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# To See or Not to See: Color-Blind Casting and Its Role in the American Theatre Today

BY MICHAEL ECKER / ON NOVEMBER 7, 2023



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At best, the theatre has had questionable reputations with inclusivity and representation throughout its storied history. For one, despite its sophisticated form being well-established as early as the ancient Greeks, professional stages in England didn't see their first *actress* until the early winter of 1660—with her eighth of December debut being the only “early” thing about it, coming over 2,000 years after public performance's Mediterranean beginnings.<sup>1</sup> Structural change then—despite often being invoked by the earliest thespians—was slow to materialize internally. Certainly in 2023, the theatre can look back proudly on the breadth of its progress—even still, though, perhaps not proudly enough, as many today urge. That is to say, the work of the theatre with specific regard to its welcome embrace of diverse voices has, to some, just begun.

The most profound stride to this end has been the color-blind casting movement, an industry-wide maneuver designed to transcend the traditional boundaries of race and ethnicity in the casting process. This concerted effort calls for the breathing of new life into theatrical productions by not excluding—but rather consciously *including*—those performers whose racial and ethnic backgrounds may have traditionally precluded them from booking the gig. It's a daring leap towards inclusivity, where a performer's capacity to embrace the essence of a character is valued above all else, including even in some circumstances conventional depictions or historical accuracy. This concept, though not entirely new, stands as a timely beacon in today's ever-evolving cultural landscape. As societies worldwide strive for greater unity, understanding, and representation, the theatre has so too emerged as both a battleground for and balefire of progress in this way. Challenging conventions and urging audiences to see beyond skin-deep stereotypes, the color-blind casting movement is at the heart of this transformative moment of theatrical history—or at least half of it. As we find ourselves in an age where stories of all cultures and backgrounds are clamoring for the spotlight, the question is naturally begged, is color-blind casting the key to a more authentic and vibrant theatrical future?

Perhaps not, answer many. Such resistance from the movement's opponents finds itself rooted not in errantly archaic outlooks on race, but rather in the conviction that color-blind casting is inherently counterproductive. The Harvard Crimson's "Unpopular Opinion: Color-Blind Casting Isn't 'Woke' — It's Racist" sheds some particular light on this vantage. Principally, the article critiques the practice for its potential to perpetuate superficial diversity, emphasizing instead the importance of intentionally considering race and ethnicity during any casting process.<sup>2</sup> The author suggests that it is actually a color-*conscious* approach—which involves a thorough evaluation of cultural connotations and adaptation to suit marginalized actors' needs—that is essential for genuine inclusivity in the performing arts.<sup>3</sup> Pioneering playwright August Wilson had also denounced color-blind casting in as early as 1996, when in a speech he said,

"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 own humanity, our own history, and the need to make our own investigations from the cultural ground on which we stand as Black Americans. It is an assault on our presence, and our difficult but honorable history in America; and it is an insult to our intelligence, our playwrights, and our many and varied contributions to the society and the world at large."<sup>4</sup>

Thus, as an understudy solution, the color-blind casting dissenters call for a more radical shift—one that charges the entertainment industry with prioritizing a more thoughtful and inclusive approach to representation, by advocating for the creation of new narratives that authentically reflect the experiences of people of color.<sup>5</sup> This process in practice would include bringing more voices of color into writing rooms, ensuring creative teams are deliberately

diversified, and on the whole, generating fresh content that seeks to capture our collective heterogeneity in its truest form. So, while critics are able to stipulate that the color-blind practice is a well-intentioned means to a long-anticipated end, they often find that it falls short on execution.<sup>6</sup>

But where does that leave the revival? Surely the color-conscious approach is laudable in its emphasis on creating new material that adequately reflects modernity's embrace of minority voices, but in a theatrical culture like this current one with such a proclivity for mining and remounting existing content, where does that commitment leave us? One may credibly stake that *this* scenario is precisely (and exclusively) the space where color-blind casting should exist, as we seek to retroactively insert diverse voices into time-honored pieces, giving them new, deeper relevance in the process. With that being said, the path forward seems a clear and uncontested one.

