and Russia. He was hailed as a distinguished actor in his 1867 *New York Times* obituary, which also noted that throughout his career Aldridge received 'numerous substantial tokens of approbation' including a first-class medal of art and science from the King of Prussia and the Grand Cross of Leopold from the Emperor of Austria. The obituary concluded that while he was scheduled to return to post-Civil War United States and arrangements had been made for his debut at New York's Academy of Music, 'death has prevented the fulfilment of his intention.'⁷⁶ While this nineteenth-century obituary writer clearly had a flair for stating the obvious, a prominent article in the *New York Times* is

⁷⁴ Bourne, 2021, p. 56

⁷⁵ Marshall, 1958, p. 335

⁷⁶ *New York Times*, 1867

an unequivocal acknowledgement of the impact of Aldridge's career and its contribution to advancing discussion of diverse casting practices.



Figure 2 Ira Aldridge, 1853, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Photographs and Prints Division, *The New York Public Library Digital Collections*

Aldridge's achievements opened the door for other Black American actors in Europe, including Samuel Morgan Smith, who arrived in England in 1866 after, similarly to Aldridge, concluding that due to rampant racism there was no future for him as an actor in his country which had fought a Civil War a year earlier. He appeared as the lead in *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *Merchant of Venice* and *Othello* at the Theatre Royal in Gravesend, and successfully toured for 10 years before dying of pneumonia in 1882 at age 49. Hill wrote that Smith, though not of the same calibre as Aldridge, 'helped to spread a knowledge and love of Shakespeare in the byways of the dramatist's own country and was a worthy successor to

the great black tragedian.’⁷⁷ Next came Paul Molyneaux born in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1856, who landed in England in 1880, but after several years of performing was unable to achieve the same level of fame as his predecessors. Perhaps his skill was unequal to that of his predecessors or it could have been that by that time the novelty of seeing Black actors was wearing thin for white British audiences. Molyneaux died at age 35 in June 1891.

With the world-wide fame and numerous accolades, both Aldridge and Paul Robeson (1898-1976) challenged racial assumptions in their respective times. In 1930 Robeson was the first Black actor to play Othello in England since Aldridge and in 1942 he became the first Black actor to portray the role on Broadway. Robeson’s life and career will be discussed in more detail as part of the *Othello* case study in Chapter Five. The pioneering actors discussed in this section were instrumental in creating opportunity for future artists and aided in normalising assumptions that Black actors could play the roles of white characters, thereby paving the way for Black actors to expand their repertoire to portray a wider range of characters.

1930s to 1960s and the Rise of Black Actors

Black Shakespearean actors achieved notoriety in the United States during the depression-era in the 1930s due to the efforts of the government-sponsored Work Projects Administration (WPA) Federal Theatre Project which was created as a relief measure for theatre professionals. Kate Dossett’s 2020 book *Radical Black Theatre in the New Deal*, examines Black-authored dramas created by the project and provides a history of the Negro Units created by the initiative. The Works Project Administration mandated that Negro Units could be established wherever there were sufficient numbers of unemployed Black theatre professionals who were eligible to claim relief and 17 Negro Units were organised by the Federal Theatre Project (FTP) in 1935 which lasted four years. According to Dossett, ‘In the 1930s participation in the FTP positioned African Americans at the forefront of innovative new theatre in the second half of the decade.’⁷⁸ The FTP had five regional centres located in the Northeast, Midwest, West and South with New York City constituting a region of its own.

⁷⁷ Hill, 1984, p. 38

⁷⁸ Dossett, 2020, p. 252

The Harlem Negro Unit was initially set up under the co-direction of Black theatre veteran Rose McClendon. McClendon was appointed to share responsibility with John Houseman, but became too ill to be actively involved. Houseman divided the unit into two categories—‘work by, for and with Black actors (the direction of which was soon handed over to Countee Cullen and Zora Neale Hurston, among others) and classical work performed by Black actors but staged and designed by white artists.’⁷⁹ In April 1936, a 19-year-old Orson Welles was hired to direct *Macbeth* by Houseman. With a cast of 100, the play opened at Harlem’s Lafayette Theatre and was set on a West Indian island using drums and transforming the witches into voodoo priestesses. The production, which could be considered a case of cross-cultural casting, as the entire world of the play was transposed into a different cultural setting, became known as the ‘voodoo *Macbeth*.’ It ran for 14 weeks in New York City and toured the country for 13 more. *Macbeth* was just one in a series of successes for the unit; within the first 20 months it had produced nine dramas, with nearly 600 performances, to an audience of over 400,000.⁸⁰ According to Margurite Rippy in *Weyward Macbeth: Intersections of Race and Performance* (2010), Welles’ interpretation depicted Blackness in ‘heavily primitive terms as something powerful, compelling, and super natural.’⁸¹ *New York Times* critic Brooks Atkinson praised the ‘sensuous black-blooded vitality’ of the witches and admired Jack Carter (as Macbeth) as a ‘fine figure of a Negro in tight-fitting trousers that do justice to his anatomy.’⁸² This is an example of fetishism—attributing sexual imagery to race, which is a feature of negative stereotyping. This concept, which was investigated in detail by Stuart Hall, will be explored in the *Othello* case study in Chapter Five.

I concur with Rippy that Welles’ production should be justly celebrated for showcasing a Black cast during a segregated period in history, yet the production’s more disturbing aspects deserve scrutiny as they too easily trade in the stereotypical fantasies of

⁷⁹ See Callow, Simon, *Voodoo Macbeth: Rhapsodies in Black: Art of the Harlem Renaissance*, in Richard J. Powell and David A. Bailey (eds.), University of California Press, 1977, p. 36

⁸⁰ Dossett, 2020, p. 207

⁸¹ Rippy, in Newstok, Thompson, 2010, p. 84

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 88

‘the primitive.’⁸³ Fifty years later, in his keynote address opening the 1986 NTCP symposium, Houseman shared his WPA experience and noted that with non-traditional casting it is necessary to make decisions that are artistically viable and that those decisions have to be accepted by the audience who ‘must not be troubled or perplexed or thrown-off in any way by the liberties that have been taken in the casting.’⁸⁴ Whether this is akin to asking that the audience be blind to multi-racial casting and a demonstration of the multiple ways audiences can respond to a performance as a result of casting is investigated in further detail in the context of analysing the current situation in commercial theatre in the next chapter.

In the United States the primary impetus for changing casting and hiring practices was the desire to achieve racial integration in all social, political, educational and cultural institutions. Previously watching Black actors playing ‘white’ characters could be regarded as an entertaining novelty. However, with the Civil Rights movement and the resulting changes of the 1960s and 1970s, which created increased opportunities for young Black creatives in theatres and elsewhere, this was no longer the case. As Angela Pao suggests in *No Safe Spaces: Re-casting Race, Ethnicity and Nationality in American Theatre* (2010), ‘The decision to cast actors of colour was an acknowledgement of their abilities and of their rightful claim to all aspects of the national cultural heritage. It was also an implicit or explicit expression of support for their struggles against racial discrimination and for equal rights opportunities.’⁸⁵ For example in a case of blind casting, on Broadway, *No Strings* (1962) and *The Owl and the Pussycat* (1964) both featured interracial couples yet had not been written about race. A decade later, 1971’s *Jesus Christ Superstar* and 1972’s *Pippin* demonstrated non-traditional casting by choosing actors without consideration of race. The result was star-making opportunities for Black actor Ben Vereen in two largely white and hugely successful productions.⁸⁶

In England, C.L.R. James recognising that theatre provided fertile ground in which to explore political ideas, saw his play, *Toussaint Louverture: The Story of the Only Successful*

⁸³ Ibid., p. 89

⁸⁴ Newman, Davis, 1988, p. 14

⁸⁵ Pao, 2010, p. 15

⁸⁶ Lane, 2015, p. 190

Slave Revolt in History, staged in the West End. Described by Christian Høgsbjerg in *C.L.R. James in Imperial Britain* (2014) as ‘a panoramic dramatization of the Haitian Revolution of 1791-1804,’ James’ play was produced in 1934 by the Stage Society at London’s Westminster Theatre. This was the first time Black professional actors had ever performed on the British stage in a play written by a Black playwright and the only time Robeson, in the lead role, starred in a play by a writer of African heritage.⁸⁷ A revised edition of James’s history of the Haitian revolution, *The Black Jacobins* (1938) was published in 1963 and Høgsbjerg and King (2001) note that the success of that work prompted James to revisit his play, making additions and revisions.⁸⁸ Renamed *The Black Jacobins* it was the first play produced by England’s Talawa Theatre Company, which was established in 1985 by co-founders Yvonne Brewster, Mona Hammond, Carmen Munroe and Inigo Espejel. Brewster, who was its artistic director until her retirement in 2002, stated that one reason for starting the company was because Black British actors were limited in the type of work being offered to them and were not given the opportunity by casting directors and producers who ‘were precious about the English plays’ and paid more attention to how Black actors would look on stage rather than their ability to perform the role.⁸⁹ In addition to Talawa, which as of 2025 was still in operation, other Black British theatre companies during this period also staged productions which represented Black experiences and challenged stereotypes. These included Temba (1972-99), Theatre of Black Women (1982-88), and the Black Theatre Forum (1983-2001).

The Black Theatre Forum was an umbrella organisation of 17 African, Caribbean and Asian theatre companies. With funding from the Greater London Council, the Forum produced a series of six festivals in London during the 1980s of plays all written, directed and interpreted by artists of African and Asian descent. In *Alternatives Within the Mainstream: British Black and Asian Theatres* (2006), Alda Terracciano writes that ‘the season presented a programme which offered white audiences the opportunity to see the sort of plays rarely performed in mainstream theatres, reflecting, as they did, the interests

⁸⁷ Høgsbjerg, 2014, p. 160

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 197, and King, 2001, p.31.

⁸⁹ King-Dorset 2013, p. 16

and concerns of the communities to whom the plays referred.⁹⁰ The Forum, as well as the other defunct companies referenced above, were dependent on Arts Council funding that required them to work under specific constraints such as government cuts to the arts due to shifting priorities. Companies that thrived did so by securing grants and multiple streams of funding.⁹¹ As Victor Ukaegbu notes in writing about the Talawa Theatre Company, the survival of a theatre organisation 'depends on the quality of its productions and the availability of a secure resource base.'⁹² The lack of funding and the dependence on grants from white-dominated institutions for these companies, as well as the Black companies in the United States such as the Negro Ensemble Company, Harlem's National Black Theatre, and the Penumbra Theatre Company was lamented publicly by August Wilson in his 'Ground on Which I Stand' speech which I analyse in the *Death of a Salesman* case study.

Playwright Mustapha Matura was from the first generation of Black Caribbean immigrants in Britain, and came to London from Trinidad in 1961 and in 1974 became the first British-based Black playwright to have a play staged in the West End. Matura's plays included productions for the Royal Court Theatre (*As Time Goes By*, 1971); the Bush Theatre (*Independence*, 1979), and the National Theatre (*The Coup*, 1991). As Lennox Goddard noted, 'His plays celebrate his Caribbean cultural heritage by representing West Indian characters speaking in their own accents and articulating their own styles and customs as a political resistance to the dominant conventions of the English stage.'⁹³ While this is not dissimilar to the troupe of Black actors performing *Macbeth* in Welles' WPA production, which had a Caribbean rather than Scottish setting, Matura was drawing from the lived experience of his own culture, whereas there is a history of white creative teams perceiving and marginalising actors of colour as different or exotic and generally treating them as the other. Using NTCP's classification system, Matura engaged in societal casting by employing Black actors for roles from their lived experience. While Welles' *Macbeth* casting might be seen to provide opportunities for displaying specific cultures or races, it can also raise issues that mark performers as exotic 'other' experts in terms of all aspects of their culture. A

⁹⁰ Terracciano in Godiwala, 2006, p. 25.

⁹¹ Macaulay, 2024, p. 174

⁹² Ukaegbu in Godiwala, 2006, p. 127

⁹³ Goddard 2011, p. viii

more recent example of this is the 2012 performance of *Julius Caesar*, one of the plays the Royal Shakespeare Company contributed to the 2012 World Shakespeare Festival, which was specifically staged to demonstrate the mix of cultures within British society through the prism of Shakespeare's plays. This production of *Julius Caesar* was set in East Africa and included the presence of a Black male actor (Theo Ogunidipe) portraying a supernatural, exotic 'witch doctor' thereby invoking primitivism. Director Gregory Doran's treatment relocated this 'tribal shaman' to a contemporary apartheid-era city and included scenes of township necklacing.⁹⁴ By using a visually and politically disturbing action for theatrical effect but changing its cultural meaning to fit the parameters of the play, the creative team misrepresented an 'other' culture.

The examples above are used to illustrate the extensive history of racial concerns in the theatre and the changing perspectives regarding the perception audiences had of Black performers and playwrights over time. From Shakespeare's time to the present, anxieties and concerns have been related to racial difference, which was experienced by Aldridge and players in The African Company and was a primary reason for the formation of Talawa company. In *Alternatives Within the Mainstream: British Black and Asian Theatres*, Ukaegbu describes Talawa as a cultural institution 'formed from the desperation of wasting black talents frustrated by the absence of a creative outlet.'⁹⁵ This company provided opportunities for Black actors as well as playwrights to showcase plays different from what audiences in large theatres in London were traditionally used to seeing. Whether this resulted in movement towards diversity and actors who embody the roles they are playing is investigated throughout this dissertation.

The Influence of Joseph Papp

At the same time Paul Robeson was in England, New York theatre impresario Joseph Papp (1921-1991) was grasping that multi-racial casting would have wide appeal in a city as culturally diverse as New York. Ayanna Thompson begins the 2006 *Colorblind Shakespeare* with the declaration that 'the systematic practice of nontraditional casting or colorblind

⁹⁴ A method of torture which involves forcing a tyre drenched in a flammable liquid on a person and setting it on fire.

⁹⁵ Ukaegbu in Godiwala, 2006, p. 127.

casting began with Joseph Papp's New York Shakespeare Festival.⁹⁶ While he may not have been the first—Angela Pao states Papp's festival was 'among a handful of theatres to make integrated casting central to their artistic policies'⁹⁷—as a known self-promoter, Papp was perhaps the most vocal. In 1954 Papp began producing Shakespeare for free in a church on New York's lower East side—a practice he continued for 35 years. Helen Epstein in *Joe Papp, An American Life* (1994) quotes Papp proclaiming, 'I wanted the verse to be American, the language handled without too much singing. The real point is nobody has a corner on Shakespeare. The artistic impulse, not the accent, is what matters.'⁹⁸ Papp provided free performances of Shakespeare in multiple locations throughout the city, including Central Park. The idea Shakespeare should be available for all including audiences and actors of all ethnicities tracks Hall's contention that images, rituals, and in this case, stories that are told and retold lend significance to human existence 'with a larger, more poetic destiny which predates and will outlive us.'⁹⁹ Papp further maintained it was an Anglophilic myth that only the British could properly do Shakespeare. He believed New York City to be the ideal place for non-traditional casting and Shakespeare's plays the perfect vehicle. 'If you try to reproduce a play the way it was done originally it becomes a museum piece,' he noted. 'You have to draw from what exists. What exists in New York and throughout the world are different coloured people.'¹⁰⁰ Papp's New York Shakespeare Festival was among a handful of theatres to make integrated casting central to their artistic policies. From the 1950s to the 1970s famous Black actors such as James Earl Jones, Morgan Freeman, Denzel Washington and Ruby Dee received their start thanks to Papp's multi-racial casting of Shakespeare's works. His mobile theatre performed plays in public parks, including sites in predominately Black, Hispanic and working-class neighbourhoods.

When his Shakespeare Festival formed a company to perform in New York City's public schools, Papp announced that not only would the actors include all ethnic groups, they would also, 'articulate Shakespeare in good American speech with their own cultural

⁹⁶ Thompson, 2006, p. 1

⁹⁷ Pao, 2010, p. 3.

⁹⁸ Epstein, 1994, p. 93

⁹⁹ Gilroy, Gilmore, 2021, p. 378

¹⁰⁰ Thompson, 2006, p. 5

sounds.’¹⁰¹ In contrast, performance theory expert Richard Schechner, who encouraged audiences to critically examine race, gender, age and body type in a flexible context yet maintained that when non-white performers are ‘integrated’ into mainstream companies they ‘either need to perform stereotypes of their presumed racial type or adopt the performative idiom of the mainstream leaving behind ethnic, racial or regional dialects or speech and movement.’¹⁰² Papp is advocating for actors to speak in their own voice and Schechner is observing that Black actors are often required to find a culturally dominant voice or else perform as themselves as stereotypes. That Black actors would find it necessary to discard a ‘natural’ dialect—what Papp refers to as ‘natural sounds’—or perhaps need to alter the way they walk assumes that they inherently speak or move differently from white actors. Such a statement is an overgeneralisation and embodies the very definition of stereotyping, which reduces and generalises people to a few characteristics of racial difference. Recognition of similarities or differences in others provides one method for understanding our own environment and how we relate to others. In *Theatre and Race*, Young maintains that ‘the more frequently we encounter people whose appearance and behaviour correspond with our previous observations, the easier it is to create classification systems to contain them.’¹⁰³ Papp, seeing how Blacks had been represented on stage, and in media, coupled with his own experiences living in New York, was encouraging awareness of a performer’s race while paradoxically proclaiming he was casting on merit. Two casting practices—colour-conscious and colour-blind—are combined, which adds to the ambiguity of the definitions which was explored in the chapter on terminology.

For example, diverse casting was on full display in 1967 when Papp founded the Public Theatre to produce contemporary plays and opened the venue with the rock musical *Hair* which became a touchstone of the anti-war movement of the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁰⁴ Written by Gerome Ragni and James Rado with music by Galt MacDermot and featuring a multi-racial cast including Black actors Melba Moore, Lamont Washington and Ronnie Dyson

¹⁰¹ Pao, 2010, p. 49

¹⁰² Schechner, 1989, p. 9

¹⁰³ Young, 2013, p. 4

¹⁰⁴ Landis, 2023, p. 73

in lead roles, *Hair* opened on Broadway and the West End a year later where it ran for 1,750 and 1,997 performances respectively. With song titles such as 'I'm Black' and 'Colored Spade' (a tune about prejudice that includes a string of pejorative labels used to describe Black Americans) and a Black character declaring 'The draft is white people sending Black people to make war on the Yellow people to defend the land they stole from the Red people,'¹⁰⁵ race-conscious casting was used and with Blacks making up one third of the cast, the musical provided employment possibilities for Black actors on Broadway during a time when scant opportunities were available. For example, of the 96 plays on Broadway in 1968, aside from *Hair* only two—*The Great White Hope*, and *The Death of Bessie Smith*—featured Black actors. Barbara Lee Horn in *The Age of Hair: Evolution and Impact of Broadway's First Rock Musical* (1991), writes that this made *Hair* the first racially integrated musical and not only opened doors for Black actors but Black audiences as well. 'The message was not black,' Horn wrote, 'the show was related more to white suburban youth and their problems, but it was black kids who carried the show.'¹⁰⁶ Papp was looking for a revolutionary production with social relevance for his Public Theatre and with its subject matter and diverse casting, *Hair* was the perfect vehicle.

Ellen Holly, who first worked for Papp in 1957 recalled being considered inappropriate for white roles in productions by other directors because she was Black and inappropriate for Black roles because of her light skin colour. When her character was Black, she wore dark face and body makeup. However, she saw Papp's Shakespeare Festival as a venue where it was acceptable for her to work with her own face. 'The most remarkable thing about Joe was the colour-blind casting he practiced as naturally as breathing, decades before it became the chic thing to do. For anyone to cast this way, not just once or twice as a matter of political posturing but as a matter of routine over the course of a career was unprecedented.'¹⁰⁷ Monique Day notes that colour-blind castings have been successful in providing opportunities for Black actors, but asserts that claiming one does not notice an actor's skin colour is to pretend that the Black person on stage is not Black.¹⁰⁸ The choice to

¹⁰⁵ Horn, 1991, p. 76

¹⁰⁶ Horn, 1991, p. 134

¹⁰⁷ Epstein, 1994, p.169

¹⁰⁸ Day, 2021, p. 347

remain ignorant has the harmful effect of making it difficult for Blacks to report when they experience discrimination and for management to recognise that bias operates within the theatrical community. The first act of noticing means that the production is always producing representation as the level of the play's meaning, as well as the level of negotiating of cultural norms in relation to the intentional casting decision.

In the Shakespeare Festival's first decade, Papp worked closely with the New York City's Board of Education to bring Shakespeare to high school students. The students were bussed to Broadway with their teachers and families who were African-American, Latino and Asian immigrants—many of whom had never been inside a theatre or seen a Shakespearean play. Papp's objective was to develop new urban audiences as an alternative to the current theatre scene of suburban, wealthy or business-account audiences, which meant beginning with students. 'What you are trying to do is restock a lake where all the fish are dead,' he said in an interview with the New York *Daily News*. 'You have to get the dead fish out and put in the live ones and spawn them. It's the most important part of this job.'¹⁰⁹ What role the audience plays in determining the sustainability of diverse casting practices is one of the questions in this dissertation and is investigated in the following chapter. Papp was astute enough to comprehend that a diverse city like New York was an ideal location for multi-racial theatre. It also made practical sense for a project consistently in need of funds to cast its net widely so as to attract greater public and foundation support.

The desire to cultivate intellectual curiosity and enliven learning to make Shakespeare's works accessible to all audiences, especially students, is no longer a novel idea and is embraced by theatre companies with Shakespeare as part of their repertoire in their mission statements and strategic planning both in England and in the United States. For example, London's Shakespeare's Globe Theatre offers opportunities for young people to develop their skills, explore the power of storytelling and work with expert Globe practitioners through short courses, on-stage workshops and training programmes and special events geared specifically for families.

Although the New York Shakespeare Festival was most likely not the first, it certainly was an early advocate and among the most notable major professional theatre companies

¹⁰⁹ Epstein, 1994, p. 411

to use racially-diverse casting. Gloria Foster, an African-American actor who first worked for Papp in 1955 and continued to do so through the 1980s said that when working for him actors felt they were doing more than just fulfilling a quota. 'Joe always made you feel that you had an open invitation to return many times.'¹¹⁰ While Papp was undeniably influential in furthering multi-racial casting and is celebrated as a prime promoter, it appears even he had some reservations. For example, actor Roscoe Lee Brown appeared in several of Papp's productions but never as a romantic lead. 'Colour-blind casting was never as blind as Papp and other proponents of the practice imagined it to be,' wrote Thompson. Actors of colour were cast to play opposite each other so that interracial unions were avoided. It was the same with families. When James Earl Jones played King Lear in a 1973 production he was provided with Black daughters. Thompson also cites Holly and Robert Hooks as Henry and Catherine in *Henry V* (1965) and again Holly with James Earl Jones as the Macbeths a year later as situations where 'the practice of colorblind casting continued to demonstrate instead of ameliorate the problems with performance and race.'¹¹¹ In these cases Papp saw what he termed as 'colour-blind' casting operable—but up to a point and with qualifications. This example of marginalising actors by restricting them to playing to their identities disallowed a performers' ability to represent the essence of a character's main quality, regardless of their race. The objective need not be a preference for perpetuating what is perceived as the status quo, but a formation of a shared space in which all actors are regularly included, rewarded and celebrated for their work, which is the actual meaning of diversity.

During his career Papp used the Public Theater, a huge six-theatre complex, to present and champion the work of many young playwrights, including David Rabe, Ntozake Shange, George C. Wolfe, David Mamet, and John Guare. His plays also garnered more than 20 Tony Awards and three he produced won Pulitzer Prizes: Charles Gordone's *No Place to Be Somebody* (1969), Jason Miller's *That Championship Season* (1972) and the musical *A Chorus Line* (1975). Forty years later, in 2015, the Public Theater had another major success with the musical *Hamilton*, which is investigated as a case study to examine the various

¹¹⁰ Epstein, 1994, p. 93

¹¹¹ Thompson, 2006, p. 9

facets and implications of what academics, critics and audiences considered innovative casting practices.

Nefretete Rasheed worked at the Public Theater from 1986 to 1996 as the Associate Director of the New York Shakespeare Festival's Playwriting in the Schools Program and became a personal friend of Papp's family. In a 2019 email exchange she shared that although she could not recall if multi-racial casting was ever specifically discussed, it was 'just understood that one of Joe's core philosophies was non-traditional casting and that anyone could portray any role at the discretion of the producer.' Rasheed added that since a multitude of roles are subject to interpretation, 'it seemed simply a case of common sense to cast the best actor for the best role.' In the early 1980s, prior to joining Papp's team Rasheed was among the thousands of aspiring actors/dancers in casting queues on Broadway hoping for their big break. She remembers auditioning for the famous New York Radio City Music Hall Rockettes and afterward laughing at her nerve. 'I recall how utterly ridiculous that was at the time,' she said. 'There were NO Black dancers in that line! But, the reason I started focusing on dance a little more was because options for a Black actress were even less likely.' If the alternative is non-theatrical work or unemployment for actors too long denied opportunities afforded to white actors, the decision to portray stereotypes or accept a role where they are a curiosity, demeaned or on stage to provide comic effect may be preferable to not being able to act at all.

This section introduced theatrical pioneers instrumental in establishing diverse casting practices as more than a novelty but as a recognised practice in commercial theatres in New York and London. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the role of blackface in providing casting opportunities for Black performers to advance and excel.

Blackface

When the words 'theatre' and 'race,' are coupled, my mind automatically goes to memories of numerous past performances where I was pleasantly surprised by how multi-racial casting was artistically employed. However, it may very well be that when others consider those two words together blackface is the term that first occurs to them. Blackface is an entertainment form, founded on parody in which actors paint their faces black and portray stereotypical characterisations of Black people. While the origins are disputed,

whenever makeup was first applied to play a person with a darker complexion throughout history whites wishing to channel blackness onstage to entertain became an international phenomenon, founded on parody and consistently rewarded with applause.

The theatrical practice of white minstrel companies in nineteenth-century America established the negative stereotype images of Black men as shiftless and irresponsible. Yet, according to Renee Simmons, writing about the history of the Actors' Equity Association (1996) blackface minstrelsy 'showcased the unique musical style of 19th-century African-Americans and later, would provide another opportunity for talented black performers to entertain American audiences.'¹¹² Among the most famous Black-American blackface entertainers were Bert Williams (1874-1922) and his partner George Walker (1873-1911), the stars of *In Dahomey*, the first full-length musical comedy to be written, performed and staged by Black artists. In 1903 the team came to London after a successful run in New York and toured through Britain after the show's run at the West End Shaftsbury Theatre.¹¹³ The popularity of blackface performance was so tremendous that Black artists who wanted to perform on the stage frequently discovered that they too had to apply burnt cork.¹¹⁴ As Young noted, by the end of the nineteenth century blackface performance had become not only a cultural export but the first significant and uniquely American contribution to global performance practice.

David Linton in his 2021 *Nation and Race in West End Revue 1910-1930* notes that nineteenth-century London revues affirmed a particular perspective that was bound to conservative traditions, seeking to frame public sentiments within a right-wing context, and were constructed against an 'other' and therefore blackface minstrelsy provided a fertile metaphor for the presentation of a safe idyllic place and time.¹¹⁵ Understanding that their sole opportunity to appear in vaudeville or theatrical shows would be through blackface performance, Black artists accepted the conventions of white blackface minstrelsy and incorporated the practice into their stage appearances, adopting the costuming, malapropisms, and slow-tongued dialect. An artistic scrutiny of this practice was coupled

¹¹² Simmons, 1996, p. 8

¹¹³ Bourne, 2021, p. 76

¹¹⁴ Young, 2013, p. 42

¹¹⁵ Linton, 2021, p. 5

with a stinging satirical examination on the interdependence between races in Douglas Turner Ward's 1965 play, *A Day of Absence*. Written at the height of the Civil Rights movement, Ward's satire is described as a reverse minstrel show as it is performed by Black actors in white face. With a relatively small cast, minimal scenery and props, the one-act play is ideally suited for local theatres with tight budgets. I attended a production at such a venue, although I have since forgotten where or how long ago. *Day of Absence* is set in a sleepy United States Southern town and opens with the white residents awaking one morning to discover all the Black residents have disappeared. It is the 1960s, and for white townsfolk that means no nannies to care for children, no maids to cook meals, no staff to wash cars, sweep floors or clean toilets. Factory production is paralysed. All of this spells disaster for the white residents. Ward's critique of white privilege and what happens when power is threatened was originally produced off-Broadway and ran for 504 performances, with 35-year-old Ward receiving a Drama Desk Award as outstanding new playwright. It was revived in 2016 and an October 2019 production in Washington, DC resonated with presumably liberal-minded audiences in US President Donald Trump's America. Following the success of his 1965 play, Ward, who died at age 90 in February 2021, went on to become a co-founder of the award-winning Negro Ensemble Company and for several years served as its artistic director.

Because of the nature and racial themes of Ward's play, I consider it unlikely that it would be produced with casting contrary to authorial intent. While racially-diverse casting is progressive in many instances, in this case the play's effect in representation depends upon Black actors playing in whiteface, which performs specific power reversals intrinsic to Ward's play. In a similar vein, a more recent example is the 2022 *Tambo and Bones*. In playwright Dave Harris' satire two Black characters are stuck in a minstrel show and plot to escape, get rich and then get even. The plot takes them from minstrel performers to hip-hop stars to activists in the Black Lives Matter movement. I attended a performance of this play in 2025 at the Stratford East Theatre in East London. Additional examples include Braden Jacobs-Jenkins *An Octoroon* (2014) which uses whiteface, blackface and redface; Ntozake Shange's 1979 play, *Spell #7* which focuses on racism faced by Black creatives and minstrel masks are briefly worn in the opening, and 2010 David Thomson's *The Scottsboro Boys* which is framed within the structure of a minstrel show and the actors playing the title

characters appear in blackface in the finale. Despite shifting demographics and populations, plays such as these that feature all or predominately Black casts produced by major venues are infrequent. Also the paucity of Blacks on stage at large commercial venues is an issue which, decades after the New York City premiere of *Day of Absence*, continues to be an issue worthy of the attention of academics, theatre professionals and the theatre-going public.

African-American theatre performers, attempting to draw audiences from the demeaning representation that embodied blackface acts, and a desire to escape from acting stereotypical depictions of blackness, promoted racial realness by advertising the fact they were in reality Black persons using dark make-up. As Newstok and Thompson (2010) note, 'By the 1870s and 1880s some Black actors stopped wearing the minstrel mask and started producing their own shows.'¹¹⁶ This in turn led to incorporating a 'non-blackface-wearing "straight man" into performances whose mannerisms, appearance and gestures contrasted with the caricatured blackface figure, thus offering a more honest representation of Black culture. By the middle-part of the twentieth century blackface had begun to fade in popularity in the United States, although it can still be found in countries with minimal Black populations when it is employed in an attempt to create a 'realistic staging of works featuring black characters whose racial identity is vital to the storyline and the recognition of the lack of black actors in the country.'¹¹⁷ Black actors should be allowed to inhabit their own cultural identity whenever appropriate. The reasoning behind this and other casting practices is explored throughout this dissertation and is integral to my argument that the casting practices in relation to Black artists within commercial theatre in New York and London have influenced social discourse and advanced dialogue on representation issues. While there has been limited transformational progress, my contention is that these discussions—although at present sporadic—can influence change resulting in increased representation.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided a brief overview of the rich history of Black actors including Ira Aldridge and others who challenged the status quo and playwrights like C.L.R.

¹¹⁶ Newstok, Thompson, 2010, p. 8

¹¹⁷ Young, 2013, p. 47

James who reimagined history by centring Black figures and narratives in their work. White creatives like John Houseman, Orson Welles and Joseph Papp advanced the practice of casting Black performers in roles that were previously assumed to be performed by white actors. Throughout history Black artists through their work excelled on stage in parts traditionally previously performed by whites and the struggles they encountered to do the work shone a spotlight on biases and discriminatory assumptions of predominately white audiences. These historical examples were provided to illuminate historical practices and to show how established procedures change over time as they relate to casting practices and as an introduction to the concept of representation in terms of who gets to inhabit these stories. The issue of whether providing performers with new opportunities and promoting racial visibility though casting sufficiently addresses the complexity of racial matters in theatrical representation is directly related to my research question of how casting which does not adhere to the equivalencies of race between the character and the actor has contributed to society's discussions on race. This discussion of historical instances has opened up the key themes of representation and intersectionality by highlighting procedural shifts and a discussion of power dynamics. These ideas will be explored further in the case studies.

In March 1975 the Afro-Asian Committee of British Actors Equity submitted a report entitled, 'Afro-Asian Artists in Theatre,' that spotlighted the difficulties of Black and Asian artists commencing professional careers in the theatre. In analysing the data of the survey the committee blamed directors who 'have no conception of the potential financial benefit to theatre if they tapped into the black market.' And they blamed playwrights for the lack of employment opportunities asserting that that their plays should be more a reflection of a multicultural society.¹¹⁸ To date, dozens of reports and statistical studies in England and the United States have been commissioned by various groups and publications and all have reached similar disheartening conclusions. Potential reasons for the lack of progress are investigated in the next chapter which explores statistical studies designed to investigate racial inequalities in commercial theatre.

¹¹⁸ Stanback, 1983, p. 83

Chapter Four: Analysis of the Current Situation

This chapter which is divided into four sections, explores how through casting practices, protests and advocacy efforts the commercial theatrical communities in London and New York have addressed, or in some cases failed to address, representation of Black professionals in commercial venues. I investigate whether the escalation in theatrical voices for change, including the advocacy work of groups such as Black Theatre United and other organisations which were formed following the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement has made a difference in respect of changing the status quo of under-representation. The efforts of non-profit organisations in England and the United States, including their approaches and outcomes to address racial injustice as well their advocacy of multi-racial casting and increased advancement of Black theatre professionals to executive levels is also dissected and evaluated. This examination addresses the research question regarding the causes and ramifications of the disparities in London and New York commercial theatre.

First, I investigate statistical research studies and surveys which have been commissioned since the 1980s and provide evidence-based research concerning imbalances and trends to assess ethnic disparities in New York and London theatre casts, crews and management as an indicator of whether progress is actually occurring or just assumed. I then consider the current situation through a survey of opinions from prominent Black actors and directors, including inspection of the response of Black theatrical professionals following the protests after George Floyd's murder. In the next section I evaluate the role of critics in advancing or impeding discourse and promoting change in theatre's commercial landscape with consideration of the role the audience performs in contributing to a more inclusive theatre experience and the organisational efforts in England and the United States to make audiences and theatre professionals more reflective of current demographics. I ponder the role of critics and how their commentary and their silence often fail to move the needle toward improvement of increased representation of Black theatre professionals.

In the final section I survey the recent changes in the New York and London commercial theatre landscape through interviews with practitioners and productions which were considered harbingers of change and provide analysis in terms of representation and linking developments to the current social, economic and political situation. To conclude, I

map back to the other histories discussed in Chapter One showing connections with the central themes of intersectionality and representation.

