

Student Work

---

8-1-1994

## Breaking the color barrier: Actors of color in traditionally white roles

Kenneth Lyles Glenn

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/studentwork>  
Please take our feedback survey at: [https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE](https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE)

---

### Recommended Citation

Glenn, Kenneth Lyles, "Breaking the color barrier: Actors of color in traditionally white roles" (1994).  
*Student Work*. 3103.  
<https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/studentwork/3103>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Student Work by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact [unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu](mailto:unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu).

**BREAKING THE COLOR BARRIER:  
ACTORS OF COLOR IN TRADITIONALLY WHITE ROLES**

A Thesis Equivalent Project

Presented to the

Department of Dramatic Arts

and the

Faculty of the Graduate College

University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

University of Nebraska at Omaha

by

Kenneth Lyles Glenn

August 1994

UMI Number: EP74501

All rights reserved

INFORMATION TO ALL USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.



UMI EP74501

Published by ProQuest LLC (2015). Copyright in the Dissertation held by the Author.

Microform Edition © ProQuest LLC.

All rights reserved. This work is protected against unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code



ProQuest LLC.  
789 East Eisenhower Parkway  
P.O. Box 1346  
Ann Arbor, MI 48106 - 1346

THESIS EQUIVALENT PROJECT ACCEPTANCE

Acceptance for the faculty of the Graduate College,  
University of Nebraska, in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements of the degree Master of Arts, University of  
Nebraska at Omaha.

Committee

Name	Department
<i>Douglas Peterson</i>	<i>Dramatic Arts</i>
<i>Lancia M (Cia) Cisneros</i>	<i>Music</i>

Chairperson *Cindy Melby Phares*  
Date *October 31, 1994*

## ABSTRACT

This thesis equivalent project is concerned with actors of color in traditionally white roles, specifically a black actor playing Fredrik Egerman in the UNO production of Stephen Sondheim's, A Little Night Music. Rarely have black actors been given the opportunity of playing the romantic leading man in films, television or in the theatre. The stigma of color and race has often excluded many talented performers from these roles when the only concern should be an actor's individual talent. This paper is an attempt to address this dilemma and asks the questions: Do we violate the play and the playwright's intention by casting actors of color in roles originally conceived of as white? Will an audience accept a black actor playing a white part? Can we or should we try to ignore the issues of color and race in the theatre?

Overall the UNO production was a success on two levels: artistic and political. Artistically, A Little Night Music had the charm and sophistication befitting Stephen Sondheim's most romantic musical. Politically, the show asked the audience to confront their feelings about racism and non-traditional color-blind casting. Hopefully this project is only the start of an on-going dialogue among theatre artists, black and white, in the Omaha theatre community. A plan of action is suggested for taking steps toward achieving a theatre in which an actor is cast on

the basis of talent and not on how he or she conforms to stereotypes--a theatre that is inclusive and bravely explores the creative possibilities of non-traditional casting by accurately reflecting the diversity of our community.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the following people for their contributions, their love and their support:

Dr. Cynthia Melby-Phaneuf  
Dr. Douglas Paterson  
Dr. Francine Crisara  
and  
David Stewart

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract . . . . .	ii
Acknowledgements . . . . .	iv
Introduction . . . . .	1
Chapter 1	
What Is Non-Traditional Casting? . . . . .	8
Chapter 2	
<u>A Little Night Music:</u> UNO's Non-Traditional Approach . . . . .	23
Chapter 3	
The Present Situation: Actor/Director Interviews . . . . .	46
Chapter 4	
Call to Action . . . . .	80
Appendix . . . . .	88
Works Consulted . . . . .	96



## Introduction

For most of my life I have been an actor. As a child, the fantasy world of comic book super heroes and Hollywood musicals would feed my imagination, and transport me to magical places where I could be those people. I could make believe I was anyone I wanted to be. However, as a teenager, the reality of being too shy to talk to girls and too clumsy to play sports like other boys made me feel outside the society of most of my classmates. It was during this period of inept adolescence that I discovered that people seemed to like my singing voice. Although I could not fathom the mechanics of a "lay-up" in gym class, I could master a time step. The fears and insecurities I felt in front of people on a basketball court were nonexistent when I stood on stage. I knew that the stage was where I was supposed to be, and I soon developed an all-consuming passion for performing. The milestone of my high school career was reached when I auditioned and was cast in the spring musical as Chief Sitting Bull in Annie Get Your Gun. From that moment on, I have loved theatre. I remember spending hours in the makeup room, happily sitting in front of the mirrors, mixing different combinations of grease paints so that I could transform my medium brown complexion to the "red skin" I thought the part required. That was many years and many plays ago. But throughout my theatrical career, I have always

been aware that my color often defined who and what people thought I was, and thereby predetermined how I was cast, not only in plays, but also in society.

The time I spent in northern Maine while attending college was perhaps the only period in my life that I felt truly free as an artist. My youth and love for performing made me believe my talent was boundless and also that I was capable of playing any role which came my way. As a child I had read about black artists such as Josephine Baker and James Baldwin, who both had left the United States and emigrated to Paris for artistic freedom and the recognition which was denied them in this country. My small college community in the northern Maine woods may not have been as romantic as the "city of light", but to me it truly was the Paris of my imagination. It was the late sixties and a time of flower children, young men avoiding the draft, and the Black Panthers. Anything was possible. My first college role was Jonathan in Arthur Kopit's, Oh, Dad, Poor Dad, Mama's Hung You in the Closet and I'm Feeling So Sad. The actresses who played my mother and my girlfriend in the production were both white. I don't recall that we were consciously trying to make a political statement with the interracial casting, just good theatre. The difference in skin color and race was not an issue for us.

The luxury of color blind casting and the sense of

freedom I enjoyed during those college years did not prepare me for the reality of the professional theatre world. I soon discovered that the goals in this theatre were different from mine, and to survive the business of show business, you had to play by a different set of rules. I suddenly was a "type" and I became "ethnic" once more. My first professional job was at a small summer stock theatre in Portland, Maine. I had been cast as Jesus in their production of Godspell, but after the first week of rehearsals, the director told me that the theatre's board of directors felt their audience would not accept a black man playing Christ, and to offer me the role of Judas. I was young, I needed the job, and so I accepted their offer. I naively thought that such blatant discrimination and prejudice only happened down South, in far away places like Selma or Little Rock. The anger and humiliation I felt at having my role taken from me because I was black is still with me, and it is something I will never forget. This episode is only one example of the racism in theatre which I personally have experienced. Over the years I have been able to laugh at the absurdity of similar situations but, honestly, it is always a cruel reminder of being kept in my place.

How does casting black actors in traditionally white roles affect the audience and their perceptions? Do we do a disservice to the play and to the playwright by casting

actors of color in roles that were conceived as white characters? Can we ignore the issue of color and race? Should we even try? These questions of multicultural color blind casting intrigue and disturb me, and as an African American, I have tried to come to terms with them in my life and in my art.

