

The Racist Case for Diversity?

Tom Cornford, The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London

The British theatre reacted recently to the latest in a series of periodic outbursts from its very own racist uncle, the Daily Mail's Quentin Letts. In early April, Letts dedicated a paragraph of his review of the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC)'s *The Fantastic Follies of Mrs Rich* to the subject of the actor Leo Wringer's ethnicity. Seeing that Wringer was not playing the part of the older Clerimont as he expected it to be played, Letts decided that the actor had been mis-cast, and blamed the RSC's stated commitment to diversity:

There is no way he is a honking Hooray of the sort that has infested the muddier reaches of England's shires for centuries. [...] Was Mr Wringer cast because he is black? If so, the RSC's clunking approach to politically correct casting has again weakened its stage product.¹

As a result, and with the predictable exception of theatre's racist nephew, Lloyd Evans, Letts was criticised from all sides both for his open prejudice and his inability to construct a logical argument. Unusually, even the RSC came out against Letts, in a press release denouncing what it said seemed to be his 'blatantly racist attitude'. (This is in marked contrast to the RSC's woeful handling of the outrage sparked by its casting of *The Orphan of Zhao* in 2012, analysed in some detail in a special issue of this journal.)² The RSC statement went on to outline the company's casting policy:

Our approach to casting is to seek the most exciting individual for each role and in doing so to create a repertoire of the highest quality. We are proud that this ensures our casts are also representative of the diversity of the United Kingdom, 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.³

'Diversity', in this policy statement, plays second string to 'quality': the RSC casts the best and they happen to be diverse, which has the added benefit that audiences 'are able to recognise themselves on stage'. You can see why the argument is framed in this way. To say anything else would risk undermining actors of colour who have overcome considerable barriers to reach the top of their profession. It would also play into the hands of those (like Letts and Evans) who will immediately respond to a non-white face that doesn't meet their expectations with shrieks decrying 'positive discrimination'. But as I begin to think, in my research, about diversity initiatives, what I 'recognise [...] on stage' troubles me more and more, because I am not only seeing 'the most exciting individual for each role', I am also seeing all sorts of unwitting or disavowed narratives about identity that are glossed over by statements such as the RSC's.

Readers of this journal will probably not need to be told, for example, that our major national stages, commonly feature female actors presented briefly and statically, as objects to be gazed upon, while, all around them, men are being active and articulate, driving the narrative forward on their terms. On the same stages, we repeatedly see black people associated with depravity and the perpetration of violence. Consider the RSC's recent *Hamlet* starring Paapa Essiedu. In an interview about the production, director Simon Godwin said:

This not a play about experience, security and order; this is a play about chaos, fear and the way a young man learns how to kill.⁴

This is not so much analysis as racial profiling. Godwin's account of the production is predicated upon the need to contextualize the blackness of his cast to an implicitly white audience. Setting out to explain what the production is *not*, Godwin reaches for the rhetoric of white civilization: 'experience, security, and order'. These he opposes to 'chaos, fear' and learning 'how to kill', racist tropes of blackness all too familiar from the media. Godwin's account of the play, then, is the literary equivalent of a racially-motivated stop-and-search. Likewise, the last time I saw Olivier Award-winning actress Sheila Atim on stage, she was playing a silent, apparently tribal woman in *Les Blancs* at the National Theatre, dragging a flaming cauldron threateningly around a building (the white people's mission) that would go up in flames at the play's end. In this production, Atim's silenced black body was presented so that it first threatened and then seemed to unleash chaos, fear and violence, chiming with Godwin's description of Paapa Essiedu's black Hamlet. In these examples, the old colonial role-reversal, in which the white perpetrators of violence project its image onto their non-white victims, continues to apply. Is this what our most highly funded theatres want their diverse audiences to be recognizing on stage?

Diversity's problematic narratives are not, of course, limited to diverse ethnicities. *Les Blancs* was succeeded in the Olivier Theatre's repertory by Rufus Norris' production of *The Threepenny Opera*. This featured the actor Jamie Beddard, who uses a wheelchair, as Mathias. Beddard, who is a highly-regarded performer and director, was making his National Theatre debut, but I will remember it most for a rather over-worked gag in which Mathias' shock at a woman beginning to go down on him was made visible by a smoke canister attached to his wheelchair going off. The joke depended upon the clear implication that the character's disability made him pitiable and neither sexually active or attractive. The obvious problem with all of these examples is that diversity initiatives do not necessarily enable diverse audiences to 'recognise themselves on stage'. They may, in fact, force diverse audiences, yet again, to encounter stereotyping and misrepresentation. Diverse casting often seems, in other words, to give with one hand, and slap with the other.

