

# To Notice or Not To Notice: Shakespeare, Black Actors, and Performance Reviews

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## ABSTRACT

This essay examines the 2006-2007 Royal Shakespeare Company's performances of *The Winter's Tale* and *Pericles*. Part of the RSC's Complete Works Festival, these shows employed an extremely diverse cast in repertory performances of the two plays. Through interviews with several of the actors employed and analyses of the published theater reviews, I highlight the challenges theater reviewers face when writing about non-traditionally cast productions. In the end, I advocate for a more progressive and responsible theater-reviewing style that takes into account the complexities of race in performance.

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In the winter of 2006-2007 the Royal Shakespeare Company, as part of their Complete Works Festival, staged two of Shakespeare's late plays in repertory: *The Winter's Tale* and *Pericles*. The plays were originally staged at the Swan Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon, but then were re-staged in the United States as part of the RSC's residency at Davidson College. The single cast used for both plays was comprised of twenty-five players, ten of whom were black. I am interested in analyzing the semiotic implications for the performances of race in this repertory company because the two plays seemed to utilize two different types of casting. While it was clear that *Pericles* was cast in a cross-cultural way — the play was explicitly staged and cast as if it took place in Africa — *The Winter's Tale* seemed to offer a more traditional colorblind model for casting — the audience was not explicitly invited to notice the actors' racial or ethnic differences. As I participated in Davidson's symposium, "Like an Old Tale Still: Shakespeare's Late Plays," I saw both productions (more than once) and led a panel discussion with the actors about non-traditional casting.<sup>1</sup> Earlier in the symposium, there also had been a panel on performance reviewing/reviewers. The splitting of these panels, it later occurred to me, symbolized the disconnect between performers and reviewers on the issues of race and

performance. The performance reviewers did not participate in the discussion about non-traditional casting, and the performers did not participate in the discussion about performance reviewing.

This article seeks to begin a discussion that interrogates the bind that surrounds race in performance reviews: Is it better to notice or not notice race in one's review? It may seem that actors of color give contradictory responses to the query. On the one hand, actors of color are often adamant about not wanting to be labeled as such because it can limit their opportunities. Why is it that actors of color are called "black actors" when their white counterparts are rarely (if ever) called "white actors," many actors have quipped. On the other hand, actors of color are often adamant about not wanting their race, color, ethnicity, and culture to be completely whited-out of performances. Many actors feel that their race and culture are central to their life experiences, and, thus, are central to their acting abilities and styles. It is not always desirable, they intone, to be blind to that. So how exactly should race play into a performance review? For this article I conducted lengthy phone interviews with several of the actors in *Pericles* and *The Winter's Tale*, and I read all of the available reviews of these productions. Although it may appear as if the bind is irresolvable — reviewers will be condemned both for noticing and not noticing race — I suggest that a more critically engaged type of noting might undo this bind. Performance reviewers must be more attentive to the way in which a production makes race semiotically (ir)relevant. Thus, it should never be a mere matter of noting an actor's race in a review; rather, it should be a matter of assessing what and how a production renders the semiotic value and meaning of that actor's race.

### OLD TALES MADE NEW

Garnering almost unanimous praise — one critic went so far as to call them "the jewels in the RSC's Complete Works Festival" — *The Winter's Tale* and *Pericles* were applauded for the fact that they were staged in promenade style, with the actors and audience inhabiting the same space onstage (Gardner 2006). This required the audience to move physically out of/into the acting space in order to see the action of the plays. *The Winter's Tale* was set first in a Sicilia that was marked by a type of cold formalism: The actors were dressed in tuxedos, and Paulina, at one point, donned a fur coat (it is a winter's tale, after all). Bohemia, on the other hand, was marked by a type of warm informalism: The actors were dressed in casual, outdoor working attire, and the rustics, at one point, pranced around in only their "fruitful" skivvies.<sup>2</sup> This is to say that the locations were less about place than "the relationship between time and one's spiritual evolution" (Cooke 2006, response to question three). Sicilia and Bohemia, not referencing exact locations, were used to evoke the possibility of change and growth over time. In line with this

interpretation of the play, the races, ethnicities, and colors of the actors were not semiotically relevant in the production. While the majority of the larger parts (Leontes, Polixenes, Hermione, Paulina, Perdita, and Autolycus) were played by white actors and actresses, two important roles were played by actors of color (Camillo and Antigonus). Their color, however, was not highlighted, questioned, or brought into the semiotic realm of the production; we, the audience, were not supposed to think about race and/or color in this production of *The Winter's Tale*.