Seldom have actors of color been given the opportunity to play the romantic leading man or leading lady in films or in the theatre. It has nearly been impossible, especially for black actors, to break out of the mold of being cast as "exotic" or in roles which consciously deal with race issues. There are of course exceptions. Such stars as Sidney Poitier, James Earl Jones, and more recently, Denzel Washington, have been able to cross over racial barriers and demand roles in which race and skin color are not paramount to the characters they play.

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts, my final project was to portray Fredrik Egerman in Stephen Sondheim's musical, A Little Night Music. My reasons for choosing this play and this role are:

1. It is an enchantingly beautiful piece of musical theatre.
2. Stephen Sondheim is a consummate lyricist and probably the most brilliant composer writing for the American musical theatre today.
3. Actors of color are not often given the

opportunity of playing the "romantic lead" and the challenge of the role fascinated me as an actor; and most importantly,

4. I wanted to expand people's consciousness and challenge audience perceptions and responses by seeing a black actor in a traditionally white role.

It is not within the scope of this paper to present a comprehensive analysis of non-traditional casting practices within the American theatre. My study is limited to this community and to the general impact non-traditional casting has had on our local theatre, and specifically, to the audience response of seeing a black man in a traditionally white role in the University of Nebraska [UNO] production of A Little Night Music. The audience surveyed for this study was limited to 71 students from UNO's Acting One and Introduction to Theatre classes.

Throughout this paper I speak primarily from a personal point of view--that of a professional black actor who has lived and worked in Omaha since 1976. I have also included interviews with several local black performers to help ascertain their thoughts and feelings about color blind casting, and what it is like for them working in a predominately white theatre. Local theatre producers and directors likewise were kind enough to share their views on non-traditional casting with me and their theatre's policy on hiring black actors.

It is my sincere wish that this study can help build

a bridge between the producer/directors and actors of color in Omaha by formulating a plan of action which includes all of us in the creative process and is representative of the many diverse cultures and people that make up this city.

Before preceding to Chapter 1, I feel it is important for me, and also for the sake of clarity, to define my ethnic/cultural self. I am old enough that I have lived through my people being referred to as colored, Negro, nigger, black, person of color, and African-American. In order to be consistent, and as a personal preference, I will refer to myself and to others born in this country of African decent as black.

Chapter 1 of this study defines non-traditional casting and examines how and why the Non-Traditional Casting Project came into being. In addition, arguments for and against non-traditional casting are presented. Chapter 2 briefly summarizes UNO's production of A Little Night Music and includes an analysis of Fredrik's action. Chapter 3 presents a broad overview of the current casting situation in Omaha for black actors, and contains interviews with six local actors and six local producer/directors. The fourth and final chapter challenges theatre makers to reach out into the community so that people of all colors are seen and heard in every theatre in Omaha. A "plan of action" is presented as a starting point for those who

adhere to the premise that an actor's race, gender, or physical capability is important only when it is essential for the character they are playing.

## Chapter 1

### What Is Non-Traditional Casting?

Non-traditional casting is casting people in roles in which race, ethnicity, gender or physical ability are not essential to the characters' or to the play's development. This concept is particularly significant to people of color--people who have other than white European ancestry--and includes: Africans, Asians, Latinos/Latinas, Pacific Islanders, Middle Eastern people and Native Americans. Simply stated, non-traditional casting is using the best actor for the role based on their individual talent, and not on how they conform to stereotypes. The Non-Traditional Casting Project (NTCP) is an organization which was founded in New York City in 1986 in order to fight racism and advocate for equal opportunity for all people in the performing arts, especially in the theatre. According to the NTCP there are four types of non-traditional casting:

**Societal**--The casting of ethnic, female and disabled actors in roles they perform in society as a whole--a Native American Moss and a Latino Aronow (two real estate salesmen in Glengarry Glen Ross;

**Cross-cultural**--Translating the world of a play to a different culture--Shakespeare's Macbeth transposed to Medieval Japan;

**Conceptual**--the casting of an ethnic, female or disabled actor in a role to give the play greater resonance--a black Trofimov telling a white Anya about his slave ancestors in The Cherry Orchard;

**Color-blind**--the casting of actors without



regard to race, ethnicity, gender or physical ability. The best actor is cast in the role--a Latina Eliza Doolittle confronting an Asian Henry Higgins in My Fair Lady; an actor who uses a wheelchair as The Stage Manager in Our Town (guidelines originally defined by NTCP director Harold Scott).

The concept of non-traditional casting is so elementary, so basic to our American self-image of fair play and to our belief that the best "man" gets the job regardless of race, color, etc., that one wonders why it was deemed necessary to form an organization which would advocate for equal employment opportunities for everyone in the performing arts. After all, Americans have been taught that with hard work there are equal opportunities guaranteed in our Constitution and protected under our laws. However, a four-year study by Actors' Equity Association published in 1986 showed that 90% of all the professional plays produced in the United States are cast with, directed by, and performed in front of predominately white people. It also stated that these productions were staged mostly in large urban cities such as New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Washington D.C., where the population is at least 50% non-white. According to information released at the Non-Traditional Casting Project Symposium held in Hollywood on 11 October 1988, "while minorities account for about 17 percent of the population nation-wide, fewer than 12 percent of the roles in regional theatres and about 6 percent of the roles on Broadway are

filled by minority actors" (Schultz 7). Equity further disclosed in its report that only 6% of the roles on Broadway were filled with "minority" actors. If one assumes that theatre is a mirror which reflects a society and its people, these statistics helped to spotlight the disenfranchisement of certain groups of individuals in our population from being seen or heard. This population of invisible faces and silent voices which were not seen or heard in America's "mainstream" theatre were victims of an insidious ethnic and cultural genocide. It is not surprising then that the leading theatre artists and educators in this country recognized the need and also their responsibility to fight against the apparent racism in the theatre, and to advocate for the inclusion of all people in the performing arts.

In November, 1986, the First National Symposium on Non-traditional Casting was sponsored by Equity and co-produced by the founders of the NTCP, Clinton Turner Davis, Joanna Merlin, and Harry Newman. The two day conference held at the Shubert Theatre in New York City was attended by theatre artists from all across the country in an effort to share their ideas and concerns about non-traditional casting. The symposium also showcased the performance of 18 non-traditionally cast scenes, including an inspired performance by James Earl Jones in a role he has always wanted to play--Big Daddy in Cat On

A Hot Tin Roof. Theatre producer, Fran Weissler, was so inspired by Jones' interpretation of the southern patriarch, that she was determined to put together a Broadway production of the play starring him. After a year of negotiating with the estate of Tennessee Williams, permission was finally given for Jones to play the role as long as he was the only non-white in the cast.