Statistical Studies

Change can be slow or practically non-existent if those at the higher levels are part of and content with the existing conditions. A 2019 survey conducted by *The Stage* revealed nine tenths of those in the topmost positions in England's 50 highest-funded theatres are white.¹¹⁹ As I noted in the introductory section comparing and contrasting commercial venues in London and New York, the central detail both Broadway and the West End share is that power rests in the hands of a few, and those hands are overwhelmingly white. For example, in 2024 the vast majority of the 41 Broadway venues were owned or managed by three organisations:

- The Shubert Organization, which owns 17 theatres;
- The Nederlander Organization, which controls nine theatres; and
- Jujamcyn, which owns five Broadway houses.

In England, there were four main groups who owned the 38 venues on the West End:

- Delfont Mackintosh Theatres, controlled by producer impresario Cameron Mackintosh;
- LW Theatres, owned by composer Andrew Lloyd Webber;
- Ambassador Theatre Group, the largest theatre owner, with more than 60 venues in the UK, US and Germany, including 10 in the West End; and,
- Nimax Theatres, which in 2024 operated six theatres.

The outliers are the independently run venues, including the Shaftesbury Theatre, the Theatre Royal Haymarket, St. Martin's Theatre, which is still owned by the same family who built it, and the Bridge Theatre, run by Nicholas Hytner and Nick Starr. There are also theatres which operate as non-profit charities, which include The Old Vic and Shakespeare's Globe, and subsidised venues such as the National Theatre, the Royal Court and the

¹¹⁹ Snow, 2020, *The Stage*

Barbican Centre.¹²⁰ This illustrates that controlled theatre ownership rests in the hands of a select few who exercise, distribute and exert influences in all areas, including casting. Power lies in leadership. As theatre scholar Errol Hill (1921-2003) stated, ‘True integration in the theatre should mean not integrated casting alone, but integration at the level of decision making, producing and directing as well as in the areas of design and technical production.’¹²¹ Black artistic directors like George C. Wolfe formerly of New York’s Public Theater and Kwame Kwei-Armah who was artistic director of London’s Young Vic from 2018 to 2024, remain unique exceptions and commercial theatre in London and New York continues to be a bastion of white, and primarily patriarchal supremacy.

Another 2019 study by *The Stage*’s news team revealed that Black, Asian and minority ethnic performers make up 38 percent of cast members in the 19 commercial West End musicals.¹²² This figure was interpreted to mean that West End musicals are more ethnically diverse than their counterparts on Broadway, where 34 percent of musical casts are from those backgrounds, with Black actors accounting for 85 percent of that total number. The West End figures were significantly boosted by six productions that feature predominantly non-white casts, including *Hamilton* and *Tina – The Tina Turner Musical*, as well as four longer-running productions—*The Lion King*, *Thriller Live*, *Motown* and *Aladdin*. Together, those six shows accounted for 70 percent of all the non-white performers. After removing those musicals from the figures, the percentage of non-white cast members dropped to 18 percent across the remaining 13 shows. Those included long-running musicals such as *Phantom of the Opera* and *Mamma Mia!* which contain overwhelmingly white casts despite the writing and direction not requiring this to be the case.

The Stage research also looked into the gender of West End musical casts, finding 58 percent of actors performing are men and 42 percent are women. When factoring in gender and ethnicity, white males proved to be the largest group, making up 37 percent of all performers. This is also supported in a 2020 ‘Women in Theatre Forum Report’ which found

¹²⁰ WestEndTheatre.com, 2025

¹²¹ Hill, 1984, p. 187

¹²² Snow, 2019, *The Stage*, 25 April

that 64 percent of artistic directors, 62 percent of performers and 90 percent of critics were men.¹²³

While statistics may be useful to gauge a situation, number-crunching is an activity that can also be simplistic and easy to ignore. Mistaking the act of collating figures as the sole action, rather than viewing the activity as a means to an end provides only a partial picture. In parallel with gathering numbers, by obtaining the stories behind the data which explain why they are what they are the picture may become clearer. Beyond a simple headcount, there are layers of complexity that should be examined to assess a more revealing picture of the situation. For example, if data gathering shows that a theatre has had a fairly equal number of male and female directors, digging deeper to look at whether the plays directed by women are more likely to be in smaller studio spaces instead of the main house, have shorter rehearsal periods, fewer performances, smaller budgets attached to them, lower fees paid to the creative team, a smaller share of the marketing department's time allocated to them can often reveal a whole set of inequalities which, in a simple headcount may have remained invisible. But without looking deeper it may be difficult to get a sense of how much has actually been achieved, what is left to do and what the priority areas should be for targeting energies and allocating limited resources.

Understanding in a thorough and useful way what progress is or is not being made should rely on combining qualitative and quantitative research. The effort to seek out opinions and personal stories can also garner useful findings. For example, in addition to collecting data, the Arts Council England survey solicited opinions in roundtable discussions, focus groups and interviews. On the subject of workforce diversity one contributor, who identified in the survey as 'BAME'¹²⁴ pointed out that one's ethnic background can come with the expectation that one is expected to be more than a role model, saying: 'you are [also] expected to be a carer for younger black people. People don't realise what that does to your creativity and time; it's an added layer of responsibility. If there were more of us doing it, more diversity, it wouldn't be such a big deal. But with us being so few, it's a problem for all of us.' In addition, the contributor highlighted difficulties around career

¹²³ Sphinx Theatre Report, 2020, p. 10

¹²⁴ Note: The 'BAME' classification was used by the UK's Office for National Statistics during this period but, thankfully, it has since fallen out of favour. Ethnic minority groups are now referred to individually rather than as a single group.

development noting that, 'As a black artist, you sometimes get considered as "emerging" until the day you die.' The need to constantly prove yourself in predominantly white arenas is not exclusive to Black theatre professionals nor those new to their careers. Stuart Hall refers to this in terms of the 'burden of representation.'¹²⁵ Black artists are under pressure because individual actions are likely to be seen as representative of the entire group, allowing not only for stereotyping career stagnation but also deferred dreams.

This point was also considered by Jami Rogers who has examined casting traditions at the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) and appropriated the term glass-ceiling, typically associated with feminism, to describe a pattern of relatively few Black and Asian actors attaining a leading role status. Using observation and statistical research she quantified aspects of casting practice including ratios of white to ethnic minority actors in productions and the types of roles they portray within contemporary Shakespearean theatre, examining 225 productions over a time span of 30 years. Rogers conceded that this data set essentially polarises the racial make-ups of casts into white and varieties of 'other' and provides a snapshot of how the National Theatre and the RSC used integrated casting in the 1970s.¹²⁶ The data collected revealed scant evidence of a Black or Asian casting presence at the National Theatre in the 1970s, with the RSC only slightly better in the same time span. Context and evidence of a glass ceiling are provided by highlighting socio-political events that influenced an increase in casting of Black and Asian actors, such as the inner-city riots across Britain in the summer of 1981 sparked by racial unrest and the murder of Black teenager Stephen Lawrence by a gang of white youths. These seminal events contributed to the rise in the belief that theatre should reflect the whole of society in the racial composition of performance. Nevertheless, allowing for notable exceptions—such as the RSC casting Nigerian-born actor David Oyelowo as Henry VI in 2000, and Adrian Lester who became the first Black actor to play a Shakespearean king at the National Theatre in their 2003 production of *Henry V*—the glass ceiling is apparent when looking at statistics. In the 1980s and 1990s the RSC had casts of between 21 to 26 actors with only one or two roles played by performers of Black or Asian descent.

¹²⁵ Gilroy, Gilmore, 2021, p. 148. Also see Tagg, J. (1988) *The Burden of Representation: Essays and Photographies and Histories*, Palgrave Macmillan

¹²⁶ Rogers, 2013, p. 409

According to the United Kingdom's 2017 'Taking Part' survey, 78.5 percent who identified as being in the white ethnic group engaged in the arts between April 2016 and March 2017 as opposed to 70.3 percent in the 'Black and Minority Ethnic group.' And during the 2015-16 Broadway season, 68 percent of all roles went to white actors, while 32 percent went to actors of colour. Of those 32 percent, Black, Latino and Asian performers were only cast in 9.6 percent of the roles where race was not germane to the production, meaning that people of colour were overwhelmingly hired to play roles specifically written for their race. During the 2016 season a production of *Noises Off* by New York City's Roundabout Theatre Company sparked a controversy when all nine roles in the show—a comical farce about a theatre company putting on a play—went exclusively to white actors. Some alleged that seeing an all-white show about theatre might give the impression that the industry is anything *but* inclusive. Martine Sainvil, a spokesperson for The Broadway League, said ensuring true diversity on and off stage was 'a challenge the entire industry is working on. We're not there yet, but the effort is being put in to try to do better.' In an August 2019 *Daily Beast* interview, Christine Toy Johnson, chair of Equity's National Equal Employment Opportunity Committee, lamented the phenomenon of some producers and directors treating diversity as a box-ticking exercise, adding that her hope is that this may lead to more diverse casting.¹²⁷

I believe journalist Afua Hirsch expressed a valid point in her part memoir, part social history book in 2018, *Brit(ish): On Race, Identity and Belonging* when she wrote that it is far too easy to implement diversity schemes without any actual thought as to why society excludes people of colour in the first place. It is not enough to launch diversity projects and studies and set targets without addressing the root causes of under-representation. The pre-set ways of doing things can feel comfortable, reassuring and supportive, but without questioning and changing these processes the output will remain the same. Creating change in theatre is only possible when taking into account the entire landscape.¹²⁸ The size of the change required will take significant time and ongoing, vigilant effort, even if the changes are incremental or seemingly minor. To solve a problem, it is first crucial to have a clear understanding of its causes and what has hindered fixing it in the first place. Without

¹²⁷ Teeman, 2019, *Daily Beast*

¹²⁸ Hirsch, 2018, p. 222

knowing the nature of the problem, people are likely to rush into a situation without appreciation of why it is as it is, possibly failing to identify key opportunities that could enable change. It may be a complex and subtle range of barriers systemically created and reaffirmed by how theatre has evolved to operate, influenced by already established inequalities.

The challenge is for theatre-makers and administrators, working collectively to possess the tenacity, stamina and persistent focus required to make successful, lasting changes in the face of innumerable barriers and frustratingly slow progress. What is required is applying consistent action in a consistent manner over the long term and not mistaking the early signs of progress as definitive, sustained improvement. While there will be the occasional gratifying ‘quick win’ along the way—and examples of some of those achievements are presented later in this chapter—sustainable success will be achieved by playing the long game.

If the predominant role of Blacks in commercial theatre is merely peripheral then the message individuals receive is that their voice carries less legitimacy. This is germane to my argument regarding the ethical and political ramifications of casting practices. Greater representation is enhanced when voices are raised to advocate for changing the status quo of exclusion. Actions taken to increase multi-racial casting and the numbers of Black theatre professionals is addressed in the next section.

Protests and the Theatre Community’s Response

In a 2022 *Performance Research* journal focused on protest, issue editors Andy Lavender and Julia Peetz noted that protests arise in relation to material circumstances in a distinct political system at a particular historical moment. In 2020 theatre communities reacted to the shooting deaths of unarmed Black Americans Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor and the May 2020 murder of George Floyd in police custody which ignited protests against racism and police brutality in more than 1,500 US cities and 60 countries worldwide. Theatre professionals in New York and London raised their voices along with the multitudes to proclaim Black Lives Matter and that it was past time for change.

While Black Lives Matter became an international rallying cry for change and enabled focused discussions on institutional racism, this was not the first time Black theatre

creatives publicly and vocally advocated for improvement in the profession. As president of the US Actors' Equity Association from 1964 through to 1973 and throughout a career spanning more than six decades Frederick Douglass O'Neal fought for increased inclusion of Blacks in all areas of commercial theatre. In the June 1952 edition of *Equity* magazine he wrote an article entitled 'Integration' where he stated, 'In confirmation of the realities of the American scene today, we urge the portrayal of the Negro as a more general part of the scheme of our society, for example as postman, policeman, clerks, secretaries, government employees, doctors and teachers without the necessity of emphasis on race.'¹²⁹ This was an appeal to use casting as a way of reflecting the reality of American culture on the New York stage. In England, in 1968 Equity's Coloured Artists Advisory Committee published a report which in part stated that 'live theatre coloured performers face far greater difficulties than do their white counterparts and few are given a fair opportunity for gaining experience in the practice of [their] art and thereby achieving a high standard of performance.'¹³⁰ The committee concluded that widespread acceptance of a policy of integrated casting would encourage producers and casting directors to consider them for roles not specifically identified by race. A week after the report's publication, *The Stage* published an editorial acknowledging that the idea of integrated casting was 'admirable' but declared it unrealistic asserting that casting directors would find it impossible in 'nine out of ten cases to cast Negro artists in non-coloured parts' adding that casting a Black character with white siblings would necessitate their being made up as white. As will be noted later in this chapter this opinion is not so varied from that of white theatre critics more than six decades later.

In the United States, on 8 June 2020 a letter entitled 'We See You, White American Theatre' was posted as a petition on a website where it was signed by tens of thousands. The petition condemned theatre management ('We have watched you inadequately compare us to each other, allowing the failure of entire productions to be attributed to decisions you forced upon us for the comfort of your theatre's white patrons'); labour unions ('We have watched you turn a blind eye as unions refuse to confront their racism...'); non-profit organisations, agents, critics, casting directors and training programmes. The letter concluded with: 'You are all a part of this house of cards built on white fragility and

¹²⁹ Simmons, 1996, p. 14

¹³⁰ *The Stage*, 1968, p. 14

supremacy. And this is a house that will not stand.’¹³¹ The letter was signed ‘The ground we stand on’—a reference to playwright August Wilson’s 1996 seminal ‘The Ground On Which I Stand’ speech which is explored in *The Death of a Salesman* case study in the next chapter.

As Lavender and Peetz note, ‘Protest also depends upon presence in a temporal sense. It is typically about an issue that is current, a change that is presently desired. Protest is of the moment. It involves action in the here and now of participatory engagement.’¹³² The editors commented that in respect of representation, protest is representational in two key ways. First, those protesting are typically representatives of a group, an affiliation, a political persuasion. They stand (corporeally present), and simultaneously *stand in* for others who are not present. Protestors are not normally elected by others to undertake the work of representation, but self-motivated to their own participation. Protestors undertake action, and do so to mobilise others, which was the case for the originators of the US and English petitions where they gathered communality of interest, and in this sense served the function of actors onstage, ‘representing someone other than themselves (even amid their own investment) while also enacting enunciation.’¹³³ The second sense in which protest is representational concerns its transaction with meaning. Protest represents an idea, a position, a call for action. Without meaning it is devoid of purpose.

Weeks after the petition was posted the *New York Times* sponsored an online program with critic Wesley Morris in conversation with four Black artists who were involved in Broadway shows during the 2019-2020 season. Morris began by asking each if they had signed the petition. Actors Celia Rose Gooding, Adrienne Warren and Daniel Watts all answered in the affirmative, with Watts adding he was one of the original signers. ‘I want to see how Broadway is going to respond to this letter,’ he said. ‘It could go south very quickly.’ However, director Kenny Leon took exception to the question. ‘As with any revolution we’re not a monolithic group,’ he began. ‘There’s room for everybody. I didn’t sign, but applaud the energy. I’m focused on other platforms and just want to encourage everybody to move this needle further down the road.’ Leon noted that it was time for their white colleagues to do the heavy lifting—but not without Black theatre professionals, adding, ‘This is our

¹³¹Change.org, 2020

¹³² Lavender, Peetz, 2022

¹³³ Ibid.

moment. It needs all of us.’ These comments denote a tension for those seeking change and representation: in order to be seen it is necessary to belong, yet belonging often requires adaptation. The politics of representation concern not only the understanding of the power inherent in the visible representation of Blacks but also recognises the mechanisms of production. According to Elan and Krasner in *African American Performance Theatre History: A Critical Reader* (2001), Black theatre practitioners ‘must not only have authority over the representational apparatus but must also use the theatre as a means of protest and revolt in order to change Black lives and fight oppressive conditions.’¹³⁴ Black voices unified can result in education and inspiration, however collaboration can lead to increased power to advocate for meaningful, positive change. For example, on 28 May 2020 more than 60 Black, Asian and ethnically diverse arts leaders wrote an open letter to the British government urging continued progress on diversity efforts. The letter’s signatories included Kwame Kwei-Armah, the Bush Theatre’s artistic director Lynette Linton, and Nadia Fale, artistic director of Theatre Royal Stratford East. Published on the Young Vic’s website, the letter called on the government and private sector ‘to ensure the progress we have collectively made does not fall by the way-side.’ The group also insisted that ethnic diversity be protected and celebrated in policy going forward and proposed that any task force or group gathering to speak about the future of British theatre seek consultation from Black, Asian and ethnically diverse leaders to ensure this commitment.

Celia Rose Gooding, then aged 20, had just made her debut in the Alanis Morissette musical *Jagged Little Pill* when theatres were ordered to close due to the Coronavirus pandemic. During the *New York Times* radio programme she shared with the moderator that even though her career was still in its early stage there were times when she had chosen to be silent for the sake of white comfort and ‘that hasn’t worked. I’m here for a reason—why would I be silent?’ Gooding asked. ‘I love Broadway but Broadway hasn’t served me the way it’s served others. Now I have an opportunity to find my voice because that’s what my ancestors fought for.’ In 2018 at age 29 Warren made her West End debut in *Tina—The Tina Turner Musical* and was portraying the lead and acting alongside Watts, co-starring as her husband Ike. Fighting tears, she mused whether she should continue when theatres

¹³⁴ Elan, Krasner, 2001, p. 6

reopened. 'The world is sifting beneath our feet, how can I think about Broadway? Now I'm thinking about how I can help my people and enough is enough. I'm ready to fight.' Leon, then aged 64 and director of more than a dozen Broadway productions, provided encouragement. 'All of us are storytellers,' he told Warren. 'There is power in our stories. Don't let them take your voice or your storytelling.' All four artists agreed that the murder of George Floyd was the tipping point that should justifiably alter perceptions and lives. Leon summarised by saying, 'If you're the same person after we get out of this, then shame on you.' Although Leon did not sign the petition, he is a founding member of the advocacy organisation Black Theatre United which is discussed later in this chapter.

One Broadway actor and playwright who not only chose not to sign the petition but publicly spoke against it was *A Strange Loop* actor, playwright and Pulitzer Prize winner Michael R. Jackson. 'They're like, "Oh, in the world where George Floyd is dead, we need to talk about our theatre careers,"' he said. 'It's like how can y'all just so casually use this man's corpse to promote your bougie-ass class bullshit? It's disgusting.'¹³⁵ Jackson was alleging that the outreach efforts of Black Theatre United and other advocacy groups were self-serving and expressed his distrust of those he perceived as taking advantage of social justice consensus around George Floyd's murder to further ulterior means. However, personal gain does not appear to be either the goal or outcome of these organisations. Although he was dismissive of their actions, if the goals and objectives of the organisations are realised then I surmise that Jackson most likely would have no qualms about reaping the benefits or representation that arose from their fruition.

In England, theatre professionals wrote their own open letter, 'A Call to Action for Black Representation in British Theatre,' which quickly had more than 1,000 signatures. The letter called for full accountability for past under-representation of Black artists and clear plans outlining transformation. In part it read: 'We are no longer going to accept lip service or empty promises. Panels or conversations that do not result in genuine changes will also not be acceptable. The racism in our industry thrives in a culture of secrets and silence. We're asking for open, honest dialogue as a path to meaningful change.'¹³⁶ Proposed

¹³⁵ Williams, 2024, *The Atlantic*

¹³⁶ <https://theatrealltoaction.wordpress.com/>

solutions included establishing an independent, impartial body to deal with complaints and increased community grass-roots engagement as ‘we believe that a focus on community-led and youth-led organisations is an integral and necessary step moving forward.’ The concerns listed were similar to those in the Broadway petition, but went one step further, declaring that if it appears there’s ‘outright neglect, or dismissal and no room for acknowledgement or conversation, respectfully as a last resort we could potentially stage a theatrical revolt through the art of protest.’ The petitions’ authors stated that this could include peaceful protests outside buildings, and economic protest through cancellation of subscriptions and union memberships. The letter concluded that tensions and protests result in opportunities previously unheard of with a potential positive outcome. As of 2024 none of the threatened ‘last resorts’ have been reported to occur.

One example of actions taken the year of George Floyd’s murder was the addition of a Diversity Equity and Inclusion (DEI) statement by the Shubert Organization to its official website and a year later, in May 2021 the organisation provided an update stating that they ‘moved as quickly as possible to enact real change within the organization’ listing hiring a DEI consultant, developing a company-wide plan and creating a video series to provide a platform for those ‘working to affect positive movement on Broadway and the American theatre.’ When I accessed the website more than three years later it had not been updated. At that time there were five videos on the Shubert Advocacy Series site, and they were all screen shots of Black faces. The fifth and most recent video, a panel discussion, was accessed in July 2024. All of the panellists concurred that statements by management on the need for change were insufficient without follow-through, which struck me as ironic as although the video was not dated, one panel member’s mention of ‘where we are now in 2021’ gave the impression that after an initial push, change was stagnant. This might also be the case in regards to the British petition, as the website had not been updated since 2020.

However, Black Theatre United, an organisation started by 19 Broadway professionals in 2020 with a mission to ‘provide access for up-and-coming Black artists, pathways for art makers and opportunities for industry professionals historically marginalized within the theatre world and beyond,’ was still growing strong four years later. Founding members include award-winning creatives Kenny Leon, Audra McDonald, Billy Porter, Vanessa Williams and Anna Deveare Smith. The group sponsors an ongoing

discussion series called ‘The Business of Show,’ holds an eight-week Broadway marketing internship programme for undergraduate students, and hosts an annual fundraising gala. ‘We’re providing people with opportunities they never knew existed,’ said actor Brian Stokes Mitchell, another founding member during the group’s first discussion series I attended in New York in February 2023 entitled ‘Meet the Founders.’ In early 2025 two founding members of Broadway’s Black Theatre United—Vanessa Williams and Billy Porter—were in London starring in West End musicals, *The Devil Wears Prada* and *Cabaret* respectively. In an example of transatlantic cooperation, Williams has stated that her *Prada* director Jerry Mitchell embraced Black Theatre United’s mission through enlisting a diverse cast and creative teams and delivering diversity training at the start of rehearsals for the production.¹³⁷ Cross-Atlantic conversations between creative teams in the West End and Broadway centred around creating more diversity in casting have the potential to be a fertile breeding ground for increased opportunities for Black actors while also potentially achieving financial success for a productions’ backers. Cooperation between Broadway and West End creatives, however informal, which is built on common history has the potential for cultural, economic and social ramifications and to positively alter the status quo of representation of Black professionals in commercial theatre in England and the United States.

In England, the Black British Theatre Awards is an organisation with a mandate similar to the Broadway-based Black Theatre United. Founded in 2019 by Solange Urdang and Omar F. Okai to highlight and celebrate the influence of Black performers and creative artists, awards are given celebrating achievements across acting, writing, directing and technical production. In 2024 the proceeds from the ticket sales supported the organisation’s youth and engagement mentoring programme. The group’s website includes an ‘Act for Action’ report dated August 2024 which provides an overview of the challenges faced by Black professionals within the British theatre industry. The report which included the results of a survey of 291 theatre professionals ‘revealed systemic inequities that impact their professional, financial, and mental well-being, with significant percentages of respondents expressing frustration over racial bias in hiring practices, tokenism, and

¹³⁷ Hislop, 2024, *London Theatre*, p. 18

insufficient support for career advancement.’¹³⁸ While it remains to be seen whether these movements which sprang from reactions to protests amount to systemic change, although none exist at present, a formalised, strategic partnership bringing together United Kingdom and United States groups such as those mentioned above to exchange views on key issues of mutual concern could result in sustained improvement in diversity not only in regards to casting, but across all sectors of commercial theatre.

The Critics’ Role in Furthering Discussion on Race

As noted above, actors and other theatre professionals may use their fame or platforms to speak out on matters they believe are important, in this case racial injustice and imbalance in theatre. However research has uncovered instances where theatre critics are reluctant to raise the topic of race in relation to casting practices. Why? Critics present reflections that set a production in a broader context. Although they write about a play’s strengths and weaknesses, what sets them apart from the average theatregoer is that they are more concerned with what the production means in the greater scheme of things—including, as Fisher writes in *How to Write About Theatre: A Manual for Critics* (2013), bringing in ‘history, philosophy, aesthetics, politics, sociology and anything else that illuminates the work.’¹³⁹ It could be that when critics mention race they may encounter criticism themselves. This was the case for the *Daily Mail*’s Quentin Letts, who in an April 2018 review of the Royal Shakespeare Company’s production of the early sixteenth-century restoration comedy, *The Fantastic Follies of Mrs. Rich* alleged that Black actor Leo Wringer was only cast because of political correctness. Letts, writing his review for the right of centre publication, claimed the experienced actor was ‘too cool, too mature and not funny enough’ for the role and questioned whether Wringer was cast because he is Black. ‘If so the RSC’s clunking approach to politically correct casting has again weakened its stage product,’ Letts wrote. In reviewing that same production Michael Billington noted in *The Guardian* that the play, also known as *The Beau Defeated*, was ‘pretty average’ but was ‘transmuted into theatrical gold’ by director Jo Davies. The *Guardian* critic did not mention Wringer in the

¹³⁸ Black British Theatre Awards, *Call to Action*, 2024, p. 21

¹³⁹ Fisher, 2013, p. 7

review. The casting, which could be classified as ‘colour-blind,’ was demonstrably noticeable to one critic and unworthy of comment by another.

The RSC’s director Gregory Doran and executive director Catherine Mallyon fired back at Letts with a joint statement that condemned his ‘ugly and prejudiced commentary’ and accused him of demonstrating a ‘blatantly racist attitude.’ Doran and Mallyon maintained that the RSC’s approach is to seek the most exciting actor for each role, and doing so ensures their casts are diverse so that ‘the audiences which we serve are able to recognise themselves on stage and that our work is made and influenced by the most creative range of voices and approaches.’¹⁴⁰ Letts responded by accusing the RSC of throwing a temper tantrum, adding ‘I often feel that colour-blind casting and gender-blind casting is counterproductive and patronising. For me that was the case in this show.’ Reflecting on this experience years later Wringer stated in an interview with Pamela Jikiemi that the backlash from his portrayal had a profound effect on him, stating, ‘What drives me is the need to be part of that movement in art that shows how we can or must look beyond our narrow borders and embrace difference.’¹⁴¹

Doran’s stance that the RSC’s focus was to cast the ‘most exciting’ actor faced justifiable scrutiny and criticism only a few years earlier when, as director of RSC’s 2012 staging of the thirteenth-century Chinese revenge tragedy *The Orphan of Zhao* his decision to have the vast majority of the roles, including all the leading parts, go to white actors playing Chinese characters with only three of the 17 roles performed by actors from East Asian backgrounds not only underscored the power wielded by white management, but also ignited debate. The type of roles three British East Asian actors were assigned was especially problematic. One actor, while performing a variety of small onstage parts only had one line; another played a ghost and operated a dog puppet; the third played a maid. This casting raised issues of ‘stereotyping, invisibility and marginalisation faced by the wider racial-ethnic community.’¹⁴² Doran maintained his casting decision was based on colour-blind casting, but this type of cross-racial casting ultimately protected and benefited white actors. The RSC was accused by British acting organisations, of at minimum, overlooking East Asian

¹⁴⁰ Siddique, 2018, *The Guardian*

¹⁴¹ Jikiemi, 2025, p. 270.

¹⁴² Rogers, Thorpe, 2014, p. 432

actors and at worst, cultural imperialism. The casting in *Orphan of Zhao* gave white actors the privilege of portraying racial 'others' while denying East Asian performers the opportunity to represent themselves.

In *No Safe Spaces: Re-casting Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality in American Theatre*, (2010) Angela Pao writes that 'non-traditional' casting opponents tend to regard it as an attempt to graft a social agenda onto the face of artistic enterprise. Theatre critic Letts would appear to be in that category. 'Resistant spectators are unsettled rather than stimulated by the violations of expectations that innovative casting entails. They are distracted by racially mixed casts, finding the results implausible if not outright offensive.'¹⁴³ In fact, another critic, *New York* magazine's John Simon in April 1991 wrote that non-traditional casting was 'biologically preposterous' and 'socially inconceivable.' Non-traditional casting, he argued, is 'the equivalent of affirmative action in the theatre, which stipulates that companies unable to survive without subsidies can get them only by casting persons of color, of the wrong gender, with physical handicaps, etc., in parts for which they are totally unsuited. It means defying logic, historical and social authenticity, and biological credibility, thus making the theatre a political battleground at the expense of artistic integrity and efficacy.' Although he is referring to the theatre, this argument is made by opponents of diversity and inclusion efforts in numerous other industries who argue that such policies shift focus from an individual's qualifications and ultimately discriminate against whites who may be equally or more qualified. This position discounts historical systemic bias and racism and shows a disinclination to rectify past wrongs. There was no public response from *The Daily Mail* regarding Letts' alleged racist comments and less than a year later—after 18 years on the job—the critic left the newspaper and in February 2019 became the political sketch writer for *The Times* and chief theatre critic for *The Sunday Times*.

In 2017 *The Chicago Sun Times* had no qualms about standing up for their critic Hedy Weiss who was labelled a bigot after her assessment of a modern day *Waiting for Godot*. In her review of the Steppenwolf Theatre's new play *Pass Over* by author Antoinette Nwandu, critic Weiss condemned what she viewed as an indictment of all white police officers and

¹⁴³ Pao, 2010, p. 3

wrote that one particular speech condescended to the theatre's white liberal audience. Steppenwolf directors issued a statement calling her piece 'particularly egregious' and stating that the review revealed a deep-seated bigotry and a lack of understanding of historic racism. The criticism did not end there. This particular piece resulted in an online petition signed by 3,500 actors, audience members and others to bar Weiss from reviewing future shows.

'Everyone's a critic' is a frequently quoted cliché. And as with most clichés, the saying contains a grain of truth. After eating at restaurants, staying at hotels, visiting hair salons, and number of other communal activities people share their opinions with others, often on social media sites. And prior to engaging in those activities it is not unusual for individuals to look at said sites to determine what others thought. A UK survey by Ticketmaster in 2013 reported that one in five theatregoers had written 'reviews' of shows they had seen. Many of the individuals had done so online. But does that mean 20 percent of audience members are critics? This is unlikely, as the survey did not give a definition of what constituted a review. However, as Fisher notes, 'for as long as theatre has existed every audience member has had an opinion about it. Often the opinion is simply expressed ("I loved it" ... "It was merely okay" ... "I was bored"), but it is an opinion nonetheless. When it comes to opinions, critics have never held the monopoly.'¹⁴⁴ Today's technology allows everyone's opinions to be widely and quickly disseminated. Being a critic involves considerably more than airing one's opinions. Sharing thoughts and ideas is a normal activity, but it is analysis that makes a critic. What counts is the reasoning behind those opinions and seemingly most individuals are not interested in providing commentary to that level of detail.

In an editorial defending Weiss the *Sun Times* declared, 'We are all free to complain, defend and debate. But Hedy Weiss is a theatre critic of integrity who writes from a place of honest good faith' and added that her review did not come close to the alleged bigotry. *Pass Over* came to London's Kiln Theatre in February 2020 and was reviewed by *The Telegraph's* Dominic Cavendish who proclaimed it well acted, but unsubtle. Although no mention was made of the Chicago controversy, he wrote that 'the white characters are crude ciphers for

¹⁴⁴ Fisher, 2013, p. 5

racial prejudice, latent or otherwise while the play's reproofing message is hammered home to a self-defeating degree.'¹⁴⁵ I was curious, wanted to make up my own mind and eagerly looked forward to attending *Pass Over* and sharing the experience and opinions with a friend. The Kiln production was scheduled to run until 21 March 2020 and was extended until 4 April. However, on 16 March all performances were cancelled due to the coronavirus pandemic. Both Broadway and West End theatres were dark for the next six months.

During the height of the national lockdown I thought about a 1993 production of Thornton Wilder's *The Skin of Our Teeth* I attended which I reference later in the *Oklahoma!* case study and the playwright's frequent references to the end of the world and pending natural and human-made disasters. I envisioned perceptive New York or London-based producers reviving Wilder's play and those shows gaining an appreciative, somewhat sombre audience after the world survives a pandemic that resulted in tens of millions of deaths. Isolated in my London flat I reread my tattered copy of the play and the following lines given to the character Sabina in Act One:

Sabina: The fact is I don't know what'll become of us...The whole world's at sixes and sevens, and why the house hasn't fallen down about our ears long ago is a miracle to me. In the midst of life we are in the midst of death, a truer word was never said.¹⁴⁶

Two years later I exclaimed 'I knew it,' when I read a newspaper report about a 2022 post-pandemic production of *The Skin of Our Teeth* at New York's Lincoln Center. I was not in the city at that time but thanks to the New York Public Library of Performing Arts I was able to view a recording of the revival a year later, which featured a Black American Antrobus family. Wilder's play is now in the public domain and this production added dialogue that referenced August Wilson, Maya Angelou, bell hooks and Covid ('For two years we've been waiting on the theatre to return to what it used to be...'). Even watching it on a small television in a darkened library, Wilder's words voiced by this predominately Black cast had the power to affect and inspire.

Mr. Antrobus: I know that every good and excellent thing in the world stands moment by moment on the razor-edge of danger and must be fought for – whether

¹⁴⁵ Cavendish, 2020, *The Telegraph*

¹⁴⁶ Wilder, 1962, p. 99

it's a field, a home or a country. All I ask is the chance to build new worlds and God has always given us that....We've come a long way. We've learned. We're learning.¹⁴⁷

This optimistic dialogue is an example of how casting decisions can result in altering nuances of meaning. As delivered by Black actor James Vincent Meredith those words can also be interpreted as reference to civil rights or Black Lives Matter in addition to the battle the audience had just witnessed on the stage.

I was at London's Southwark Playhouse the very evening London theatres were closed due to the pandemic and saw a revival of the musical *The Last Five Years* on 16 March 2020. I returned on 1 September the first evening theatres reopened and travelled to Wembley Park Theatre to attend *Sleepless*, a new musical based on the 1993 movie *Sleepless in Seattle*. Neither production employed multi-racial casting, the artistic teams were all white and the number of Blacks I saw in the audience could be counted on one hand. In both instances I was the guest of a white theatre critic. I was not surprised when he made no mention of the lack of racial diversity in the cast or the audience composition in his published reviews. I was the 'other' looking for representation, not he. In *The Darker Side of the Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality and Colonization* (2006), Walter Dignolo urges us to question the assumptions inherent in the forms of cultural production and communication and the ways we must inspect how we analyse societies, particularly our own, and how the representations of others entail consequences. 'The crux of the matter is that when cultural differences go beyond common memories... we have no alternative but to understand the differences in relation to our own identity and to look at ourselves as others.'¹⁴⁸ In this situation, I was the observer in my interactions with the critic as a surveyor of the audience members surrounding me and as a viewer of the production.