The RSC's production of *Pericles*, on the other hand, made race extremely semiotically present and pertinent because of an emphasis on place: "*Pericles* is looking at place and the effect of place on self, or place as a metaphor, a journey through physical places as a metaphor for spiritual evolution" (Cooke 2006). Specifically staging Pericles's journey as beginning in east Africa and moving north and west through the Mediterranean, the director, Dominic Cooke, evoked the way in which the issues of displacement, migration, and estrangement have become pertinent in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries by casting many of the black members of the company in speaking roles for *Pericles* (Pericles, Gower, Antiochus, Thaliart, Helicanus, Cleon, Dionyza, Marina, Leonine, and Antiochus's Daughter). As many of the reviewers noted, Clarence Smith's performance of Antiochus, for example, seemed loosely based on the verbal and physical stylings of Robert Mugabe, the controversial president of Zimbabwe. The African-ness of the early scenes, then, was established through the use of black actors who were employing African accents and outfits. In addition, the white actors in the company (of whom there were roughly two for every one black actor) were not present in the early African scenes unless their bodies (and skin colors) were completely shrouded. In this semiotic realm, the color of the actors was highly invested with meaning: blackness helped to establish the African-ness of the setting.

It is important to note, however, that none of the production materials for the plays made references to race and casting and their relationship with the potential implications(s) for interpretation. While the beautiful thirty-page theater program included many color and black-and-white photos of the mixed-race cast, the synopses of the plays did not mention race or place. In fact, the program notes for *Pericles* did not even mention the fact that the play was being updated to a "non-descript African country" (Mydell 2007). While Lucian Msamati, the Zimbabwean-born actor who played Pericles to much acclaim, states that he knew "quite early on" about Dominic Cooke's idea of setting *Pericles* "in an east African setting and mov[ing] on," the other actors were not informed until after they had begun rehearsals (Msamati 2007). As Maynard Eziashi, who played Dion in *The Winter's Tale* and Cleon in *Pericles*, explains:

It was only on the first day that I realized, "Ooh, there are a lot of black actors." And I thought, "That is very interesting." Having heard of Dominic Cooke but not really

knowing him, I thought, "Well, he is very egalitarian. Go, Dominic, go." I was really pleased. Then after about the third day, he said, "Right, the setting for *Pericles* is going to be in Africa." And I was like, "I see, Okay, I get it now. Alright, fine. Fair enough, fair enough. . . . I see what my role is. It is to be an African." (Eziashi 2007)

Likewise, Joseph Mydell, the Olivier Award-winning actor who played Camillo in *The Winter's Tale* and Gower in *Pericles* (again, to much acclaim), offers that Cooke "very strategically did not want it to leak to the press that he was setting any of this in any part of Africa because he did not want people to get a spin on it" (Mydell 2007). The silence around the significance of the setting — and its relationship to the actors cast — continued: I have been unable to find any quotes from Dominic Cooke about this issue. While he has spoken about immigration and migration in general terms, he has not addressed how these issues conflate with or contradict constructions of racial identity. Furthermore, there were no materials or thoughts offered about the different semiotic performance lenses employed by this single repertory company for *The Winter's Tale* and *Pericles*. And, not surprisingly, I have been unable to find any theater critics who have addressed this interesting and thought-provoking theatrical challenge.