*[Enter playwrights].*

Many playwrights have been closely guarding their casting authority since even before contemporary notions of "blind" casting were forged. Playwrights do not underestimate the weight of casting, and for many, betrayal against given character descriptions is seen as directly affecting the reception of the piece.<sup>7</sup> Who is afraid of Edward Albee? The color-blind director ought to be, as in 2017, a certain Albee play concerning a one "Virginia Woolf" was forced to halt rehearsals when the Albee team learned of the director's nontraditional choice. Albee himself did not pose a threat to the production, having passed away a year prior in September of 2016, but the managers of his estate were nonetheless fervently staunch in the preservation of his intentions. Such zeal found the Albee estate in the position of revoking performance licensing from a regional theatre in Oregon. The Albee decision was not a popular one once it broke the headlines and online chatrooms, but the persnickety playwright's estate representatives made it clear that they would not budge, justifying further that the fixed race and ethnicity of the character Nick are vital to the plot.<sup>8</sup> The character of Nick is supposedly written for a Caucasian actor, as the script includes the following specification: "[... *Blond, well put-together, good looking.*]"<sup>9</sup> And so the estate acted on behalf of Albee's perceived interest, and the decision was conclusive: the Black actor could not go on as Nick. And the director, firm in his convictions, pulled the production from the season before it ever saw an audience. Of greater interest than Albee's posthumous nitpicking is the precedent it sets: in exactly what scenarios does authorial intent reign supreme? Or perhaps a better question, when does it *not*? Is there a limit for those scenarios where the creative's vision stands contrarily in the face of modernity's devotion to increased visibility? These questions are, in essence, unanswerable—part of an ongoing debate unlikely to be mediated—but nonetheless of vital significance.<sup>10</sup>

Adding to the pile-up of frustration, the "color-conscious" approach finds its fair share of disfavor, too. The revolutionary Broadway hit, *Hamilton*, took a country by storm in its

juvenescence. But in March of 2016—some six months after its first Broadway bow—the musical fell from public grace with the casting notice for its national touring company having been recently published. The notice, soliciting performers with information for its then-upcoming audition date, made mention that the casting team was looking for something specific—that is, performers who were “non-white.” The qualification was immediately defended by the show’s producers, as they explained that the “[show] depicts the birth of our nation in a singular way. We will continue to cast the show with the same multicultural diversity that we have employed thus far.”<sup>11</sup> But civil rights attorney Randolph McLaughlin felt strongly that the *Hamilton* producer was missing the broader legal implications of his “depiction”: “You cannot advertise showing that you have a preference for one racial group over another . . . As an artistic question—sure, he can cast whomever he wants to cast, but he has to give every actor eligible for the role an opportunity to try.”<sup>12</sup> McLaughlin pointed to the particularly scrutinizing New York City Human Rights Law as the basis for his misgivings about the casting call’s specificity.<sup>13</sup> Following the initial waves of backlash, the actor’s union, Actors’ Equity, joined the chorus, also censuring the *Hamilton* team for their patently made preference.<sup>14</sup> And thus—in an all too familiar frustration—neither the color-conscious nor the color-blind seem to have a workable answer.

Surely this is a hotly contentious battleground, one that fosters little consensus across its aisles: what is impermissibly anachronistic for the period purists—that is, the irreconcilable implausibility of a Black man attending an all-White dinner party for Albee’s 1962 *Virginia Woolf*—constitutes for the theatrical progressives the ushering in of a long-awaited period of modernity—think of the striking visual of Lin Manuel Miranda, Christopher Jackson, and Leslie Odom Jr. standing tall as the nation’s Founding Fathers in a twenty-first century retelling of the great American Experiment. What *is* clear, though, is what the role of the law ought to be: our institutions of justice must be fervently committed to ensuring everyone has a seat at the table—especially those tables that are so publicly visible and paradigmatic of our contemporary national identity. For what is universally true is that representation matters. The world is diverse, and our stages must be too. The means of getting there though, well, that *is* the question.

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2. Emi P. Cummings, Unpopular Opinion: Color-Blind Casting Isn't 'Woke' — It's Racist, *The Harvard Crimson*, <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2020/12/9/unpop-opinion-color-blind-casting/> (last visited Oct. 23, 2023) [<https://perma.cc/6M3J-TZUA>].
3. *Id.*
4. August Wilson, *The Ground on Which I Stand* (11th biennial Theatre Communications Group Nat'l Conf., 1996)  
  
<https://www.americantheatre.org/2016/06/20/the-ground-on-which-i-stand/> (last visited Oct. 20, 2023) [<https://perma.cc/P7CR-28YB>].
5. Cummings, *supra* note 2; see also Maya Phillips, 'Hamilton,' 'The Simpsons' and the Problem With Colorblind Casting, *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/08/arts/television/hamilton-colorblind-casting.html> (last visited Oct. 23, 2023) [<https://perma.cc/7N5P-WG2Y>] (corroborating the Cumming's article, stating "Though egalitarian in theory, colorblind casting in practice is more often . . . a high-minded-sounding concept that producers and creators use to free themselves of any social responsibility they may feel toward representing a diverse set of performers.")
6. Phillips, *supra* note 4.
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14. Broadway Union Takes Issue With 'Hamilton' Casting Call For 'Non-White' Performers, *supra* note 8.