One of the most controversial critics of modern times was the aforementioned *New York* magazine's John Simon. Numerous playwrights, actors, theatregoers and readers labelled his critiques biased, cruel, racist, misogynist and homophobic. He denied being all those things, and argued that no one was above criticism, especially the untalented and those who, in his view used race, gender or sexual identity to claim preferential treatment. 'I

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 176

¹⁴⁸ Dignolo, 2006, p. 23

do not like people who are a professional this, that or the other,' he said in a 2008 interview. 'Professional writers, actors and singers are O.K., but I don't like professional Jews, professional homosexuals, professional blacks, professional feminists, [and] professional patriots. I don't like people abdicating their identity to become part of some group, and then becoming obsessed with this and making capital of it.'¹⁴⁹ Simon began writing theatre reviews for the *New York* magazine in 1968 and was dismissed in 2005. That year he had likened Denzel Washington, playing Brutus in *Julius Caesar*, to 'a naïve sophomore in a college comedy.' From *New York* magazine he went onto write for Bloomberg News and was fired from there five years later. In 1981, an advertisement in the trade publication *Variety* appeared accusing Simon of being 'racist, anti-Semitic, misogynist, vicious, and derisive.' It was signed by 300 artists, apparently upset over his review of *Richard III* in which he complained that a female actor in the show 'should never be cast as anything but an itinerant gefilte fish with a nervous condition.' Simon died in November 2019 at the age of 94. A *New York Times* obituary noted that he was not without supporters. 'His fans applauded the obvious intelligence of his writing; the deep knowledge of the classics and of languages that informed his reviews (he was known to correct playwrights' grammar and word usage).'¹⁵⁰ He was also noted for his bravery in expressing his opinions in no uncertain terms.

One instance of a theatre critic specifically writing about how race and casting can be used to 'fashion a theatrical world that speaks to the multicultural reality' of society was when in 2021 *New York Times* London-based critic Matt Wolf used a cultural development--the popularity of the Netflix television series *Bridgerton*—to advance understanding of casting practices. Using examples, including Black actor Josette Simon as the female lead in the a 1990 production of Arthur Miller's *After the Fall* and Adrian Lester's turn as Henry V in 2003 at the National Theatre and more recently the 2019 Young Vic production of Miller's *Death of a Salesman* which is discussed in the next chapter, Wolf used his significant platform to advocate the position that 'time honored stories belong to all us, regardless of race.'¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁹ McFadden, 2019, *New York Times*

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Wolf, 2021, *New York Times*

Writing about theatre is an act of translation. It turns the language of performance into the language of words. 'You start with a performance. It begins at a fixed time and has a predetermined length, yet, moment to moment, it is fluid and organic, already resistant to ordinary words. Its meaning may be communicated through words, gesture, music, lighting, costumes, choreography, design, or more likely some juxtaposition of all these elements.'¹⁵² According to Billington, who at the end of 2019 retired as *The Guardian's* chief theatre critic after more than 10,000 plays and 48 years on the job, a critic's role is to 'describe, interpret and evaluate a theatrical event for readers who were not there and may have no chance of going. You are not writing for scholars, posterity or the cast of the show, although it would be nice if they all read your words. You are addressing that morning's reader with as much clarity and elegance as you can muster, and seeking to put a transient event in its theatrical and social context.' Unlike the vast majority of audience members, when critics attend a play it is not an occasional, and sometimes fairly expensive, treat. For them it is a professional requirement.

As theatre critics, both Weiss and Letts as well as Billington and my critic friend had a responsibility to record, interpret and evaluate. For them and their colleagues the thrill of watching Shakespeare or any classic for the sheer joy of finding out how it ends is a distant memory. A theatre critic is there to bear witness. Viewer, actor and/or theatre administrator concurrence with their views is not, nor ever should be, a prerequisite. However, as is the case with actors, directors and administrators and owners, the current lack of racial diversity in theatre critics has implications when investigating theatre's failings and looking at its future. Different backgrounds, experiences and perspectives contribute to increased reflection and awareness. Arifa Akbar, a woman of Pakistani descent, became *The Guardian's* chief theatre critic in 2019 following Michael Billington's retirement. Two African-American writers, Maya Phillips at the *New York Times* and Vinson Cunningham of the *New Yorker*, are theatre critics for two prominent publications. As theatre criticism becomes less the exclusive domain of seasoned white males and the number of Black critics as well as those of different ethnicities increases I expect the discourse for exploring race and representation will become more prevalent.

¹⁵² Fisher, 2013, p. 1

Artists' Reactions and Positive Change?

In response to monitoring data published in December 2015 by Arts Council England which revealed that people from Black, Asian and other minority ethnic backgrounds¹⁵³ are significantly under-represented in theatres across all areas, with figures as low as 5 percent at some venues in London, where 41 percent of the population is minority ethnic, the 40,000-strong Broadcasting, Entertainment, Communications and Theatre Union (BECTU), began a major initiative involving more than 90 theatres across the United Kingdom to tackle representation issues. This Theatre Diversity Action Plan was a 10-step guide for theatres to increase the diversity of their workforce. Backers included major commercial theatre operators, subsidised venues and several notable figures including the mayor of London Sadiq Khan, actor and director Adrian Lester and Kwame Kwei-Armah. National Theatre executive director Lisa Burger welcomed BECTU's charter, saying, 'it is collectively, as an industry, that we will generate the creativity and commitment to ensure that our workforce is made up of the widest range of talents.'¹⁵⁴ The plan recommends that each theatre establish a joint working group between its management and BECTU before evaluating its equality policy and assessing its workforce. BECTU suggested each theatre then set a realistic target to be reached and reassess its application and recruitment processes to attract more Black, Asian and other minority applicants and ensure a more level playing field. BECTU diversity officer Janice Turner said the union would continue to advise theatres as they put the plan into action. She stated that 'rather than putting the onus on employers to address this issue alone, we decided to assist them by using the best knowledge we had available – our members' experiences,' noting that representatives were also asked about the reality of theatre recruitment to establish how it really works.

Lester called the plan a 'giant leap forward for theatre' and argued it should be applied to the wider creative industries. Khan added that it was vital that people from all backgrounds should be able to access the array of theatre available and urged the creative sector to follow BECTU's lead. The BECTU's step-by-step guide to addressing diversity in the workplace included the following recommended actions:

¹⁵³ The acronym used was BAME.

¹⁵⁴ Masso, 2018, *The Stage*

- Accurately assess the makeup of the theatre's workforce if the venue has not already done so and determine how the results compare to the makeup of the general population;
- Decide a realistic target and timeframe for achieving equitable representation;
- Study how individual roles are usually recruited, the ethnicity of applicants and acquire new recruitment sources; and,
- Conduct regular evaluations of the plan with updates to the union about progress.¹⁵⁵

In 2019 the union created a 22-page race equality resource guide for members which was updated in 2022. The guide provides information on race equality law, how to create a more inclusive workplace and negotiating for equality and includes a section with a focus on theatre diversity.¹⁵⁶

Researching the theatre community's actions to address access and diversity led me to reflect on the US Actors' Equity Association's 1985 study which revealed that 90 percent of all plays professionally produced were done with all-white casts, leading to the formation of the Non-Traditional Casting Project, which devised casting definitions. When NTCP was formed in 1986 its primary focus was on actors and casting, as the founders believed that empowering actors who had historically been excluded was an important part of their mission. Throughout its existence, the NTCP co-sponsored or served as advisors for regional conferences held in several cities including Los Angeles, San Francisco, Boston, Washington, DC, Dallas and Hartford, Connecticut. It also helped organise more than 90 forums on non-traditional casting for theatre organisations, community groups, universities and student organisations. Sessions at these forums had such titles as, 'Non-traditional Casting: What Tradition?' 'Realizing the Play, or Playing with Reality?' 'Re-viewing the Audience,' and 'The Next Tradition.' Like the first 1986 symposium, programmes often included staging scenes from well-known tragedies or comedies with ethnic, female and disabled actors in principal roles.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ BETCU, 2018

It is not surprising that the questions raised from the first symposium highlighted that casting was just one part of a much bigger issue. The group discovered the deeper they dug the more complex and sophisticated both the questions and answers became. A name change, to the Alliance for Inclusion in the Arts, was required as the organisation recognised a need to address these issues as comprehensive. When casting is investigated, I argue that one begins to see how the disparity issues also affect directors, writers, choreographers, designers and the audience. This in turn raises concerns that extend to theatre policy, philosophy, staffing, programming, messaging, accessibility, and boards of directors. For 31 years the Alliance addressed all those issues, but ceased operations in December 2017. A message from their Board President Linda Earle on the organisation's website said that the group would pass the torch to stronger and equally dedicated partners advocating for disabled artists and artists of colour.

Has progress been made since? On Broadway at the time of *Hamilton's* premiere there was a definite sense that progress was in the air. In late 2016 actor Denée Benton, a newcomer, was cast in one of the title roles in Broadway's new musical *Natasha, Pierre, and the Great Comet of 1812*, along with popular singer Josh Groban. According to an article on National Public Radio's WNYC website the unusual decision to cast Benton, a Black actor and singer, to play a seventeenth-century Russian countess showed that non-traditional casting was becoming more prevalent. Early the following year it was announced that Okieriete Onaodowan, fresh from the role of Hercules Mulligan in *Hamilton*, would be replacing Groban. This meant that two Black actors would be the leads in a Broadway production not specifically written for Black actors.

The WNYC article cites *Hamilton's* success for bringing a resurgence to the concept of non-traditional casting and provides additional examples. According to the article, 'recently shows like *Les Misérables* and *Phantom of the Opera* opted for blind casting, which in *Phantom's* case allowed for the first Asian-American and African-American actors to be cast in the principal roles of the Broadway production.' In that same period another newcomer, Jelani Alladin also found success on Broadway. As he tells it, although he showed up for the audition for a popular Broadway musical based on a Disney film he had his doubts. 'I didn't really see myself being in *Frozen*,' he said in an interview posted on the NBC news website in May 2018. 'It's an all-white piece. There aren't really any characters in

there for me.’ But after the audition and a few call backs later Alladin was cast in the principal role of Kristoff and made his Broadway debut. ‘I think it’s quite major for a black man to be playing this part that is about love and vulnerability,’ he said. ‘Usually you see the black man in torment or the black man in rage. To see him be the one that you're rooting for [to end up with Princess Anna], that is huge.’¹⁵⁷ Alladin also took special care to ensure that Kristoff would be a character audiences would root for. During rehearsals a scene was altered at his request that had Kristoff stealing items that he and Anna would need on their winter journey. Cautious not to perpetuate a stereotype, Alladin suggested that the characters convince the shop owner to give them the items instead. ‘I'm not going to be up here as a black man stealing something from this man's store, because that is wrong,’ Alladin said. The change was made.

The *Frozen* role was not the only casting example of Black actors starring in new productions on Broadway during the 2018 season. As well as Noma Dumezweni transferring from the West End to portray Hermione Granger in *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*, that year also saw Tony award winner Denzel Washington return to Broadway as Hickey, the play’s protagonist in Eugene O’Neill’s *The Iceman Cometh*, which premiered in 1946. The role had not been played by a Black actor on Broadway since James Earl Jones in 1973. George C. Wolfe, directing *The Iceman Cometh* said that the character was ‘not really’ changed by being played by a Black actor. ‘There are rhythms that are in play that are Denzel's and rhythms that are O’Neill’s, and I think they marry each other beautifully.’ Washington's performance earned him another Tony Award nomination.

That year also saw Joshua Henry as Billy Bigelow in *Carousel*. This Rodgers and Hammerstein classic had never before had a Black man play this lead role on Broadway. He too received a Tony Award nomination for his performance. Then Jordan Donica appeared as Eliza Doolittle’s would-be suitor Freddy in Lerner & Lowe’s *My Fair Lady*, being the first Black actor to play this role on Broadway. And in 2018 there was also Condola Rashad as Joan of Arc in *Saint Joan* who was the only Black actor to play the historical figure on Broadway since Diana Sands in 1967.

¹⁵⁷ Bonhomme, 2017, WNYC.org

And in London, in November 2019 Black actor Amara Okereke appeared in the West End as the ingénue Polly Browne in *The Boy Friend*, a 1950s' parody of 1920s' musicals. Staged at the 180-seat Menier Chocolate Factory, *The Boy Friend* is a frothy tale that takes place in a finishing school on the French Riviera and features a romance between a millionaire's daughter and an aristocrat's son. It is now best known as the show that helped launch Julie Andrews' career when she made her 1954 Broadway debut as Polly. The revival—and Okereke—received favourable reviews with the *What's On Stage* critic proclaiming 'it'll be exciting to see what [Okereke] turns her hand to next.' In the six reviews I read the (to my mind) unique fact of a Black actor portraying a millionaires' daughter in a musical set in the Roaring 1920s was never commented upon. Should this be considered progress or wilful blindness? As stated previously, the assumption of audience colour-blindness is a fallacy. Considering this casting to be so common as unworthy of notice may seem progressive, but I believe it to be a missed opportunity to acknowledge improvement of theatre management in reflecting demographic shifts.

If the casting choices cited above were not sufficient to suggest a shift among directors and producers in their openness to reinterpreting characters through a more racially diverse lens and expanding roles beyond how they were written or previously 'traditionally' portrayed then consider the case of Lauren Ridloff, a multi-racial mother of two, who could not imagine herself in the role of Sarah in the revival of *Children of a Lesser God*—a performance that earned her a Tony Award nomination for best leading actress in a play. The role was originally played by Phyllis Frelich when it debuted on Broadway in 1980 and by Marlee Matlin in the 1986 movie—both white actors.

The play focuses on a deaf woman's complicated romance with a hearing man who teaches at a school for the deaf. Ridloff was hired by director Kenny Leon to teach him American Sign Language while he was developing the production. Rather than audition, she was offering to recruit for the role. 'I was trying to be helpful by suggesting several deaf actresses who were young and white,' Ridloff said. 'In retrospect, I cringe at how oblivious I was about diversity casting.' Her interaction as a tutor for the director also resulted in a revelation for Leon, who is Black. 'All of a sudden I said, I'm looking at Sarah right in front of me,' Leon said. 'I just started expanding my worldview in terms of what the role would be.' Leon's creative decision led to critical raves for Ridloff (who had only a few acting credits

when she was cast) and invited additional depth to the play's themes through a fresh interpretation of the character. As an example of intersectionality, not only did the play investigate the struggles of the deaf community in society, this production of *Lesser God* also took on racial undertones. 'Now instead of just looking at it on one dimension, it works on three,' Leon said. 'If she brings her new, hearing boyfriend to meet her mother, and her mother is African-American and Sarah's African-American, now you're dealing with not only deaf and hearing issues, but you're also dealing with race and class.'¹⁵⁸ This is indicative of Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality which espouses that forms of equality, such as race, gender, class and age, are connected and overlap on a personal and structural level, which requires attention to difference and in turn leads to questions about who we are or what is being excluded or erased. Intersectionality requires that efforts to address one form of oppression take others into account. Efforts to fight racism would require examining other forms of prejudice (like anti-Semitism, for example); efforts to eliminate gender disparities would require examining how women of colour experience gender bias differently from white women (and how non-white men do too, compared to white men).

While the casting choices deployed, illustrated above, may suggest a shift among those wielding power in the theatre community to increased openness to reinterpreting characters through a more racially and gender-diverse lens and expanding roles beyond how they were written or previously 'traditionally' portrayed, I argue it is not enough. As Kerbel writes in *All Change Please, A Practical Guide to Achieving Gender Equality in Theatre*, targeting energy on broadening the range of individuals in power who, through casting choices, set the tone of artistic output is an obvious place to start. I concur with Kerbel that if increased scrutiny on the issue should result in enhanced understanding and building on past successes then sustainable change may be the desired outcome.¹⁵⁹

The work is ongoing and for every one example of progress, often another can be found showing the polar opposite. For example, in April 2024 when Francesca Amewudah-Rivers was cast opposite Tom Holland, a white actor known for playing the title character in the hit movie *Spiderman*, for a West End production of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* she

¹⁵⁸ Soltes, 2018, *Hollywood Soapbox*

¹⁵⁹ Kerbel, 2017, p. 100

encountered racist backlash in the form of online harassment, hate mail sent to the Duke of York's Theatre and even death threats. 'I know I'm not alone,' she stated in an interview five months after the show closed. 'I know other actors who have had similar experiences, more recently too. For [this casting] to cause such an outrage means we have a long way to go.'¹⁶⁰ In an interview with Pamela Jikiemi for the 2025 *Out of the Black Box: Conversations with the Global Majority*, Amewudah-Rivers further questioned the extent or lack of progress particularly in management positions. 'It's like, why are you hiring Black people when they're not reflected behind the scenes, or when actually they're not safe on the job, or when they're saying that they need something and you're not listening,' she asked. '..To me that feels exploitative, that feels unsafe, that feels disingenuous...'¹⁶¹ Former NTCP executive director Sharon Jensen would agree. 'The world, including theatre—to which we all aspire is one in which everyone has the same opportunity, the same shot. However, we are far from that utopia,' she shared in an email exchange. 'Are we past this? No! We're in a country that elected someone who is racist. I think we have a long way to go. [Director] Lloyd Richards said every 20 years we have to relearn everything again. You have to fight for these things—whatever your bent is, that's your responsibility—to fight.' I concur with the strategies Kerbel suggests for achieving gender equity, as they are also applicable in terms of Black representation in theatre, including regularly scheduled evaluations and holding individuals accountable for changed behaviours and actions by inserting language into position descriptions. Along with clear strides in casting Black performers in roles previously not available to them, I argue that ongoing advocacy of groups like New York's Black Theatre United and the efforts of London's Black British Theatre Awards to marshal resources and support also show potential to affect systemic change in commercial theatre.

Conclusion

In this chapter I investigated the current state of considerations in relation to employment representation and critical discourse in commercial theatre. The underlying aspect of my argument is that the discussions that have arisen have ultimately raised problematic issues impacting commercial theatre that extend beyond casting. Despite formation of groups organised to change the status quo the commercial theatre in London

¹⁶⁰ Chambers, 2024, *The Stage*

¹⁶¹ Jikiemi, 2025, p. 136

and New York has yet to see the systemic, structural changes needed to be truly diverse, inclusive and welcoming to artistic professionals from all backgrounds. While there has been some progress as evidenced by increased representation of Blacks in lead roles that previously were the domain of white actors, I contend that change has been slow, sporadic and not so ubiquitous as to be unworthy of comment. As of 2024 ensuring these venues reflect the demographics of both countries has yet to become a reality. Without increased representation and equity in how theatrical organisations are run—from the administrative to the technical to the financial and including the creative—problems and inequities will persist.

With the overwhelming majority of West End and Broadway critics and audiences still the domain for affluent whites a reluctance to cause them discomfort during a performance which could have the impact of decreased theatre revenue may influence decisions on what plays to produce, which authors to support and who to cast. In the next chapter I use case studies of productions which ran on both Broadway and the West End to illustrate how unconventional casting is used to advance dialogue on race issues facing society and provide insights that arise from the productions in relation to the key themes of representation and intersectionality.

Chapter Five: Case Studies

The four case studies in this dissertation provide an in-depth, multi-faceted exploration of the impact casting practices have had in popular discourse in relation to racial issues in commercial theatres in New York and London. Productions which ran both on Broadway and the West End are compared, contrasted and employed to provide insights that arise regarding the key themes of representation and intersectionality to advance my argument that development of casting assumptions and practices over time and the conceptual issues that apply map onto ideas of how power is unequally distributed in the commercial venues of Broadway and the West End.

I begin with *Othello*. Analysis of productions of this Shakespeare drama and portrayals of the title character are pertinent to my research question as throughout history they have contributed to discussions on race and revealed various assumptions about customary practices both in casting and theatrical representation. The works of Young (2013), Jarrett-Macauley (2018), Karim-Cooper (2023) and others are probed to show how *Othello* productions are used to further understanding of race as socially constructed with shifting meanings in different historical periods and cultures. I conclude with exploration of the connections between the two theoretical concepts and analyse how they coalesce in *Othello*.

Next I explore the 2019 West End and 2023 Broadway revivals of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* to investigate how intentional casting is employed and can advance racial and societal commentary. Playwright August Wilson's specific reference to this drama in his now famous speech indicting 'colour-blind' casting, the subsequent well-publicised debate and the scholarship that arose from the discussion necessitates inclusion in this case study. Analysis of Wilson's stance has not been undertaken in the context of these revivals until now. This contributes to existing scholarship on race and casting in contemporary theatre.

The final two case studies are musicals. Observing three performances of Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* during a five-year period allows for detailed analysis of how three directors have used this oft-revived classic to address issues of representation and inclusion. Lin-Manuel Miranda's phenomenally successful *Hamilton* includes a mix of casting

practices and is investigated to explain and explore the societal impact of multi-racial casting and inclusiveness in commercial theatre.

Othello

Analysis of *Othello* productions and portrayals of the title character are pertinent to my research question as throughout history they have contributed to discussions on race and illustrate attitudes to and issues concerning representation. In this case study I expand the investigation of the procedural shifts in casting practices introduced in Chapter Three and demonstrate how these practices employed in *Othello* productions have been used to advance dialogue about racial injustice. I argue that representation of power and its unequal distribution specifically as it relates to Black actors in various productions has had ramifications for commercial theatre on both sides of the Atlantic. First I begin with an exploration of Othello portrayals over time before discussing two plays that were written with Othello portrayals as their focus and what they reveal. I conclude with an analysis of views from academics on race as the predominant theme of *Othello* and examine a 2024 Globe production designed to accentuate race as a commentary and condemnation of contemporary British society.

Portrayals Over Time: Is Othello Black?

The character Othello is a jealous, middle-aged respected military hero who marries, and later kills his significantly younger wife Desdemona and then commits suicide. He is goaded into these actions by a vengeful Iago, angered after being overlooked for promotion. Arguably, *Othello* is Shakespeare's only play that features a 'Black' title character. There is debate as to whether the fact Othello is a Moor is a significant element of the narrative. Although Othello is identified as such, there have been multiple interpretations of his racial identity. The writer William Kenrick said in 1774 that Othello could not be Black and was 'at worst only a tawny color' if only because a white, pure Desdemona could not have fallen in love with a Negro.¹⁶² In *Race & Theatre* (2013) author Harvey Young asks, 'How could a play about a black man who marries a white woman, and, later, murders her not engage with race?' However he then adds that the play surprisingly reveals little about racial thinking in the Elizabethan era and claims that unlike *The Merchant of Venice* (1596) *Othello* is not centrally concerned with cultural or racial difference.¹⁶³ According to Farah Karim-Cooper in *The Great White Bard: Shakespeare, Race and the Future* (2023), 'the Moor' is a phrase that

¹⁶² Karim-Cooper, 2023, p. 36

¹⁶³ Young, 2013, p. 26

appears more than 45 times in *Othello*, 'lest we might forget his otherness for a brief moment.'¹⁶⁴ In 1833 the famous British actor Edmund Kean bitterly complained about portrayals of Othello as Black and opted to portray the character as 'vaguely Middle Eastern.' Although always portrayed as an 'other,' Othello did not become consistently 'Black' until Ira Aldridge interpreted the role at London's Covent Garden, just one month after Kean's performance on the same stage.

In the autumn of 1943 Paul Robeson's Othello also took America by storm, running for 280 performances at Broadway's Shubert Theatre before going on a multi-city tour. Lewis Nichols, writing for the *New York Times*, praised both the production and acting as excellent and declared the show to be the best interpretation in many years 'and one that should remain on hand for a long time to come. Robeson's stature as a huge man was noted and that he looked the part.' There was no mention of his race. As an interesting aside, Robeson studied voice and diction with Ira Aldridge's younger daughter, Amanda Ira Aldridge and among her possessions at the time of her death was a photograph of Robeson in part inscribed with thanks for the inspiration received from the reports of her father's greatness and concluding with, 'I realize that I can only carry on in the tradition of Aldridge.'¹⁶⁵ Paul Robeson said he considered *Othello* a tragedy of racial conflict, rather than jealousy or vengeance. For him Othello's objective was to overcome the slurs of his race by 'exemplary behavior under all conditions.'¹⁶⁶ It is Iago, the play's villain, who uses Othello's colour in an attempt to sow discontent and as a weapon for revenge. While acknowledging Shakespeare's gift for interconnecting themes and perspectives, Karim-Cooper declares that race is not merely one aspect of Othello. She further adds that the repetitive use of the phrase 'The Moor' keeps Othello's 'otherness' at the forefront of the tragedy.

However Young maintains Othello's colour is a fairly insignificant detail that only the envious Iago takes issue with. In Act One, Scene One Iago calls out the racial difference disparagingly to Desdemona's father following their elopement ('Even now, now, very now, an old black ram/Is tupping your white ewe.') Karim-Cooper disagrees with Young's theory and notes that despite extensive scholarship on race in Shakespeare, while academics may

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 48

¹⁶⁵ Marshall, p. 3

¹⁶⁶ Hill, 1984, p. 7

argue that race is merely one of the playwright's themes and shares space with military comradeship, jealousy, and domestic abuse, 'race is the very motor of *this* play.'¹⁶⁷ The emphasis is hers. I agree that race is the predominant theme of *Othello*, but that it is intersected with paranoia, jealousy, envy, and toxic masculinity which carries the action forward to the play's tragic conclusion.

There is a long tradition of white actors, including Laurence Olivier and Orson Welles playing Othello in blackface. Paul Robeson Jr. attributed the change in casting Othello 'authentically' to his father, stating at the Non-Traditional Casting Project's symposium that the elder's success made it not just acceptable but mandatory for Black rather than white actors to perform the role. For example, the Royal Shakespeare Company halted *Othello* productions for 20 years to avoid the practice until 1999 when Black actor Ray Fearon was cast in the title role.¹⁶⁸ Robeson maintained that his father actually reversed artificial traditional casting by making it not just acceptable, but *de rigueur* for Blacks rather than white actors to perform Othello.

British classically trained actor and Star Trek television star Patrick Stewart chose to put himself in the role of 'other' and conceived the idea of portraying Othello with an all-Black cast in a 1997 Shakespeare Theatre production in Washington, DC. Stewart said he hoped that replacing the Black outsider with a white man in a Black society would encourage a broader view of the fundamentals of racism. 'I've been imagining myself playing Othello and, in a sense, preparing for it, since I was about 14,' Stewart said. 'When the time came that I was old enough and experienced enough to do it, it was the same time that it no longer became acceptable for a white actor to put on blackface and pretend to be African.' In lieu of artificially darkening his skin, Stewart was afforded his opportunity to be 'the Moor' by virtue of his fame which allowed an entire production to be mounted around him to accomplish his lifelong desire.

Washington Post critic Lloyd Rose praised Stewart's performance as commanding and fascinating but he was less enamoured with the idea of a white moor and a Black cast. 'The potential dynamite fizzles,' he wrote, 'largely because race prejudice is only one of

¹⁶⁷ Karim-Cooper, 2023, p. 116

¹⁶⁸ Thompson, 2006, p. 7

several dramatic elements in the script and won't stand up to being made into what the play is about.'¹⁶⁹ Also he noted that Stewart's Othello being sneered at as Black falls flat. 'If the purpose was to show how foolish and empty racial derogations are, how they're just words, the device misfires. Racial derogations end up seeming meaningless, even harmless.'

Ayanna Thompson, editor of *Colorblind Shakespeare: New Perspectives on Race and Performance* (2006) agreed with that assessment and wrote that such productions seem to fuel a conservative agenda that racism does not exist anymore so the audience can therefore ignore it. This is partly in contrast to the *New York Times*' commentary on 21 November 1997 where critic Peter Marks maintained that Stewart's race reversal attempt was more than a mere trick and the Shakespeare Theatre's company sought to shatter stereotypes and remind playgoers of the 'endlessly adaptive nature of Shakespeare's exploration of otherness.'¹⁷⁰ Yet Marks also found fault with the production's commentary on race relations. 'Surrounded by a roomful of white faces, Othello seems a figure of strength and sympathy. But when Othello is a white military leader—what more recognizable authority figure exists in Western culture?—it's hard to feel particularly sorry for him,' Marks wrote, adding that this was an instance in which race reversal did not jibe with an audience's sense of the way the world beyond the theatre works.¹⁷¹ As evidenced by these reviews, this production succeeded in its attempt at 'conscious casting,' which actively draws attention to the ways in which race alters a production, thereby encouraging audiences (and critics) to specifically notice an actor's race and ponder its meaning and value in performance.

I was living in Washington, DC when Stewart was starring in this production and, knowing of his theatre credentials as well as being a Star Trek fan, I dearly wanted to attend. Alas, the entire run sold out almost immediately and I was unable to obtain a ticket. In 1997, at the time of Stewart's attempt to 'photo reverse' *Othello*, the concept of racially diverse casting did not loom large on my radar screen. As an audience member I was primarily interested in attending the theatre to see a celebrated star in what I believed to be a once-in-a-lifetime performance. In hindsight, Stewart's Washington, DC production strikes me as

¹⁶⁹ Rose, 1997, *Washington Post*

¹⁷⁰ Marks, 1997, *New York Times*

¹⁷¹ Ibid

a vanity piece that, due to his star status any theatre company in England or the United States would leap at the chance of producing. And although I have always believed that the villain Iago has the meatier, more nuanced role, I can also understand why Stewart wanted his chance at interpreting what is considered one of Shakespeare's great tragic heroes.

Almost 20 years later, in a 2015 *Daily Mail* interview Stewart said he would love to play the part again with an all-Black cast because, 'I am in favour of as much diversity as possible because it's art—it's not politics, it's not government, it's creativity.'¹⁷² In a 2005 interview with author Thompson for *Colorblind Shakespeare*, Timothy Douglas, an actor who has directed numerous racially-diverse cast productions of Shakespeare, said that while conceptually it was a great idea, he was troubled by the 'photo negative casting' of Stewart's *Othello*. 'Patrick Stewart is a fantastic actor. I absolutely loved hearing him do Othello,' Douglas said, adding that the bigger message for him was that the audience was being encouraged to set aside or ignore the legacy of African enslavement. 'I go to see something like this and it says to me, 'Oh, we've dealt with that. So we are all past that... But I can't as an American: I sit there and I see race. And I see the white man getting the best lines.'¹⁷³ This is in line with Dyer's study of representation of white people who contends that the point is to dislodge whiteness from its centrality and authority, not to reinstate it. As long as whiteness is represented as the human condition then it defines what is the norm.

While a production with a wildly famous white film star and award-winning thespian surrounded by an all-Black cast would be a novelty that results in additional employment opportunities for Black actors, suggesting that repeating the 1997 production is a stand for diversity and inclusion is a stretch. A white Othello surrounded by a sea of Black faces shifts the power dynamic and diminishes the dilemma and pathos of the title character facing a world shaped by white supremacy.

Red Velvet and 8 Hotels: Representation and Power

Public interest in *Othello* and specifically Aldridge's career received a significant boost with *Red Velvet*, a 2012 play by Lolita Chakrabarti that retells the 1833 struggles of the

¹⁷² Shakespeare, 2015, *The Daily Mail*

¹⁷³ Thompson, 2006, p. 139

actor in taking over for Kean in the role of Othello in Covent Garden. The playwright's then spouse, award-winning actor Adrian Lester, portrayed Aldridge. Nominated for several Olivier Awards, *Red Velvet* was revived in London in 2014 and since 2020 has been produced by more than a dozen theatres across the United States. Reviewing the 2012 production at the Tricycle Theatre, *The Guardian* critic Michael Billington gave it four out of five stars and declared that 'the play deftly reminds us that Aldridge's London Othello took place in the context of fierce debates about the abolition of slavery, and that his casting acquired inescapable political overtones.'¹⁷⁴ An example of this is in scene six when the character Aldridge observes, 'When Kean plays the Moor, we're amazed at how skilfully he descends into this base African tragedy, but with me it seems I'm revealing my true nature.'¹⁷⁵ As Karin-Cooper notes the encounter with Shakespeare for a Black man can be vastly different and a more alienating experience than for a white actor. Through Aldridge the author is making the point that *Othello* is not just about Blackness, but centres on whiteness as well, particularly in relation to the representational transaction with a predominantly white audience.

I was curious to see a different representation of casting of *Othello* impacting Black actors like Aldridge and Robeson in regard to their lifelong struggles with racism on stage and in life so in August 2019 I took a two-hour train ride to England's West Sussex region and attended a matinee performance of *8 Hotels*, a drama about Robeson and his famous, decades-long portrayal of Othello, produced by the Chichester Festival Theatre. Looking at the programme I noted that this new play was inspired by playwright Nicholas Wright's encounter with Robeson's Desdemona, the Tony-winning American actor and drama teacher Uta Hagen. Although I was willing to give Wright the benefit of doubt and be pleasantly surprised with a fully fleshed-out character, I feared this would mean Robeson's story would be told from the perspective of the white cast members. My suspicion proved correct.

The four-person play begins in 1944. In the programme notes for *8 Hotels*, Wright noted that for Robeson to play Othello in the United States was a political message in itself.

¹⁷⁴ Billington, 2012, *The Guardian*

¹⁷⁵ Chakrabarti, 2012, p. 90

In 1940s America Black actors seldom appeared onstage except as servants, slaves and nannies. Margaret Webster, an English woman making a name for herself in the United States as a Shakespeare specialist, was the director. She discovered that casting was tricky. For the part of Iago she first turned to Maurice Evans, a suave English actor who frequently performed Shakespeare roles on Broadway, but he turned her down. 'America isn't ready for a black Othello,' he told her. Other offers produced the same reply. Paul Robeson, Jr., as one of the featured speakers at the 1986 National Symposium on Non-Traditional Casting, looked back at his father's breakthrough production and recalled to those in attendance that the Hearst newspapers suggested a riot would ensue if Robeson were to play opposite a white woman. 'They couldn't decide whether the riot would develop when he kissed her or when he strangled her,' his son said, adding that big name actors refused to go near the production. Finally Webster found a young unknown Hispanic actor named Jose Ferrer for Iago and even younger unknown actress named Uta Hagen to play Desdemona.¹⁷⁶ As Robeson Jr., noted, there was apprehension at the prospect of a Black male appearing in a romantic situation with a white woman.

When *8 Hotels* opens, 'Jim Crow' or segregation laws were in force and through the dialogue the audience hears of the real-life designated areas of accommodation and transport for Blacks and whites, as well as separate schools, churches, parks, restaurants and restrooms. As previously stated, the 1943 production enjoyed a long Broadway run prior to setting out on a nationwide tour. It was during the tour that racism became a major issue. The show could not tour in the South, as it was deemed unsafe. But wherever it travelled there would be theatres that had never before hosted a racially integrated audience and did not plan to change that practice. Robeson, Webster and the management insisted that performances should be open to all. Occasionally the company would arrive at a venue and discover ticket holders were deliberately seated on opposite sides according to race. Also, when Hagen, Ferrer and Robeson ate together in a restaurant it was not unusual for waiters to come rushing up to place discreet screens around them. In some hotels Robeson was asked if he could use the service elevator so as not to upset other guests.