This lack of attention, however, does not minimize or erase/e-race the semiotic challenges put forth by the RSC's employment of a repertory company. Blackness signified two radically differently things in *The Winter's Tale* and *Pericles*. In the former, the audience was asked not to see or notice blackness. More than an empty signifier, blackness — if noticed at all by the audience — became a false signifier. It did NOT provide any semiotic, performative, or interpretative lenses that enhanced, impacted, or even informed the production. In the latter, on the other hand, the audience was asked to see and notice blackness. More than a signifier of mere racial difference, blackness in *Pericles* became a signifier of geographical, national, cultural, and racial import. It DID provide semiotic, performative, and interpretative lenses that enhanced, impacted, and even informed the production. Thus, the audience was implicitly asked to move from not imparting color and/or race with any theatrical, performative, or semiotic meaning/value to doing just the opposite. One cast, two plays, and two semiotic implications for race. What does this mean for the black actor? By examining some of their critiques of both semiotic/performance systems, I postulate a new path for theater reviewing with regards to race and performance.

### DO I CONTRADICT MYSELF? "BLACK ACTORS"

What is it like, as a black actor, to be told implicitly or explicitly that his/her race will not be a factor in a production? This is, after all, one of the fundamental tenets of colorblind casting:

that race, color, and/or ethnicity will not be taken into account for either the casting or direction of a production.<sup>3</sup> Lucian Msamati articulates the frustrations of many actors of color when he says:

What does "black actor" mean? I'm an actor, and I will always be an actor. Of course, it became very clear quite quickly what it meant to be a black actor. Suddenly, with people's best intentions and with the best will in the world, I might lack the opportunity, or be limited, or that I was not going to be automatically considered to play the romantic lead, not because of my ability but simply because of the color of my skin. (Msamati 2007)

Many actors of color have expressed similar sentiments; being labeled as a "black actor" has historically limited performance options. Colorblind-ness, the act of not taking race or color into account, then, might open doors that traditionally have been closed. Joseph Mydell explains how taxing it can be to have to play "black" roles, arguing:

I love the idea that as a black man I can play Shakespeare and express things about myself that I couldn't necessarily express if I were limited to only trying to play my blackness, which is usually in relation to someone's whiteness, which is so boring because then you are just reacting. (Mydell 2007)

Not only are actors of color potentially limited in the roles that are available to them, but also they are potentially limited by the range of the "black" roles. If these plays address the historically unequal power dynamics between black and white, then black actors are often forced to be more reactive than active, Mydell argues.

Yet, acting in productions in which one's race, color, and/or ethnicity is deemed irrelevant is not without complications. Maynard Eziashi, who played the important role of Cleon in *Pericles*, only played a minor role in *The Winter's Tale*. He stresses that many productions that claim to be colorblind in their casting often replicate the glass ceiling that continues to prevent actors of color from earning important roles. Thinking about the RSC's use of black actors in *The Winter's Tale*, Eziashi comments: "Apart from Camillo and Antigonus, the main characters, the main thrust, were white. So most of the black actors in that play were not helping with exposition: They were just there. There were only really two black actors who were storytellers. So everyone else were just fillers" (Eziashi 2007). Despite the fact that the casting for *The Winter's Tale* aimed to be colorblind, with race not impacting the casting, direction, or production, the characters whose lines most affected the "exposition" of the play were played by white actors. So while the production aimed to render race and color irrelevant semiotically, one

could re-inscribe a type of semiotic relevance through the employment of black actors as "fillers." In other words, this production of *The Winter's Tale* unwittingly rendered the black actors less important than the white actors, who were charged with delivering most of the "exposition" of the narrative. Instead of making blackness irrelevant, this production implicitly made it secondary to, supportive of, and less important than whiteness, which in turn enjoyed primacy. Not unique to this production of *The Winter's Tale*, the invisible glass ceiling often emerges in ostensibly colorblind productions.

Clarence Smith offers a slightly different critique of not-seeing race, color, and/or ethnicity in performance. Smith, who played Cleomenes in *The Winter's Tale* and Antiochus in *Pericles*, started his career playing the King of France in the RSC's 1991 colorblind production of *King Lear* (directed by Nicholas Hytner). When Smith spoke his first lines, "This is most strange, / That she . . . / . . . should in this trice of time / Commit a thing so monstrous" (*King Lear*, 1.1.214-18),<sup>4</sup> he was heckled by a French woman in the audience. Smith explains:

Somebody in the audience says, "Well, yes, it most bloody certainly is [strange]!" and shouted. And every time I spoke, I was being heckled. And you can imagine, you look out into the auditorium, and it's just a sea of white faces, and I'm like, "This isn't happening. Something else is happening, Clarence. You [just] think that every time you speak somebody is saying you should not be speaking." And basically, there was someone in the audience who was French who said it was a disgrace that a black man was playing the King of France. (Smith 2007)

Despite the fact that Nicholas Hytner and the RSC intended the production to be a colorblind one, in which Smith's black skin was either semiotically irrelevant or semi-invisible, this French woman could not be blind to Smith's color; for her, it was always relevant, visible, and inappropriate for the role. While the original intent of colorblind casting was to make race irrelevant and/or invisible for audience members, audiences often come with biases that even the best productions are unable to alter. The interesting pull between production and reception is not my focus here, however. I am more interested in the way the RSC persisted in insisting that race should not be a factor for discussion, even when Smith wanted to initiate one. He continues:<sup>5</sup>

What happened is a bit like, you know Ralph Ellison? *Invisible Man*? He says, "I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids — and I might even be said to possess a mind." And I went, "I'm not fucking invisible." Because what happens is, within the company, it just wasn't mentioned. . . . I said to myself, I've got to speak to Terry Hand, who was the artistic

director of the company, and Terry's the most wonderful man, the most wonderful man. I went to Terry and said, "Did you hear what happened?" And he went, "Oh, Clarence, yes, I know, it's just terrible, isn't it. You get small-minded people wherever you go in the world." And I went, "I know, I know, I know. I just want to kind of know what the company's policy is should that happen again, which is quite feasible." . . . And he said, "Well, really, black actors have come on leaps and bounds. Actors like you now, they don't even *sound* black." And I went, "I beg your pardon? Terry, if that was meant to be a compliment, that's kind of like the worst thing you could've said to me, because I *am* black, it doesn't matter what I sound like, how I walk, what I wear, how I smell: I *am* that, and it's kind of like you want me to *be* neutral, translucent." It was such a shock to me that this man, who I had great respect for and still do, [should say this to me]. . . . "Well," he said, "What can we do?" And I said, "Well, what you would do is, if someone was making a racist or anti-Semitic public statement, you would remove them." And he went, "Well, Clarence, how do we do that? That would interrupt the show." And I said, "What? You would compromise my position and who I am as a person for the show? I'm not prepared to do that, so if that were to happen and the company's not going to do anything about it, then I will do something about it. And that means if it should happen again, I will leave the stage. That's what I will do." . . . And he went, "Well, I don't know if that would be the right thing to do." (Smith 2007)

The RSC was so wedded to the notion of colorblind-ness that the company made Clarence Smith feel like the invisible man. Although Smith was elated to be invited to act in the company, and although he had earlier dropped out of a drama school that wanted him to focus on what he could say theatrically as a "black man,"<sup>6</sup> Smith did not want his race to be erased or to be treated as "invisible," "neutral," and/or "translucent." If the audience was unable to be blind to his race, then Smith wanted the company to say something about its (in)significance. Both Eziashi and Smith, then, point to some of the inherent problems of treating race, color, and ethnicity as semiotically irrelevant in performance.

On the other hand, actors often critique casting directors, directors, producers, reviewers, and audience members for seeing, noting, and commenting too much on race in performance. All four of the actors I interviewed, for example, commented (without prompting) that Michael Billington's review of *Pericles* mistakenly identified the repertory company as a "predominantly black company" (Billington 2006). They all noted that Billington failed to recognize that the company was the same for both *The Winter's Tale* and *Pericles* and that this company was only one-third black. Several of the actors, however, speculate that this mistaken vision — seeing more color than is actually there — might have stemmed from some strains within the

production itself. While all of the actors had high praise for Dominic Cooke's vision, several wondered why *Pericles* was not staged "a bit bolder" (Eziashi 2007). Eziashi explains that he and several other actors had encouraged Cooke and his associate director Maria Aberg to represent Africa through more than just the black actors cast, noting:

Clarence [Smith] and I said that the opening scene was originally very weak: We felt that it had to be strong; you had to understand this country. For example, there wasn't the use of drums; there wasn't the use of the marauding-style. It wasn't a large entrance. And we felt that compared to Pentapolis, which was very sophisticated, it just looked very watery: It just looked like a few people in the middle of the bush. So we tried to beef it up that way, and to give our input there. . . . Pentapolis is set up as this very sophisticated world, and the rest of world was very savage-like. I felt that wasn't really right and that you had to show at least some kind of sophistication. This would come out in costume and the kinds of things they would want to put on me or have me do. For instance, I played Cleon, and, "Well, we want you to walk out and walk amongst the people and greet them and then sit on the floor somewhere." And the guy's a king! . . . There are certain behavior patterns that have to be observed: They are very, very important. These are the things that I tried, with Clarence and others, to put across. So that these kingdoms looked like kingdoms. (Eziashi 2007)

Eziashi intimates that the African-ness of the RSC's *Pericles* was primarily being established through the black actors cast, as opposed to the staging, blocking, and/or costuming employed. While Pentapolis, as an all-white kingdom, was being established through elaborate stagings, the African kingdoms were left under-attended because there was the assumption that the race and color of the actors would semiotically convey place. Before Eziashi, Smith, Mydell, and others offered their input on the blocking and staging of the early scenes, the scenes in Africa looked much less magisterial than the scenes in Pentapolis because blackness was entrusted with conveying so much. It is no wonder, then, that Billington thought the company was "predominantly black," for *Pericles* alone because blackness was invested with so much meaning.

Furthermore, because the actors' blackness was initially entrusted with conveying a sense of place, the production did not consider the complex race relations that take place in Africa. Smith comments:

When you go to Africa, there are white Africans that speak with an African accent. When you go to Jamaica, there are white Jamaicans that speak in a Jamaican accent. When you go to the south of America, there are black Americans that speak with a real southern

drawl, and there are white Americans [that do, too]. What Dominic didn't do is he didn't factor in the white cast, white actors, with African accents. Had he done that, he would have really opened up the whole debate about integrated casting and colorblind casting. That's what he should've done because then we would've been in a real world. . . . What happens is that you have an idea, but can you really think it through logically to the final conclusion. . . . Dominic laid his soul out to a lesser degree, and he's only human. The fact is that it needs black directors to be able to be in that position, to say, "I'm going to do this play and actually, I am going to research it fully." At any moment it was just a good idea, but there's something else that needs to take place. (Smith 2007)

Smith suggests that Cooke's good idea to update *Pericles* by setting it in Africa was inventive and thought provoking, but, ultimately, under-analyzed because for Cooke, the blackness of the actors signified Africa and African-ness. Smith wisely challenges that this not only creates weak theater without equally inventive staging, but also does not reflect the reality of life in Africa. Blackness, Smith implies, should not be assumed to be able to perform a sense of place semiotically any more than whiteness should. Pentapolis, in Cooke's RSC production, was a Grecian kingdom with elaborately staged rituals and rites of power (including the hilarious Pentathalon). The African kingdoms were not initially afforded the same attention to detail because the actors' races and colors were thought to signify so much about place. Cooke, in this instance, perhaps was too color-sighted.

#### THE BLIND LEADING THE BLIND: PERFORMANCE REVIEWERS

Performance reviewers have, for the most part, backed away from focusing on the race of actors. None of the reviews of *The Winter's Tale* mentions that the cast is racially mixed. And while Michael Billington's is the only review of *Pericles* explicitly to mention the blackness of the cast, many reviewers focus on the African-ness of the setting in interesting ways. For instance, Ian Shuttleworth, writing in the *Financial Times*, claims that "Cooke envisions narrator Gower as a West African *griot*, but here all the city-states of the eastern Mediterranean are played as African. Almost the first person we see is the incestuous tyrant Antiochus, looking and sounding more than a little like Robert Mugabe" (Shuttleworth 2006). Likewise, Susannah Clapp sums up *Pericles* as all "heat, bullying, and riotous outbursts. Starting in an African dictatorship (severed heads, strutting soldiers), it makes a journey out of a play that can flop around as a string of episodes" (Clapp 2006). Clapp ends her positive review by arguing that Dominic Cooke will "put on plays that interrogate privilege and power, and have a kick at the laziness of liberal-left thinking. . . . He's shown at Stratford that this isn't just a ritual obeisance" (Clapp

