

Gabriela Madu

Dr. Vanessa Campagna

THEA 272

February 2021

**Colorblind and Purposeful casting in Classical and Contemporary Production**

“Race [...] has multiple, and at times contradictory, uses in contemporary American Discourse” (Wetmore 489). This begs the question of whether or not “colorblind” casting possible in a contemporary production. This essay uses Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* and Aeschylus’ *Prometheus Bound* to discuss how different casting practices promote “access and relevance” (Wetmore 488), offer “contemporary comment” (Wetmore 489), “generate meaning” (Wetmore 490), and/or gave “racial resonance” (Wetmore 490) to a classical text not intended for that purpose.

Wetmore describes Purposeful Casting as requiring “that the audience be aware of the ethnicity of the performers, as the Greek text is used as a frame to comment on the historical realities which are evoked by the races of the performers” (Wetmore 490). If this is true, and paired with the belief that the purpose of art is to imitate life, then the setting of the play in Africa is truly purposeful. The play is originally set in Greece. This method of casting as well as this given circumstance of *where*, make “statements on the nature of leadership, or the failure of leadership in response to the AIDS crisis in Africa” (Wetmore 490). Different Given Circumstances affect behavior and by changing the circumstances of *Oedipus Rex* in terms of location and present action we change the story and the message being received by the audience. In the Shakespeare Theatre in Washington D. C’s casting of a Mr. Avery Brooks as Oedipus, they have not only given access to actors of color, specifically African-American actors, but now have

an added purpose of not only “performing plays for [their] own sake but because they are “relevant” and/ related to contemporary issues faced not only in Western culture but Non-western cultures as well” (Wetmore 488-489).

Colorblind casting is defined as “cast without regard to their race or ethnicity; the best actor is cast in the role” (Wetmore 489). This statement at first may seem optimistic or as a liberal mindset but can prove to have potential negative consequences. In an article published by the John Hopkins University Press playwright August Wilson states “we do not need colorblind casting; we need some theatres to develop our playwrights.... Without theatres we cannot develop our talents. If we cannot develop our talents, then everyone suffers: our writers; the theatre; the audience...” (Heard 2021). Race cannot be disregarded, and attempting to do so poses the idea of being “freed from race” when in reality “we can never be freed from race” (Wetmore 490).

Colorblind casting is procrustean and consequently, ends up having some form of racial resonance. Take for example Wetmore’s comments on Aeschylus’ *Prometheus Bound* where an African American actor played Prometheus. “While many who saw the production understood Aeschylus’s theme of an individual standing against autocratic power and tyranny, it was equally impossible to escape seeing an African-American man chained up for resisting a European power structure. In other words, the ostensible colorblind production ended up having racial resonance” (Wetmore 492). If we contrast this with Purposeful casting however, ethnicity/race can now be used to provide contemporary comment and as a result, allow a classical work to become adapted without textual variation (Wetmore 490).

Wetmore’s article further discusses playwright August Wilson's objection to colorblind casting. He rejects “universalism” as he believes it “erases race”, but Wilson fails to, according to Wetmore, take into consideration Purposeful casting (Wetmore 490). The argument can then

be made that Wilson would be opposed as well to the Universalism of Greek Tragedy as it relates to masking black skin. According to Wetmore, this works in one of two ways: Either by employing purposeful casting in disregarding race and using the Greek mask to “highlight some aspect of the African diasporan experience” or opposingly, “erase difference and universalize the Greek experience”, which on some level erases blackness (Wetmore 491).

After comparing and contrasting these two methods of casting it must be understood that race cannot be “erased”. It is something that is seen at all times and experienced in different ways by different cultures. As a result, we must be *Color Conscious* when casting and ensure that however plays are being cast the end result is something that moves us forward and does not send us several steps back.

Works Cited

- Heard, Elisabeth J., and August Wilson. "August Wilson on Playwriting: An Interview." *African American Review*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2001, pp. 93–102. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/2903337](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2903337). Accessed 19 Feb. 2021.
- Sophocles, and R. D. Dawe. *Oedipus Rex*. Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- Wetmore, Kevin J, et Jr. 39936. "Black Skin, Greek Masks: Classical Receptions, Race Reception, and African-American Identity on the Tragic Stage", *Revue de littérature comparée*, vol. no 344, no. 4, 2012, pp. 487-493.