¹⁷⁶ Newman, 1986, p. 64

Robeson's passport had been revoked because of his alleged communist affiliations; in 1951 he met with United States officials to get it reinstated. The effort was unsuccessful and the following year Robeson, along with members of the Civil Rights Congress made a presentation to the United Nations arguing the United States government was guilty of genocide due to its failure to outlaw lynchings. By 1956, when *8 Hotels* ends, the civil rights movement has gained momentum.

I thought all four performers in the 2019 Chichester Festival production of *8 Hotels* were exceptional. My issue was with the writing. Robeson is depicted as a 46-year-old Russian-loving, serial philanderer and (at best) a mediocre thespian who arrogantly refuses the acting advice of the two white women, the director, 'Peggy' Webster and 25-year-old Hagen, Desdemona to his Othello and his lover off stage during the show's tour. An example of white entitlement can be found in this fragment of dialogue given to Webster, complaining to another character about Robeson's abilities, which I found indicative of white privilege:

Peggy: And, oh, his acting! I despair. Othello mustn't *intone*! He mustn't *boom*! He mustn't sound like an old ham actor, or a gloomy preacher warning his congregation about the perils of drink. His words would reach our hearts and upset us dreadfully, because they would be *spontaneous*. They'd be *real*. Never have I had such a failure with an actor and God knows I've had a few. After the show, I had a thousand notes for him, but I feebly winnowed them down to three and he didn't want *those*.¹⁷⁷

Also, although all the onstage action takes place in hotel rooms, Robeson is the only character given a nude scene, further playing into the stereotypical myth of the highly sexualised Black male. In its portrayal of Robeson, I found *8 Hotels* to exemplify Stuart Hall's examination of representation. Placing individuals, in this case Robeson, in a marginal space gives others, in this situation the play's author through his characters, the power to speak for Robeson and tell his story. The character Robeson is classified as an 'other' and is marginalised by those with more power. Exaggerating the perceived exotic, the heroic or tragic aspects of the other (the under-represented) or romanticising allows a represented

¹⁷⁷ Wright, 2019, p. 25.

culture wielding power to use their representation of 'others' to portray their vision, which is deemed better.¹⁷⁸ I contend that as the author of *8 Hotels* Wright's choice to make white characters the focus of a play supposedly about a Black actor was a study of how white people represent themselves. As Richard Dyer notes in *White* (1997), 'White people claim and achieve authority for what they say by not admitting, indeed not realising, that for much of the time they speak only for whiteness.'¹⁷⁹ In his play Robeson was seen as Black and 'other'; the other characters were represented as normal.



Figure 3 Paul Robeson (Othello) and Uta Hagen (Desdemona) in the stage production *Othello*, *The New York Public Library Digital Collections*, 1943.

Academics' Analysis of Othello and Race

To address racialised representation Hall uses Paul Robeson as an example and relies heavily on Richard Dyer's study, *Heavenly Bodies* (1986) as a source. Dyer maintained Robeson was perceived differently by white and Black audiences, who while each valuing

¹⁷⁸ Hall, Evans, Nixon, 2013, p.

¹⁷⁹ Dyer, R. White, 1997, p. xiv

spontaneity, emotion and naturalness, had different implications depending on which race was the spectator. Dyer identified themes through which Robeson came to embody 'the epitome of what Black people are like and that his choice of roles played directly into the black/white, emotion/intellect, nature/culture binary oppositions of racial stereotyping.'¹⁸⁰

At the conclusion of their chapter in *Shakespeare, Race and Performance: The Diverse Bard* (2016) Lennox Goddard looks at the Royal Shakespeare Company's 2015 production of *Othello* which cast a Black actor as Iago, to reflect on whether comparable casting of a Black female as Desdemona would be a useful indicator of how perceptions of multi-racial casting and attitudes towards Black female actors in Shakespeare have progressed. Issues around race and casting, Goddard writes, seem to be most prominent in relation to Shakespeare's plays because the tendency towards casting white performers conflicts with ideas about the cultural legacy of his work and the 'universality' of his plays.¹⁸¹ This is in line with Errol Hill in *Shakespeare in Sable: A History of Black Shakespearean Actors* (1984) who opines that Shakespeare primarily created roles that do not depend on race and that the playwright's characters have a common humanity and a shared destiny that can be re-created by Blacks as well as white actors.

Goddard finds it significant that Lucian Msamati was cast as the first Black actor to portray Iago at the Royal Shakespeare Company in 2015, which 'hints both at complete color-blindness in ignoring the tradition of casting white actors to play' that role and writes that casting a Black actor as Iago would impact how the production is understood 'and on how the casting decision affects the text's logic and alters the dynamics between the main characters, particularly how it connects with debates about how Iago's motivations work through racial discourses.'¹⁸² Ralph Berry, in a 2004 *Contemporary Review* article entitled 'Shakespeare and Integrated Casting,' maintained that however *Othello* is cast, Iago has to be played by a white actor 'else the play is destroyed.'¹⁸³ This was disproven by the RSC production, directed by Iqbal Kahn. As RSC's artistic director, Gregory Doran stated that with

¹⁸⁰ Hall, 2013, p. 243

¹⁸¹ Goddard, 2016, p. 83

¹⁸² Ibid., p. 91

¹⁸³ Berry, 2004, p.36

a Black Iago, specifically Msamati, ‘every line became freshly minted’ and was revelatory.¹⁸⁴ Theatre critic Paul Taylor, writing for *The Independent*, called the production a significant milestone for the RSC, but noted that racism still simmered below the surface and this interpretation made it harder for the actor to convey Iago’s destructiveness and diminished Othello’s outsider status.¹⁸⁵ Although casting Iago as Black is uncommon, I contend that the character’s motivations are such that his race need not be impactful. Iago’s goal is to sow discontent and he uses what is available, in this case Othello’s colour, as a weapon for revenge. Karin-Cooper concurs but goes further and asserts that a Black actor cast as Iago did not shift the dynamic from race, but rather highlighted the issue of racial colourism—the belief that a lighter skin tone is superior to a darker one.¹⁸⁶

How *Othello* would work with a Black Desdemona is worthy of discussion because, as Goddard notes, it could be considered as an indicator of the progression of multi-racial casting and attitudes towards female actors in past decades. Discounting Stewart’s 1997 Shakespeare Theatre’s *Othello* production, Black women have been precluded from this particular role. Goddard raises the question: ‘Would a production so steeped in ideas of a stereotypical contrast between a black man and a white woman—the ‘old black ram’ and a ‘white ewe’—retain its effectiveness with a Black Desdemona?’ and theorises that such a casting decision would suggest the ultimate potential of inclusive casting in opening opportunities for Black women. Goddard refrains from answering the question they pose, and concludes with ‘I think the question remains as to whether we will ever have a black Desdemona.’ In examining this question within the concept of intersectionality, I can envision a future Black Desdemona in a production exploring themes of colourism, the explicit preference for lighter-skinned women and the damage caused by this bias where the lighter one’s skin, the greater their social value. As bell hooks writes, ‘All black folks, even those who know very little if anything at all about North American history, slavery and reconstruction, know that racist white folks often treated lighter-skinned black folks better than their darker counterparts.’¹⁸⁷ An Iago approaching a loving father he suspects practices

¹⁸⁴ Brown, 2014, *The Guardian*

¹⁸⁵ Taylor, 2015, *The Independent*

¹⁸⁶ Karim-Cooper, 2023, p. 117

¹⁸⁷ hooks, 1994, p. 174

discrimination that favours light-skinned members of the same ethnic group and using that knowledge to disparage Othello is plausible and would not require any change in motivation and a very minor change in dialogue.

Humans like to see stories that reflect their lives and exploration of a Black Desdemona, a Black (and blond) 'good witch' Glinda in Stephen Schwartz's musical *Wicked* (2003), or a Black actor cast as the heroine Laurey in Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* which I explore in another case study, all suggest a shift among creative teams in their openness to reinterpreting characters through a more racially diverse lens and expanding roles beyond how they were written or previously ('traditionally') portrayed and are key to my investigation of how multi-racial and diverse casting has changed the modern-day theatrical commercial landscape.

Celia R. Daileader coined the term 'Othellophilia' to address the tendency to cast Black actors in 'colour-blind' roles that are reminiscent of *Othello*—coupling a Black man with a white female—and defines it as the critical and cultural fixation on Shakespeare's tragedy of inter-racial marriage to the exclusion of other definitions. In her essay she argues Othellophilia has disturbing implications for Black actors with Shakespearean aspirations and that the modern Anglo-American myth of the sexually potent Black male and his morally dubious white female target can be traced to Othello. Othellophilia is not consciously perpetuated, Daileader writes, but rather simply occurs and is not unique to a handful of British directors and exploits both white women and Black men. I was in agreement up until she concluded her thought with the sentence, 'The choices for a black actor are limited indeed. It's almost as bad as being a woman'¹⁸⁸ and I question whether this provocative statement and the comparison of who is more oppressed—provided without additional justification—was necessary to advance her argument. Daileader renders Black women invisible with her declaration. Race, gender and other individual characteristics, can intersect with one another and overlap and scrutiny of how this intersectionality of identities are impacted through casting is explored throughout this dissertation.

When the Royal Shakespeare Company put on *Othello* in 2015 with British Ghanaian actor Hugh Quarshie as the lead, in an interview with *The Guardian* he said that Black

¹⁸⁸ Daileader, 2000, p. 196

performers should endeavour to carefully explore the role as well as the play's context. 'Only by black actors playing the role can we address some of the racist traditions and assumptions that the play is based on,' he said, later adding that what people make of the play says more about themselves than it does about Shakespeare. Inherent in this approach is an admission that 'socio-political and cultural-historical factors influence an audience's viewing abilities.'¹⁸⁹ Those same factors were also under consideration decades earlier in the United States when Black Shakespearean actors achieved notoriety during the depression-era 1930s due to the efforts of the government-sponsored Work Projects Administration (WPA) Federal Theatre Project discussed in Chapter Three. Fifty years later, in his keynote address opening the 1986 NTCP symposium John Houseman shared his WPA experience and noted that with non-traditional casting it is necessary to make decisions that are artistically viable and that those decisions have to be accepted by the audience who 'must not be troubled or perplexed or thrown-off in any way by the liberties that have been taken in the casting.'¹⁹⁰ This is akin to asking that the audience be blind to multi-racial casting, yet *Othello* allows the audience to witness how racism and mistrust can unravel a powerful man in real time, regardless of whether Iago or Desdemona are played by Black actors. The power of this destruction was on full display for viewers in 2024 at Shakespeare's Globe in an intensely emotional *Othello* production.

2024: Othello and His 'Other'

In January 2024 the Globe's production of *Othello* was set in modern-day London rather than sixteenth-century Venice and the marketing copy noted this version asked challenging questions, including, 'What does it mean for accomplished Black men to be torn down by the society that initially lauded them?' Naturally I was anxious to view this production, directed by Ola Ince and I was frequently delighted by the numerous contemporary modifications including food obtained courtesy of Deliveroo, mobile phone selfies, references to Eton, the Docklands area and a Desdemona frequently referred to as 'Dessie.' This *Othello* was a detective chief inspector with London's Metropolitan Police force dealing with criminal cartels in the London's Docklands section. For this modern-day version it was racism, not revenge or envy, which was the paramount focus. This was

¹⁸⁹ Thompson, 2006, p. 8

¹⁹⁰ Newman, Davis, 1988, p. 14

accentuated to an excessive degree both visually, through the physicality of an additional character who mutely portrayed Othello's subconscious—twitching and spinning with each racial slight or microaggression—and audibly with the repeated use of racial epithets through walkie-talkies.

The casting of actor Ira Mandela Siobhan as the subconscious Othello alludes to the 'double consciousness' explored by W.E.B. DuBois defined in the production's programme by Jeffrey Boakye as a concept where 'Black people are forced to live a kind of 'two-ness' within one body.'¹⁹¹ In *Theatre and Race* Harvey Young cites DuBois' 1904 *The Souls of Black Folk* to explain the power of community consensus to assert its domination over another creating for Black people what DuBois describes as a 'sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, or measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.'¹⁹² The majority white audience was forced to witness a Black man's trauma and plight as he tragically struggled to assert his masculinity in a context of racial inequality.¹⁹³ That evening, after the production I found myself thinking about Stuart Hall's investigation of fetishism – the fixing of particularly sexual imagery in relation both to race and to gender, which is a feature of negative stereotyping. Fetishism in representation involves disavowal, the strategy by means of which a powerful fascination or desire is both indulged and at the same time denied, which was embodied in the movements of Othello's subconscious, which could be considered a displaced form of representation. In Hall's definition it could have been perceived as different or 'primitive' but can also be considered bizarre or exotic. Through the use of two performers in the role of a single character this 2024 *Othello* production effectively captured how racial tension, societal scrutiny, hostility and bias can intersect resulting in, as MacManus writes 'the breakdown of an individual's mental state under extreme emotional duress.'¹⁹⁴ If audience discomfort was the goal of the director and artistic team then their mission was accomplished.

¹⁹¹ Boakye, 2024, p. 22

¹⁹² Young, 2013, p. 12

¹⁹³ Boakye, 2024, p. 22

¹⁹⁴ MacManus, 2024, p.27

Conclusion

The fact is that almost 200 years after Aldridge's success discussions about *Othello* portrayals as they relate to casting and race persist and Black actors continue to grapple with what it means to portray this character. Casting practices have changed through time and interpretations of this Shakespeare drama reflect those shifts. Exploration of the themes of representation and intersectionality were seen through Othello's trials with otherness, fetishism and racial difference. Karim-Cooper writes that not only is *Othello* a play about race because its title character is a Moor, but it is also a play about race because it 'centres upon whiteness and the white spaces that Othello is employed to defend.'¹⁹⁵ This section showcased the complexities and potential impacts related to casting by relating the controversies of challenging racial assumptions through the iconic role of Shakespeare's Othello. Examples presented of the contemporary interpretations of the title character directly link to the history of racial concerns faced by Aldridge and other Black trailblazers discussed in Chapter Three. Then and now biases, political overtones and the discriminatory assumptions continue to impact casting decisions and careers of Black actors. The white spaces prevalent in commercial theatre venues and the internality of casting are two of the avenues explored in the next case study, *Death of a Salesman*.

Death of a Salesman

This case study investigates the 2019 and 2022 West End and Broadway revivals of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* which featured a Black Loman family in mid-twentieth-century America. Did this casting decision change the play's focus? Through exploration of the revivals I respond to that question and reveal how these productions are relevant to my argument that the deliberate casting choices made by the creative team instigated public discourse on racial issues. An investigation of August Wilson is germane to this discussion and is included in this case study because the playwright specifically drew attention to Miller's drama in a well-publicised 1996 speech denouncing what he termed 'colour-blind' casting. This is pertinent because as one of America's most successful playwrights Wilson used his platform to elevate discussion on casting practices in a way that had not been attempted previously. To lay the foundation, Wilson's background is explored to understand

¹⁹⁵ Karim-Cooper, 2023, p. 114

how he arrived at his position and how it ties into issues of representation and a concept of 'otherness,' which is defined as anyone or group perceived by the 'in' or dominant group as not belonging or being different in some fundamental way. It is important to look at Wilson's origins, as well as his creative output to see what brought him to his conclusions about casting and how they continue to resonate decades later. In this context I discuss Wilson's speech which drew the attention of the New York theatre world, including critic Robert Brustein. Their public discourse remains an example of how casting practices can incite discussions on race which was acknowledged by the cast and production leads involved in the *Death of a Salesman* revivals. In addition I examine how the intentionality of casting can contribute to racial, societal and political commentary and investigate Wilson's assertion that staging Arthur Miller's drama with African-American actors would be an insult to the Black theatre community.

The Ground on Which Wilson Stood

'All of art is a search for ways of being, of living life more fully. We who are capable of those noble pursuits should challenge the melancholy and barbaric, to bring the light of angelic grace, peace, prosperity and the unencumbered pursuit of happiness to the ground on which we all stand.'¹⁹⁶

With those words Wilson concluded a speech and at the same time sounded an alarm that rings decades later. In his 1996 seminal talk at Princeton University's McCarter Theatre Center the playwright proclaimed colour-blind casting 'an aberrant idea that has never had any validity other than as a tool of the Cultural Imperialists [*sic*] who view American culture, rooted in the icons of European culture, as beyond reproach in its perfection.' Wilson maintained that casting Black Americans in what are considered traditionally white roles was equivalent to having them perform as mimics. 'Colour-blind casting is the same idea of assimilation that Black Americans have been rejecting for the past 380 years,' he declared. 'For the record, we reject it again.'¹⁹⁷ Wilson began his speech with the qualifier that he was speaking for himself. But the playwright's voice—and in 1996

¹⁹⁶ Wilson, 1996, p. 73

¹⁹⁷ Wilson, 1996, p. 70

he was speaking as a recipient of two Pulitzer Prizes, four New York Drama Critics Circle awards, two Drama Desk awards and one Tony—was one of immense power.

Mid-way through his speech Wilson made his declaration that an all-Black production of *Death of a Salesman*, or any other play conceived for white actors as an investigation of the human condition through the specifics of white culture, denied Blacks their humanity as well as their own history, and represented an insult to Black theatre professionals.¹⁹⁸ Wilson's argument was Black actors in the play would merely give a new face to someone else's cultural experience.

Sharon Jensen, as executive director for New York's Alliance for Inclusion in the Arts (formerly the Non-Traditional Casting Project) was in the audience and approached Wilson after his speech. In a 2019 interview she told me when she queried Wilson about his remarks he elaborated that he considered 'non-traditional' casting a moot point since Black theatre professionals were nowhere near a level playing field compared to white artists. According to Wilson, the scarcity of works produced by Black playwrights for Black theatre actors and the extremely limited venues available to them to perform those works equated to what amounted to a near silencing of the African-American voice. History needed to be confronted and acknowledged before a level playing field could be achieved, and Black people, rather than those in power in predominantly white theatre, should lead the charge. 'The balance of scales was so unequal that it was like a knife in his heart,' Jensen said, adding that his ground-breaking speech aided in focusing discussion on casting practices. Wilson's stance is analogous to Talawa co-founder Yvonne Brewster's goal 'to open up, almost by any means possible, the wonderful world of live theatre to as many Black people as possible.' *In Alternatives Within the Mainstream: British Black and Asian Theatres* (2006), Brewster specified that her objective was not to exclude white artists, adding, 'surely there were sufficient people working on their behalf.'¹⁹⁹

Wilson died at age 60 of liver cancer in 2005, six months after the Yale Repertory's premiere of *Radio Golf*, the tenth and final instalment in his cycle of plays shining light on Black American lives and culture. Through the device of writing a play for each decade of the

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Godiwala, 2006, p.395

twentieth century Wilson highlighted 100 years of culture from an African-American perspective with a cycle based on the assumption that before one can move forward it is necessary to acknowledge, investigate and retrieve the past. The communities he depicted were rich with characters steeped in traditions, myths and pride in their heritage. The plot of Wilson's first Broadway play, 1982's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, concerns the appropriation of Black art by white society. Set in the 1920s, this play takes place in a Chicago recording studio and illuminates the exploitation of Black recording artists by white producers. All the action in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* occurs during an afternoon recording session in 1927. At the play's start, three members of Ma Rainey's band arrive—Toledo, Cutler and Slow Drag, followed by a fourth member, trumpeter Levee. A songwriter with dreams of securing a recording contract, Levee is also the proud owner of an expensive pair of shoes. Ma Rainey's arrival and the session are punctuated with bickering by bandmembers and several delays brought on by the title character's endeavours to control the recording session with her numerous demands in an attempt to exert power. As the session ends Levee is informed that no contract is forthcoming and instead is presented with an offer to buy the rights to his songs at only five dollars apiece. At the play's conclusion, Levee uses a seemingly trivial incident of Toledo accidentally stepping on his shoes as an outlet for his frustration and fatally stabs his bandmate.

In a case of life imitating fiction, Wilson was offered \$25,000 (£19,880) to take his play to Broadway. However, the contract gave complete control of Wilson's script to the Broadway producers who, similar to the white characters in the play, attempted to assert their authority by refusing to negotiate. This encounter early in Wilson's professional career in all likelihood reinforced his views, later espoused in his 1996 speech on the need for venues which exclusively showcase Black talent and promote Black culture. Artistic director Lloyd Richards, an African-American, countered the producers' offer with a more modest one to stage *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* at the Yale Repertory Theatre in New Haven, Connecticut. Wilson's acceptance began what became a fruitful partnership with Richards who went on to direct five of Wilson's plays, with six having premieres at the Yale Rep. In 1984 *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* received a Tony Award nomination for Best Play and the 2016 West End revival received an Olivier Award for Best Play. In 2020 *Ma Rainey*, directed by Denzel Washington, was adapted for film and received several Oscar nominations.

Wilson's education and emergence as an artist were synonymous with the United States' Civil Rights movement and Black Americans' struggle to abolish discrimination in housing, education and employment discrimination and most likely aided him in forming his ideas surrounding casting practices. In 1964 at age 19, Wilson having left school at 15 moved into a basement apartment in Pittsburgh with a group of writers and painters and was exposed to the works of Malcom X and the blues of Bessie Smith. Born Fredrick August Kittel and known as Freddie Kittel, Wilson changed his name at the age of 20 after his father's death and adopted his mother's maiden name and began writing poetry as 'August Wilson.' Early in his 'The Ground on Which I Stand' speech by way of introduction he spoke of discovering the Black Power Movement of the 1960s 'as a young man coming into manhood searching for something to dedicate my life to.'²⁰⁰ According to Nadel in *The Theatre of August Wilson* (2018), 'theatre was a way of raising the consciousness of people.'²⁰¹ While still in his early twenties, Wilson co-founded the theatre troupe Black Horizons Theater in order to politicise the community by asserting literature and the arts could alter the relationship between Black people and society.

Angela Pao writes that it is difficult, even impossible to separate the history and discussions of casting practices from political and social developments. 'The pervasive structural transformations brought about by the civil rights movement and the attendant salutary changes in the manner and extent to which racial and ethnic minorities were represented in visual, dramatic and narrative mediums (textbooks, television, movies, print media, etc.) created conditions that brought an influx of young black, Latino, and Asian actors into the acting profession.'²⁰² It was also fertile ground for Black playwrights such as Wilson.

Some critics, including Robert Brustein, described Wilson's thinking as promoting separatism, or advocating cultural or racial separation from the white majority. Wilson rejected the charge of separatism and in his 1996 speech he elaborated on his rationale for championing the need for Blacks to control their artistic output. By way of introducing his topic, early in his speech Wilson explains that the ground on which he stood was the ground

²⁰⁰ Wilson, 1996, p. 66

²⁰¹ Nadel, 2018, p. 7

²⁰² Pao, 2010, p. 7

of theatre 'on which my fellow artists and I have laboured to bring forth its fruits, its daring and its sometimes lacerating, and often healing, truths.'²⁰³ On that particular day those truths included not just a repudiation of 'non-traditional' casting but also the lack of and underfunding of Black regional theatres. 'If you do not know, I will tell you that black theatre in America is alive, it is vibrant, it is vital... it just isn't funded,' he said. 'Black theatre doesn't share in the economics that would allow it to support its artists and supply them with meaningful avenues to develop their talent and broadcast and disseminate ideas crucial to its growth. The economics are reserved as privilege to the overwhelming abundance of institutions that preserve, promote and perpetuate white culture.'²⁰⁴ Wilson's speech was relevant to fellow Black theatre professionals on both sides of the Atlantic because, he noted, American theatre was built on the foundation of European theatre, beginning with Aristotle, Greek dramatists and the proscenium stage. 'This is the theatre that we have chosen to work in,' he said. 'We embrace the values of that theatre but reserve the right to amend, to explore, to add our African consciousness and our African aesthetic to the art we produce.' In England, the Talawa Theatre Company originated in 1985 to address the disregard of Black theatre by those in power and provided a base for Black actors to showcase their skills.²⁰⁵ The formation of this company and the need for specific Black voices could be interpreted as a counterpoint to the marginalisation of Black culture and experience in commercial theatre spaces Wilson referenced in his speech.

Wilson suggested that colour-blind casting practices were an impediment to Black theatre's survival and prosperity and not much more than Band-Aids—inexpensive healing implements covering the wounds of exclusion

Wilson saw the historical exclusion of Black artists in commercial theatres and the economic impact from funding cuts resulting in the loss of Black theatre companies as a perpetuation of a power imbalance that required correction. In his speech he declared, 'We reject, without reservation, any attempts by anyone to rewrite our history so to deny us the *rewards of our spiritual labours* [the emphasis is mine], and to become the culture custodians of our art, our literature and our lives.' It seemed to me, as a ticket-paying

²⁰³ Wilson, 1996, p. 66

²⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 67

²⁰⁵ Ukaegbu in Godiwala, 2006, p. 126

customer at the white-owned and managed theatres I visited to view Wilson's plays that this 'Black-first' playwright had reconciled any qualms he may have possessed with whites reaping the rewards of *his* 'spiritual labour.' In a *Los Angeles Times* story following the speech the irony was noted that Wilson's plays were rarely, if ever, produced at Black-owned or managed theatres. Wilson countered that by maintaining he had long-established relationships with his producers, adding that theatres are reflective of their communities.²⁰⁶ Also, it should be noted that with the lack of Black theatres, Wilson had very few alternatives open to him. As Dimple Godiwala writes in , *Alternatives Within the Mainstream: British Black and Asian Theatres* (2006), 'It is only by locating themselves in an identity space which reflects the material of their histories, the forms of their own performance, their values and ideologies, their social practices can dramatists of colour begin to write their identities and experience as subjects-in-the-world.'²⁰⁷ I do not believe Godiwala nor Wilson are advocating for an outright rejection of white theatres, rather for an increased number of Black theatres, coupled with sufficient funding to sustain them, or as Sharon Jensen noted, a level playing field.

Rather than 'colour-blind' or 'non-traditional' casting, what was really needed was financial resources for Black theatres to develop Black playwrights. 'Why is it difficult to imagine nine Black theatres but not 66 white ones?' Wilson asked. 'Without theatres we cannot develop our talents. If we cannot develop our talents, then everyone suffers: our writers; the theatre; the audience. We cannot allow others to have authority over our cultural and spiritual products.'²⁰⁸ The importance and need for specific Black voices is also espoused by Deirde Osborne who writes in *Alternatives in the Mainstream*, that 'the importance of including and perpetuating indigenous Black British drama in the mainstream theatre scape can be neither underestimated nor over-emphasised. It provides a key cultural site wherein ethnicities and experiences who may not otherwise meet are directly exposed to each others' cultural practices. Its maintenance is a prerequisite for disabling white elitism in British theatre.'²⁰⁹

²⁰⁶ Shirley, 1996, *Los Angeles Times*

²⁰⁷ Godiwala, 2006, p. 4.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 71

²⁰⁹ Osborne in Godiwala, 2006, p.84.

The struggle I, and perhaps others have is that on the surface it appears Wilson's focus was one topic—Black American theatre—while in fact he raised numerous distinct points of contention with each one requiring a different response: 1) casting; 2) increasing the number, with requisite funding, of Black theatres; 3) the production of Black playwrights' work; and, 4) the dearth of meaningful opportunities for Black theatre professionals. Each of these could have easily been the subject of four provocative speeches, yet Wilson packed all the topics into one. Years later in a 2003 interview with Howard University professor Sandra Shannon he was asked if he had to do the speech again whether he would make any changes. Wilson expressed regret for raising too many ideas in one presentation thereby diluting his message.²¹⁰

At the time of Wilson's speech Robert Brustein, founding director of the Yale Repertory Company and American Repertory Theatre, was an essayist for *The New Republic*, director of Harvard University's American Repertory Theatre, and one of the USA's most outspoken theatre critics. He was mentioned by name and criticised in Wilson's talk for embodying several of the forces that obstructed the progress of Black art in American culture and for his defiant stance regarding the tradition of white American drama. Wilson disparaged Brustein's 'surprisingly sophomoric assumption' that funding agencies using diversity as a criterion to fund minority artists results in inferior productions and called Brunstein a victim of nineteenth-century thinking. 'Quite possibly this tremendous outpouring of works by minority artists may lead to a raising of standards and a raising of the levels of excellence, but Mr. Brustein cannot allow that possibility,' Wilson said.²¹¹ While Brustein called for writers to meet on the common ground of a single value system, Wilson rhetorically asked, 'Where is the common ground in the horrors of lynching?' Through his plays, Wilson was acknowledging and confronting history so that common ground could be achieved. He was not alone in this and acknowledged the work of other Black playwrights including Sonia Sanchez, Amiri Baraka, Ed Bullins and Lonne Elder III and others who 'were particularly vocal and whose talents confirmed their presence in the society and altered the American theatre, its meaning, its craft and its history.'²¹² Wilson further noted that their

²¹⁰ Williams, Shannon, 2004, p. 191

²¹¹ Wilson, 1996, p. 69

²¹² Ibid, p. 68

work in the turbulent 1960s' Civil Rights era provided a signpost guiding him and his contemporaries who stood on the same ground.

The 'Great Debate'

Several years earlier Brustein, again writing for *The New Republic*, had maintained that Wilson's single-minded documentation of American racism was 'monotonous, limited and locked in a perception of victimization.' Brustein did not attend Wilson's 1996 speech, but a transcript later appeared in *American Theatre Magazine* and he responded in the same magazine with an essay entitled 'Subsidized Separatism.' In his essay, Brustein called Wilson's speech a 'rambling jeremiad' given in the language of self-segregation and that it was full of 'boiler-plate rhetoric.'²¹³ Brustein claimed that he was notably disturbed that only Black history and experience could inspire the work of Black actors and maintained that most American theatres are racially mixed, providing Lloyd Richards at the Yale Repertory Theatre as one example. If one followed Wilson's logic, Brustein wrote, then Black actors should perform only Black roles written by Black playwrights ('Must we bar Andre Braugher and Denzel Washington from enacting the Shakespearean monarchs?') and history would be rolled back to the time of segregated theatres. Calling Wilson's speech a testimony to rabid identity politics and poisonous racial consciousness that had been infecting the United States, he claimed that Wilson was in effect calling for socially approved separatism, funded by foundations.

Wilson volleyed back with a rebuttal in the same issue, noting that theatre should not be the property of any one race or culture, yet its current state is that it is skewed toward whites and the classical values of European theatre that ignores the contributions being made by other or different ethnic and racial backgrounds. Funds allocated towards developing diverse audiences for white institutions and yes, 'colour-blind' casting only reinforces the status quo. He accused Brustein of a bias blinding him to the fact that being a Black artist is not limiting any more than being a white artist is limiting. He asserted that Black artists do not ask, seek or desire special treatment nor should they be judged or treated differently to whites. Lastly he chided Brustein's inability to imagine theatre sufficiently broad and secure in its traditions to absorb and make use of all manners and

²¹³ Brustein, 1996, p. 26

cultures of American life. The Wilson/Brustein feud attracted other commentators, including critics, scholars and a variety of theatre practitioners who shared *their* views via articles, editorials and letters to various publications including the *New York Times*, *Variety*, and the *Village Voice*. One of the voices was that of stage director and educator Benny Sato Ambush who instigated a panel discussion after Wilson's speech at the conference and penned his own article about the immediate aftermath and the need for honest engagement across racial, cultural, class, geographic, gender and generational divides.

The Wilson/Brustein dispute lasted most of 1996 culminating in a face-to-face showdown in January 1997 at New York's Town Hall. The sold-out debate, 'On Cultural Power: The August Wilson/Robert Brustein Discussion' was moderated by Anna Deavere Smith, an artist known for portraying people of all races and genders. 'As a woman who identifies as black and who performs postmodern work that actively transgresses racial boundaries Anna Deavere Smith served as a physical bridge between the absolutes each man was meant to represent.'²¹⁴ The debate was immortalised on video which I had an opportunity to view in March 2023 in the video archive at the New York Public Library's Center for Performing Arts. This debate was significant because it brought casting practices as they related to Black artists to the fore and the prominence of the two speakers made it impossible for Broadway power brokers to ignore.

Smith opened the debate by noting that both men were passionate lovers of metaphor and shared the ability to, in the words of James Baldwin, 'disturb the peace.' Brustein began by stating that the complicated issues dividing himself and Wilson have been around in so many different guises so that the only hope for the evening was to 'come a little closer to each other's understanding.' He claimed that Wilson had called on all Black actors to denounce non-traditional casting and questioned whether it was the best advice for them to potentially damage their careers for the purpose of racial exclusivity, adding, 'If Mr. Wilson wants to give Black theatres his support he should reward it with one of his world premieres.' True diversity, he said, lies in acknowledging that everyone is an individual and not simply a member of a racial or sexual group.

²¹⁴ Catanese, 2011, p. 61

When it was Wilson's turn he said he was not present to enlighten the audience but was there 'to speak truth as I know it and also to inspire new avenues for shaping the future.' Black art, Wilson said, is placed in the hands of others as custodians, and he stated that he was not an advocate of separatism ('as Mr. Brustein claims'), but that African-Americans were currently fighting to be included in the making of theatre in America. 'Never is it suggested that what artists are is limiting themselves or... being confined in their art by pursuing white themes. We cannot share a same value system if it is based on the values of white American and European ancestors and if it does not include all Americans, no matter their racial origin,' he said. 'If we choose not to assimilate it is because we choose to champion our own causes, not that we reject the dominant culture.' Wilson's comments reinforced statements in his Princeton speech where he noted that Black Americans are Africans and there are many histories and cultures on the African continent and those who would deny Black Americans their culture would also deny them their history; a recurring theme in all of Wilson's plays.

Brustein and Wilson were given an opportunity to respond to each other's opening remarks. Brustein set an acrimonious tone by 'complimenting' Wilson: 'I think you have one of the best minds of the seventeenth century' with the playwright interrupting and declaring, 'that's the most outrageous thing I've ever heard.' Brustein suggested that since Wilson was such a champion of Black owned and operated venues he should offer up his plays to Black theatres or start one himself, 'because you're in a position to do that.' Wilson fired back: 'I'm a playwright. I'm not interested in starting a theatre,' adding that the Black theatres which were in dire need of funding could benefit from foundation and public support, meaning the funding currently going to white organisations.

More than 1,500 spectators, including actors, directors, theatre administrators and the news media showed up for what on that winter night was the most coveted ticket on Broadway. From what I could surmise by watching a two-decades old video on a small television screen in a darkened cubicle, the two men, who had previously met only once before in passing, while remaining polite never wavered from their respective positions. Wilson reiterated his charge that there was an appalling lack of professional Black theatres and that grants given to white-run theatres to increase Black participation are misguided and siphon off funding that should go to Black institutions. Wilson also did not pass up the

opportunity to dismiss non-traditional casting, which ‘puts Black identity at the mercy of the white power structure’—personified by Brustein.