2006). Simon Thomas, in one last example of the reviews, writes that "Cooke begins the play in an African dictatorship, complete with armed thugs and severed heads. Pericles' painful travels through the heart of darkness bring him into contact with a wide range of peoples and manifestations of evil" (Thomas 2006). Unlike Billington's review, which mistakenly identified the company as "predominantly black," most of the other reviews side-step the issue of the actors' races by focusing on the setting. Despite the fact that some get that setting incorrectly (the African-ness of the early scenes, for instance, seems to blind some reviewers to the fact that Pericles does move to the "eastern Mediterranean" as the play progresses), the reviewers write attentively about the staging elements that conveyed the setting as Africa: the severed heads, strutting soldiers, and Mugabe-style of Antiochus ("the heart of darkness").

It seems as though theater reviewers today have been overly attentive to the notion that color should not matter semiotically in performance. Writing in 1991 about Clarence Smith getting heckled during the RSC's *King Lear*, Benedict Nightingale forcefully articulates what would become the new code for theater reviewing: Race should not be a matter worth mentioning. Nightingale writes:

Resistance to black performers who take "white" roles is seldom so shameless [as the heckling Smith received] these days. . . . If black actors have yet to be fully accepted at the RSC, what are their chances of persuading more conventional producers and audiences to exploit their skills to the full? . . . Bluntly, what is to be done with all the able, black British actors who will be clamouring for work, fulfillment and recognition in their nation's theatres? (Nightingale 1991)

Nightingale then goes on to quote two black British actresses who make very similar comments about not wanting to be identified as *black* actresses. Josette Simon, who made a name for herself playing classical theatrical roles in the 1980s and early 1990s, is quoted as saying, "I find critics calling me 'black Josette Simon,' as if there were a white Josette Simon knocking about somewhere. They wouldn't dream of talking about 'white Anthony Sher'" (quoted in Nightingale 1991). And Dona Croll, who played Cleopatra in the all-black Talawa production of *Antony and Cleopatra*, is quoted as saying that being identified as a black actress enables casting agents and directors to "put a limit on you, and you just cannot get any further" (quoted in Nightingale 1991). Similarly, the four actors I interviewed made almost identical statements, claiming that they do not want to be identified in reviews only as *black* actors.

What is revealing in Nightingale's article, however, is his reliance on the Non-Traditional Casting Project's (in 2007 renamed as the Alliance for Inclusion in the Arts) four categories for non-traditional casting (societal, cross-cultural, conceptual, and colorblind).<sup>7</sup> The

Non-Traditional Casting Project's admirable mission is to "promote inclusive hiring practices and standards, diversity in leadership and balanced portrayals of persons of color and persons with disabilities" in "theatre, film, television and related media." It is clear that Nightingale is attempting to grapple with how reviewers should approach and write about non-traditionally cast productions, and he ends by lending credence to the notion that race should not be mentioned in reviews. Although he does not say this directly, his inclusion of, and dependence on, the quotations from black British actors, like the ones cited above, provides a profound critique of reviewers who write race into their reviews. It should not matter, the actors say, and Nightingale's essay implicitly endorses this stance. This early essay (again, published in 1991 — well before the public debates in 1996 between Robert Bruestein and August Wilson about the merits and pitfalls of colorblind casting) seems to give voice to many fears, anxieties, and questions reviewers have about how to handle non-traditional casting in their published reviews, and Nightingale anticipates the virtual white-out of the mention of race in reviews. While there are still one or two reviewers who occasionally identify actors by race ("black Josette Simon"), most reviewers leave race, color, and ethnicity out of their reviews. Thus, the reviewers of *The Winter's Tale* and *Pericles* do not mention race and, instead, focus on place and setting.