Part of the reason for this situation seems to be the desire for difference to be visible but not to have particular significance. The RSC's rebuttal of Letts' claims in his review is a case in point: it is careful not to ascribe meaning to the diversity of its casts. The same can be said of Shakespeare's Globe. Michelle Terry's announcement of her casting for this year's Globe Ensemble productions of *Hamlet* and *As You Like It* represented a commitment both to diversity and to its invisibility. Terry makes a proud claim for her casting as 'gender blind, race blind and disability blind'.⁵ The details of her casting, however, undermined that assertion. Some male-gendered parts were given to women, and the gender of roles such as Hamlet and Ophelia and Rosalind and Orlando was swapped, but these changes do not seem to represent 'blindness' to gender. In Terry's Ensemble, a female Hamlet fights a female Laertes and woos a male Ophelia, just as a female Orlando is wooed by a male Rosalind. These changes remain squarely within the framework of gender and sexual normativity. The same can be said of the Globe Ensemble casting choices relating to ethnicity: they feature a non-white Ophelia and Guildenstern (parts that it has recently become almost traditional to cast as ethnically distinct from white Hamlets) and a non-white Amiens in *As You Like It*, the role in that play that has historically been most commonly cast with a performer of colour.⁶ These choices represent a blindness not to ethnicity or gender as such (as if such a thing were even possible), but to the narratives, and discourses that constitute what Stuart Hall called these 'social facts'. This approach to casting therefore makes gender and ethnicity visible on a committedly superficial level, while refusing to scrutinize their construction or meaning. The consequence is that the cultural dominance of middle-class, heteronormative whiteness is sustained by an approach to inclusion that seems to welcome people of colour and those living with disabilities, but in fact continues to keep them at arm's

length. A quotation from an interview by Ayanna Thompson with the actor Maynard Eziashi, who was cast in *Pericles* at the RSC by director Dominic Cooke illustrates the point:

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.”⁷

If Eziashi’s role is ‘to be an African’, then his casting does nothing to alter the dominant discourses of whiteness. In fact, in this situation, Eziashi’s presence reinforces the dominance of whiteness as he is converted into a visible and audible manifestation of otherness from its anticipated norms. Thus diversity is pressed into the service of exactly those hierarchies it ought to expose and dismantle.

In early June, Arts Council England announced its strategic priorities for the next two years in its new corporate plan. Arts Professional reported that, under the new plan, ‘funded organisations will need to set themselves “increasingly demanding targets” [for improving their diversity] and those in receipt of the most funding will need to achieve a ‘strong’ Creative Case for Diversity rating by 2021’.⁸ We are already seeing theatre-makers responding both to these official targets and to a climate of public debate in which questions of diversity and inclusion are raised with increasing frequency. This can be illustrated by the anecdotal example of two shows that I saw last weekend: RashDash’s response to Chekhov’s *Three Sisters* and *A Monster Calls*, directed by Sally Cookson at Bristol Old Vic. The latter told the story of a woman’s death from cancer through the eyes of her pre-teen son. Its central family were all white, and the monster of the title was a yew tree a (white) green man figure who told tales of the country’s distant past that illuminated with the central narrative. In both the main narrative and the accompanying tales, performers of colour were not only given supporting roles but commonly characterized by opposition to the white protagonists. One (John Leader) played a bully at the son’s school and an ‘evil’ prince in one of the tales, another (Hammed Animashaun) was the bully’s sidekick and a misguided apothecary, the enemy of a ‘good’ (white) parson, played by Felix Hayes (who also played the central character’s father). Tacitly, therefore, blackness was used, here, subordinately, as a foil to the whiteness of the main characters. It was also notable that, in most cases, the performers of colour exhibited a multi-skilled virtuosity (particularly in movement, working as aerialists, and singing) that was mostly not demanded of their white counterparts.