Brustein countered by declaring that Wilson was harking back to previous decades when ‘separate but equal’ was the catch phrase used to justify egregious racial inequity and proclaimed that drama investigates ‘the workings of the human soul, which has no colour.’ And as for non-traditional casting, the critic maintained that it expands opportunities and accused Wilson of asking Black actors to damage their careers for the sake of racial exclusivity.

One of the few laughs of the evening occurred during the question-and-answer period. Wilson was asked whether he believed gay actors should play only gay roles, just as he believes Blacks should play only Black roles. The playwright paused. An audience member called out: ‘Don’t touch it!’ Wilson complied.

At the evening’s close moderator Smith asked the two men what, if anything they learned from the other. Brustein replied: ‘I learned that behind Mr. Wilson’s anger, he is a teddy bear.’ Even that comment brought disagreement. ‘I assure you I am a lion,’ was Wilson’s response, but conceded that he harboured no ill-will against Brustein as a person. ‘Unfortunately I was not able to learn much about the positions he espouses. I didn’t learn much else but what was already there.’ Evidently neither did anyone else present. In an opinion piece for the *New York Times*, critic Frank Rich wrote that while the debate ‘promised to be the intellectual version of extreme fighting’ it actually ended as a stalemate between ‘two humourless and often petty egomaniacs’ who narcissistically fiddled while ‘the world of serious culture they share burns.’²¹⁵ I agree with Catanese’s assessment in *The Problem of the Color [Blind]: Racial Transgression and the Politics of Black Performance* (2011) that the difference between the two men was one of racial valuation. ‘Wilson values race (especially Blackness) as an integral component of American theatre, as it is a site for the presentation of specific cultures, whereas Brustein seems to consider racial discourse inherently exclusionary and divisive, to be abandoned.’²¹⁶ As previously noted, Wilson died in 2005, at the age of 60. Brustein, author of 16 books on theatre and society, was a scholar

²¹⁵ Rich, 1996, *New York Times*

²¹⁶ Catanese, 2011, p. 57

of residence at Harvard at the time of his death in October 2023 at the age of 96. The infamous debate merited several paragraphs in Brustein's *New York Times* obituary.

After watching the debate, I returned to my Manhattan hotel room and reread Wilson's 'Ground on Which I Stand' speech recalling the many times I had attended his plays. In all of my dozen or so enlightening and emotion-filled outings not one was in a Black-owned or operated theatre. Initially Wilson was insistent that his works must have Black directors, and favoured the Yale Repertory Theatre because of its African-American artistic director Lloyd Richards, who early in his career directed the premiere of Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*. The ground on which Wilson stood was undoubtedly race. In his 1996 speech he acknowledged it to be the largest, most identifiable and most important part of one's personality. Race, awareness of a common past, a shared language and history were common denominators for all of Wilson's characters, and he required not only performers able to physically, psychologically and spiritually embody those roles, but that his directors have the same characteristics.

A director's power as the person responsible for the overall artistic vision and staging of a production includes the power to represent characters in a certain way. Wilson believed those directing his plays should represent the same cultural sensibilities as his characters, and as he noted, 'The last time I looked, all those directors were Black.'²¹⁷ That insistence seemed to ease as his popularity increased with white directors at the helm of at least two of his plays during his lifetime, one being a 1989 National Theatre production of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, directed by Howard Davies. Wilson's widow, Constanza Romero, approved the choice of Tony award winning director Bartlett Sher for a 2009 revival of *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, marking the first Wilson play with a white director on Broadway. Wilson's assessment of the 1989 National Theatre production was that it wasn't 'too bad,' however he remained adamant that any movie made of his work required a Black director who shared this same common past and history of his characters because 'A film will be here 150 years from now,' he said. 'I want that permanent record to be best reflected by a person of my culture.'²¹⁸ After adapting, directing and starring in the movie version of *Fences* in 2016

²¹⁷ Nadel, 1994, p. 201

²¹⁸ Williams, Shannon, 2004, p. 199

Denzel Washington embarked upon a goal to have Wilson's entire century cycle of plays on film. Washington directed *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* in 2020 and co-produced *The Piano Lesson*, which in 2024 was adapted for Netflix and directed by one son, Malcolm Washington, and starred another, John David Washington. Thus, Wilson's dream of a permanent record of his works with Black artists at the helm is well underway.

In an interview with critic John Lahr to discuss the opening of *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1984) Wilson said that when white people say 'I don't see colour' what they are truly saying is 'you're affected by this unacceptable condition and I'll pretend I don't see that.'²¹⁹ Wilson also addresses this in his 'Ground' speech, claiming that proponents of colour-blind casting are proclaiming they do not see colour in their desire to ignore the presence of Black people and deny them their history ('We want you to see us,' Wilson stated in his speech. 'We are black and beautiful.') In 2003, seven years after 'The Ground on Which I Stand,' Wilson was asked if he had to do the speech again, would he make any changes. His response was that he would delete references to 'colour-blind' casting as it became a lightning rod that detracted from his main message of the plight of Black theatre and an appeal for funds that would sustain Black theatres. Had he changed his stance and perhaps mellowed his opinion on casting? The answer is no. 'I still would have said it,' he concluded, 'But I would have talked about that the next week.'²²⁰ But if Wilson had raised the issue of what he termed colour-blind casting in a talk a week later would it have caused the same uproar? I maintain that had Wilson chosen a more obscure playwright than Arthur Miller or used a lesser-known play than *Death of a Salesman* as an example to criticise casting practices perhaps academics and theatre professionals, including Alan Nadel (*The Theatre of August Wilson*, 2018) would not be talking about his speech 30 years later. In addition had Wilson refrained from specifically calling Brustein's assumption that Black artists are judged on sociological rather than aesthetic criteria as 'sophomoric' and labelling him 'a victim of nineteenth century thinking' Brustein may not have felt compelled to defend himself and there would have been no outcry or the Town Hall event. The issues Wilson raised regarding the historical, societal, political and economic rationale for disparities faced by Black actors

²¹⁹ Bigsby, 2007, p. 31

²²⁰ Williams, Shannon, 2004, p. 191.

and theatre professionals remain pertinent today and his comments as they relate to Arthur Miller's drama provides an intriguing starting point to explore these issues.

Death of a Salesman and August Wilson

Mid-way through his 1996 seminal talk, 'The Ground On Which I Stand: A Speech on Black Theatre and Performance,' Wilson declares, 'to mount an all-Black production of a *Death of a Salesman* or any other play conceived for white actors as an investigation of the human condition through the specifics of white culture is to deny us our humanity, our own history.'²²¹ Wilson's declaration makes one ponder what his reaction would have been to the 2019 Young Vic's production of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, which portrayed the Loman family as Black American. Wilson was writing against the insertion of a Black actor into a white scenario and narrative. This revival reconfigured *Death of a Salesman* for an African-American context.

Written in 1949, *Death of a Salesman* is about the last days of Willy Loman, a failing, ageing travelling New York salesman and perpetual dreamer descending into madness. Willy's unrealistic plans and aspirations for his two sons, especially the elder Biff, and the anguish and the steadfast love of his wife Linda are at the heart of Miller's play, which has seen multiple revivals both on Broadway and the West End, and has received numerous accolades, including Tony and Olivier Awards and the Pulitzer Prize for Best Drama.

In 2017 the Arthur Miller estate contacted British director Marianne Elliott to inquire if she would be interested in directing *Death of a Salesman* with a Black Willy Loman. Elliott quickly said yes, and then sought to take the idea even further, making the entire Loman family African-American. She flew to New York and instigated a series of workshops to test the concept. Although one of the play's main themes is the struggle to achieve an elusive American Dream, I believe British audiences need not perceive this as a uniquely American story as the immediate post-World War II period also saw mass migration of non-white people to the United Kingdom, many in search of a better life in 'Mother England.' Although hostility towards immigrants was nothing new, the influx of colonial subjects prompted changes in immigration law and policy. These changes were crafted in response to popular fears of being overwhelmed by non-white Commonwealth subjects and by the politicians'

²²¹ Wilson, 1996, p. 70

ability to exploit these fears for political advantage since the African and Caribbean emigrants who arrived in Britain blurred lines between British subject and citizen, foreigner and native. The increased presence and visibility prompted both public and governmental reactions. This view was reflected in several developments within the British government, most notably in the creation of Race Relations Boards, as well as the overhaul of existing immigration regimes. According to Michael Hanchard in *The Spectre of Race: How Discrimination Haunts Western Democracy* (2018), 'In brief, Blacks were largely viewed as a problem in British politics, society, and culture, as were Indian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan, and other South Asian populations.'²²² Thus, a Black Willy Loman—a dreamer desiring a better life for his sons, denied employment advancement and encountering belittling from a white boss—should easily resonate with theatre goers on both sides of the Atlantic.

The Young Vic's production of *Death of a Salesman* opened in May 2019 where it quickly sold-out and was extended for two weeks. The show was moved to the West End for a three-month run and I attended a performance a few days after its opening. I found it glorious as well as heart breaking. As Willy, Wendell Pierce—making his West End debut—gave an excellent performance that captured the torture that accompanies living with the deferred dreams that Hughes' poem emulates. Sharon D Clarke, as Linda seemed a far cry from Miller's original description of the character of Willy's wife who, according to Miller's original text, shares her husband's longings 'but lacks the temperament to utter and follow [them] to their end.'²²³ In Clarke's interpretation of the role I witnessed the fire, fearlessness and strength I associated with the Black wives and mothers of my childhood, not a repressed, submissive female. As the granddaughter of American southern, barely working-class migrants who desired a better life 'up North' I related on a personal level to the universal theme of the desire for an improved life for one's offspring and felt a connection to this particular Loman family and their poignant struggle to achieve the American dream.

I had the same impression four years later when I attended the Broadway production, with Pierce and Clarke reprising their roles. I watched both productions curious

²²² Hanchard, 2018, p. 135

²²³ Miller, 1949, p. 12

to see whether the theatre creatives involved had considered Wilson's stance against Black actors portraying Miller's characters and if his dialogue had influenced the actors' character interpretations or, indeed the overall production. With the leads repeating their roles it was difficult to ascertain differences between the two venues and I wondered if a Black British actor as Willy would have approached the role differently than the African-American Pierce. With very minor alterations in dialogue the production team showed that this revival was about a Black family, not a case of Black actors portraying roles written for white characters.

One notable difference between the two venues was the cover images of the theatre programmes, pictured on the following page. I found it interesting that the Broadway programme included Clarke and Pierce with hopeful expressions giving the impression that this was a production with a family-oriented focus. The London programme's image of a solitary figure walking down a deserted highway with ominous clouds overhead projected loneliness and isolation and portended the tragic conclusion. In my experience productions of dramas are more frequent and prevalent on the West End than on Broadway and I attribute the different images to Broadway marketers catering to audiences who, as I will note in the *Oklahoma!* case study, are statistically more inclined to attend the theatre for entertainment than enlightenment.

ILLUSTRATION REDACTED

Figure 4 *Death of a Salesman* Theatre Programme, Picadilly Theatre, London, 2019

ILLUSTRATION REDACTED

Figure 5 *Death of a Salesman* programme, Hudson Theatre, New York, 2023

In a January 2020 review of the revival *New York Times* critic Ben Brantley wrote that if this *Salesman* had been retooled to be solely about race, 'it would shrink and oversimplify Miller's play. Instead, race expands and exacerbates Willy's suppressed fears that the world regards him as outcast, a loser, a clown.'²²⁴ In the productions I attended Loman's fear of his world's perception of him as an outcast or a failure as he succumbed to madness was at times palpable, but there was never an instance when I would have imagined that Willy, as portrayed by Pierce, saw himself as a clown. While Brantley's review was favourable, I could not ignore my visceral negative reaction to seeing a white person use the word clown in print as it related to a Black male in a dramatic role. Wilson in his 'Ground' speech denounced those who refuse to recognise Black conduct and manners as part of a system 'fueled by its own philosophy, mythology, history, creative motif, social organization, and ethos.' Wilson noted that *Death of a Salesman* was conceived for white actors as an investigation of the human condition through the specifics of white culture. Even with a Black cast, it seemed Brantley was viewing the play through the same lens. The insinuation that even with a disturbed mind a Black man, after facing a life of oppression, would abandon any vestige of pride and consider himself a clown is (again, Wilson's words) 'to be in league with a thousand naysayers who wish to corrupt the vigor and spirit of his heart.'²²⁵ Brantley should have found another word, or better still, stopped while he was ahead before his misrepresentation of Pierce's performance.

Wendell Pierce said he was convinced to play the patriarch Loman by the production's co-directors Elliott and Cromwell, having never considered the role before. Elliott has maintained that Pierce was always her first choice to play Willy and she would not have pursued the project if he had said no. A New Orleans, Louisiana native and graduate of

²²⁴ Brantley, 2020, *New York Times*

²²⁵ Wilson, 1996, p. 70

New York City's Julliard Drama school, Pierce has more than 30 years' experience in movies, television and the theatre. But *Death of a Salesman* was his London debut and also the first time he had performed in a Miller play. In a May 2019 interview with *The Stage*, he added that making the Loman family African-American brought a new dynamic to the play and that audience members have questioned whether any lines were added to the script, such as one character's demeaning use of the word 'boy.' However not a single consonant was altered, Pierce said. 'This [interpretation] adds another layer without abandoning the lessons that are in the play.' Anguish, hope—including the loving, empathic loyalty of a strong mother, the selfishness and thoughtlessness of youth embodied in two sons and the callous cruelty of employers—are all captured in under three hours.

In Act Two an exchange between Willy and his supervisor Howard is an example of how casting can aid in reverberating issues around race, prejudice and privilege. Willy approaches the younger man respectfully:

HOWARD: Say, aren't you supposed to be in Boston?

WILLY: That's what I want to talk to you about, Howard. You got a minute?

HOWARD: What happened? What're you doing here?

WILLY: Well...

HOWARD: You didn't crack up again, did you?

Willy denies the abrupt allegation, explains that he would prefer not to travel anymore and requests a desk position. Howard refuses.

WILLY: God knows, Howard, I never asked a favor of any man. But I was with the firm when your father used to carry you in here in his arms.

HOWARD: I know that Willy, but—

WILLY: Your father came to me the day you were born and asked me what I thought of the name of Howard, may he rest in peace.

HOWARD: I appreciate that, Willy, but there just is no spot here for you.

(He looks for his lighter. Willy has picked it up and gives it to him Pause.)

WILLY: Howard, all I need to set my table is fifty dollars a week.

HOWARD: But where am I going to put you, kid?

Willy continues to plead his case. Howard exits, but then returns and ultimately fires Willy from his position and suggests Willy ask his sons for assistance.

WILLY: I can't throw myself on my sons. I'm not a cripple!

HOWARD: Look kid, I'm busy this morning.

WILLY: (*grasping Howard's arm*) Howard, you've got to let me go to Boston!

HOWARD: (*hard, keeping himself under control*) I've got a line of people to see this morning. Sit down, take five minutes, and pull yourself together, and then go home, will ya? I need the office, Willy.²²⁶

This tense scene as written in 1949 is demoralising for Willy. But the dynamic of a young white male speaking in this manner to a much older Black employee takes on a deeper resonance. Viewing this and recalling my previous workplace experiences it appeared that Howard had little interest in or time for Willy and discounts his employees' past successes, only seeing the colour of his skin. Black audience members who have worked in predominantly white environments would know how navigating management of white perceptions adds an additional layer of stress, which differs from what a white counterpart may encounter. As Derrick Bell writes in *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism* (1992), because racial bias is often masked Black people 'must wrestle with the question whether race or some individual failing has cost us the job, denied us the promotion, or prompted our being rejected as tenants for an apartment. Either conclusion breeds frustration and alienation—and a rage we dare not show to others or admit to ourselves.'²²⁷ In interviews about this production and his casting in the lead role, Pierce recalled the racism he experienced as a young actor. As a mature Black man in this scene Pierce brought his lived experience to the role and the pervasiveness of experiences doubtlessly resonated with Black audience members like myself differently than white viewers.

In a December 2019 podcast with Pierce and his London castmates—Clarke (as wife Linda), and sons Sope Disaru (Biff) and Natey Jones (Happy)—critic Dominic Cavendish

²²⁶ Miller, 1949, pp. 79-84

²²⁷ Bell, 1992, p. 6

questioned whether August Wilson's refusal to consider a Black *Death of a Salesman* was because he had assumed a Black Willy Loman would be lynched if he tried to be a salesman in 1949's America. Pierce responded that not only had he known Wilson, but also he had produced two of his plays (*Jitney* off Broadway and *Radio Golf* on Broadway). Pierce allowed that while the playwright was entitled to his opinion, he disagreed with Wilson's stance on colour-blind casting, but understood where he was coming from.

In a May 2019 article that focused on Elliott's revival and Wilson's speech, Pierce elaborated that in his opinion Wilson was talking about the motivations for casting Black actors in 'non-traditional' roles. In the instances where race is not specifically written into the role, Black actors should be cast—but there should be a specific reason for doing so. 'Wilson believed the perspective of the African American was not the subset idea of any other people; it is a specific cultural contribution to the human diaspora and that aesthetic is what August was saying should be revered because there are people out there that do not have respect for our contribution to the world, and do not have our best interests at heart so they'll not only deny our input, but try to erase it,' Pierce said.²²⁸ In attempting to preserve Black heritage and history Wilson was saying validation from the white population should not be required nor sought. Pierce said he believes Wilson's position was contradictory. 'His contradiction was that he had all these young artists and playwrights saying "I ain't gonna put my shit in competition, I don't need the New York mainstream theatre community"—and in the meantime August was producing his shit on Broadway. And now he has a named theatre there. So that was his contradiction.' In 2005, just two weeks after Wilson's death, the Broadway Theatre District renamed the Virginia Theatre for Wilson—the first Broadway theatre to bear the name of an African American.

During the podcast Pierce noted that this particular interpretation of *Death of a Salesman* works in concert with Miller's drama and rather than being in competition with the themes it instead heightens them. Although the Lomans in this version are Black, Pierce said the Young Vic's version should appeal to all. 'What's important is the love of family and not letting your individualism be crushed by a capitalistic idea... It illuminates something for everyone—it's not restrictive, it's actually broadening. All of the issues of the American

²²⁸ Benjamin, 2019, *Exeunt Magazine*

dream being disappointing and capitalism not feeding itself is there. So when you see an African American family in this play, it illuminates even more the desperation of the situation. The more specific you are, the more universal you become.’ As in the case with much of American drama, it is not surprising that the very ideas Pierce attributes to Miller’s drama can also be applied to Wilson’s plays, where his characters also are eager to affirm their identities, fiercely desire to succeed and experience tense generational conflict at the forefront. This is particularly striking when comparing Willy’s interactions with his son Biff in *Death of a Salesman* with Troy Maxson, the father in Wilson’s *Fences* (1984) and his son Cory. Both plays are set in approximately the same post-World War II time period and both sons excel in sports while fathers Troy and Willy loudly display their strong opposition to their sons’ aspirations and future goals.

The use of theatre narratives in shaping one’s American identity can also be seen in early Broadway musicals, according to Andrea Most in *Making Americans—Jews and the Broadway Musical* (2004). For example, socioeconomic mobility in twentieth-century America was a key subtext for the post-World War II productions in Irving Berlin’s *Annie Get Your Gun* (1946), and Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *South Pacific* (1949). In both ‘the topics of ethnic identity, racist ideology...were represented, debated and discussed on the Broadway musical stage.’²²⁹ The musicals Most investigates reveal a desire for Jewish producers and composers to use the genre to envision an ideal America and write themselves ‘into that scenario as accepted members of the mainstream American community.’²³⁰ However, this option was not a viable one for Wilson as evidenced in his cycle of plays that celebrated Black heritage while also eloquently acknowledging racism and unequal balance of power in a white-dominated America.

Conclusion

It is evident in the attention given to the most recent West End and Broadway revivals of Miller’s tragedy, audiences, critics and theatre professionals are revisiting and still grappling with Wilson’s forceful rejection of ‘colour-blind’ casting, as well as the other issues he raised. Peter Erickson writes that Wilson’s position is mischaracterised as

²²⁹ Most, 2004, p. 6

²³⁰ Ibid, p. 2

separatist, and that he should be acknowledged for his approach to African-American culture as a vital part of American culture as a whole. He notes that you can disagree with Wilson's rejection of colour-blind casting yet still wholeheartedly accept Wilson's searing indictment of colour-blindness as erasure, negation, and insult.

As Wilson noted in his speech, 'Our manners, our style, our approach to language, our gestures and our bodies are not for rent. Nor is the meaning of our history...' More than 50 years earlier, in 1940 poet Langston Hughes had a similar opinion about the appropriation of Black culture by whites and shared his thoughts through the poem 'Note on Commercial Theatre:'

'You've taken my blues and gone —
You sing 'em on Broadway, And you sing 'em in Hollywood Bowl,
And you mixed 'em up with symphonies, And you fixed 'em
So they don't sound like me.
Yep, you done taken my blues and gone...
But someday somebody'll stand up and talk about me,
And write about me —
Black and beautiful —
And sing about me, And put on plays about me!
I reckon it'll be, Me myself!
Yes, it'll be me.'²³¹

I was surprised that Hughes' poem was not referenced by Wilson, as I believe it clearly expresses the opinions he espoused in his speech and in the debate. Peter Erickson writing the Afterword in Thompson's 2006 *Colorblind Shakespeare* puts forth the interesting idea of a hypothetical dialogue between Wilson and impresario Joseph Papp, who, lamenting the limited number of Black characters in Shakespeare, promoted colour-blind casting at his New York Shakespeare Festival. Putting Papp in conversation with Wilson provides a different historical perspective. 'Listen to this,' Erickson wrote, 'I don't like "integration" on the stage because what you get is tokenism. Real integration comes from power, when there is equal justice, equal opportunity, not "token" opportunity... If you form

²³¹ Hughes, 1986, p. 190

a fine company that has its own excellence... that to me, is integration.' It sounds almost like August Wilson, but, as Erickson notes, the speaker is Papp.²³²

Identifying himself 'as a white person,' Papp expresses dissatisfaction with token gestures such as colour-blind casting and proposes the formation of an all-Black company. Although Papp's dream for such a company was never realised it is illuminating to see the similarities of the men's aspirations. Both Papp and Wilson seem to agree that the history of Blacks in America is distinctive and to refute the suggestion that Black Americans on white stages were no more than a variation on the American dream espoused in Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. Wilson's point was that colour-blind casting can be a token gesture if disconnected from the larger picture of the ways in which institutional power is represented and remains structured in white dominance. Wilson further backs up his point by creating a centre of cultural power through his plays.

Timothy Douglass, a theatre director, actor and educator was Wilson's choice to direct the world premiere of what would be his final play, *Radio Golf*. In a 2005 interview with historian Ayanna Thompson he said that when teaching acting classes at Boston's Emerson College he has no qualms about assigning his white students readings from August Wilson because it would be negligent if he failed to bring the playwright into the classroom. But could Douglass see himself—or any director—commercially staging one of Wilson's plays with a white cast? 'The cultural perception is that audiences would never go for it,' he said. 'Perhaps I am perpetuating this stereotype by even saying it. I am open to it if the actors are really good and the director gets those relationships in line.'²³³ That may be, but initially I could not imagine Wilson's estate approving having white actors representing and appropriating his work.

However, in a 2003 interview Wilson acknowledged that while an all-white production of *Fences* would miss the cultural underpinnings of his play 'there's nothing I can do about that.' The interviewer, Sandra G. Shannon, a professor of African American Literature at Howard University in Washington, DC, mentioned she was aware of an all-Chinese production of *Fences* which was seemingly understood by those in attendance.

²³² Erickson, 2006, p. 246

²³³ Thompson, 2006, p. 152

Wilson responded, agreeing that Black culture is not necessarily universal, using England as an example. 'I would have said that Black culture is Black culture until I went over to London and they were doing *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. And I found out that the Black folks over there are very influenced by British culture.' Wilson noted that the type of mistakes that a white director might make because they are unfamiliar with the culture were also apparent with Black casts making the same mistakes because they are British.²³⁴

Historian Henry Louis Gates Jr. in a 1997 *New Yorker* article entitled, 'The Chitlin Circuit,' noted that it was not surprising Wilson's speech aroused high emotion and 'found little acceptance among working black actors, dramatists and directors.'²³⁵ As I write this, the level playing field of opportunity for Black artists seeking creative and financial support in a white-dominated theatre community has not been reached. The statistics and surveys supporting the current state of affairs and the possible reasons for this slow march of change were explored in the previous chapter. Had Wilson lived I believe he would still be challenging and contesting Broadway theatre hierarchy, as control over venues, budgets and artistic selections are still in the hands of an elite few. He would vocally and eloquently express his dismay at the lack of theatre's progress since his celebrated speech and highly publicised debate. But, almost 30 years later would August Wilson have mellowed with age and revised his views on non-traditional casting and *Death of a Salesman*? I suspect if he were still with us not only would he be continuing his prolific streak of award-winning plays but would still be giving voice to the disenfranchised while celebrating the richness and fullness of African-American culture. Instances of casting Blacks in roles originally written for white actors without acknowledgment of race would continue to rankle. This case study revealed how changing casting to make Black characters the aspirants of the elusive dream of a better life for one's offspring can focus a discussion of power, representation and discrimination in insightful ways that speak to twenty-first century audiences. In my opinion, which as noted above is supported by actors, directors and critics, by challenging audiences to see a revered classic in a fresh, diverse way the 2019 and 2023 West End and Broadway productions of Miller's *Death of a Salesman* do not fit that category of productions that cast Blacks as mimics in a denial of their culture, and I conclude that Wilson would have been

²³⁴ Williams, Shannon, 2004, p. 98

²³⁵ Gates, 1997, *The New Yorker*

satisfied that these revivals were staged not only to entertain, but also to investigate the cultural ground on which a Black Loman family stood. Another classic staged in a fresh innovative manner is the musical *Oklahoma!*, the topic of the next case study.

Oklahoma!

This case study examines productions of the musical *Oklahoma!* which were viewed at three different venues over a five-year period (Oregon Shakespeare Festival, 2018; Chichester Festival Theatre, 2019; and in 2023, a Broadway revival that transferred to London's West End). In each production directors chose to re-imagine this classic through casting choices which in turn allowed them to explore societal issues including injustice, prejudice and exclusion from a majority population. The concepts of representation and otherness are examined through these productions in which I argue that the deployment of casting practices made possible by the directors' interpretations contributed to public discourse and advanced discussion of the social, ethical and political issues facing contemporary audiences. Beginning with an in-depth examination of *Oklahoma!*'s genesis and reception I reflect on the musical's position in Broadway and West End history and provide an analysis of these three productions and their commonalities and differences as they relate to emphasising difference and exclusion. My personal experience of 'otherness' encountered as a Black person in overwhelmingly white audiences during viewing of *Oklahoma!* productions is examined to illustrate how, as Kirsty Sedgman in *The Reasonable Audience: Theatre Etiquette, Behaviour Policing and the Live Audience* (2018) notes the multiple layers of white privilege, elitism and entitlement intersect to underpin theatre experiences.²³⁶

I conclude with a discussion on how re-envisioning established works enables and advances discussion of casting diversity and address the question: If individuals are already primed for a live performance visit to fantasyland via a play set to music, what are the ramifications of expanding the imagination even further to view faces of actors audiences are not *traditionally* accustomed to seeing?

²³⁶ Sedgman, 2018, p. 115

Oklahoma! Origins

Although the numbers vary by year, musicals are a significant portion of Broadway and West End productions and have always contributed to the success of these commercial venues. For example, according to the Broadway League, the national trade association for the Broadway theatre industry, in the 2023-24 season musicals grossed over \$1.3 billion compared to over \$200 million for plays.²³⁷ The musical comedy originally was a light-hearted story that was primarily a showcase for songs and dances with plot being incidental. With a book musical, such as *Oklahoma!*, musical numbers arise naturally out of the action and are used to develop the characters and to carry the story forward.

My research on musicals uncovered writers, including Harvey Young (2013) and Kurt Ganzl (1995) who cite ancient Greece as the start of drama as a form of musical theatre. However I contend that these authors ignore the rich oral tradition of the African continent, visible through folktales, songs and dances which predate ancient Greece by several centuries. Interpretation of history as seen through the lens of white identity to the exclusion of others indicates a perceived racial hierarchy. I argue that omissions which have the effect of downplaying or ignoring the contributions of those who are not white are evident in *Oklahoma!* as well as in *Hamilton*, the subject of the next case study. These biases serve to delegitimise the history of others. As British historian David Olusoga has noted they categorise Black history as 'political or to do with grievances. There has been this determination to keep it marginalised.'²³⁸ Script, plotline and theatre critics' commentary on casting choices may reflect this bias by ignoring and misrepresenting the contributions and experiences of Black culture, and with regards to *Oklahoma!*, Native American culture as well. In *Making Americans—Jews and the Broadway Musical* (2004) Most writes that 'the musical theatre offered an array of techniques for defining community, encoding otherness, playing roles, and defining the boundaries of the self.' However, while self-invention was available to Jewish performers, allowing audiences to see them as white and their 'Jewishness to become transparent,' this was not an option for Black artists. As Most notes,

²³⁷ [Microsoft Word - Statistics Broadway 2024-2025 Detail](#). Note: While the Society of London Theatre does not provide a similar breakdown for non-members, approximately 17.1 million theatregoers attended a West End Show in 2024, and more than half of the shows were musicals.

²³⁸ Brooks, *The Guardian*, 16 May 2021

‘unlike race, ethnicity was presented as a set of transient qualities that were nonthreatening because they could easily be performed away.’²³⁹ The importance of whiteness as desired currency in defining community and what it means to be American are explored in *Oklahoma!*

The most successful musical writing team in history is composer Richard Rodgers and lyricist Oscar Hammerstein II. For 18 years the partners produced a new show approximately every two years, tackling strong topics like interracial romance (*South Pacific*, 1949); suicide (*Carousel*, 1945), and cultural conflict (*The King and I*, 1951) before their final big hit, *The Sound of Music* in 1959. Their blending of lush harmonies and soaring melodies, drama and dance—with the agile and elegant ballets often choreographed by Agnes de Mille—quickly became the accepted template for popular musicals and as Hannah Thuraisingam Robbins writes, ‘positioned them as the dominant leaders of the evolution of the Golden Age musical and this has been reflected in the related scholarship.’²⁴⁰ As the first musical written by the team, *Oklahoma!* was considered ground-breaking when it debuted in 1943. It is touted frequently as the first show to thoroughly integrate songs, story and dance.²⁴¹ As Robbins suggests in her 2017 PhD thesis on Cole Porter’s 1948 musical *Kiss Me Kate*, the integrated musical stems from the challenge of interpreting how music and lyrics serve dramatic themes and ideas. ‘This concept has been intrinsically linked to the works of Rodgers and Hammerstein and to an artistic aspiration to prioritise narrative coherence. As such, the integrated musical is frequently understood as a template against which individual Broadway shows can be compared as well as a measurement of aesthetic value.’²⁴² *Oklahoma!* also broke new ground by beginning the show with an unaccompanied ballad (‘Oh, What a Beautiful Morning’), rather than a rousing toe-tapping song and included extended musical numbers with both song and dance furthering onstage action. Similar to Jerome Kern’s 1927 *Show Boat*, which included a subplot featuring prejudice and miscegenation, *Oklahoma!* contained serious themes and three-dimensional characters as

²³⁹ Ibid, p. 26.

²⁴⁰ Robbins, 2017, p. 9

²⁴¹ Authors and composers who make this claim include Geoffrey Block, Jack Viertel, Stephen Sondheim and Alan Jay Lerner.

²⁴² Robbins, 2017, p. 9

well as light-hearted, comedic plotlines. This recipe for success soon became the accepted template for popular musicals.

Musicals are frequently adapted from existing literary works and *Oklahoma!* is no exception. Based on Lynn Riggs' 1931 play *Green Grow the Lilacs*, two men in Oklahoma territory at the beginning of the twentieth century—cowboy Curly McLain and farmhand Jud Fry—vie for the affections of rancher Laurey Williams, the ward of Aunt Eller. A comic subplot features the love triangle of Ado Annie, cowboy Will Parker and itinerant peddler Ali Hakim. As noted previously, although much of the musical can be considered light-hearted and wholesome, it contains darker undertones. In the Oregon Shakespeare Festival publication *Prologue* Mark Dundas Wood notes, 'wrath, envy and lust are among the deadly sins that figure in its scenario.'²⁴³ It also discusses suicide, an attempted murder and in the final act where Curly faces a criminal charge it remains ambiguous whether justice has been served. Yet *Oklahoma!* is best known for presenting a nostalgic picture of the expansion of the American West. Debuting in the midst of World War II its tale of a unified community and a simple life resonated with war-weary audiences. As Jack Viertel writes in *The Secret Life of the American Musical* (2016), Americans saw the war as a fight for 'the values of democracy and liberty against the deadly incursions of tyranny and bigotry. This show was set at the turn of the century, but like all shows, it had to speak to the audiences of its own time.'²⁴⁴ A show's popularity is measured by its commercial success and the length of its initial run, and as Geoffrey Block notes in *Enchanted Evenings: The Broadway Musical from Show Boat to Sondheim* (1997), the revivability of a show arguably constitutes a more compelling measure of its success.²⁴⁵ *Oklahoma!* has had several West End and Broadway revivals—including in 1951, 1979 and 2002 on Broadway and 1980 and 1998 on the West End—is a staple of amateur companies and was adapted for film in 1955.

The original Broadway production, directed by Rouben Mamoulian at the St. James Theatre was hailed by *The New York Times* as a 'truly delightful musical play' that 'combines a charm of manner, beautiful acting, singing and dancing and a score by Richard Rodgers

²⁴³ Wood, 2018, p. 3

²⁴⁴ Viertel, 2016, p. 29

²⁴⁵ Block, 2009, p. 12

which doesn't do any harm either, since it is one of his best.'²⁴⁶ It was an instant success and ran for five years with 2,212 performances, making it the longest running show in Broadway history, a record it held until *My Fair Lady* in 1956.²⁴⁷ Its Broadway run was followed by a 10-year national tour. The show opened at London's Theatre Royal Drury Lane in 1947 and was the first American musical to transfer from Broadway to the West End after World War II. Londoners took to it as enthusiastically as American audiences and it ran for 1,548 performances.