One of the many complicated issues surrounding non-traditional casting was voiced at the symposium by Alan Eisenberg, a member of the Board of Directors of the NTCP:

I, for one, accept the premise that non-traditional casting of ethnic minorities or other actors would not be appropriate in certain plays . . . plays in which the social milieu (family member) or where race, gender or physical ability . . . will at times prevent non-traditional casting from occurring in an acceptable, common sense manner (Davis 4).

What is an ethnic minority? According to Cultural Etiquette: A Guide for the Well Intentioned, by Amoja Three Rivers, "Ethnic refers to nationality or race. . . . Margaret Thatcher, Susan B. Anthony and Bach are just as 'ethnic' as Miriam Makeba, Indira Ghandi and Johnny Colon" (Rivers 4). Granted, the majority of the population in the United States is white but as Ms. Rivers points out, "4/5 of the world's population is people of color. Therefore, it is statistically incorrect as well as ethnocentric to refer to us as minorities" (Rivers 4).

Non-traditional casting must be thought of as more than just affirmative action for black folks and for other people of color. Admittedly, it is a political struggle about power and taking some control away from those in power. As James Baldwin points out:

The sloppy and fatuous nature of American good will can never be relied upon to deal with hard problems [racism]. These have been dealt with when they have been dealt with at all, out of necessity--and in political terms, anyway, necessity means concessions made in order to stay on top (Newman 22).

Non-traditional casting from an artistic standpoint is really about rejecting stereotypes and looking and thinking about artists in new ways. It is artistic choice as opposed to adopted attitude. The acknowledgment and acceptance of all people in a theatre which is truly representative of American society goes beyond political mandates for cultural diversity and mainstreaming. Sara O'Connor, managing director of the Milwaukee Repertory Theatre, notes, "I am not sure why we designate something 'main'. I suppose that means there is something minor. . . . It seems to me that theatre exists to try to understand the flow of all the streams in its society" (Davis 23).

It has been suggested that the issue of non-traditional casting is passe and that its proponents are belaboring the obvious. Perhaps on a national level it could be argued that an awareness of multiculturalism has taken root as

more and more theatre companies have become dependent upon federal and state money in order to stay in operation. Often the grant money awarded to theatre companies is contingent upon their inclusion of some sort of minority programming into their season. Admittedly, strides forward have been made in several regional theatres throughout the country. It was reported in the March 1993 issue of American Theatre that the Oregon Shakespeare Festival with its "largely white artistic staff will also take a multicultural microstep forward this year when Clinton Turner Davis, only the second African-American ever to direct an OSF production, directs August Wilson's Joe Turner's Come and Gone" (Simmons 17). This step forward also has limitations as Mr. Davis points out in New Trends, "Directors on Cultural Diversity: A Forum":

A new stereotype has been created--the African-American director as monolith. We are thought of as only being capable of directing work by or about our specific ethnic group (Davis 3).

Non-traditional casting and sensitivity to the issue of color-blind casting on a local level here in Omaha has been minimal. Most of the theatres in this community have included one or two people of color in their casts and have even gone as far as to including a "black" show in their season. However, in my opinion, the Emmy Gifford Children's Theatre and The Center Stage are among the few local theatres making a conscious effort to present plays,

which were written for and performed with multicultural casts.

Producer/directors are often afraid to cast plays non-traditionally and argue that such casting will somehow violate the play or compromise the playwright's work by making an unintentional political statement. But a play with an all-white cast that has nothing to do with race or a specific culture makes a very loud political statement to America's nonwhite population. When theatre doesn't accurately reflect the lives of all of the people that live in that society, it becomes self-serving and limited to a particular point of view. The images of people and of their lives that we are given and ultimately believe are stereotypes, artificial people born out of fear and a lack of understanding. As Paul Robeson, Jr. has pointed out:

The ability of traditional casting through the imagery of the stage, film and television to educate the American people, who in their perceptions of different cultures and ethnicity are perhaps the most backward of modern industrial nations, is of enormous long-range importance (Davis 66).

A young black woman after seeing UNO's production of Thornton Wilder's, Our Town, told me that she didn't much care for the play. I asked her why and she said, "If I want to see a soap opera about white people, I just turn on my television." Sadly this student felt no connection to this classic American tale but only saw a

story about white people that had nothing to do with her daily existence as a black woman in this society. The student's remark deeply disturbed and angered me. Why was the world of her imagination limited to the narrow confines of a black and white reality? As I watched the same production unfold, my mind kept imagining the endless possibilities of non-traditional casting and how it might breathe new life into this familiar piece of Americana. I wanted to change the stark white coldness of a New England town to the deep brown warmth of the South, where Our Town is peopled with black people. What new insights might we discover by coupling a white George Gibbs with a black Emily? What if George Gibbs were gay?

People of color, specifically black people, have to see themselves reflected in plays that mirror their lives if the theatre hopes to embrace a wider audience. Douglas Turner Ward, founder of the Negro Ensemble Company states the following: "There has to be an inclusion--a wider inclusion, first and foremost of black material in which the presence of black people will be a natural part of the artistic project" (Davis 20).

Cultural conditioning aside, why not a black Blanche DuBois, a black Saint Joan or a black Hamlet? As Lee Breuer points out, "There is no Hamlet. Hamlet is the sum of the known meaningful interpretations of the role in the context of their time, place, politics and aesthetics"

(Breuer 22). Directors and producers should not be afraid that their audiences will run from the theatres and cancel their season tickets because they are presented with a black Marc Antony or a black Willie Loman. As John Dillion, Artistic Director of the Milwaukee Repertory Theatre puts it, "One of the most creative decisions I make is the casting decision. If I already close my mind to a large pool of talent available, then I have done a disservice to my profession and to my art. . . . The issue is an artistic one" (Davis 39).

In summary an audience comes to the theatre eager and willing to accept that what they are seeing on stage is reality. Theatre spectators enjoy the game of make believe. For example, the audience knows that a white actor up on stage who calls himself Othello is not a black general from Morocco. But once the houselights dim, there is a reciprocal agreement between audience and actor, and we forget the color of someone's skin or the shape of their eyes and accept them for who they say they are in the world of the play.

In theory at least we can all usually agree upon a "willing suspension of disbelief" in the theatre; for actors of color however, it is seldom practiced. Black actors are usually cast as "exotic" or in roles which consciously deal with racial issues. White actors on the other hand have not had to deal with these limitations on the



characters they play, and ironically have often been cast as black, especially in Hollywood films. In fact, there is a history in the country of white actors putting on "black face" since the early minstrel shows of the 1830s. It was not until 1946 that the gifted black actor, Canada Lee, performing Bosola in The Duchess of Malfi, made the bold artistic choice of appearing in "white face" that the reverse occurred. A reviewer for The Boston Post reported that stage history was undoubtedly made with Lee's unprecedented appearance on stage:

Using a special make-up, the base of which is a white paste that women use to conceal skin imperfections, and wearing a thick brown wig, he looked like a white. Except for the shape of his nose, which is flat and broad, there was nothing in his appearance to suggest his race, and nothing in his performance. Perhaps this was the most striking thing about the whole performance, there were some scenes in which you forgot entirely that he was a colored man in make-up (Woll 222).