Is this progress, however? Does the white-out in reviews make race, color, and/or ethnicity less semiotically relevant in production? Does this help an actor's ability to advance his or her career? Noting how infrequently actors of color in the RSC's productions of *The Winter's Tale* and *Pericles* were actually named in reviews, Joseph Mydell comments that this is not a new phenomenon, stating:

In one review of *Angels in America* [the original production was staged in London in 1994, and Mydell was the first black actor to win an Olivier Award for his role as the nurse, Belize], one reviewer referred to me as "the black nurse." And he gave the names of the other actors. So I wrote back to him and said, "The black nurse is played by Joe Mydell: He has a name." He certainly corrected himself after that. . . . A black actor does not get the same profile. (Mydell 2007)

Black actors have a much harder time establishing a profile, a reputation that immediately calls to mind the complete history and range of their performances. Time and again, actors of color comment on the difficulty they have establishing their profiles in published reviews. All too often actors of color go nameless, as in Ian Shuttleworth's review of *Pericles*, in which he praises the fact that "we never forget here that Gower is steering things," but never names Joseph Mydell as the actor portraying Gower, or they are praised as a "newcomer to watch." Maynard Eziashi notes, "I studied a lot of history and black theatre, and what I found really incredible is that [they

would say], 'This person's a newcomer!' It could be their fifth film or their fifth play or they could have won awards, and it was always 'the first time'" (Eziashi 2007). Newcomers, of course, do not have profiles; they are assumed to be blank slates who have yet to develop a performance history, style, and reputation. Clarence Smith likened this selective forgetting — under the guise of praise — to a "Jedi mind trick," arguing:

I've had so many of those reviews: "Star of the 90s, la la la." But that means nothing to me because I realize, if they go, "Oh, you're the first black one," and you go, "No, I'm not. I'm just another one that you're kind of doing the Jedi mind trick with. That's all you're doing." . . . There are countless [black] actors who have the force, and then the force moves to somebody else. So you've got to remember, they're not in control of it. It's like the dark side: somebody else is doing it to them. (Smith 2007)

The published praise that calls an actor of color the first, the newcomer, the one to watch, creates the "Jedi mind trick" that numbs the actor into thinking a profile will follow. Instead, the "force" is constantly moving to the next "first." This, of course, stunts an actor's ability to move up to more prestigious, challenging, and varied roles. As Joseph Mydell notes about his own profile, "So if it was Simon Russell Beale playing Gower, oh my God, they would be going on and on about him, saying, 'Here he is yet again playing another role'— because I play all different types. . . . Economically it is not the same: it is different" (Mydell 2007). Treating actors of color as the first, the newcomer or the one to watch, performance reviewers highlight the actors' color and/or race, but they erase/e-race their profiles. The "dark side," Smith implies, does not just control the actors, however. Rather, it also controls the reviewers who may not realize the implicit biases that creep into their supposed praise. Nonetheless, these biases have real effects not only professionally (what jobs actors get next), but also economically (how much actors can command).

Although many actors of color, including many of those I interviewed, do not want to be called "black actors," there is a real threat that their races, and the challenges they have had to face because subtle (and not so subtle) biases have not disappeared (even if the mention of their races in reviews largely has), will simply disappear from history along with their true profiles. Joseph Mydell, for instance, worries that his accomplishments will not be remembered because his profile often gets lost in print. He says:

I don't want it to happen that 100 years from now [people will say], "Did you know Joe Mydell came from America, and he had the longest sustained career in Shakespeare performances [as a black actor] since Ira Aldridge?" . . . This kind of PC way of thinking has a very sinister undertone. They say, "Oh, well, it doesn't matter." And, "We don't

have prejudice." But if it doesn't matter, then we are not going to be included. . . . There is something very sinister about that. Yes, it is a double-edged sword. . . . If you are going to put me in your play, then you cannot ignore me or marginalize me [in reviews]. (Mydell 2007)

It is not simply that black actors have a difficult time establishing their profiles in print, but also that their profiles and the history of their accomplishments may be lost forever through this erasure/e-race-sure. While theater critics have for the most part followed what Mydell refers to as a "PC way of thinking" — that not mentioning an actor's race is more egalitarian and colorblind, in the sense of not noticing/noting racial differences — this way of thinking may have unintended "sinister" side effects. Actors of color are too often being marginalized, which may result in their invisibility.