The *Oklahoma!* revivals analysed below as well as previous productions continue to have one thing in common –the exclusion of Native Americans.²⁴⁸ The narratives of Native Americans who originally inhabited Oklahoma territory are never mentioned in the play. As of 2020 there were 39 Native American tribes residing in Oklahoma. Many of those who inhabit the state are the descendants of those forced to leave their homeland due to the Indian Removal Act of 1830, also known as the 'Trail of Tears,' which resulted in a loss of land and tribal independence. By the time of Rodgers and Hammerstein's musical several tribes reorganised and were granted a measure of sovereignty over their daily lives through various treaties. As the programme notes written by Arianne Johnson Quinn for the Chichester Festival Theatre's production state, although Native Americans are not visibly present in *Oklahoma!*, 'these unspoken voices left an indelible mark on life in the western United States and the subsequent enduring fascination of countless audiences with the vast cultural landscape of the Wild West. It's vital that we remember their stories and find new cultural networks,' she wrote. 'After all, to paraphrase Oscar Hammerstein, these invisible voices too, belong to the land.'²⁴⁹ And one day, perhaps those Native American voices will find representation and a place in an *Oklahoma!* revival. How this might be realised is explored in the conclusion of this case study.

²⁴⁶ Lewis Nichols, *New York Times*, 1943 in Brantley, 2001, p. 110

²⁴⁷ Ibell, 2018, p. 4

²⁴⁸ This is in spite of the fact Lynn Riggs (1899-1954), author of the book the musical is based on was born in Claremore, Oklahoma and according to the OSF programme, through his mother was part Cherokee.

²⁴⁹ Quinn, 2019

A 'boundary-busting' *Oklahoma!*

In 2018, the 75th anniversary production of *Oklahoma!* at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival (OSF) in Ashland broke new ground by staying true to the story and maintaining the 1906 setting but it featured same-sex lead couples and LGBTQ2+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Two-Spirit) casting. The festival's use of gender inclusive casting celebrated love in many forms and was a success with critics and packed audiences throughout its six-month repertory run. In an August 2018 *New York Times* review critic Laura Collins Hughes declared it a hit that 'stakes a claim for segments of the population that weren't visible in most earlier incarnations.'²⁵⁰ In the OSF production, Curly, now a female, was still a cowhand in Oklahoma territory and in love with Aunt Eller's young charge Laurey. Cowboy Will loves the male Ado Andy. The peddler Hakim is bisexual and Aunt Eller is listed in the programme as transsexual. Jud Fry is a troubled straight man, furious that Laurey could prefer a woman rather than him. But as in the 1943 original, farmers and ranchers still attend town socials, battle over fences, land and water rights and belt out lyrical melodies while nimbly kicking up their heels in the graceful and athletic dance numbers that arise logically from the plot.

Bill Rauch, who was then OSF's artistic director said that the goal was to honour the original work but update it with multi-racial casting and make it inclusive in terms of gender identity and sexual orientation. He recounted that as a gay adolescent and later as a gay adult he did not see himself in classic musicals. 'I felt unrepresented and shut-out, and they were not about me or people like me,' Rauch stated. 'And so the idea that this thing that I love—that's a classic, that has existed—could also reflect the gay community feels very meaningful on a personal level, but also in terms of social justice and the artistic boundary-pushing that is part of what OSF does.'²⁵¹ With the previously unrepresented becoming central to the story and the promotion of diverse casting Rauch shined a spotlight on how a musical could be reimagined while preserving the basic premise, dialogue and original songs. Intersectionality which describes the way people from different backgrounds encounter the world is evident through visibly promoting racial and gender identity issues through diverse casting. The Rodgers and Hammerstein organisation approved the

²⁵⁰ Collins-Hughes, 2018, *New York Times*, 15 August 2018

²⁵¹ Wood, 2018, p. 5

innovations and granted licensing in part because of earlier dealings with Rauch who in 2012 successfully staged a production entitled *Medea/Macbeth/Cinderella* which blended texts from Euripides and Shakespeare with the Rodgers and Hammerstein's 1957 musical.

Rauch's experience and his identity had a bearing on how he wanted this *Oklahoma!* represented, and that vision was embodied in his casting decisions. The director's introduction to *Oklahoma!* was as a high school student when the white Rauch was 'admittedly miscast' as the Persian peddler Ali Hakim and in this production he was determined to cast the role 'with an actor who self-identifies as Iranian.'²⁵² As the person responsible for OSF's overall artistic vision Rauch used that power to represent characters in a certain way—which Stuart Hall terms a 'regime of representation.' Hall's research of how racial, ethnic and sexual difference have been represented is applicable particularly regarding how one's perspective affects meaning and the implications of power in interpreting meaning.²⁵³ Rauch had an agenda to represent the peddler in what he felt was a more authentic manner and that decision was infused with intent and bias. In the other two productions referenced in this case study the directors also made the deliberate decision to ensure the peddler was not portrayed by a white actor. This is an expression of the regime of representation by showing how racial and ethnic meanings shift depending on culture and historical context. The representational choices made were in stark contrast to the 1955 movie version where Hakim was portrayed by Eddie Albert, a blond actor of German heritage.

The opportunity to see herself represented and reflected in OSF's production resonated with Tatiana Wechsler, who portrayed Curly. As a self-identified Black-Korean actor based in New York City, in a 2019 email interview Wechsler noted she has played male characters, female characters who were originally written as male, and characters originally written as white. 'However, those productions weren't all cast non-traditionally to make a statement. It is also important for non-traditional casting to be normalized so that marginalized actors don't always have to be performing their identities—they can just be without having to comment on who they are,' she wrote, adding that this has traditionally only been allowed for white actors. The intersectionality of a Black woman performing a

²⁵² Ibid.

²⁵³ Hall, Evans, Nixon, 2013, p. 249.

role originally written for a white male in which her love interest is also a woman openly challenged audiences presuming a degree of familiarity traditionally inherent in this oft-produced classic.

Weschler shared that viewing the 1997 television special of Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Cinderella* starring Black singers Whitney Houston and Brandy was life-changing and had a major impact on her career choice. This version of *Cinderella* 'had Black women as princesses, queens (Whoopi Goldberg), fairy godmothers (Houston),' she recalled. 'It allowed dark-skinned Black women with natural hair to be regal, strong but soft, and beautiful. And they were all that while singing Golden Age musical theatre songs, the kind of songs I grew up loving but could not feel fully welcome within. And the rest of the world of the movie was filled with actors of all races and families who didn't all look alike, just like mine. The impact it had on me as a young girl can't be understated.' If the role of non-white characters is merely peripheral then the message individuals, especially impressionable young people, receive relates to whose voices are more worthy of being heard and who the public is (or is not) interested in hearing. The phrase 'you have to see it to be it' means becoming something or taking on a certain role is much easier if you have already seen someone who looks like you doing it. As Lucy Kerbel writes in *All Change Please: A Practical Guide to Achieving Gender Equality in Theatre* (2017) 'If you never see someone with your body type or your ethnicity, or with your accent playing the kind of roles you would aspire to one day play, that may make it harder for you to visualise yourself achieving that dream.'²⁵⁴ Not only may it make it more difficult, but perhaps it discourages actors from making an attempt.

I am well acquainted with *Oklahoma!* and have lost count of how often I have watched the 1955 Fred Zinnemann-directed movie starring Shirley Jones and Gordon MacRae as well as numerous amateur and professional stage productions. How could I *not* love a musical that includes a song about my hometown ('*Everything's Up to Date in Kansas City*')? I was naturally curious about this production and while still living in the United States flew from Phoenix, Arizona to Ashland, Oregon with the express purpose of seeing if a diverse, same sex *Oklahoma!* would work. At first I found myself actively listening for

²⁵⁴ Kerbel, 2017, p. 113

pronoun changes both in dialogue and song, which were necessary due to casting. For example, Ado Andy's solo number was altered from girl to 'I'm just a guy who cain't say no.' However, eventually I settled in and became captivated by the set, music and spirited choreography. I found the homespun humour and romance was not lost or diminished because of the gender shifts. The narrative told through the lens of the turn-of-the century frontier operated irrespective of race or gender casting changes. In the stirring closing number cast members still sang, 'We know we belong to the land, and the land we belong to is grand' despite the historical fact that the land was only theirs through theft from and violence toward Native Americans. As Warren Hoffman writes in *The Great White Way: Race and the Broadway Musical* (2020), 'if Indians had actually shown up, the logic of the show would call for either their expulsion or their extermination.'²⁵⁵ However, one of the strengths of live musical theatre is the ability to seduce with a lyrical ballad or a tuneful comedic song. I was appreciative of the opportunity to witness a progressive production filled with what I considered interesting casting choices and made the conscious decision to temporarily pause contemplation of the racial, societal and political ramifications reflected in what I had just witnessed and exited the outdoor theatre smiling and humming the score. Or, it could be that I was briefly lulled by the deep-seated belief that musicals must be pleasurable and, as Hoffman writes regarding audiences, was so hungry for entertainment that I glossed over the deeper issues. Hoffman asserts that ethnic concerns are often overlooked by audiences because such issues do not fit the stereotype of musicals being light, carefree theatre. While enjoyable, the OSF production's deliberate use of 'conscious casting' by changing genders and acknowledging ethnicities provided increased resonance to a beloved musical and allowed this audience member to contemplate issues of access and inclusion. Those concepts as well as race and racism were definite concerns when I attended the next *Oklahoma!* production.

***Oklahoma!* With Racial Overtones?**

On a Friday morning in August 2019 I travelled from London to West Sussex to attend *Oklahoma!* at the Chichester Festival Theatre, considered one of England's flagship theatre complexes. This production, directed by Jeremy Sams included two Black actors in

²⁵⁵ Hoffman, 2020, p. 65

the cast: Amara Okereke as the heroine Laurey, and Emmanuel Kojo as the villain Jud Fry. I had read a July 2019 *Stage* review where the critic Bella Todd wrote that she found this production ‘decidedly uncomfortable’ and that a Black Jud added an unacknowledged negative racial spin, unalleviated by Okereke as the female lead. She concluded that this *Oklahoma!* felt ‘unresponsive to the racial tension its apparently colour-blind casting evokes.’²⁵⁶ I wondered if I would have the same opinion. I was also interested in comparing this version to the multi-hued and same-sexed Oregon Shakespeare Festival production I attended the year before. Following a two-hour train ride from Victoria station I arrived in Chichester and walked around for about an hour. Coming from London where 55 percent of the population is non-white, I immediately noticed I was not seeing too many (well, any) people who looked like me. I later learned that 88.9 percent of the population in West Sussex are White British (English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish), a higher proportion than for the entire population of England and Wales (80.5 percent).²⁵⁷ This statistic proved meaningful later that night.

The evening production of *Oklahoma!* in the 1,340-seat Festival Theatre appeared to be sold out. I thought the production was very well done. I had a couple of minor objections with inflection/emphasis of some lines and the interpretation of a couple of lyrics and was not overly impressed by the staging of the ending: the newly married Curly and Laurey drive off in a car and I would have preferred to see them in a surrey, with the fringe on top, which is the title of the musical’s second number. Amara Okereke’s Laurey radiated beauty and confidence. She has a lovely voice and could dance as well as she sang. Her talents were apparent in the extended dream ballet number, an exploration of sexual desire which traditionally employs a dance double. Indeed, I witnessed some of the best dancing of any of the *Oklahoma!*s I had seen to date—that is until four years later when I saw the West End revival analysed next in this case study.

From my centre lower balcony seat I had a clear view of the stage but also a fairly panoramic view of my fellow audience members. As I watched the action on the stage that evening my thoughts kept coming back to the audience in this packed venue. Three brown

²⁵⁶ Todd, 2019, *The Stage*

²⁵⁷ West Sussex.gov, 2019

faces in the entire place—me and the two actors—Laurey and Jud.²⁵⁸ Audience diversity will be explored in a later chapter, but my being the ‘other’²⁵⁹ in this audience correlated with the representation of one of the main characters—Jud. Bella Todd had written that in this production ‘stereotypes of black masculinity are ignited without being interrogated,’ specifically noting that the spectre of lynching hovers around Jud’s death, while the white Curly is assuaged of all guilt and that the overall production had not sufficiently questioned key undercurrents. For *The Stage* critic Jud’s large size and dark skin contrasted with Curly’s ‘lean body’ added an additional threatening element. The character Jud is seen as an isolated drifter and outsider. His first number, ‘Pore Jud is Daid,’ a duet when Curly visits Jud in his sleeping quarters—a grimy smokehouse decorated with pornographic pictures of naked women—and jovially encourages him to commit suicide. Jud’s solo ‘Lonely Room,’ follows immediately. It is an aching emotional number about longing for love and acceptance (*‘And all the things I wish fer, turn out like I want them to be, And I’m better ‘n that smart aleck cowhand who thinks he is better’n me!...’*)²⁶⁰ Hammerstein has said that this number paints a ‘savage’ picture of Jud’s solitary life, his hatred of Curly and his pathological desire for Laurey.²⁶¹ Author Jack Viertel writes that this was Hammerstein’s way of ensuring the audience heard Jud’s side which allows viewers to acknowledge that despite considerable faults Jud ‘has dreams just like the other characters in the piece and just like us.’²⁶² If so, I argue the audience empathy with character Jud is written to be short lived and unsustainable. In the next scene ‘dream Laurey’ encounters Jud and is terrified by his advances and in the act that follows leaves no doubt of her opinion of the farmhand as she rebuffs him:

JUD: I ain’t good enough, am I. I’m a hired hand, got dirt on my hands, pig slop. Ain’t fittin’ to touch you. You’re better, so much better. Yeah, we’ll see who’s better, Miss Laurey. Then you’ll wish you wasn’t so free with your airs...

²⁵⁸ The peddler was portrayed by Scott Karim, a British-born actor whose father is of Egyptian heritage.

²⁵⁹ The Cambridge English dictionary defines otherness as, ‘Anyone perceived by the in-group as not belonging, threatening or being different in some fundamental way.’

²⁶⁰ Rodgers and Hammerstein, 1942, p. 71

²⁶¹ Carter, 2020, p. 206

²⁶² Viertel, 2016, p. 29

LAUREY: Are you making threats to me? Are you standing there trying to tell me if I don't allow you to slobber over me like a hog why you're gonna do something about it? Why you're nothing but a mangy dog and somebody ought to shoot you.

Laurey then fires Jud and threatens if he ever returns to the farm, 'I'll sic the dogs onto you!'²⁶³ In the musical's final act Jud unexpectedly shows up at Laurey and Curly's wedding and dies when he falls on his knife after starting a fight with Curly.

Briefly that summarises the character Jud, who is undoubtedly the villain of the piece. Did his dark skin colour make him more intimidating in the Chichester production as the critic seemed to believe? Perhaps others in the majority white audience felt the same. However coming from a family with large Black males in abundance, fear or menace was not my default reaction to seeing someone who resembled a cousin. Emmanuel Kojo performed the role admirably, but in my opinion his Jud was not especially scary. The outsider Jud is an object of fear for Laurey, of disgust for Curly and indifference from the rest of the community.²⁶⁴ I would categorise the casting of Kojo not as race-conscious but as 'blind' casting with the previously noted caveat that while casting may have occurred without consideration of the actor's race, the audience—and in this case, the critic Todd—was not able to ignore it. She chose what she wanted to see and experienced discomfort from the casting choice. I had a different interpretation. Todd's editorial commentary imposes a racial stereotype, projecting racist visions of Blackness onto Jud. Evident from how my opinion diverged from Todd's, the decision to cast Kojo in the role was received differently depending on the perspective and personal experience of who was viewing the production. Whether those perspectives are taken into consideration by the creative teams who are empowered to make casting choices hearkens back to the discussion in the previous chapter analysing the trajectory of change in commercial theatre since 1984.

²⁶³ Rodgers and Hammerstein, 1942, p. 108. Note that the original script and lyrics contain Hammerstein's interpretation of how he imagined people spoke when the story takes place. The 2021 edition notes the written dialogue is meant to be used as a guide rather than an indication of exactly how the words need to be spoken.

²⁶⁴ Block, 2009, p. 201

To explore what happens when a play is cast in a particular way and consider how altering casting norms produces different nuances of meaning, imagine the following scene with a white Curly and a Black actor as Jud in Act One, Scene Two. The exchange takes place in Jud's smokehouse.

- JUD:** You ain't told me yet what business you had here. We got no cattle to sell... the oat crop is done spoke for.
- CURLY:** You sure relieved my mind, considerable.
- JUD:** (*Tensely*) There's only one other thing on this farm you could want—and it better not be that!
- CURLY:** But that's just what it is.
- JUD:** Better not be! You keep away from her, you hear?
- CURLY:** (*cooly*) You know somebody ought to tell Laurey what kind of a man you are. And for that matter, somebody outta tell you about yourself.
- JUD:** You better get outta here, Curly.
- CURLY:** A fella wouldn't feel very safe in here with you... if he didn't know you. But I know you, Jud. In this country, there's two things you can do if you're a man. Live out of doors is one. Live in a hole is the other... How'd you get to be the way you are anyway—setting here in this filthy hole—and thinking the way you're thinkin'? Why don't you do something healthy once in a while, instead of staying shut up here—crawling and festering!
- JUD:** Anh! (*He seizes a gun in a kind of reflex, a kind of desperate frenzy and pulls the trigger. Luckily the gun is pointed toward the ceiling.*)

The above dialogue spoken by a white actor appearing as Curly could be interpreted as a racist character addressing a Black man he considers dangerous, but also inferior or 'the other.' Curly insults and denigrates and Jud's inarticulate, 'savage' response is to go for his gun. With no changes to the production or dialogue to reflect the casting choice is it possible to contextualise this scene through anything other than a racial lens? This is a powerful scene regardless of who inhabits the roles, but diverse casting opens this scene to reveal complexities of race and has the potential to initiate potentially uncomfortable but fruitful conversations about addressing race rather than pretending it does not exist.

This specific casting choice of Emanuel Kojo as Jud had an effect in terms of amending representation, but potentially ‘reads’ differently depending on who is in the audience. This commentary is a marker of racialisation—a mechanism of othering people of colour. As Richard Dyer in *White* (1997) noted, as long as race is something only applied to non-white individuals then whiteness is considered to be the human condition and defines what is normal. ‘White people claim and achieve authority for what they say by not admitting, indeed not realising, that for much of the time they speak only for whiteness.’²⁶⁵ The assumption of what physically large Black men are like, in this case menacing and sinister, played directly into the black/white, nature/culture binary oppositions of racial stereotyping. In *Making Americans—Jews and the Broadway Musical*, Most notes that the musical is ‘loaded with cues’ about Jud’s and the peddler Hakim’s otherness, with Hakim a thinly veiled Jewish immigrant while Jud’s ‘sexuality, like that of the stereotypical male racial other is threatening,’²⁶⁶ Investigating the spectacle of the ‘other’ Hall reveals how racial, ethnic, and sexual difference have been represented by examining well-known visual examples and addresses the essentialising of difference through stereotyping and also delves into how violence and fantasy play into representational practices, making their meanings more ambivalent.

Another example of the impact of casting a Black actor in role of a villain can be found in the 1993 Washington D.C. Arena Stage production of Thornton Wilder’s Pulitzer Prize winning *The Skin of Our Teeth*. Written in 1942 as the United States was on the brink of a World War, *The Skin of Our Teeth*, a three-act parable of human history tells the story of one family’s survival in the midst of looming world disasters. According to Wilder the daily life events of the main characters—Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus, their two children and maid Sabina—comes alive under conditions of crisis.²⁶⁷ The Antrobus family faces—and endures—the Ice Age, a great flood, refugees begging at their front door and a devastating war. The original Broadway production was directed by Elia Kazan and actors included Tallulah Bankhead and Fredric March. The London production opened at the Phoenix Theatre 16 May 1945, just one week after the end of World War II (VE Day) in Europe. That

²⁶⁵ Dyer, 1997, p. xiv

²⁶⁶ Most, 2004, p. 108.

²⁶⁷ Wilder, 1962, p. 13

production was directed by Sir Laurence Olivier. Sabina was played by Vivien Leigh. I had only read the play and looked forward to seeing a live production, but in 1993 I left the Arena Stage disappointed with what I had just witnessed. My objection was that the director, Douglas Wager, chose to cast a Black male as the Antrobus family's evil son Henry, who is originally named the Biblical 'Cain.' Washington D.C. was a majority-Black district from the 1950s through 2011. In the 1990s, in part due to lenient gun laws and roughly 80 homicides for every 100,000 residents it had the reputation of being known as 'the murder capital of the world.'²⁶⁸ With a Black man (Teagle F. Bougere) cast as a malicious murdering villain, a beloved play took on a disturbing, even sinister tone. This casting decision which may have been considered as 'colour-blind' by the white director, ruined the experience for me. Slightly outraged, I expected others to share my opinion. However in the generally positive reviews I read of that particular run not a single critic made reference to the race of the actor portraying Henry/Cain. Lloyd Rose, the *Washington Post* critic, called Bougere's portrayal 'affecting' and did take note that Sabina was played by an African American (Sandra Quartermann). Rose wrote that at the end of the play Sabina's remark wondering why she 'always ends back in the kitchen' had a sardonic bitterness it would not have had with a white actor in the role.²⁶⁹ The non-mention of a casting decision I saw as significant was puzzling and I wondered about general reluctance of theatre critics to raise the topic of race which was addressed in the previous chapter. This also correlated to representation and my research question regarding the impact of casting without consideration of societal issues. Twenty-five years after disliking a production because a Black actor was cast as a villain I encountered someone else critical of casting a Black man as an evil character, this time in *Oklahoma!*, but had a different reaction. This illustrates how meanings of racial or ethnic difference can shift depending on community, culture or historical context, as delineated by Hall in his investigation of representation.²⁷⁰

Contemplating Hall's theories of representation invited consideration of another *Oklahoma!* outsider—the peddler Ali Hakim. Hammerstein had first designated him as 'Armenian' but by the show's opening he was identified as 'Persian' and in Act Two he refers

²⁶⁸ Lewis, 2014, BBC News

²⁶⁹ Rose, 1993, *Washington Post*

²⁷⁰ Hall, Stuart, Evans, Nixon, 2013, p. 2.

to himself as the 'lonely Gypsy.'²⁷¹ I found this shift notable as it further isolates the peddler from the other town folk and emphasises his outsider status. Hakim is marginalised by the insular community and considered a foreigner. For example, he is not present on stage to sing in the communal songs such 'The Farmer and the Cowman' or the finale, 'Oklahoma.' As Josephine Lee writes in *Race in American Musical Theatre* (2023), 'Ali Hakim provides access to the exotic, mysterious, and sensual realms that are conspicuously lacking in the more homespun lives of the characters.'²⁷² However, although Hakim could be considered an exotic other because of creative costuming and heavily-accented English, the character openly courts Ado Annie and is still considered an acceptable suitor for a farmer's daughter. This is in sharp contrast to outsider Jud, who is soundly rejected by Laurey and his eventual death fails to even merit a proper trial, which is consistent in his role as the musical's villain.

I was reminded of the otherness I share with the characters Jud and Hakim as I walked back to my Chichester hotel following that evening's performance. After wandering around for a few minutes I determined I was lost. This was not unusual for me, as I have always considered myself a bit 'directionally impaired.' When I saw an older white couple walking towards me I approached them and immediately noticed their hesitation. I recognised the disinclination was probably fear that I was either going to ask them for money or worse, so very quickly I asked if the street I was seeking was in that direction. Their relief was palpable, as they pointed me the opposite way. As Harvey Young notes, 'the association of blackness with criminality or dangerousness, coupled with the recognition of the approaching figure as "black," incites an assumption of the other person's potential behaviour—that he or she might mug or attack the pedestrian...'²⁷³ I experienced this as yet another reminder of being 'the other,' but continued on, now in the correct direction. The incident did not tarnish my evening and pleasant memories of the show were still uppermost in my mind when I reached my destination. As composer and lyricist Alan Jay Lerner noted in his 1973 introduction to the *Great Songs of Broadway* music book, those

²⁷¹ In the 2021 text edition the licencing agency includes a note that 'in all instances "gypsy" can be changed as necessary for your production' adding that a dialogue change request should be first submitted to a licencing representative. I believe this note is a reflection of the understanding over time that 'gypsy' is an offensive term for Romani people.

²⁷² Lee, 2023, p. 26

²⁷³ Young, 2013, p. 9

who attend the theatre 'go to be transported, amused, uplifted, moved or enchanted on the highest level, the level that has made the theatre survive through the ages.'²⁷⁴ I argue that through deliberate casting decisions, in addition to Lerner's citing laudable emotions those in attendance are also able to contemplate concepts of inclusion and representation without any diminishment of their enjoyment. While this was my experience, I can infer from Todd's *Stage* review the casting choices were read differently by the predominantly white audience, evidenced by the how the casting of a Black actor as the character Jud represented preconceived notions of menace and fear. In contrast to the generally uplifting productions I witnessed on the Oregon Shakespeare Festival and Chichester Festival stages, in the final *Oklahoma!* production I analyse joyfulness was in short supply. The third production in this case study was intentionally designed to solicit exploration of the concepts of fairness and exclusion.



Figure 6 *Oklahoma!* Programme, Chichester Festival Theatre, 2019

²⁷⁴ Lerner, 1973, p. 6

Dream Baby!

After Laurey shares her desires which include achieving clarity about her hopes and true feelings, the peddler Hakim sells her a potion that once ingested, instigates the show's 15-minute dream ballet that concludes the first act. This number was newly choreographed to be provocative and unforgettable in the West End *Oklahoma!* revival I attended in 2023. This production, directed by Daniel Fish, arrived on Broadway in 2019 where it was nominated for eight Tony Awards, winning Best Revival of a Musical. It transferred to London three years later and in August 2023 I obtained a prime Dress Circle seat at Wyndham's Theatre. Black actors Anoushka Lucas and Paige Peddie inhabited the roles of Laurey and Ado Annie and the 'dream Laurey' or 'lead dancer' was played by Marie-Astrid Mence. For her number Mence was not costumed in the traditional attire befitting a young woman in a 1906 farming community but instead represented Laurey clad in an oversized tee-shirt with 'Dream Baby Dream' in big black letters across the front. In all productions this choreography is paired with the song 'Out of my Dreams' ('...*When the mist is low, and stars are breaking through, then out of your dreams you'll go, Into a dream come true*') and is meant to be an expression of character and situation that arises after Laurey consumes the 'exotic elixir.' The dancers were created to be dream counterparts to the actors and in most productions stand behind the actors before becoming 'figures' fading into Laurey's dream to dominate the stage in place of the actors. Mence's energetic dance performance provided an enthralling insight into Laurey's internal world and the choreographer, John Higinbotham, said that this ballet revisits the actions, music and themes the audience experiences earlier but in innovative ways. Aside from one early galloping-like movement which paid homage to the original 1943 choreography, this version was decidedly different from Agnes DeMille's ballet. The 'Dream Laurey' Fish stated was not just dancing, but provoking the audience as an outsider 'with her audacious presence and movement.'²⁷⁵ In the production's programme, Mence said she related to this number because it was about a woman trying to find her place in the world, 'which is something any woman can relate to.' Watching a talented Black woman represent a main character's internal world to the audience through a powerful, complex, modern dance solo brought to mind Weschler sharing her memories of being influenced after viewing Black women in roles she had never

²⁷⁵ Ibell, 2023, p. 8

before seen. I wondered/hoped if this could be an occasion where other young Black girls watching Mence's performance could be similarly inspired and feel represented as a result of this inclusive casting choice. Unlike my Chichester experience, I did not have a panoramic view of the audience so I was unable to assess the level of diversity of attendees that evening.

The extended, passionate modern solo dance was not the only change in this production. Upon entering the theatre the audience was confronted by a mostly bare stage with at least a dozen rifle racks adorning the walls. There were jarring lighting shifts of glaring brightness to pitch black darkness. I am still scratching my head in wonder at the director's decision to have Aunt Eller in the second act engage in an extended and unexplained make-out session with the peddler Hakim on one side of the stage which proved a distraction from the action occurring centre stage. Perhaps it was a representation of female sexual power. This observation is connected to my argument that the impactful staging and casting choices made by those in power have lingering effects beyond the final curtain.

In this revival Jud is killed not by falling on his knife but after being shot at close range by Curly. At the musical's conclusion normally the audience rhythmically and joyfully claps along to the triumphant finale title tune, (*'You're doin' fine Oklahoma, Oklahoma, okay!'*), which incidentally in 1953 became Oklahoma's official state song. But that was not to be in this production, which was understandable as the title song was sung more in defiance and Laurey and Curly took their curtain calls in blood-stained wedding attire, remnants from the climactic fatal fight with Jud.

Director Fish stated he chose to highlight violence, injustice and the ways a community needs to create an outsider in order to define itself. In the West End theatre programme Dahlak Brathwaite who was the assistant director of the United States national tour in 2022, noted that as a Black male who favours hip-hop over showtunes he initially was not automatically drawn to *Oklahoma!* and when he first saw this production he was suspicious about the presence of multi-racial casting, which he dismissed as arbitrary on account of his limited experience with Broadway musicals and pre-conceived perception of what he considered an outdated play. However Brathwaite eventually saw Fish's revival as the story of 'a paradise lost and a way to consider the stories that have been left out and

can arise from familiar stories we already know (like *Oklahoma!*) by viewing them from a different angle,²⁷⁶ in this case from the purview of the outsider. The director took special interest in the trial scene where Curly faces a criminal charge for Jud's killing but is quickly acquitted of any wrongdoing by townsfolk in a quick 'trial' that takes place in Aunt Eller's kitchen to enable the newlyweds to start their honeymoon.

AUNT ELLER: Oh fiddlesticks. Let's do it here and say we did it in court.

CORD ELAM: (as town Marshall): We can't do that. That's breaking the law.

AUNT ELLER: Well, let's not break the law, let's just bend it a little. Come on Andrew (town judge) and start the trial. We ain't got but a few minutes.²⁷⁷

As indicated by the kangaroo court proceedings, Jud as the alienated 'other' in the community deserved no better and Fish has stated that the trial scene proved critical to how he styled the rest of the production. In the original production Jud is identified as having a darker skin than the other key characters, with Hammerstein having Curly refer to him as 'a bullet-colored, growly man.'²⁷⁸ Jud is not allowed to assimilate into the community, dies to preserve its harmony and is not considered worthy of a just trial. This revival kept the text and the songs but as Paul Ibell notes found a complex way to show part of American history while 'throwing light on, and asking questions about, the contemporary issues that face us all.'²⁷⁹ One such issue is a justice system that favours the population in power. Although in this production the character Jud was played by a white man (Patrick Vaill) and not by a Black actor, audiences viewing the travesty of justice in the trial scene are emotionally steered toward contemplating justice denied. In the 'kitchen courtroom' scene Jud is not present, has no representation, is summarily dismissed and found guilty.

Hoffman noted that as originally staged *Oklahoma!* rewrites history by 'expunging the painful aspects of frontier history while celebrating the rewards of the white pioneer spirit.'²⁸⁰ This revival as well as the Chichester revival of Rodgers and Hammerstein's musical

²⁷⁶ Brathwaite, 2023, p. 7

²⁷⁷ Rodgers and Hammerstein, 1943, p. 129

²⁷⁸ In the 2012 edition, this description was changed to a 'hardened, growly man.'

²⁷⁹ Ibell, 2023, p. 4

²⁸⁰ Hoffman, 2020, p. 65

illustrates how racial identity and casting can subtly shape the perception of an audience. In this production the director's specific casting choices, such as the 'dream Laurey' and the deliberate choice to highlight the musicals' darker aspects of violence and exclusion allowed for examination of character depending on one's cultural perspective. Violence and fantasy play into representational practices and as the interpretations of familiar characters shift meanings become more ambivalent. Director Fish created tension and audience discomfort by having Curly and Laurey remain in blood-soaked clothes for the curtain call as a statement that the romanticised paradise of the open frontier in early twentieth century America was ominous and far from perfect. With his staging, lighting, choreography as well as the diverse casting choices not unlike those made by the Oregon Shakespeare Festival and Chichester Festival directors, Fish told this story in a previously unexplored manner, allowing those present to view a favoured classic with a fresh perspective.

Conclusion

Dyer's work, *White* focuses on the study of representation of white people in white Western culture and provided additional perspectives on the subject of otherness and how power is represented. He writes, 'to say one is interested in race has come to mean that one is interested in any racial imagery other than that of white people.'²⁸¹ The casting choices made in these three *Oklahoma!* productions were calculated to present Black actors and dancers in roles that were originally written for white performers. Future productions are encouraged to do the same, as evidenced in the 2021 edition of the *Oklahoma!* script in which the licencing agent, Concord Theatricals includes the statement, 'In this show, the race of the characters is not pivotal to the plot. We encourage you to consider diversity and inclusion in your casting choices.' As evidenced by these three revivals, 'old-fashioned' musicals are expanding in ways that reveal a more inclusive world and through diverse casting are allowing audiences to reconsider larger societal issues that these shows have the capacity to reveal.

However, as previously noted with the lack of representation of Native Americans in *Oklahoma!*, I argue that inclusivity has its limits. Stuart Hall wrote that racism allows individuals to make distinctions 'between inside and outside, between us and them,

²⁸¹ Dyer, *White*, p. 1

between who belongs and who doesn't belong.'²⁸² One possible way to theatrically show those distinctions in future *Oklahoma!* productions would be to cast Jud as a Native American. This would amplify his outsider status in a territory where settlers systematically eliminated and forcibly removed his people from their land and in turn would make Jud's death scene symbolic of the injustice inflicted on his people by white Americans.

I was able to contemplate and explore the concept of otherness as it relates to the research questions posed in this dissertation in an unexpected venue: England's National Portrait Gallery. The 2024 exhibition, *The Time Is Always Now*, presented 22 contemporary artists across the African diaspora whose work illuminated the fullness and complexity of Black life. The exhibition considered how artists depict the Black figure and how the Black body is often distorted or made invisible. A drawing of a person in a commercial gallery may at first seem merely a representation; but when that drawing is of a Black person it is infused with meaning, as it is in a place where one is viewing something different from the vast majority of art represented and is judged through the lens of whiteness, the standard against which all other groups is compared.

This hearkened back to my reading of Hall and Dyer as both investigate racial representation, with Dyer maintaining that white is the 'colour' by which all other ethnicities are always examined. Creative re-envisioning does not exclusively apply to *Oklahoma!* The artwork I viewed, including works by Claudette Johnson whose large-scale works show powerful Black women, represented various aspects of the Black experience while celebrating the form as something to be prominently displayed, not as an afterthought or a fetish. As evident from its rich performance history, *Oklahoma!* has been subject to a range of interpretations since its inception. Just as those attending the Portrait Gallery's exhibit, theatre audiences have increased opportunities to view classic works with fresh eyes as evidenced by the three *Oklahoma!* productions which, through casting allowed opportunities to reflect on social issues such as injustice and exclusion. But forward-thinking, updated productions are still considered newsworthy exceptions and I argue the theatre world has a long way to go before true inclusiveness is realised.