Rashdash’s *Three Sisters* was more politically conscious, explicitly treating ‘the classics’ as another facet of patriarchal control and creating a space for the company’s core group of three white women (Helen Goalen, Abbi Greenland and Becky Wilkie) to attack, satirise and offer alternatives to the plays that continue to dominate our stages. They were joined, in this production, by two women of colour (Chloe Rianna and Yoon-ji Kim) who played percussion and violin and synth respectively. Each was given a musical solo, both of which were notably bracketed out of the action by the other performers stopping and watching with apparently rapt attention. This was effective in foregrounding forms of performance (a jazz-influenced drum solo, a folk-inflected, virtuosic performance on the violin) that are commonly excluded by plays in which, in RashDash’s words ‘men [...] have all the lines’.⁹ However, it also emphasized the supporting role of these two women of colour who, once again, demonstrated a level of virtuosity that was not expected of their white peers. As Olga, Masha and Irina, Goalen, Greenland and Wilkie worried aloud about how to respond to the male-authored world of this play and voiced the contemporary concerns of the women whose lives parallel Chekhov’s

characters. They did so with with more self-awareness about their relative privilege than Chekhov's characters demonstrate, but the decision not to further integrate Chloe Rianna and Yoon-ji Kim into the production's response to Chekhov did little to address the cultural networks of white privilege in which productions of his plays have generally participated. Thus, although the sisters' ironic self-awareness was not without value in exposing the troubling politics of the production's situation, RashDash offered no other response than ironically to indicate the problem. A fundamental argument of black feminism has been that if white feminism simply seeks the same privileges for white women that are enjoyed by white men, then it does nothing substantial to dismantle wider intersectional matrices of oppression. In their irony, RashDash seemed aware of this problem, but, like the other productions discussed here, the form of inclusion that they practiced did nothing substantial to address the problem or to develop an intersectional response to Chekhov's play.

Some time ago, I might have made the argument that situations such as those I have critiqued here chime unfortunately with a society in which exclusions and oppressions based upon protected characteristics such as gender, ethnicity and disability prevail. This form of argument seems to me, however, to be increasingly untenable. The British theatre is apparently unified not only in its willingness to condemn Quentin Letts for his explicit prejudice, but in its willingness to perpetuate implicit forms of structural exclusion and prejudice. Often these exclusions seem not only to be concealed beneath a fig-leaf of diversity-rhetoric, but to be positively sustained by diversity initiatives that refuse to engage with diversity at the level of narrative and discourse. Such approaches to diversity, therefore, seem to provide platforms for the kinds of 'racism without racists' critiqued in the US by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva.¹⁰ If the theatre's leaders continue in this project to increase diversity while refusing to engage with its intellectual and political challenges to the status quo, then we should give this practice the title it deserves and call it the racist case for diversity.

¹ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-5584191/QUENTIN-LETTIS-reviews-Fantastic-Follies-Mrs-Rich.html>, accessed on 20 June 2018.

² *Contemporary Theatre Review*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (2014).

³ <https://www.rsc.org.uk/news/the-rsc-responds-to-the-daily-mails-review-of-the-fantastic-follies-of-mrs-rich>, accessed on 20 June 2018.

⁴ <http://thersc.tumblr.com/post/134920897045/q-a-with-simon-godwin-director-of-hamlet>, accessed on 20 June 2018.

⁵ <https://www.thestage.co.uk/news/2018/michelle-terry-to-play-hamlet-in-gender-blind-inaugural-season-at-shakespeares-globe/>, accessed on 20 June 2018.

⁶ Data available at: <https://bbashakespeare.warwick.ac.uk/>, accessed on 20 June 2018.

⁷ Ayanna Thompson, 'To Notice or Not To Notice: Shakespeare, Black Actors, and Performance Reviews', *Borrowers and Lenders, The Journal of Shakespeare and Appropriation*, <http://www.borrowers.uga.edu/782039/show>, accessed on 20 June 2018.

⁸ <https://www.artsprofessional.co.uk/news/arts-council-outlines-priorities-next-two-years>, accessed on 20 June 2018.

⁹ <https://www.rashdash.co.uk/three-sisters/>, accessed on 20 June 2018.

¹⁰ *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States* (Lanham MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010).