Canada Lee's appearance in this production probably was not the first time in the history of the American theatre that a black actor put on white face, but most likely it was the first time a black actor did so, not as a parody, but to appear white.

The American theatre was again shaken out of its complacency in 1967 when Diana Sands was cast as Joan in the Broadway production of Saint Joan. In fact, the New York Times devoted several columns to the casting of this gifted black actress in a traditional white role. Sands,

commenting on playing the part, stated: "I think it's about time--and it is correct--that an American Negro actor should be cast in all types of roles that he or she is qualified for. It will reach the point, if we continue this way that such casting will not be considered unusual" (Woll 223).

The success of black actors in roles usually reserved for whites has never come easily. Black actors continually have had to prove themselves capable of playing other than "black" characters, and when they do, the achievement is often heralded as some sort of theatrical milestone. For example, singer and actress Lonette McKee was the first black woman to play the part of Julie, a mulatto, in the 1983 Broadway production of Show Boat. It is hard to believe that from 1927 up until this 1983 production only white actresses have played Julie. Even the magnificent Lena Horne was bypassed in favor of Ava Gardner in the 1951 MGM movie of the musical. In an article entitled, "Actors Union Calls Conference . . .", Ms. McKee, who was nominated for a Tony award for her performance, told Jet magazine that, "The producers were so afraid to cast a black woman in this role even though it was a black role. . . . This was doing a role that I am--a mulatto--and they didn't want me to do it" (Jet 58-60).

Some black performers, usually stars from television or film, have been able to cross over the color barriers

found in the theatre. Actor pioneers such as Sidney Poitier, James Earl Jones, Diahann Carroll, Louis Gossett, Robert Guillaume, and more recently, Denzel Washington, have been able to demand roles in which their race is incidental to the character they play, but these actors are the exception to the norm. The number of black women who have been able to make the transition is pitifully small, especially in light of the shining talents of women like Ruby Dee, Gloria Foster, Cicely Tyson and many, many more. Moreover, the reluctance to cast black and other women of color in leading lady roles may go beyond skin color because they carry the additional burden of what Sue-Ellen Case refers to as "cultural encoding":

. . . casting blond women in the roles of ingenues, and dark women in secondary and vamp roles is not based on the demands of the text, but betrays cultural attitudes about the relative innocence, purity[,] (sic) and desirability of certain racial features. . . . (Kolin 150).

It is a constant struggle for blacks to get producers, directors and playwrights to expand their vision beyond skin color. Wesley Snipes, who recently co-starred with Sean Connery in the film, Rising Sun, told Jane Pauley on Dateline NBC that the author of the book, Michael Crichton, did not want him for the part of Web Smith because he had not written the character as a black man. "Crichton himself has uttered a few nasty words about the race-changing in the production, but by that time he had

no power to affect it . . ." (Hunter 2). The producers were able to override Crichton's objections because of the marketability of Snipes and the proven box office success of his films, New Jack City, Jungle Fever, and White Men Can't Jump.

Should black actors be cast in roles written for white actors? Before liberals answer unequivocally "yes", one must consider that non-traditional, color-blind casting is a double edged sword which allows whites to play ethnic roles as well. British actor Jonathan Pryce who played the part of a Eurasian pimp in the London cast of the musical Miss Saigon, found himself in the middle of this controversy when Actors' Equity refused to let him recreate his role on Broadway. The Commission on Racial Equality of Actors' Equity, after receiving several complaints from actors of Asian descent who were not given the opportunity to audition for the part, felt they had no other choice but to forbid Pryce from appearing in the role. Chuck Patterson, a black man and head of the Commission, reportedly asked the producers to have open auditions for the role but they refused. Patterson in an interview with Jet magazine, "Should Non-Ethnic Actors Play Ethnic Roles", acknowledged that Pryce is a very talented actor, "But there are also Asian-American actors of enormous talent and for a producer to say he can't find an Asian-American to play the role is absolutely racist" (62). Equity

eventually lifted its ban on Pryce and Miss Saigon, with an estimated advanced ticket sales of \$25 million, went ahead as planned.

Can casting ever be color-blind? I think there is no simple answer to the question. Some critics of non-traditional casting feel it is nothing more than "a disguised form of reverse racism, selectively colorblind only when considering the casting of Caucasian roles" (Brustein 35). Chuck Smith, associate director of the Black Chicago Theatre Company also interviewed in the above Jet article stated:

If you've got a play by a black author and it specifically says the parts should be played by blacks, then of course you make a special effort to find black actors. . . . If the role is nonspecific, you throw it open. But you can't be color-blind one way and not the other (63).

Why should there be non-traditional casting? Quite simply, assuming we are to have a theatre which is truly representative of our society, we must see and hear the voices of all people on our stages. The premise behind non-traditional casting is that actors of color, indeed all actors, should be judged solely on their individual talents and skills, and not on how they conform to stereotypes. Not every actor is right for every part, but racism has often kept black actors from playing roles that have nothing to do with their color. By casting ethnic actors in parts where race is not crucial to the play's

development, actors, directors and audience member often will discover dimensions to a character that otherwise would not have been revealed. Non-traditional casting does not take away a director's right to cast a play as she or he sees fit, on the contrary, it offers them numerous casting possibilities that are limited only by imagination.

In Chapter 2, I discuss UNO's production of A Little Night Music, and the audience response to our non-traditional casting of the show. Included also is an analysis of Fredrik's action to help illuminate for the reader my actor process in bringing the character to life.

## Chapter 2

### A Little Night Music: UNO's Non-traditional Approach

A Little Night Music takes place in Sweden at the turn of the century, and it is Stephen Sondheim's glorious celebration of romantic love. In the play Fredrik Egerman, a widowed lawyer, has recently married an eighteen-year-old girl who is still a virgin after eleven months of marriage. Fredrik is a middle-aged man trying desperately to cling to his fading youth. His emotions are governed by logic and his reasoning legal mind. He wants sexual satisfaction "Now" from his virgin bride but lacks the passion of youth and ultimately is content taking afternoon naps.