²⁸² Hall, 1997 in *Selected Writings* 2021, p. 370

In all three productions casting was used as a mechanism for providing increased access to opportunity for actors and broader representation on stage. As Jenny Kidd (2016) notes, representation is concerned with ‘the simultaneity of being and seeing, constructing and consuming, presence and absence...’²⁸³ With the Oregon Shakespeare Festival production’s use of gender-inclusive casting, the Chichester Festival Theatre’s controversial choice to cast a Black actor as the villain and the 2019 and 2023 Broadway and West End revivals which chose to highlight otherness through dance and violence, these unconventional productions of *Oklahoma!* gained complexity, immediacy and relevance to current society as a result of inclusive casting changes and a willingness to radically rethink a beloved classic. The escalation in melding casting, music, politics and cultural history together is investigated further in the next case study, *Hamilton*, which coincidentally inhabits the Broadway theatre named for *Oklahoma*’s composer, Richard Rodgers.

Hamilton

When America sings for you will they know what you overcame? Will they know you rewrote the game? The world will never be the same. – Act One, song 1, Hamilton

The primary aim of this case study of Lin Manuel Miranda’s *Hamilton* (2015) is to explore the implications of alternative casting practices and address the research question: In what ways have ‘non-traditionally’ cast plays contributed to discussions on race? The musical’s deliberate use of race-conscious casting, its enduring popularity and the scholarship that has arisen in part because of its success make it an obvious choice for examination in this investigation. *Hamilton*’s entrance to the musical canon has made audiences, theatre creatives, politicians and academics question the myriad ways to consider casting as a mechanism for providing increased access to opportunity and broader representation on stage. This invites examination of the politics of those choices.

I begin with a description of the musical’s origins. A synopsis, discussion of the impact of its unique casting, including aspects of the musical that caused consternation among its detractors is followed by an exploration of the show’s ties and involvement with

²⁸³ Kidd, 2016, p. 148

modern-day politics. *Hamilton*'s legacy is looked at through the prism of the concept of deracialisation before concluding with my thoughts on the musical, including what it got right, what I thought was wrong, and why it still matters.

Hamilton, a musical about America's colonial past, is told through a multi-racial cast and was conceived to reflect the country's present and future. Lin-Manuel Miranda, *Hamilton*'s creator, has said casting a predominately non-white ensemble of Blacks and Latinos to perform the roles of white founding fathers was intentional. In his 2016 book *Hamilton: The Revolution*, Miranda wrote, 'In *Hamilton*, we're telling the stories of old, dead white men, but we're using actors of colour, and that makes the story more immediate and more accessible to a contemporary audience. You don't distance the audience by putting an actor of colour in a role that you would think of as default Caucasian, you excite people and you draw them in.'²⁸⁴ Diverse ethnicities attending Broadway and West End theatre performances who are unaccustomed to viewing actors on stage in principal roles who look like them might be drawn to a show where they are prominently represented. With shifting demographics and the need to attract younger audiences to aid in theatres' sustainability, populating a cast with young, non-white actors could also be construed as a smart marketing move on Miranda's part.

Humanising history for its audience and using a dense 832-page biography as its source material, *Hamilton* is many things, including a love story, a political history lesson and a morality play decrying the perils of ambition and arrogance. This intersection of multiple elements as well as the varied musical styles, from traditional Broadway showtunes, 1960s' pop, to rap and hip hop, and as previously stated, creative casting, all contribute to *Hamilton*'s success, while simultaneously providing material for controversy and debate on the musical's significance, historical accuracy and impact of commercial theatre casting.

Hamilton's Backstory

Hamilton is a conglomeration of music genres which is a reflection of the author's upbringing and vast knowledge of musical history. Miranda began writing musicals in high school and premiered his first Broadway hit, *In The Heights* in 1999, in his second year at

²⁸⁴ Miranda, 2016, *The Hollywood Reporter*

Wesleyan University where he majored in theatre. Like myself, in his studies he would have encountered books focused on musicals that cite ancient Greece as the start of drama as a form of musical theatre, discounting Africa's oral tradition which predates ancient Greece by several centuries. The Middle Ages brought musical dramatisations of Bible stories, designed to make church teachings readily accessible. This gave way to pantomimes and comic opera. The musical comedy is the earliest type of musical and originally was a light-hearted story that was basically a showcase for songs and dances. Plot was incidental, at best.

The musical's origins are firmly grounded in creator Miranda's vast knowledge, apparent affection and respect for musical theatre. He was not only influenced by musical legends such as Rodgers and Hammerstein, but pays them homage in his music and lyrics. For example, in *'My Shot,'* the second number in the first act, the pivotal character Aaron Burr raps, '...I'm with you, but the situation is fraught; You've got to be carefully taught; if you talk, you're gonna get shot...' This, Miranda has acknowledged, was a nod to the team's 1949 *South Pacific* second act song about prejudice, 'You've got to be carefully taught.' With book musicals, such as *Oklahoma!* and *Hamilton*, the songs arise naturally out of the action and are used to develop the characters and to carry the story forward.

A New Yorker of Puerto Rican descent, Miranda spent six years writing *Hamilton's* music, lyrics and book before it opened Off-Broadway in New York's Public Theatre in February 2015. The show, with Miranda in the title role, transferred to Broadway in July of that year. London's much-anticipated opening at the newly remodelled Victoria Palace Theatre occurred in December 2017. Many, including critics, actors, directors and a multitude of fans, have hailed the mega-hit as a turning point in theatre history. Commenting on the 2015 Broadway opening after its transfer from the Public Theatre, the *New York Times* theatre critic Ben Brantley asserted that *Hamilton* had 'been given the kind of worshipful press usually reserved for the appearances of once-in-a-lifetime comets or the births of little royal celebrities.' The first one-sentence paragraph of his review said it all, 'Yes, it really is that good.'²⁸⁵ Award committees and the public agreed. The musical garnered 11 Tony Awards, and seven Olivier Awards, eight Drama Desk Awards and a

²⁸⁵ Brantley, 2015, *New York Times*.

Pulitzer Prize for Drama. Its Grammy-winning cast album went triple platinum (selling more than 3 million copies) and was the first cast recording to reach the top position on the *Billboard* Top 200 chart for rap. In addition to New York and London casts, in 2024 there were *Hamilton* touring companies in North America, Germany, Australia and the United Kingdom—all playing to packed houses.

Alexander Hamilton, a half-Scottish orphan born in the Caribbean, rose to become George Washington's aide-de-camp during the Revolutionary War. A prolific writer, he was a major force behind the United States Constitution and served as the country's first Secretary of the Treasury. Hamilton was also a vain, impulsive self-promoter who was involved in America's first sex scandal and died in a duel with his rival, Vice President Aaron Burr.

As referenced in the *Oklahoma!* case study, musicals are frequently adapted from existing literary works, and Miranda's hit is no exception. The Hamilton story that first appealed to and profoundly impressed Miranda was Ron Chernow's biography *Alexander Hamilton* (2004), which he read while on a holiday. At their first meeting Miranda told the author he wanted historians to take his musical seriously. Walking into an early rehearsal, Chernow, who became the musical's historical advisor to aid Miranda in writing about the politics and culture of the Revolutionary era, has said he was initially shocked to see George Washington, Hamilton and other founding fathers being played by Blacks and Latinos. A white male born 31 years before Miranda, Chernow was not a rap aficionado and was initially surprised to find that those conversant with the musical's vernacular stylings did not look like their historical counterparts. 'However, within five minutes he was carried away by what he heard and became a militant defender of the idea that actors of any race should play the Founding Fathers.'²⁸⁶ *Hamilton* was conceived from the beginning for a multi-racial cast which was an important part of the production's regime of representation. While the cast play white individuals, the casting protocol requires from the outset performers who are not white. As the world continues to struggle with issues of diversity and inclusion, *Hamilton* advances the discussion while providing Black, Asian and Latino/Latina actors not

²⁸⁶ Miranda, McCarter, 2016, p. 33

only increased employment on commercial stages but the chance to make a statement by being the voices of America's early history.

Casting and Race

When the show opened in London reviews were generally positive, with Paul Taylor of *The Independent* wishing Miranda had gone even further with culturally diverse casting ('Why not an African-American woman as George Washington?'). Tim Bano, reviewing for *The Stage*, saw skin colour as no barrier to 'being allowed to wear the ruffs and epaulettes of history's movers and shakers.' However, Lloyd Evans writing for the ultra-conservative *Spectator* magazine seemed perplexed that Blacks were not up in arms at the show's premise. 'The founding fathers included prosperous white capitalists who used black slaves as concubines and labourers,' he wrote. 'Black Lives Matter must be hopping mad with this musical. Not only does it pretend that Black and White Americans existed on terms of equality in the eighteenth century, it has the temerity to invite black audiences to pay money to watch a false version of their own history.'²⁸⁷ While Evans' commentary was doubtlessly designed to provoke controversy, it misses the point of the musical's casting. The Black actors are not portraying the title or other characters as Black but are meant to be seen as historical figures. To consider *Hamilton* a true and comprehensive view of life in Colonial America disregards the reality that it is, and always will be, one playwright's vision and loses sight of its primary objective—entertainment, albeit in part through its deliberate reconfiguring of casting. Also, the question of realism in casting rests on convention. For years audiences accepted without comment Native Americans and persons of South Asian origin played by white actors. Irving Berlin's musical of the American West, *Annie Get Your Gun* and Rodgers & Hammerstein's *The King and I* set in nineteenth-century Siam being two examples. Although first produced in the mid-twentieth century, both these musicals have had repeated revivals with white actors in the key roles. Also, like *Hamilton*, both are fictionalised true stories of famous or powerful individuals.

Hamilton's casting draws upon the Non-Traditional Casting Project's casting definitions previously discussed, while also remixing them in specific ways to suit the theatrical and storytelling needs of show. Theatre scholar Brian Eugenio Herrera labels

²⁸⁷ Reviews are cited in *Theatre Record*, Vol. 37, July 2018

Miranda's endeavours a textbook case of conceptual casting for the assignment of traditionally under-represented actors to presumptively white roles in ways that reinvent, reimagine, and reinterpret a familiar narrative. '*Hamilton* therefore offers a vivid example of how, by the turn of the twenty-first century, the disparate tactics of non-traditional casting can be used selectively, or even simultaneously, within a production.'²⁸⁸ The musical also employs compositional casting, in which a playwright predetermines casting as an integral part of the show, thus making the manner in which the production is cast subject to copyright and intellectual property protection. This pro-active defence works to avoid the default to white actors for ethnically non-specific roles. This particular casting category was challenged shortly after the show's Broadway opening and *Hamilton* made headlines when it was attacked for usurping employment opportunities for white actors when the legality of its casting notice seeking 'non-white' performers was challenged. There is a human tendency to attack a perceived threat. There are, and perhaps always will among us those who assume inclusivity means less for them or something is being taken away from someone else. In March 2016, via Twitter, an unnamed civil rights attorney called the show out for potentially violating a New York City human rights law forbidding discriminating in hiring based on race. The Actors' Equity Association, the labour union representing United States actors, stepped into the fray to point out that casting notices can say that a character is Caucasian, a child (as in the case of the show *Matilda*) or African American (which it does for *The Color Purple*) or in the case of *Hamilton*, 'non-white because this reflects authorial intent.' The union's statement continued that the real issue was that there are still far too few roles for non-Caucasian actors and in that respect *Hamilton* had been ground-breaking and concluded with the hope that the 'true and exciting diversity on display' would inspire casting directors and creative teams throughout the industry.

The 2018 book *Historians on Hamilton: How a Blockbuster Musical is Restaging America's Past* includes a chapter entitled, 'Race-Conscious Casting and the Erasure of the Black Past in *Hamilton*.' Its author, Lyra D. Monterio, writes that despite its diverse cast *Hamilton* remains the story of great white men and excludes the contributions of people of colour. America has never been all white and in her opinion *Hamilton* erases the presence

²⁸⁸ Romano, Bond, 2018, p. 232

and role of Black and brown people in eighteenth-century America. Monterio states it is a damning omission that ‘despite the proliferation of Black and brown bodies onstage, not a single enslaved or free person of colour exists as a character when at the time about 14 percent of New York’s inhabitants were of African descent, the majority who were enslaved.’²⁸⁹ This made me curious to see how often the topic is mentioned. The enslavement of Blacks receives only a handful of passing mentions throughout the play’s running time of more than two and a half hours. The first mention is during *Hamilton’s* opening explanatory rap number (‘... And every day while slaves were being slaughtered and carted away across the waves he [Hamilton] struggled and kept his guard up.’) In the third song, ‘*My Shot*,’ the character John Laurens sings, ‘... We’ll never be truly free, until those in bondage have the same rights as you and me.’ At the start of Act Two a member of the chorus briefly assumes the role of enslaved Sally Hemings to hand Thomas Jefferson a letter. The other references are in ‘Cabinet Battle #1’ when Hamilton takes exception to what he calls a civics lesson from enslaver Jefferson (‘... *keep ranting, we know who’s really doing the planting...*’) and in the final number when, as Hamilton’s widow, Eliza sings after Hamilton’s death that to preserve his legacy she spoke out against slavery, as he would have had he lived longer. Are these scant mentions insufficient acknowledgment of African descendants’ presence in eighteenth-century America? *Hamilton’s* detractors maintain that despite the innovative casting, the musical upholds and reinforces white supremacy and essentially lauds the way whiteness has shaped the United States.

Although the main characters are played by Black, Asian and Latino actors, whites are still at the centre of the narrative. Hannah Theraisingam Robbins notes that ‘Miranda has become the leading voice for ‘diverse’ representation on stage and screen, even though Hamilton does not foreground the people of colour alive when the history took place’ and considers it a great irony that part of the success of Miranda’s *Hamilton* hinges on the premise that those who are marginalised (or are often unheard and/or unseen) are given voice. ‘What does it mean for diverse casting if actual people of colour no longer exist in the narrative being presented? To what extent does Hamilton’s aspiration to flip the power balance and “put [ourselves] back in the narrative” enable the ambition to make musical

²⁸⁹ Romano, Potter, 2018, p. 62

theatre more inclusive?’²⁹⁰ While acknowledging that the musical should not be construed as academic history, the *Historians on Hamilton* editors Renee C. Romano and Claire Bond Potter note that the musical is analogous to a work of history since it interprets facts and the result is an archival account. At its core, *Hamilton* is about how history unfolds and how events are narrated. As the musical’s final number notes, it matters ‘who lives, who dies, who tells your story.’

Dueling Grounds: Revolution, Revelation in the Musical Hamilton (2021) provides diverse scholarly perspectives in four key topics: history, representation, staging and music. In the chapter ‘A Model American Musical,’ Sissi Liu suggests that it should be disconcerting to watch a Black George Washington, Aaron Burr and a Puerto-Rican Alexander Hamilton and other characters as stand-ins for the white founding fathers and as a Black woman I should cringe when I listen to them sing their praises. Also seeing Black actors portraying these roles distracts white viewers from thinking about how this was a society geared towards rewarding the elite while dooming everyone else.²⁹¹ With the overwhelming majority of West End and Broadway audiences still the domain for affluent whites, this demonstrates a reluctance to cause them discomfort that could result in decreased theatre revenue and may in turn influence decisions on what plays to produce, which authors to support and who to cast.

***Hamilton* and the Political Scene**

Hamilton’s first public outing occurred at the White House when in May 2009 the 29-year-old Miranda performed the first song publicly for the first time. ‘An Evening of Poetry, Music and the Spoken Word,’ was a cultural event hosted by the new Obama Administration and Miranda was scheduled to close the programme with a song from his first Broadway hit, *In the Heights*. Now immortalised on YouTube, the composer approached the microphone and announced, ‘I’m actually working on a hip-hop album—a concept album—about the life of someone who embodies hip-hop. Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton.’²⁹² At the song’s close, President Obama was the first on his feet to lead the standing ovation.

²⁹⁰ Robbins, 2023, p. 909

²⁹¹ Liu, 2021, p. 119

²⁹² Miranda, McCarter, 2016, p. 15

Musical theatre historian Adam Rush writes in Chapter 14 of *Dueling Grounds* that *Hamilton*'s beginnings parallel rock/pop operas *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Evita*'s origins, as all three began as concept albums. He goes further by noting that they all contain key figures who were outspoken and suffered untimely deaths.²⁹³ Rush adds that all three were popular, but I would say that was not necessarily the case with *Hamilton*, who, although his face is on the American 10-dollar bill, would fall behind several other founding fathers (Washington, Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin to name just three) in popularity. However, the three do have a narrative arc of the title character's rise from lowly origins to positions of influence.

After more than a year of sold-out shows this musical about America's history again made political news when on 18 November 2016, 10 days after the United States presidential election, then Vice President-elect Mike Pence attended a Broadway performance. Seizing an opportunity as the play ended, the actor playing Vice President Aaron Burr acknowledged Pence, thanked him for attending and proceeded to make an unusual appeal.

'We sir—we—are the diverse America who are alarmed and anxious that your new administration will not protect us, our planet, our children, our parents, or defend us and uphold our inalienable rights,' Brandon Victor Dixon began. 'We truly hope that this show has inspired you to uphold our American values and to work on behalf of all of us.'²⁹⁴ The next morning the statement—which was written by Miranda, the show's director Thomas Kail and the lead producer Jeffery Seller, with input from cast members—received a response from then President-elect Donald Trump via two Twitter posts. Trump maintained that the cast was 'very rude,' Pence was 'harassed' and ended his second tweet with a command: 'Apologize!' No apology was made; the furore died down and real, modern-day politics returned with the next news cycle.

The strength of the blockbuster's incredible popularity ensures it a voice and a platform to comment on current events impacting America. The shooting deaths of unarmed Black Americans Ahmaud Arbery in Georgia and Breonna Taylor in Kentucky

²⁹³ Rush, 2021, p. 218

²⁹⁴ Mele, Healy, 2016, *New York Times*

quickly followed by the 25 May 2020 murder of George Floyd in police custody in Minneapolis ignited protests against racism and police brutality in more than 1,500 US cities and 60 countries worldwide. In the midst of the protests Miranda and *Hamilton* producer Jeffrey Seller took to social media to address their followers—and apologise. The following is an excerpt from Miranda’s 31 May statement to the 1.3 million fans on the *Hamilton* Instagram page.

Miranda: ‘That we’ve not yet firmly spoken the inarguable truth that Black Lives Matter and denounced systemic racism and white supremacy from our official *Hamilton* channels is a moral failure on our part and as the writer of this show I take responsibility and apologize for my part in this moral failure... the idea of this show doesn’t exist without the brilliant black and brown artists in our cast, crew and production team who breathe life into this story every time it’s performed. And while we live in a country where black people are under attack from emboldened white supremacy, police brutality and centuries of systemic anti-black racism it’s up to us in words and deeds to stand up for our fellow citizens... and to have each other’s backs.’

Miranda closed the statement with links to a list of resources.

Should any of the politics, or the diverse casting, or the innovative and unorthodox mix of music styles matter to the audience, the actors on stage or other theatre professionals involved in the production? The multi-racial casting which occurs in *Hamilton* opens up new ideas and ways of thinking about the world and challenges audiences to comprehend possibilities that are potentially endless and exciting. It also confronts imbalances rather than reaffirming them. According to Richard Schechner, casting against type is used for parody and travesty and occasionally the intention is political.²⁹⁵ With *Hamilton*, the conscious political choice regarding casting reflected cultural shifts and encourages audiences to critically examine race, gender, age and body type with flexibility. I witnessed an example of this in May 2019 when Sarah Amankwah, an actor of Ghanaian descent, played the lead in The Globe’s *Henry V*, or *Harry England*, as it was renamed for this production. Towards the end of the play Amankwah’s Henry woos Katherine of France,

²⁹⁵ Schechner, 1989, p. 9

who was played by Colin Hurley, a pale, balding, obviously middle-aged white male in a flowing teal gown. In the performance I attended the audience initially chuckled at this mismatched pairing, but the twittering soon quietened down as suspended disbelief and subtle, earnest acting washed over the crowd. Powerful theatre unleashes the imagination to believe what is put before us. Such innovative casting, which also occurs in *Hamilton*, opens up new ideas and ways of thinking about the world and challenges audiences to comprehend possibilities that are potentially endless and exciting.



Figure 7 Sarah Amankwah as Henry V, Shakespeare's Globe, 2019

A Game Changer?

Just how unique is *Hamilton*? The Sherman Edwards musical *1776* which opened on Broadway in 1969 is also set in the same Revolutionary War period and both concern founding fathers, with only James Madison and Jefferson making an appearance in both. Focusing on the creation and signing of the Declaration of Independence, *1776* has a narrower focus. But both *Hamilton* and *1776* could be classified as ‘founders chic,’ a term reserved for a specific kind of history catering to popular appeal. Historical discrepancies can be found in both musicals which delete characters and compress timetables for a variety of reasons including brevity and context. Miranda, by way of acknowledging its influence borrows a line from *1776* when one of the character’s raps ‘Sit down, John,’ which is the name of the 1969 musical’s opening number.

As Elizabeth Sallinger notes in her chapter on *Hamilton*’s vocal stylings in *Dueling Grounds*, ‘While *Hamilton* is undeniably a landmark show in musical theatre history for its large scale inclusion of rapping to help frame the subject matter, the show’s roots are strong in the overarching history of the musical theatre stage... speaking in a pitched or rhythmic manner has been a staple of theatrical practice for centuries.’²⁹⁶ *Hamilton*’s use of rap with its rapid-fire pacing can be traced as far back as Gilbert and Sullivan’s ‘I am the Very Model of a Modern Major General,’ in the 1879 *The Pirates of Penzance*, Meredith Wilson’s *Music Man* (1957) rapid-fire number ‘Trouble,’ and also Sondheim’s ‘Getting Married Today’ in *Company* (1970). The pre-set ways of doing things can feel comfortable, reassuring and supportive, and without questioning and attempts to change the status quo the output will remain the same. *Hamilton* is not the first musical to be considered a game-changer or revolutionary. Consider *Hair*, which in 1968 was celebrated for infusing rock music into the musical landscape or Jonathan Larson’s *Rent* (1996), a rock opera based on Puccini’s *La Boheme*. One can even go as far back as Jerome Kern’s 1927 *Showboat* which was celebrated for the novel idea of containing serious themes and three-dimensional characters and *Oklahoma!* (1943) which is frequently touted as the first show to thoroughly integrate songs, story and dance. Where *Hamilton* diverges from the perceived norm is through its casting. Yet, despite the show’s intentional casting of people of colour it still

²⁹⁶ Sallinger, 2021, p. 213

remains a musical with a conventional, linear story. However, even with its founding-era subject matter the effect *Hamilton*'s casting has had on its very diverse audiences should not be discounted. Just consider the cast album's prodigious sales success, millions of followers on social media outlets and I am a witness to its memorisation by a generation of adolescents. *Hamilton* allows people of colour to see themselves as belonging to the founding and vice versa. What sets *Hamilton* apart from all that came before is casting. 'It's not a box-ticking exercise, it is the best way to tell the story,' said Londoner Giles Terera in his Olivier acceptance speech for his portrayal of Aaron Burr, adding it had been the joy of his life and career to be part of such a diverse company.²⁹⁷

I queried three of the actors I interviewed for this dissertation on their thoughts about *Hamilton* and whether they considered the musical a game changer. All three responded that they thought it came down to the bottom line: money. *Hamilton*, says actor and drama instructor Jennifer Bradford, proves that others, not just older white theatre patrons, can have a seat at a very profitable table while bringing new ideas and stories forward. However, it should be noted that with the exception of one of several producers and an assistant choreographer, all those seated at the *Hamilton* table were men. Mary Jo Lodge and Paul R. Laird, the editors of *Dueling Grounds* write that this basically all-male creative team 'is itself a glaring indictment of the limited roles women still fill behind the scenes on Broadway.'²⁹⁸ New York-based actor Tatiana Wechsler ('Curly' in the Oregon Shakespeare Festival's *Oklahoma!*) was concerned that diverse casting made even more popular by *Hamilton* will occur because it is considered trendy and financially successful, not because it is the right thing to do. 'Inclusive casting creates richer, deeper art and inspires and invites a wider range of humanity to be a part of theatre,' she shared in an email exchange. 'That should be the core reasoning for theatres to cast inclusively.' Stephen McKinley Henderson told me that while he believes *Hamilton* is a brilliant artistic achievement, it arrived on the giant shoulders of successful productions reaching back more than 40 years and that if producers believe that imaginative casting will increase their chances to match the financial success of *Hamilton*, they will try it. I concur with both actors on this subject. *Hamilton* has provided employment opportunities for actors in roles like

²⁹⁷ Harper, 2016, *Huffington Post*

²⁹⁸ Lodge, Laird, 2021, p. 5

George Washington and Thomas Jefferson that were previously inconceivable for commercial theatre while showing those in power the potential profitability of risk taking in their casting decisions. However, diversity in casting should be something to explore, rather than exploit.

Race and Representation in *Hamilton*

Deracialisation, a term first used in the political sphere, defuses the polarising effects of race by deliberately avoiding it. In this section I argue that this concept, as it relates to *Hamilton*, is evident in the musical's development, script and marketing efforts.

Racialisation is used to understand the process through which racial meaning is attached to something that is perceived to be 'unracial' or devoid of racial meaning.²⁹⁹ This theory has evolved since its formulation in the 1970s by Omi and Winant who investigated what meanings are attached to race and how it is used and they defined racialisation as 'The extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice or group.' However, this definition came under scrutiny as some argued that it is limiting when studying groups that experience forms of racism that may be construed as different from past-racist practices, such as Islamophobia. Racialisation cannot be understood as a static concept; it involves change and ongoing practices that attach racial meanings to people and 'It is thus born out of social dominance and power.'³⁰⁰ Deracialisation was introduced in 1973 by political scientist Charles Hamilton and in 1976 he revisited the concept in a position paper commissioned by the Democratic Party and advised presidential candidates to emphasise issues that would attract voters across racial lines, arguing that programmes targeted directly at minorities failed to capture white voters. In short, Black candidates should be wary of giving white voters the impression that they are only interested in representing their fellow Blacks and should project a non-threatening, reassuring image to the white electorate.

In *Hamilton* Miranda fails to mention that his title character or his wife Eliza's family, the Schuylers, were enslavers, thereby using deracialisation to submerge a key and in all likelihood distressing issue. In *Dueling Grounds*, Sissi Liu writes in the chapter entitled 'A

²⁹⁹ Gonzalez-Sobrino, Goss, 2019, p. 505

³⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 507

Model American Musical,' seeing Black actors portraying these roles distracts white viewers from thinking about this colonial system rewarding the elite while dooming everyone else. It was a marketing strategy, Liu writes, to not mention hip-hop or rap in the musical's promotional materials so as not to limit sales and potentially eliminate the core audience. There was also a conscious decision in *Hamilton's* artwork with a lone figure above the title 'that engenders racial ambiguity and a sense of mystery.'³⁰¹ Liu attests, and I concur that the now well-known image (Figure 8) gives the impression that *anyone* could be Hamilton, regardless of race.

ILLUSTRATION REDACTED

Figure 8 *Hamilton* Programme, Victoria Palace Theatre, London

³⁰¹ Sissi Liu, *Dueling Grounds*, p. 119

With the overwhelming majority of West End and Broadway audiences still the domain for affluent whites, there is a reluctance to cause them discomfort that could result in decreased theatre revenue and may in turn influence decisions on what plays to produce, which authors to support and who to cast.

The following two examples show how deracialisation is used in commercial theatre as a means to avoid race-specific issues in order to project a non-threatening image. First, as recently as 2021 I read about a 20-something actor who was thrilled to be one of several leads in a drama on Broadway. That joy was significantly diminished when she saw the marketing campaign which included photos of her fellow leads, but excluded her—the only Black person in the cast. The advertising was designed to increase ticket sales and her face was considered less of a money maker than her castmates. The campaign was changed only after she complained. The second example comes from England: The RSC's 2012 production of Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*, which was staged with a South Asian cast to demonstrate the mix of cultures within British society as part of the World Shakespeare Festival. Set in India, the production incorporated Bollywood cinema tropes as part of the production's advertising campaign. The marketing decision to reduce characters in captioned photographs of the actors to ethnically specific and stereotypical clichés ('The Wit,' 'The Cynic,' 'The Villain,' etc.) commonly displayed on movie screens promoted ideologies of exploitation. The marketing was tailored to suit predominantly white audiences and further illustrates that theatre continues to be defined in ways that maintain white perspectives and artistic dominance.

Through marketing decisions such as the two examples above and the choice to deliberately evade controversial topics such as enslavement, I maintain that *Hamilton* creators employed deracialisation to ensure its considerable success. While the use of Black, Asian and Latino actors could be viewed as innovative casting, it also has the effect of distancing whiteness from the founding of America and distracting the audience, as Liu notes, 'from the unscrupulous system that rewards the Anglo-Saxon elite and dooms everyone else to tribulation.'³⁰² This again caters to white audiences by providing the

³⁰² Ibid, p. 121

message that despite racial differences America is inclusive for all who are willing to work hard and, to quote an oft repeated refrain in the musical's third song, 'Rise Up.'

It could be argued that Hamilton and the Marquis de Lafayette's pride in their non-native status (proclaiming at one point: 'Immigrants—we get the job done.') brings foreign-born Americans into the Revolutionary era. A counter-argument would question Hamilton's immigration status, as in actuality he was a migrant, moving from one British colony (Nevis in the Caribbean) to another (New York). However, as Schocket notes, 'these inclusions can change the perception of viewers concerning who belongs at the founding, and, no less importantly, to whom the nation's founding belongs.' Although the immigrant line regularly is cheered in performances, I wonder if those applauding are considering that *all* of America's founders came from families that migrated to America. They were not fleeing oppression, but in practically all cases, as enslavers, were oppressors themselves. The history of the Black lead actors on *Hamilton's* stage is one of enslavement, not of voluntary immigration. Assuming that anyone can view a theatrical production and ignore the identity of the performers on stage is to assume the impossible. I cannot pretend that the person I am seeing on stage, despite the fact he is portraying George Washington, Aaron Burr or Thomas Jefferson is not Black which was Miranda's intent.

Hamilton's Legacy

In addition to the compilation *Historians on Hamilton* which with 15 academic essays endeavours to explain the appeal of the *Hamilton* phenomenon, a plethora of related books and academic articles have been published since the musical became a sensation. Excluding the officially sanctioned merchandise available at the spacious New York City gift shop across from the Richard Rodgers Theatre and *Hamilton* concession stands, there are easily a dozen Alexander Hamilton books obtainable and geared for school-aged children, as well as several biographies of his wife Eliza and her sisters published following the musical's success. I have encountered several tomes that focused on Hamilton's relationship with Aaron Burr, and assorted paraphernalia such as calendars, sketchbooks and even a card game ('Deal or Duel'). Although I have not come across any books featuring vampires or zombies (as of 2024), at least one graphic novel/comic book was available on Amazon. The abundance of specialised material catering to an unabated interest in all things *Hamilton* is representative not only of its popularity but of its cultural impact.

Theatre is always changing and that is because the world around it is always changing. Popularity alone is merely one measure of a play's worth. Also, human beings love novelty. When we find something new we rush to embrace it. But you can only be a novelty once. Andrew M. Schocket in a 2017 article for the *Journal of the Early Republic* titled, 'The American Revolution Rebooted: *Hamilton* and Genre in Contemporary Culture,' argues that in several ways *Hamilton* is not really that unique; as noted in this chapter it shares basic similarities with other Revolutionary War-era plays and movies. According to Schocket, recognisable hallmarks include: familiar heroes which are sufficiently indistinct in the popular imagination, allowing writers flexibility for interpretation; ethnically British villains, but brutality which is never shown; strong women characters who stand by their men, and patriotism consistent with popular definitions of liberty (who is against freedom?) are easily and quickly explained.

Historian Stacy Wolf takes issue with Schocket's characterisation of the women portrayed in *Hamilton* as 'strong,' as she maintains Manuel has sidelined *Hamilton* female characters and reduced them to stereotypes solely to serve the romantic plot lines. She further asserts the three female characters can easily be summed up as 'muse' (Angelica), 'docile wife/mother' (Eliza) and 'whore' (Maria Reynolds).³⁰³ After three viewings of the musical, I am inclined to agree with Wolf's characterisation of Angelica and Maria Reynolds, and although she does not mention her, the other Schuyler sister 'Peggy' whose role is so minor that the actor portraying Maria plays both parts. However, I do not believe Miranda wrote the character Eliza as 'docile.' For example, she sings the passionate solo '*Burn*' after discovering Hamilton's affair ('You forfeit all rights to my heart. You forfeit the place in our bed. You sleep in your office instead, with only the memories of when you were mine. I hope that you burn'). In the final song, '*Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story*,' Eliza's story is told—she lives another 50 years, raises funds for the Washington monument, speaks out against enslavement and establishes the first private orphanage in New York City—hardly representative of the activities of a docile wife.

While the narrative outline of the American Revolution may be familiar to many, the details are suitably vague in the contemporary public mind to leave writers and directors

³⁰³ Wolf, S. 2021, *Dueling Grounds*, p. 79

latitude for individual story arcs. 'All these parameters, render a show recognizable enough to be pitched and marketed successfully and to appeal to wide audiences but elastic enough to allow for invention—with the potential for outliers to provide intriguing counterpoints,' Schocket writes. '*Hamilton* was forged in the mould of this genre, and, despite its casting and hip-hop delivery, is more representative of it than we might think.'³⁰⁴ This is a counterpoint to the previous argument espousing the musical's novelty and uniqueness.

The issue of whether providing performers new opportunities and promoting racial visibility though casting sufficiently addresses the complexity of racial matters in theatrical representation is directly related to my research question of how casting which does not adhere to the equivalencies of race between the character and the actor have contributed to society's discussions on race. When Miranda first performed the opening number at the White House in 2009, he got a laugh for introducing it as about someone who 'embodies hip-hop—Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton.' This was a sly nod to the fact that we do not expect the nation's founders to rap. However, Schocket makes an excellent point that the creators of 1969 Tony Award winning musical *1776* could have said the same thing about having the Continental Congress break into song. Former United States President Barack Obama has said that *Hamilton* endures because the show 'reminds us of the vital, kinetic energy that's at the heart of America—that people who have a vision and a set of ideals can transform the world.'³⁰⁵ The intersection of opinions from politicians, academics, artists, students and audiences coalesce representing the musical's enduring legacy.