### PROMOTING CLEAR VISION

A more progressive and responsible reviewing style would take into account the complexities of race in performance. It is enlightening to note that while all of the reviews of *Pericles* mention its updated African setting, not one actually explores or interrogates what that updating means, if it worked, or how it affected the reviewer's understanding of the play. Susannah Clapp, for example, ends her review with enigmatic praise for Dominic Cooke. What does she mean when she claims that Cooke will "interrogate privilege and power" and "kick at the laziness of liberal-left thinking"? How exactly does this production of *Pericles* demonstrate these tendencies? Is it the fact that all his blacks/Africans are not virtuous and good, but instead represent a full range of human types (including the Mugabe-style of Smith's portrayal of Antiochus)? Or, does she see Cooke interrogating the left's beliefs in the benefits of migration and immigration? In this play, of course, there is real loss and pain associated with migration. And, if this is the case, does this production offer an interrogation of the related issues of racial politics, as well? Clapp does not ask or answer any of these questions, and her review is not unique. Rather, it is representative of the confusing — and, dare I appropriate her own use of the word? — *lazy* reviewing style when actors of color are employed. It is not enough to dance around the topic. Reviewers must engage more fundamentally, thoughtfully, and critically with the relationship between performance and race.

Part of the lacuna around race in the reviews of *The Winter's Tale* and *Pericles* may stem from the RSC's lack of promotional materials that address the updating: There is a clear need for companies, directors, and producers to explain their own philosophies with regards to race and performance.<sup>8</sup> Yet, this does not excuse reviewers: It is their job to explain if, how, and why a

production succeeds or fails, and the semiotics of race should not be whited-out of this analysis. Reviewers need to engage more critically with the semiotics of race in every production. As I have tried to demonstrate throughout this essay, there is a lot to be said about the potential benefits and costs both for noticing and not noticing race in performance reviews, but noticing race can be done in a responsible fashion that enhances a true assessment of any production. Of course, these types of reviews will require a longer time to research and write and will necessitate more space in print. We, as readers and subscribers, have to be willing to support this change. The pay-off, however, will be great. This type of critical engagement will encourage more wide-ranging discussions about where we as a society want performance to go in the future.

#### NOTES

1. See Davidson College's website for an overview of this residency program and special symposium: [http://www2.davidson.edu/news/RSCresidency0607/RSCres0607\\_reside.asp](http://www2.davidson.edu/news/RSCresidency0607/RSCres0607_reside.asp).
2. For production photos of *The Winter's Tale*, see the RSC's website: [http://www.rsc.org.uk/explore/workspace/winterstale\\_2532.htm](http://www.rsc.org.uk/explore/workspace/winterstale_2532.htm).
3. For an overview of the history of colorblind casting, see Thompson 2006.
4. All citations to Shakespeare's plays are from *The Norton Shakespeare*, edited by Stephen Greenblatt et al. (1997).
5. Clarence Smith recited these lines from memory. See Ellison 1995.
6. Here is what Smith said: "Basically, I did a course where when I got there they said to me, 'Well, what do you want to say as a black man?' I went, 'Well, what do you mean? Anything more than what I say every day of my life?' I don't have something specific to say as a 'black man,' I have something to say as 'Clarence,' who is black — something I don't attempt to get away from — I'm not making a distinction. This was the first time at seventeen that I realized that somebody else made a distinction in this world I was in, and it didn't happen at the youth theater, because we were just kids. It's now when I moved into academia that these issues started coming out. And I decided, 'Well, I don't understand. If you're giving me some work to do, show me what I have to achieve here to be able to say and create the character, my blackness — isn't that secondary to me actually being able to do the job at hand?' That's what I thought" (Smith 2007).
7. The Non-Traditional Casting Project defined these categories in their 1988 book, *Beyond Tradition*, and film *Breaking Tradition*. Their history is available at: <http://www.nea.gov/resources/accessibility/NTCP.html>.
8. For an excellent comparison of the reception of companies who updated *Othello* with regards to promotional materials, see Pao 2006.

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