I stated earlier that in A Little Night Music I saw an opportunity to cast myself as the romantic leading man, a role for which I probably would not be considered in most commercial theatres. It was also a chance for me to test audience acceptance of a black man in a traditionally white role. I felt confident that I was capable of playing the part, and I was sure I could sing the role. My instincts told me, none the less, that with a racially mixed, multicultural cast, the audience would be more inclined to believe I was who I said I was (a Swedish lawyer) once they processed all the different relationships going on within the script. Unfortunately, there are few actors of color in the dramatic arts

department. Those students outside of the department who I considered for roles were either musically not up to the demands of Sondheim's score, or they lacked the actor training necessary for such demanding roles. My search for black talent compelled me to look outside of the university to my colleagues in the community for their support. However, most of the performers I knew were busy working in shows or had made prior commitments which kept them from auditioning for our production. Despite all my recruiting efforts to have a "rainbow coalition" of singers and actors taking part in this elegant musical, I ended up being the only person of color in the show.

My approach to playing Fredrik was the same as it is for any character I play. I searched for the who, what, where, when and why of the character and did my best to live truthfully under the imaginary circumstances of the play. I am a Swedish lawyer who happens to have brown skin. In bringing Fredrik to life, I soon found many similarities between us so that very quickly we became familiar old friends who knew each other very well. For example, like Fredrik, I too am a middle aged man and a hopeless romantic. I am a daydreamer who has pondered the possibility of an innocent flirtation or a romantic liaison to take me away from the drudgery of everyday existence. If pushed too hard into taking decisive action or faced with too many choices, I often "shut down",



preferring to nap and think about problems at a later time. The following is a moment by moment analysis of Fredrik's action in the play using the active voice first person to describe what I want, what obstacles keep me from getting what I want, what tactics I employ to get what I want, and the victory I expect to achieve.

What do I want? I want to go to bed with my wife Anne. I want sexual release. I want fulfillment. I come home after spending an exhausting day in court. I feel anxious and eager to surprise Anne with the theatre tickets I purchased to see Desiree Armfeldt in Woman of the World. I never told Anne about Desiree. Why should I tell my wife about an old love affair that ended fourteen years ago? I hope Anne will be thrilled at the prospect of going to the theatre and that perhaps she will, finally, finally go to bed with me. I barely have time to remove my coat and hat when Anne tells me that my son, Henrik, has come home for a visit. He is my first obstacle. I love him I suppose, but I hardly know the boy. His mother always insisted on seeing to his upbringing, and since her death, he has been away in boarding school. I try to appear happy to see him but what can we possibly discuss and, more importantly, how can I get rid of him so I can be alone with Anne? I feel jealous seeing the way Anne flirts with Henrik. I think if a woman flirts with a man, she damn well ought to flirt with her husband as well. I tell

her, "Don't tease him dear," hoping she senses that I disapprove of her coquettish behavior. I suggest perhaps a nap is in order with such a long evening ahead of us, and Anne quickly runs off to turn down our bed. I can't be cross with her for long. I love to spoil her, and I am totally enchanted by her feminine concerns over her hair and which dress to wear. I momentarily forget about Henrik as I think about the pleasures that await me in the bedroom. Henrik and his damn cello! Why did he have to come home today, this afternoon? I suddenly remember he wrote to me weeks ago asking if he could come home for a visit. I apologize for failing to get a third ticket for the theatre, even though a French comedy might not be suitable for a devout seminarian. My attempt at humor does not succeed and Henrik thinks I am laughing at him. I can tell he is anxious to start a fight. This is not the time or the place for us to have a confrontation, not when there are more pressing matters at hand. There is so much that is unsaid between us. This unhappy child of my first marriage is suddenly a man and I don't know what to say to him. What good would it do to bring up past regrets and recriminations? I rush off to be with Anne and leave Henrik alone to wallow in his melancholy.

I love Anne but I have grown impatient with her avoiding my romantic advances. Once again I attempt to take her in my arms and I am rejected. I am defeated.

As I get undressed for my nap, I try to figure out how to get Anne to give in "Now". I try to come up with the best plan of attack while also considering all the alternatives:

"A, I could ravish her,  
B, I could nap."

Anne and Henrik also voice their own frustrations in this song, first separately, and then joining with me as a trio. As they weave in and out of my thoughts, I decide it is too much to contemplate at the moment and easier to sleep. Before dozing off to sleep, I subconsciously utter my heart's desire which foreshadows the conflict that is to come:

"When now I still want and/or love you,  
Now as always,  
Now, Desiree."

Later that evening I take Anne to the theatre. From the moment I see Desiree and our eyes meet, it rekindles the memory of our once passionate affair fourteen years ago. I want to see her again. I must have her again. Anne is young but she is not stupid. She is aware of the intense attraction between me and Madame Armfeldt even across the footlights. Anne is humiliated and rushes out of the theatre in tears.

Anne is still crying when we return home. I try to convince her that although I knew Desiree many years ago, I'm sure she was not looking at or addressing me from the

stage. Anne refuses to listen to reason and rushes past Henrik, and Petra, our young maid, into our bedroom. Before I go to her, I try to explain to them that our early return home was because Anne became ill. All of a sudden I realize that our unexpected arrival has caught Henrik and Petra engaging in some rather compromising positions. In spite of myself, I smile. Perhaps this moody, sensitive boy is my son after all.

Anne's crying fit has passed by the time I get to our bedroom and to my surprise, she has put on a very pretty negligee. I try to explain to her that I was a very different man before I met her, and that she must not be jealous of my past life. My head aches from the stress of this evening. I feel a knot of tension between my shoulder blades. Anne tries to soothe me and she coyly crawls onto my lap. She is a precious child and I love to spoil her, but her inane chatter is enough to drive me mad. Once more I try to rise to the occasion but as she reminds me how she used to call me "Uncle Fredrik" when she was just a little girl, my passion is soon deflated. Anne's attempt to seduce me is ludicrous and I am more than a little annoyed by her fumbling. I feel trapped in a hopeless situation with a girl who keeps promising me "Soon". I have to get out and get a breath of fresh air. I cannot stop thinking about Desiree. I have always felt bewitched by her. I have to see her if

only for a few minutes, just for old time's sake. Perhaps we could have a drink and talk about the old days? I plan to be reserved, almost cool towards her. I am not the inexperienced law clerk she once knew, but a well established and respected lawyer. My heart is beating so quickly, I feel as frightened as a school boy at his first dance.