And what do I—someone who bought the *Hamilton* soundtrack as soon as it was available and purchased a back-row upper balcony seat as my birthday present—think? Every actor in the three productions I attended possessed the requisite skill allowing me to totally inhabit Hamilton's world. Acknowledging that the race of those portraying Thomas Jefferson, Hercules Mulligan, Angelica Schuyler and the other characters, and the mixed genders of the singers and dancers playing Revolutionary War soldiers were deliberately chosen as a social statement, I appreciated that these performers were given the opportunity and had accepted the responsibility to escape safe, stereotypical casting

³⁰⁴ Schocket, 2017, p. 263

³⁰⁵ Miranda, McCarter, 2016, p. 284

choices. As noted from the news and scholarly articles, books, awards and a very vocal fan base, this work of art has done more to escalate theatre's focus and dialogue on diversity than any other show in ages, or perhaps ever, as the Act One song indicates, '*the world will never be the same*.' I conclude Miranda's inspired decision has opened millions of minds to the creative possibilities of live theatre. Years, perhaps decades from now, I comfortably predict there will still be Broadway and West End productions and the show will stand the test of time with few updates, or 'fresh takes' necessary. It also would not surprise me one day to see a female George Washington, male Schuyler sisters or a few of Hamilton's comrades change genders. One thing I can guarantee: *Hamilton* Broadway and West End casts will never be all-white. However, it is not a stretch to assume a white actor will continue to be cast as King George III, who while providing comic relief with the 1960s-era pop number '*You'll be Back*' can be considered not only a villain in the piece but also a visual foil to which the actors of colour stand in relief. With its race-conscious casting, despite its reluctance to take on the topic of enslavement and its exclusion of Native Americans I do not believe that *Hamilton* 'whitewashes' America's history. This musical has created a space for overdue discussions on multi-culturalism, partisan politics, immigration and diversity.

Hamilton provides educators with innovative ways to incorporate history into various curriculums at all levels of schooling from primary to (obviously) post-graduate education. For example, funded by the Rockefeller Foundation in coordination with the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, the Edu-Ham project pairs live performances with formal learning by providing a ready-made curriculum for teaching the musical and offering discount tickets to high school students across the United States. In New York City, as many as 20,000 students—or one in four high school juniors were able to see *Hamilton* in the first year of the project.³⁰⁶ I challenge anyone to name another musical that can make that claim. Roughly two decades of US history and Chernow's 860-page book are condensed into close to three hours of enthralling song, drama and dance.

Dissecting what *Hamilton* does not do, such as including Benjamin Franklin, and sufficient emphasis on the female characters, or what Miranda should have done, such as having a more diverse creative team with more than two women, has become a growing

³⁰⁶ Romano, Potter, 2018, p. 9

cottage industry and I am the willing recipient of the considerable amount of commendable scholarship that has emerged since the show became a hit. However, while it makes for vigorous discussion exploring the many differing perspectives, I agree with the opinion of *Time Out* London's critic Andrzej Lukowski that *Hamilton* shines, is successful and 'It's been a hit for the only reason anything is a hit.'³⁰⁷ I concur with the *Time Out* critic—but to a point. As previously noted, *Hamilton*'s historical and cultural context through deployment of innovative casting practices contributes significantly to its success.

Separately and collectively all four case studies demonstrate the impact of theatrical casting practices have had on public discourse, and at times debate. They were also used to illustrate how the intersectionality of race, ethnicity and gender in casting decisions results in varying interpretations of meaning and representation. The following conclusion summarises the discussion, provides final thoughts and suggests avenues for future research.

³⁰⁷ Lukowski, 2018, *Theatre Record*

Chapter Six: Conclusion

In this dissertation I argued that casting practices and the historical exclusion of Black theatre professionals has had social, ethical and political impacts which have affected the commercial landscape of London's West End and New York's Broadway. As evidenced in my methodology, extensive and varied sources were assembled and analysed to support my argument which was underpinned by the theoretical concepts of representation and intersectionality. I framed this study with a personal view as a Black theatre goer to situate it in the historical context of my own life, time and place. Through the use of case studies I opened up the variety of potential effects of casting choices, cumulatively establishing ambiguities, and shifting contexts and showed how overlapping but different casting practices are frequently employed in a single production. I considered instances of casting, such as *Hamilton* and the *Death of a Salesman* revivals which facilitated representational opportunities for Black performers and critiqued the power imbalance and over-representation of white men on stage and behind the scenes in Broadway and West End theatres. What I discovered is when casting is used to make a statement the result has been increased discussion about representation by producers, directors, actors and other involved in the production process as well as theatre critics and audiences. The dozens of newspaper stories addressing casting practices as well as the articles I have cited from peer-reviewed journals as a result of *Hamilton's* success are an example of heightened interest in diverse casting. My research has also revealed that the causes and ramifications of the persistent state underlying casting disparities found in London and New York commercial theatre are a result of the paucity of diverse voices in positions of power and a lack of communication. When Black theatre professionals play an integral part in a production's development process, which was the case in the Globe's 2019 production of *Richard II*, different perspectives and ideas can surface resulting in new interpretations and increased innovation.

As its methodology this dissertation used interviews with theatre practitioners, books and articles published between the nineteenth century and 2024. The parameters of the investigation were dictated by a 40-year period beginning when the term 'non-traditional casting' gained currency in the United States. The scholarly material around

casting informed the way in which plays and performances were selected for comparative analysis. The following criteria was used to select sources to establish and substantiate my argument:

- Material that specifically addressed theatrical multi-racial casting practices;
- Resources of significant historical influence related to my subject area;
- Resources that informed or inspired my own viewing journey, including performances, presentations and exhibitions, thus allowing me to situate myself as a spectator amid contexts where race and representation were both visible and (in terms of whiteness) invisible; and,
- References to a theoretical context relating to representation and intersectionality which were used for framing and shaping the focus of my argument.

The productions used as case studies in my investigation intentionally utilised diverse casting as societal and political commentary. In some cases, both New York and London productions were studied to explore how Broadway and the West End have separately attempted to address racial issues. My investigation uncovered occasional successes (the *Death of a Salesman* revivals and the Globe's production of *Richard II*, 2019), and some disappointments (*8 Hotels*, 2019 and *The Skin of Our Teeth*, 1993) which illustrated the connection between casting and representation and the influence of those who wield their artistic power on both. With a few exceptions (including Patrick Stewart in *Othello*, Whoopi Goldberg in *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* and Lolita Chakrabarti's *Red Velvet*), I attended virtually all the plays cited in this dissertation.

My methodology also included a critique of the terms used to describe various casting practices. I explored the ambiguity surrounding casting terms from dozens of sources including editors Amanda Rogers and Ashley Thorpe (2014) who use Harvey Young's definition of colour-blind casting which is anchored in the belief that talented actors will convince the audience to overlook any differences between their physical appearance and the characters they portray and Sita Thomas (2014) who concurs with Ayanna Thompson (2011) that the casting terminologies are confusing, unstable and continually evolving.

While non-traditional casting is used as an umbrella term for different types of casting, I concur with Thompson that while there are productions that would wish that the audience be blind to race, it is highly unlikely that is ever possible. Scholarship validates the assertion that audiences are not 'colour-blind' to the casting of Black actors in roles originally specified as white. Reading contradictory opinions for and against 'non-traditional' casting aided my desire to delve into questioning disparate views such as those expressed by critics John Simon and Robert Brustein.

I reviewed historical and contemporary theatrical casting debates in England by those theatre critics alongside academics and pondering disputes led me to one of the most famous arguments in modern theatre history: the August Wilson and Robert Brustein debate which emerged in part due to Wilson's 1996 speech, 'The Ground on Which I Stand: A Speech on Black Theatre and Performance,' in which he proclaimed 'non-traditional' casting as an aberrant idea and tool for cultural imperialists. It was serendipitous that in 2019 a production of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* would be staged challenging Wilson's argument while it honoured the historical and social context of a Black Loman family in mid-twentieth century America. This made it a logical candidate for one of my case studies.

Through critical examination of resources I viewed the concept of 'otherness' from various perspectives in order to amplify aspects of my research questions as they relate to commercial theatre on the West End and Broadway. The theoretical concepts of representation and intersectionality defined in Chapter Two were used to identify common themes between historical and contemporary discourses in the main body of this dissertation. Representation was central to the theoretical underpinning of my argument and understanding its meaning informed my position as an audience member of long standing. Hall's investigations of how racial, ethnic and sexual difference have been represented have applicability to performance studies, particularly how one's perspective affects meaning and the implications of power in interpreting meaning and representation. Crenshaw's work on intersectionality allowed for investigating the overlapping identities in casting, as evidenced in the *Oklahoma!* revivals, intersect to advance discussion on societal issues and shed new light on contemporary productions, as discussed in the *Death of a Salesman* case study.

Reading the research of Angela Pao (2010), along with the works of other academics who explore racial politics, including Brandi Catanese (2011), and Farah-Karim-Cooper (2023), assisted in clarifying my argument and answering associated research questions. The opportunity to personally view approximately two dozen West End and Broadway productions, study scripts, critics' reviews and reflect on various other regionally-produced plays aided in formulating my opinions regarding diverse casting practices and their bearing on the questions posed in my thesis. Dyer's work, *White* (1997) which focused on the study of representation of white people in white Western culture, was helpful in broadening my perspective. As long as race is something only applied to non-white individuals then whiteness is considered to be the human condition and defines what is normal. This work allowed me to think of the subject of otherness and how power is represented in a different way than I had previously.

Findings and Reflections

The focus on Broadway and West End casting practices as they relate to Black professionals is a new contribution to theatre studies. Throughout Broadway and the West End's history I have concluded that a complex range of casting practices has influenced the discussion of racial barriers and inequalities systemically erected and repeatedly reaffirmed. Shifts in how stories are claimed, which were investigated in the *Othello*, *Death of a Salesman* and *Oklahoma!* case studies, and creating work that lends itself to creative casting which I explored using *Hamilton*, allows for theatre to evolve and thoughtful discourse to ensue. I also conclude that the issues that exist around casting are often the result of the dearth of meaningful discourse about how audiences see and how they receive race in a particular production. Information about casting and race that is disseminated in theatre programmes, such as what was referenced in the *Oklahoma!*, *Death of a Salesman* and *Othello* case studies, is a useful tool for audience education. However I found those to be the exception. *Shucked*, *Henry V* and *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* are just three examples of dozens of productions I attended between 2019-2025 that chose to ignore how multi-racial casting affected the production thus missing an opportunity to advance the discussion.

I concur with one of my interview subjects, actor and US-based drama instructor Jennifer Bradford who would like to see the day when the phrase 'non-traditional' is

permanently out of vogue. 'Hearing "non-traditional" immediately turns me off from wanting to participate and honestly I don't hear it much anymore,' she said in a 2019 interview. 'I think it needs to be within the mission of the theatre to responsibly choose stories that lend themselves to casting in a new tradition. Non-traditional means non-white and non-white male when I hear it and I think we have the playwrights and the performers to expand how we view what non-traditional is. We can redefine it.' Another interview subject, actor Stephen McKinley Henderson, is still waiting for that expanded view. 'One day we may be ready to see that we are all "Earthlings" but I know we're not *there* yet,' he told me. One way to 'get there' I addressed in Chapter Four which is through organisations such as Black Theatre United and the Black British Theatre Awards which are both advocating for progress in hiring, training and retention of Black theatre professionals.

A third interview subject, Tatiana Wechsler and I discussed why it is vital to approach older works, such as *Oklahoma!* 'non-traditionally' so that one day what is considered innovative casting will become the norm. However, it is equally important to inspire current artists to create new works that are inclusive from the start. 'It can be disheartening to always be a part of works that didn't consider you when they were created,' she said. 'We need new works to ensure the future of the theatre.' Representation is not limited to actors but also playwrights, producers, designers and directors. All too often marginalised groups have not been given the platform to tell their own stories in commercial venues. Education, dissemination of new ideas and creating opportunities will allow for authentic and meaningful representation.

Three of my interview subjects, Beverly Andrews, Jennifer Bradford and Stephen McKinley Henderson, have experience teaching drama students. When it comes to achieving increased representation on Broadway and West End stages the importance of focusing efforts around young people cannot be overstated. The next generation of performers, writers, directors, producers, designers, administrators, technicians and audience members are currently to be found in youth theatres, school drama classes, community theatre groups, and higher-education drama courses. *Being Black and British: Before, During and After Drama School* (2025), an edited collection from artists, academics and teachers, explores training of Black performers and offers tools to Black British actors to navigate the theatrical profession. While British drama schools have a rich history of cultivating talent, in

Chapter Two Josette Bushnell-Mingo writes that this history is also marked by exclusionary practices that ‘often reinforce stereotypes rather than challenging them’ and advocates for incorporating diverse narratives and perspectives into the curriculum as ‘crucial for fostering an environment where all students can see themselves reflected and valued.’³⁰⁸

Changing how the next generation perceives the role they can play in the theatre-making process and empowering them through a diverse curriculum, programs and outreach initiatives —so that they are welcome rather than not feeling so much like ‘the other’ either onstage, back stage or in the audience—is one of the best methods for increasing representation. In the United States, with the goal of making theatre more inclusive and to foster future audiences, the Broadway League, Broadway’s trade organization, began a programme in 2018 with a goal to bring every New York City public high school student to a Broadway show before graduating. Producers make \$20 tickets available, which the program then offers to schools for \$10 each (or approximately £13). As of November 2023 more than 100,000 students and chaperones had attended a performance.³⁰⁹

Change occurs by embracing alternative viewpoints and approaches such as the Broadway League program. Empowering Black drama school students by providing tools to successfully sustain careers in commercial theatre such as Daly’s edited collection and Pamela Jikiemi’s *Out of the Black Box: Conversations with Global Majority Actors* (2026) which features interviews with more than two dozen artists about how to begin and develop a life in theatre, encourages and inspires future artists. Both texts provide a pathway to meaningful and sustainable change that ultimately is beneficial to students, artists, administrators and audiences.

Returning to the questions posed at the beginning of this research my findings have revealed that the dearth of discussion surrounding casting and representation has had a detrimental effect on commercial theatres in England and the United States. Progress has been made, evidenced by the advocacy efforts of groups like Black Theatre United and others, but it has been slow and more is needed. For example, despite the success of *Hamilton* in calling attention to alternative casting practices which ultimately provided more

³⁰⁸308 Bushnell-Mingo in Daly, 2025, p. 100

³⁰⁹ Broadway League, 2023

access to opportunity and broader representation on stage, in the 2017-18 season, three years after *Hamilton's* Broadway debut, nearly two thirds of the roles were still cast with white actors and approximately 94 percent of the directors were white.³¹⁰

Diverse personnel at all levels of decision making is one way to address meaningful representation. One solution to address the issue of exclusionary employment practices in London and New York's commercial theatres is for those in power to make concerted efforts to have ethnically diverse creative teams to nurture conversations about casting which in turn empowers those who have been historically excluded to voice concerns early in the production process regarding lack of diverse casting. Once a production is cast and marketed, particularly if the casting is considered to be a departure from what commercial audiences have previously experienced, meaningful dialogue between management and actors should occur to consider perceptions and potential discomfort surrounding a casting choice. In this dissertation I provided examples of occasions of when the lack of such conversation proved detrimental to actors, the production and the audience. Sharing the outcome of impactful casting choices expands knowledge of divergent viewpoints and can contribute to a production's success, which is economically beneficial for all involved. When casting practices are used to investigate issues of exclusion the result can illuminate problematic issues impacting commercial theatre.

I addressed my research question of how debates arising from what were perceived as controversial casting decisions has increased awareness and led to intense conversations through investigation of the August Wilson/Robert Brustein debate and discussion on the role theatre critics in the context of casting, a topic that makes an original contribution to the field regarding the gatekeeping role critics play on Broadway and the West End. While the questions posed may seem specific to casting of Black actors in commercial theatrical venues, the answers are applicable to a wider range of specialities and can enable greater dialogue regarding issues of representation.

Avenues for Further Research

In the prologue and introduction I briefly addressed the origins of this dissertation and my interest in this topic. The origins lent themselves to an auto-ethnographical

³¹⁰ Bahr, 2020, *New York Times*

investigation alongside scholarly research. The time frame under examination was a very fruitful period for experimental casting in commercial spaces and social media was either not as prevalent or unheard of during the start of this period. Investigating the impact of instantaneous comments and responses to productions that engage in nonconventional casting practices that benefit Black artists is an area worthy of additional exploration.

Casting as it relates to other ethnicities, women and gender identity was beyond the scope of this dissertation but would be of interest to future scholars. For example, Stephen Sondheim's musical *Company* (1970), specifically director Marianne Elliott's 2018 West End revival which switched the main character's gender and transferred to Broadway in November 2021, is fodder for examining how discussions of gender roles and politics in society are demonstrated theatrically. Such an investigation could also include critiques of other productions that employed gender reversal as means to explore women's lives in contemporary society, including Morgan Lloyd Malcom's *Emilia* (2018).

Another area ripe for future research is the intersection of politics and productions that employ casting to advance dialogue on societal issues. As noted in the *Hamilton* case study, US Presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump used their pulpit to weigh in with their opinions on the musical, its cast and creators. In March 2025, the musical again made news when Miranda announced the cancellation of performances at the John F. Kennedy Center for Performing Arts in Washington, DC following Trump's politicisation of the bi-partisan centre by firing board members and making himself chairman. 'The Kennedy Center was not created in this spirit,' Miranda declared in a *New York Times* interview, 'And we are not going to be a part of it while it is the Trump Kennedy Center.'³¹¹ *Hamilton*'s creative team vowed to find another venue in the country's capital rather than cancelling the production. Other examples throughout history of the intersection of politics and theatre as it relates to diverse casting and representation of ethnicities in commercial theatre is an area that merits further exploration.

Lastly, theatre offers the opportunity to explore national histories, events and political intrigues and offers the audience a chance to communally reflect on the impact of national events. How Black theatre professionals have taken on this challenge, such as Adjoa

³¹¹ Paulson, 2025, *New York Times*

Andoh in her direction of the Shakespeare Globe's 2019 production of *Richard II*, and Clint Dyer and Roy Williams, authors of the *Death of England* cycle of plays produced at the National Theatre are considered indicators of the state of the nation plays. At first glance *Death of England*, a 2020 one-person play with a white man in the lead role does not seem unusual. However, this National Theatre production about race and class was written by two Black men, and directed by Dyer, which made the play definitely, and perhaps sadly, non-traditional. Williams and Dyer discovered that one play was insufficient to confront questions of class, race and twenty-first-century post-colonialism and ultimately wrote a four-play cycle. *Death of England* was followed by a sequel: *Death of England: Delroy* which was set in 2020 during England's national Covid pandemic lockdown. The production was halted due to the return of Covid restrictions and a recording of the play was made available for free on YouTube. A filmed theatre piece, *Death of England: Face to Face* premiered the following year and in September 2023, *Death of England: Closing Time* opened at the National's Dorfman Theatre. Each play explores questions of personal identity and was shaped by ongoing national discourse. Black directors, writers, choreographers, designers and producers availing commercial audiences of successful work that is not reflective of their race or gender is not only newsworthy but I believe deserves detailed investigation.

In *Theatre and Nation* (2010), Nadine Holdsworth argues that theatre opens up a creative space for 'exploring the paradoxes, ambiguities and complexities around issues of tradition, identity, authenticity and belonging associated with the nation.'³¹² Similar to casting terminology, there is no consensus on what nations are or how national identity should be defined. While theatre is a vehicle that individuals can use for reflecting what is happening in a nation at any given time, with multi-racial casting a theatrical experience can result in advancing cultural discourse through representation of those previously unseen and the creation or reinvention of familiar stories it chooses to tell.

I have conducted this exploration during a time for action that has not been as pronounced since the reasons that gave rise to the need for non-traditional casting discussions more than three decades ago. The escalation in theatrical voices for change should lead to space being made to tell a wider range of stories with more females and

³¹² Holdsworth, 2010, p. 7

Black actors with perspectives to challenge and inspire. Perhaps this would lead to rethinking what theatre looks like and what it says both to and about the world around us. However, whether the efforts underway are sustainable or if the voices raising the racial issues that exist in the theatre will continue to receive the platform they deserve is a work in progress.

As I began the introduction with the poetry of Langston Hughes, it seems an appropriate way to conclude. The prologue was a story from my childhood and it so happens that Mr. Hughes also figured prominently in my youth as his 1926 'Epilogue' (better known as 'I, Too') was the first poem I recall memorising, although I primarily used it to annoy my parents in my always futile efforts to persuade them to allow me to sit at the adult table at large family gatherings:

*I too, sing America.
I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen when company comes.
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong.
Tomorrow,
I'll sit at the table when company comes.
Nobody'll dare say to me,
'Eat in the kitchen'
Then.
Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed,—
I, too, am America.³¹³*

As I matured I saw this poem as far more than a taunt. Hughes is describing being robbed of one's proper place, while asserting he, the 'darker brother,' is still a part of the family and has every right to a seat at the proverbial table. One day ('tomorrow') those in power will be forced to acknowledge his presence as he will be impossible to ignore ('I, too, am America'). The parallels to the representation of Blacks artists in London's and New York's commercial theatre communities are evident. Today if theatre goers attended a classic revival with an all-white cast there would be 'shock and outrage' theatre critic

³¹³ Hughes, 1986, p. 275

Michael Billington noted in his 2019 farewell *Guardian* column after 48 years on the job. 'The days when black actors were confined in Shakespeare to playing Othello or Aron the Moor in *Titus Andronicus* are long gone,' he wrote. 'I have seen actors such as Sophie Okonedo, Sharon D Clarke, Cecilia Noble, Hugh Quarshie, Adrian Lester, David Oyelowo and Chiwetel Ejiofor prove they can play anything and everything. All this represents real progress. The mantra of all self-respecting companies right now is, of course, to create a theatre that represents the infinite variety of the British public. Who could argue with that?'³¹⁴ However, in this dissertation I argued that while there have been strides in increased numbers of Black actors performing a wider range of roles, lasting and sustainable representation on Broadway and the West End requires a diverse range of voices and a wide-ranging variety of approaches. As Kerbel writes, 'The opportunity for us to collectively remodel, re-imagine, and refresh what our industry and our art form could be is ours for the taking. It's a mission I hope many of us will work alongside each other to achieve.'³¹⁵ When casting, hiring and retention of Black theatre professionals and women is approached with complete openness the possibilities are limitless and as I have discovered, often thrilling. Perhaps there will come a time when there will be an amateur production of *The Sound of Music* in a small Midwestern community and the local director won't think that race or gender will distract an audience but instead electrify and attract them. Children of all ethnicities will be Von Trapps. Now that is a play I would like to see!

³¹⁴ Billington, 2019, *The Guardian*

³¹⁵ Kerbel, 2017, p. 11

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Interviews Conducted

Andrews, Beverly, in-person interview, 12 June 2019.

Beverly Andrews is a playwright and documentary film director. Originally from Detroit, she has lived in London for more than 15 years and is the recipient of six Arts Council of England Research and Development awards.

Jennifer Bradford, email exchange, 6 February 2019.

Jennifer Bradford is a director, former actor and assistant professor of theatre at Berry College, Rome, GA.

Henderson, Stephen McKinley, in-person interview, 12 January 2019; follow-up email, 2 February 2019.

Stephen McKinley Henderson has received Oscar and Tony award nominations for August Wilson's *Fences*, and received the Drama Desk award for Wilson's *Jitney*. The former chair of Theatre and Dance at the State University of New York, Buffalo, in 2017 he received an honorary doctorate of Fine Arts from New York's Julliard School.

Jensen, Sharon, telephone interview, 1 March 2019; follow-up in-person interview, 5 January 2023.

For 30 years Sharon Jensen was executive director of New York's Alliance for Inclusion in the Arts (formerly the Non-Traditional Casting Project).

Pascal, Julia, email exchange, 26 July 2019.

A British playwright and theatre director, Julia Pascal was the one of the first women directors at London's National Theatre.

Rasheed, Nefretete, email exchange, 25 January 2019.

A former actor, Nefretete Rasheed was hired by New York Public Theater founder Joseph Papp and became a close friend of the Papp family. From 1986 to 1996 she was the Associate Director of the New York Shakespeare Festival's Playwriting in the Schools Program.

Weschler, Tatiana, email exchange, 23 January 2019.

A 2014 graduate of New York University's Tisch School of the Arts, Tatiana Weschler has appeared and in 2018 performed the lead role Curly in the Oregon Shakespeare Festival's production of *Oklahoma!*

Productions Attended/Cited

8 Hotels, Nicholas Wright, Chichester Festival Theatre (Attendance date: 10 August 2019). Richard Eyre, director.

As You Like It, William Shakespeare, Globe Theatre, London (Attendance date: 3 September 2023). Ellen McDougall, director.

Barbershop Chronicles, Inua Ellams, Roundhouse Theatre, London (Attendance date: 24 July 2019). Bijan Sheibani, director.

Company, Stephen Sondheim, Gielgud Theatre, London (Attendance date: 1 October 2018). Marianne Elliott, Miranda Cromwell, directors.

_____ 28 July 2022 Broadway production viewed at New York Public Library for Performing Arts, 1 March 2023.

Death of a Salesman, Arthur Miller, Young Vic, London (Attendance Date: 30 October 2019). Marianne Elliott, director.

_____ Hudson Theatre, New York (Attendance date: 11 January 2023). Miranda Cromwell, director.

Death of England, Clint Dyer and Roy Williams, National Theatre, London (Attendance date: 29 February 2020). Clint Dyer, director.

Death of England: Closing Time, Clint Dyer and Roy Williams, National Theatre, London (Attendance date: 16 October 2023). Clint Dyer, director.

Emilia, Morgan Lloyd Malcolm, Vaudeville Theatre, London (Attendance date: 31 May 2019). Nicole Charles, director.

Fairview, Jackie Sibbilies Drury, Young Vic, and London (Attendance date: 23 January 2020). Nadia Latif, director.

Hamilton, Lin Manuel Miranda, Victoria Palace, London (Attendance dates: 10 January and 24 August 2019; 3 October, 2024). Thomas Kail, director.

Harry Potter and the Cursed Child, Parts One and Two, J.K. Rowling, Jack Thorne, John Tiffany, Palace Theatre, London (Attendance dates: 8-9 November 2018). John Tiffany, director.

Henry V ('Harry England'), William Shakespeare, Globe Theatre, London (Attendance date: 26 May 2019). Sarah Bedi, Federay Holmes, directors.

Oklahoma!, Richard Rodgers, Oscar Hammerstein II, Wyndham's Theatre, London (Attendance date: 19 August 2023). Daniel Fish, Director.

_____Chichester Festival Theatre (Attendance date: 9 August 2019). Jeremy Sams, director.

_____Oregon Shakespeare Company, Ashland Oregon, USA (Attendance date: August 2018). Bill Rauch, director.

_____Wyndham's Theatre, London, London (Attendance date: 19 August 2023). Daniel Fish, director.

Othello, William Shakespeare, Globe Theatre, London (Attendance date: 30 January 2024). Ola Ince, director.

Richard II, William Shakespeare, The Globe, London (Attendance date: 7 March 2019). Adjoa Andoh, Lynette Linton, directors.

Shucked, Robert Horn (book), Brandy Clark and Shane McAnally (music and lyrics), Regent's Park Open Air Theatre, London (Attendance date: 31 May 2025). Jack O'Brien, director.

Sleepless: A Musical Romance, Michael Burdette (book), Robert Scott, Brendan Cull (music) Wembley Park Theatre (Attendance date: 1 September 2020). Morgan Young, director.

The African Company Presents Richard III, Carlyle Brown, Oregon Shakespeare Festival (Attendance Date: 30 August 2011). Seret Scott, director.

The Last Five Years, Jason Robert Brown, Southwark Playhouse (Attendance date: 16 March 2020). Jonathan O'Boyle, director.

The Skin of our Teeth, Thornton Wilder, Arena Stage, Washington, D.C (Attendance Date: June 1993). Daniel Sullivan, director.

_____ 22 May 2022 Broadway production viewed at New York Public Library for Performing Arts, 1 March 2023. Lileana Blain-Cruz, director.

Taming of the Shrew, William Shakespeare, Royal Shakespeare Company, Barbican Theatre, London (Attendance date: 21 November 2019). Justin Audibert, director.

_____ Shakespeare's Globe (Attendance date: 24 September 2024). Jude Christian, director.

Presentations Cited/Attended

‘On Cultural Power: The August Wilson/Robert Brustein Discussion,’ Theatre Communications Group, January 1997, viewed at the New York Public Library for Performing Arts, 8 March 2023.

‘The Business of Show: Meet the Founders of Black Theatre United,’ Panel discussion, New York, 27 February 2023.

‘Standing on the Shoulders: Black Women Actors in the UK from 1950s-1980s,’ Panel discussion, National Theatre , 20 July 2020.

‘Actor Rafe Spall on *Death of England*,’ National Theatre, 2 March 2020.

‘Off Stage Conversation: Exploring What This Time of National Unrest Means for Artists and the Theatre,’ *New York Times* virtual event, 12 June 2020.

‘Making Representation a Meaningful Reality,’ Act for Change panel discussion, Shakespeare’s Globe, 6 October 2019.

‘Playwright Carlyle Brown on *The African Company Presents Richard III*,’ Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Ashland, OR, 29 August, 2011.

Evidence of Dissemination

- European Association for the Study of Theatre and Performance Annual Conference, London, Presentation Topic: 'The *Hamilton* Effect? Democratisation in Casting in Commercial Theatre,' 4 September 2025.
- Theatre and Performance Research Association (TaPRA) Conference, Audience, Experience and Popular Practices Working Group, Newcastle, UK, Presentation Topic: 'The West End Cultural War: Audience Discomfort and the Path Forward,' 6 September 2024.
- TaPRA Post-Graduate Symposium, London, Presentation Topic: 'Casting and Underrepresentation,' 22 June 2023.
- Presentation to Dame Jessica Corner, Chief Executive of Research England at Guildhall School of Music and Drama, London, Topic: 'Dreams Deferred? Underrepresentation of Blacks and Women in Commercial Theatre,' 29 June 2023.
- Opening Speaker, Visitor Studies Group Conference, London, Topic: 'Exploring Otherness: The Business and Personal Case for Audience Diversity,' May 2022.
- Book Publication: *Broadway and West End Casting: Roles, Race and Gender*, Intellect Books. Expected publication date: January 2027.

Ethics Approval

A research ethics application was submitted to the GSMD Research Committee and full ethical approval was granted on 24 April 2023 (Application reference: REA-2223-BEASLEY-01). The application included the following questions/information:

1. Principal researcher's qualifications and experience in the past five years (relevant to proposed research):

After a 20-year career in journalism and communications, being an avid theatre goer (1,000+ plays and counting) I moved to London in 2018 and two years later received an MA in creative writing, non-fiction from City, University of London. As part of the MA programme requirement I successfully completed a 60,000-word publishable work on theatrical non-traditional casting for US and UK audiences.

Research includes in-person and remote interviews with US and UK theatre professionals (some previously conducted in 2019 during my MA studies), as well as attendance at and critique of relevant Broadway and West End productions.

2. Does the research project involve human participants? YES.

3. Does the research involve obscene or potentially offensive material? NO.

4. Human participants: In what way do you intend to involve human participants in the project?

Interviewing and observation (non-invasive).

5. Consent – Are all participants able to provide consent for themselves? YES.

6. How many participants do you intend to recruit?

8-10. Note: Five interviews were conducted in 2019 (during pursuit of MA degree), follow-up opportunities will be investigated.

7. How will they be selected and recruited?

Subject selection is based on personal knowledge or research where it was determined that the potential participant is an expert with first-hand non-traditional casting theatre experience either as an actor, writer/director, professional critic or administrator. Requests will be (or in some cases, were) made via email. No compensation.

8. Interviewing/questionnaires. How many questions do you intend to ask? In what format are you collecting the answers? What method of analysis, quantitative or qualitative, do you intend to use?

Allowing for obtaining basic information and follow-up when warranted, I expect to ask approximately eight qualitative questions either in person or via email. Answers will be obtained in a narrative format. Non-invasive observation will occur during in-person interviews. The sample questions are:

- In my research I've read arguments for and against the practice of casting without considering the actor's ethnicity, skin colour and/or gender. What is your opinion of 'non-traditional' casting?
- Did you ever see a performance or play where 'non-traditional' casting didn't work? Why, and how would you have altered it?
- (For actors) At a young age a teacher told me I couldn't be in *The Sound of Music* because 'All families look alike.' In a recent *NY Times* article a playwright shared that she was told she couldn't participate in a high school production because 'there are no Asians in Oklahoma!' Was there ever a part you sought, but didn't get because of your ethnicity or gender?
- Regarding the diverse cast in *Hamilton*, Lin Manuel Miranda has said, 'We're telling the stories of old, dead white men, but we're using actors of colour, and that makes the story more immediate and more accessible to a contemporary audience.' Do you think *Hamilton's* success has (or will) alter the way theatre productions are cast?
- Edward Albee's estate denied a theatre company rights to *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* when learning a Black actor was to be cast as Nick. In your opinion are there plays that should be always cast as originally written?
- What's the most entertaining or enlightening experience of non-traditional casting you've witnessed? When, where and what made it memorable?
- What can/should be done to address casting and management inequities that currently exist on Broadway and the West End?
- What do you believe has worked/what hasn't and why?

9. What do you think will be the effects of your observations/questioning on your participants? Are the effects likely to differ for different groupings (eg male/female,

people with or without a disability, different ethnicities)? What safeguards or follow-up care arrangements need to be put in place?

Given my research to date, I expect Black participants will provide examples of personal experiences with racism or exclusion in the theatre. These inequalities and injustices may produce cumulative and collaborative accounts relating to broader questions concerning racialisation and representation. By addressing pertinent questions the expectation is participants will add to existing knowledge about non-traditional casting and under-representation of Blacks of African origin and women on Broadway and the West End. The expectation is that this information should elicit innovative ideas about possible, sustainable solutions to current disparities. As all participants are theatre professionals with extensive interview experience, follow-up care is not anticipated. However, should the retelling of lived experience involving memories of racist behaviour produce emotional discomfort, confidentiality will be offered and names of specific organisations who offer support to theatre professionals of colour facing racism will be provided.

10. How will the raw data be stored and for how long? Who will have access to this data?

Describe how you intend to make the results of the study known to participants.

Interviews will either be recorded or notes will be taken and later transcribed and securely stored on my personal computer. Back-up copies will be maintained in paper and electronic form for no more than 10 years. On request, raw data will be made available to supervisors and peer reviewers, with confidentiality maintained, should the participant request it. Subjects will be able to view a transcript of their particular interview, if requested. Following the interview, I plan to ask participants if they are available for any follow-up and/or if they would like be informed of my results/recommendations at the conclusion of the programme. Interviews will be incorporated into my research and dissertation.

11. Describe and discuss any ethical issues arising from this project, other than those already dealt with in your answers above.

These interviews will be used to supplement detailed analysis of successful and groundbreaking West End and Broadway productions as well as research gathered from a range of sources including academic journals, theatre reviews, news articles and historical archives. All potential participants have the capacity to consent to their

participation. Although it is not expected, should any participant request confidentiality, it will be granted. I have downloaded, reviewed and will adhere to the directives outlined in Guildhall's Governance Framework for Good Practice in Research (updated 23 August 2011). A list of the participants who participated in interviews prior to my start at Guildhall are provided in an attached document. The questions asked were similar to those listed above. I have maintained contact and am able to request their consent to use the previously obtained material for my current research.