When I arrive at Desiree's apartment, I find that the years have scarcely touched her beauty. I try to appear confident and self-assured but my mouth is dry and I can barely speak. Desiree is as vibrant and as alluring as she was fourteen years ago. We laugh easily about old times together and I try to explain my walking out on her performance. Desiree knows immediately it was because of "the girl in the pink dress". I stand before a woman whom I adore, feeling guilty and not knowing exactly why. I wish she would get dressed. I can not concentrate with her sitting in front of me in her robe. I know I am an old fool for marrying a girl young enough to be my daughter but Desiree does not condemn or laugh at me. On the contrary, the woman reveals to me her considerable charms that have only improved with age. Even though I married Anne, she must know that I have never forgotten her or the wonderful times we shared together. I tell her about the delicious dream I had about her this very afternoon while napping. She finds it incredible that I now take

afternoon naps and of course she wants to know what we were doing in the dream. I haven't laughed this much in years. I am amazed at how comfortable I feel with Desiree in these shabby surroundings. We have talked about my life but I must find out whether or not she is married or if she has a lover. I should have known that marriage would hardly suit Desiree but she does have a lover:

A very handsome, very married dragoon with,  
the vanity of a peacock, the brain of a pea,  
but the physical proportion . . . (1.4)

The sexual tension in the room makes me feel very uncomfortable. The smell of her perfume and the way she looks at me is unnerving. I try to fill the awkward silence by getting another drink. While pouring a glass of schnapps I notice the picture of a young girl on the table next to the glasses. Desiree informs me that she is her daughter and that she lives with her mother in the country. It is obvious to me that Desiree does not want to talk about her so not knowing what else to do I tell her, "You Must Meet My Wife".

Desiree is infuriated that Anne still denies me my conjugal rights after eleven months of marriage. I feel stupid for bringing up my marital problems with Anne. I know I should leave before we both make the same mistake we made fourteen years ago. However, my desire is greater than than my logic. I try to ask Desiree what I came here for but find myself at a loss for words. Desiree makes

it easy for me by saying, "What are old friends for", as she leads me into her bedroom.

Our evening of passionate lovemaking is interrupted by a loud knocking on the door of Desiree's apartment. Desiree immediately recognizes that the voice demanding to be let in belongs to her dragoon, Count Carl-Magnus. We both find the situation humorous and decide to have a little fun with her "tin soldier". The moment Carl Magnus steps into the room I realize that I have made a serious error in judgment. The man is a colossus, obviously an expert in weaponry and even if blindfolded, could easily dispose of me. I hate him for being so damned cock-sure of himself. The man absolutely refuses to acknowledge my presence in spite of the fact that I am standing in front of him in his robe. I feel I must protect Desiree's reputation, not to mention my own, and begin to try and offer an explanation of this rather awkward situation. I tell him I am Miss Armfeldt's mother's lawyer, here with extremely important papers which required her immediate signature. Of course he doesn't believe a word I'm saying and the part about tripping and falling into Desiree's hip-bath on my way to the water closet seems particularly assinine. I think Desiree sees the terror in my eyes despite my brave front, and she rushes into the bedroom to get my clothes so I can exit before Carl Magnus decides to challenge me to a duel.

Carl-Magnus tries to frighten me by telling me about the numerous duels he has fought and won. I refuse to back down. I do not care if he is bigger and stronger and younger than me. He can stand there in his shiny boots and tunic and whistle every march he ever heard, I still refuse to be intimidated by his boorish ways. In fact, I start to whistle a Mozart melody hoping it will grate on his military nerves. Desiree returns to find us standing toe to toe and interrupts us just in time to prevent bloodshed, namely mine. I am forced to borrow one of his nightshirts since Desiree thought it necessary to drench my clothes in her bath to add a touch of theatrical realism to this farce. In spite of the indignity of being forced to walk home in the middle of the night in another man's nightshirt, I thoroughly enjoy seeing the blood drain from Carl-Magnus's face as I thank Desiree for her cooperation.

The first act of A Little Night Music ends with "A Weekend In The Country". Desiree has persuaded her mother to invite me and my family to a weekend party at the Armfeldt chateau. In this musical number all of the characters voice their secret longings which they hope will be realized while spending a delightful weekend in the country. I can not wait to see my darling Desiree once more. I know the danger of a liaison with my wife under the same roof but I can not stop myself. I do not



know where this love affair is heading and I do not care. There is Anne to consider whom I would not hurt for anything, but I have not felt so alive in years.

At the beginning of Act II, we (Anne, Henrik, Petra) arrive at Madame Armfeldt's country estate and the first person I run into is Carl-Magnus and his wife, Countess Charlotte Malcolm. I hate him. I must find a way to discredit him in front of Desiree. What does she see in this overblown peacock? I do not believe he has the audacity, not to mention the bad manners, to invite himself here for the weekend. I must be careful not to appear too upset over the Count imposing himself on the Armfeldts in front of Anne. I know she is still suspicious of Desiree from the way she is barely civil to her when I introduced them to each other. I am embarrassed by Anne's bad manners. The Countess is certainly a handsome woman. I wonder whatever possessed her to marry Carl-Magnus? I try to take Desiree aside but already Carl-Magnus is trying to monopolize all of her attention. Desiree promises to speak to me "later" once all the guest are settled.

After I park the car and am shown to my room, I realize Anne has disappeared. Thinking she has decided to take a stroll in the gardens, I go off in search of her. I hope she is not being a nuisance to Desiree or to her mother. I discover Anne and the Countess laughing and talking in the garden. I am so glad she has made a new

friend. Perhaps her new companion will entertain her and thereby free me to spend more time with Desiree. Walking into the midst of a conversation always unnerves me, especially when it is women who are talking. I feel as though I am the object of their gaiety but I don't know why. The Countess compliments me on my cravat, while resting her delicate hand lightly on my chest. If we had met at a different time, in a different place, perhaps we could indulge in an delightful flirtation but I have enough entanglements this weekend trying to keep Anne and Desiree apart.

Act 2 Scene 3, I am in the garden, dressed for dinner and having a liqueur. Once more I have the bad luck to be in the same place at the same time as Carl-Magnus. I try to ignore him. Perhaps he will have the good sense to realize I want to be alone and he will go off to polish his saber or whatever it is he does between duels. This weekend is proving to be more of a headache than I had bargained for. All this intrigue! Thinking back over the past several weeks, I realize that none of these entanglements would have occurred if only I had not gone to the theatre:

If she'd only been faded,  
If she'd only been fat . . .  
It would have been wonderful. (2.3)

Desiree's daughter interrupts my thoughts and I overhear her tell Count Malcolm that her mother wishes

to see him in the green salon. However, as soon as he leaves, Desiree appears for our little moment alone together. I feel totally confused and more than slightly annoyed. I want some answers because I am tired of stolen moments and of playing cat and mouse. Desiree tells me her daughter Fredrika was only playing a little game with Carl-Magnus. Fredrika! Of course, I should have guessed it right off. She is my daughter. Fredrik--Fredrika. It all makes sense. Desiree quickly destroys my illusion by telling me not to flatter myself thinking her daughter is my child. My face feels hot. I am embarrassed for being such a fool. I feel hurt and rejected. I may not be as worldly wise as she is when it comes to deceiving a lover, but I still have my dignity. I merely wanted to inform her that "my wife has no inkling of the nightshirt episode" and that we should be discreet. I will not have Anne hurt. I want Desiree to know that she cannot play me against her dragoon. I will not be toyed with. Desiree quickly soothes my injured pride and assures me she only wants to be with me, and will prove it later in her room. All is forgiven. I only want to hold Desiree like this in my arms and stay here with her for the rest of our lives. Suddenly we hear Carl-Magnus heading back towards us and rather than face another unpleasant confrontation, I decide to hide in the shadows behind the nearest pillar. Frid, Madame Armfeldt's butler, enters soon after Carl-Magnus

arrives, and announces that dinner is served. As Desiree and Carl-Magnus head toward the house, I see Frid coming towards the very spot where I am hiding. I try unsuccessfully to keep him from exposing me but despite madly waving him away, he announces once again that dinner is now being served. What can I do but gallantly offer my arm to Desiree? With Carl-Magnus on her right and myself on her left, the three of us go in to dinner.

The next scene takes place in the drawing room after dinner. The Countess is flirting with me shamelessly and I enjoy her unwarranted attention immensely. The mid-summer night, an excellent dinner and too much wine has put all of us in a very festive mood. I feel quite clever and assured, and more than capable of engaging in the rapid fire quips and sexual innuendoes being bandied about the room. The Countess obviously has had more than enough to drink but she insists that we dance together. It is all I can do to keep her steady on her feet as we attempt to waltz about the room. As the music builds in intensity, the Countess becomes more and more agitated. She begins to hurl one offensive remark after another at Desiree as the once festive mood turns ugly and menacing. The color drains from Anne's face as she slowly sinks into her chair. Desiree is totally humiliated and glares at me as if I were somehow responsible for the ridiculous behavior of the Countess. Henrik suddenly smashes his glass on the

floor and starts screaming for all of us to stop it. I fear the poor boy is having some sort of breakdown and try to quiet him. My attempt to calm him down seems to have the opposite effect on him. He lashes out at me and at Desiree. Who is this poor unhappy boy? I am shocked and embarrassed that he would speak to me in this manner. For all of our sakes, I must take him from this place. I try to restrain him physically but he breaks free from my grip. I had no idea how unhappy he is and how much he despises me. It is evident to all of us that he is madly in love with Anne. Henrik runs from the room and Anne tries to follow him. I will not be laughed at and humiliated further in front of these people by having my wife run after my lovesick son. In my anger I order Anne to come back and sit down. I want to strike her. This evening, this entire weekend is a complete disaster.

Later that evening I manage to make my way to Desiree's bedroom. Anne has cried herself to sleep, and Henrik has run off. I want quiet. I want peace. I want the comfort and understanding only Desiree gives me. She may reject me. I feel awkward entering her room. Perhaps it is because we are in her mother's house. In spite of everything that has occurred this evening, we are able to laugh about the last time we were alone together like this in a similar situation. We know how foolhardy it would be to even contemplate a repeat performance. I want Desiree to explain

to me how all this muddle came about. She has always seen things more clearly than I have. Perhaps I have been trying to renew my "unrenewable youth."

Desiree tries to explain why she has invited me here this weekend. All at once I feel as though I have been struck with the force of a cannon exploding. It is clear to me now--she wants me to leave Anne for her. I am dumb-struck. How can I make her understand? Anne needs me and Desiree never has. Desiree has always been so strong, so independent and resourceful, a "Woman of the World". How can she ask me to give up the certainty of this life for one so unsure? I thought it was a game and we were only playing at love. I had no idea, I never dreamed it possible for her to be "on the ground" while I am the one caught dangling "in mid-air". I ask her forgiveness realizing, "To flirt with rescue when one has no intention of being saved . . ." (2.6).

I will leave this place before love's mid-summer madness causes all of us to become more foolish than we already are. I will get my wife, beg her forgiveness and leave here immediately. I search the gardens for Anne and accidentally run into the Countess. She has been sitting here all alone in the darkness and crying for some time. She apologizes for the scene she caused after dinner. She confesses she is still desperately in love with her husband in spite of his numerous affairs with other women.

In her madness she somehow thought by flirting with me, she could make Carl-Magnus jealous. I understand her pain and do my best to offer her some solace. As we sit there quietly comforting each other, Anne and Henrik slowly emerge from the house carrying their luggage. It is apparent that they are running off together and also, that they are very much in love. I am able to quietly endure their departure because we are all clowns in an absurd farce and the world has gone mad and turned itself upside down. I am numb. I can not move and I can not think. What I thought I wanted, what I thought was mine, I no longer have.

Carl-Magnus rushes on brandishing what looks like a pistol in front of my face. He keeps talking about Russian Roulette. I finally understand what he is referring to and agree that a duel is the only sane solution in this insane world. We march off together into a clearing just beyond the house. The last thing I remember is a loud popping noise and a flash of white light. There is a ringing in my ears as I slowly open my eyes and try to focus. I see Desiree and try to get up but I cannot. There is a smell of gun powder and I feel as though I might get ill. The feeling passes after a few minutes and I am aware that Desiree is holding me in her arms. It feels good. I feel safe. I tell her about Anne and Henrik but none of that seems to matter now. We are together. The

blinding light of the pistols discharge has brought everything into sharp focus for me. I want Desiree. I want a "coherent existence" with her and with our child Fredrika. Wherever we go, whatever we have to do, as long as we are together, the summer night smiles on lovers in love.

The above analysis helps, I trust, illuminate for the reader my thought process, some of the goals and the obstacles I set for Fredrik's character. Certainly Fredrik achieved sexual release but whether or not he gets the coherent existence he speaks of, I am not sure. Regardless, the point I would like to stress is that my approach to the character was, I believe, not unlike what any actor, black or white, would do. If asked how I was able to reconcile the racial cultural differences between myself and this fictional character, I would simply say, I was "playing" a Swedish lawyer--playing in the sense that children play by making believe they are something or someone other than who they are. My Swedish lawyer just happened to have brown skin. As an actor approaching a role I will often play a game in which I say to myself, "once upon a time I use to be someone else." As simplistic as it sounds, it helps free my imagination to soar across barriers to different times and to different places. I think the technique is akin to Stanislavsky's "Magic If" because through it, I can imagine myself in virtually any



situation.

There was only one night during the run of the show that I felt self-conscious about being black. It was the evening the Chancellor of the university invited a select audience of friends and theatre patrons to A Little Night Music as part of the official opening of the school's new theatre. Near the beginning of the play there is a small scene between Fredrik and Anne which takes place in their bedroom. They are both excited about going to the theatre that evening, and end up falling onto their bed in a fit of laughter. Fredrik takes Anne into his arms thinking her jovial mood is the signal that "Now" she is ready to make love. Fredrik starts to slowly caress and kiss his wife but she immediately stiffens in his arms rejecting his passionate advances. It was at this moment in the play that I became consciously aware that I was a black man fondling and kissing a white woman in front of a very rich, mostly white, upper middle class audience. The discomfort I experienced at this moment probably lasted no longer than a heartbeat, but I instinctively felt I was guilty of violating an ancient taboo. Thankfully, I was able to shut out these intrusive negative thoughts and refocus my attention on the play, and on my objective. However, for a split second I was not just a man whose wife refuses his sexual advances; I was a black man forcing myself upon a white woman and I felt scared. This

particular scene was sensitively staged, and was by no means suggestive of a rape. Due largely to societal, cultural, and sexual conditioning, however I felt as though I had committed a violent act and was being emotionally castrated. I have no way of knowing whether the audience was aware of my momentary "paralysis" of inaction but I would like to think I was able to cover the drama that was being played out in my mind.

As a sort of general barometer of audience reaction to the non-traditional casting in our production of A Little Night Music, I offer a limited survey of UNO's Acting I and Introduction to Theatre students in the appendix. The majority of the 71 students polled in this survey were not theatre majors, but were required to see the production as a class assignment. The survey contains their reactions to what they saw and felt, and also their views on interracial, cross cultural dating and marriage. I admit I was pleasantly surprised by the number of positive responses to non-traditional casting by the majority of students. However, in answering questions concerning interracial crosscultural dating and marriage, the students tended to be more conservative. They were able to accept me in the context of the piece but viewed "mixed" couples as something that would be okay for some people but not for them--not in their real life.

I do not know if seeing a black actor playing a

traditionally white role successfully challenged or changed any long held attitudes about race and color, and what that means in this society. I do not know if seeing an interracial couple whose relationship had nothing to do with ethnicity helped anyone see beyond the superficial qualities of race. But of the 71 students surveyed, only 3 stated that they could not accept the color and racial differences in the cast. It was my desire of course to accomplish these changes in attitudes, but that was not my job as an actor. My task was to bring Fredrik Egerman to life, and I feel I was able to do that successfully. It was during the rehearsal process, however, that I was constantly tested both as a singer and as an actor. These challenges included not only the music, but also the lyrics, and the character relationships within the play. my being. For an actor, the experience parallels playing Shakespeare. It has been suggested that Sondheim singers have to have a soul and an edge. A "trained" voice, I believe, is incidental.

As Fredrik, I was also faced with the problem of creating multifaceted relationships with characters with whom I had only brief scenes. For example, Fredrik and Henrik are only in two scenes together but there is a history between them of which the audience must be made aware. I felt especially good about the relationship we were able to establish in the dining room scene in Act

II. I think Keith and I made clear the age-old problem between fathers and sons who love each other but do not know how to communicate, and who ultimately end up strangers.

My relationship with Wendy Mandy, who played Desiree, was warm and friendly. Wendy was a graduate student studying voice and had little acting experience, but she nevertheless gave a solid performance as Desiree. We immediately felt comfortable with each other, as if we were indeed old friends. Thus the concept of Fredrik and Desiree's romance made sense to both of us. I never thought about her being white and my being black. I never once felt any hesitancy from her during our love scenes. We had a chemistry between us on stage which grew out of genuine affection for each other.

Regardless of the political impact of this production, my joy was in the music and in Sondheim's intriguing lyrics. I will always be grateful for being given the opportunity of playing Fredrik for it proved, at least to myself, that I could play the leading man who gets the girl, loses the girl and wins her back again.

I now turn my attention to the present situation in Omaha for actors of color. How do black actors feel about color-blind casting? Do they think racism plays a part in getting cast when they audition? How do local directors feel about non-traditional casting? These are the questions

examined in Chapter 3.

## Chapter 3

### The Present Situation

This series of interviews with local black actors, and with local producer/directors (all of whom were white except for Laura Partridge-Nedds of the Emmy Gifford Children's Theatre), is intended as an overview of the attitudes and feelings of theatre makers in Omaha about non-traditional casting, racism, and what we can look forward to in the future. The six actors interviewed are: Clyde McNeal, Kevin Williams, Dion Brooks, Kathy Tyree, Camille Metoyer-Moten, and Billy Bohannon. Except for Dion Brooks the actors I spoke with are, I felt, well established performers in Omaha's theatre community. The actors were asked to respond to questions which I recorded and transcribed. Not all questions were answered or in some cases, the response was less than revealing. Relevant passages have been taken from those transcripts, edited and utilized in this paper.

### Actor Interviews

**Clyde McNeal** was born and raised in San Antonio, Texas. After serving in the United States Air Force as a linguist, he settled in Omaha, Nebraska in 1975. Clyde's most recent roles include the Wiz in The Wiz and Judas in Jesus Christ Superstar. Clyde went to predominately white schools while growing up in Texas and, in the second grade, tackled his first big dramatic role playing George Washington in his

elementary school play. In high school, Clyde appeared in A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum and admits to getting hooked on show business: "There was something about the opening number ["Comedy Tonight"] that gave me nirvanā." Clyde did not have a favorite actor or movie star whom he idolized as a child but he did have a special fondness for Dame Judith Anderson, and would often listen to her recordings of Shakespeare's plays at the public library. The following interview contains some of Clyde's thoughts on non-traditional casting, being an actor, being black, and racism in the theatre.

1. Were you encouraged by your parents or by a teacher to be an actor?

"I think some of the teachers, we find out in retrospect, had some issues about color. One might say they were bigoted, prejudiced whatever, but I didn't know that at the time. I thought that's just the way it goes. I guess we don't get to do that [lead roles]."

2. Do you feel welcomed at local theatres when auditioning for a show?

"No I do not. I feel like they were desperate and decided to do this show and they needed somebody and I happen to fit the bill."

3. Have you experienced racism working in the theatre?

"I once tried to convince a local theatre producer to do more shows that black people could be in, but he felt that the problem was not his fault, but the fault of playwrights because they just don't write roles for black actors. To me, that is racism. The overall attitude is we don't want no black people, no lesbians, no nothing except Oklahoma and that kind of stuff."

4. Do you think color-blind casting works?

"I can go with it. I like to see different interpretations of what we normally expect to see."

5. Are there roles you would not accept because you consider them stereotypes?

"I don't ever, ever, play servants. I figure that's already been done."

6. If you saw UNO's production of A Little Night Music, what was your reaction to the non-traditional casting?

"I think its great, and I think when you are able to do that, as you have been able to do, especially Shakespeare in this community particularly, it is a wonderful thing and we need it."

7. Why do you think black people and other people of color, generally, do not go to the theatre?

"We're forever insulted in it. . . . When we go to the theatre we do feel out of place when for years the main thing we have seen on TV is ooglee jamin [natives dancing] and voodoo casting. There is a frustration they feel for you and I. They see white actors up on stage doing a half step and think that no matter how talented a black performer is, he will not be seen unless a miracle occurs. The average person who is black, do you think they are going to actually feel good about theatre when there is nothing in it to feel good about?"

8. Have you ever been made to feel you were too dark, too light, or not "black" enough for a role?

"Oh, yes! I have two cousins that were in the film business in California and they told me no, you're not dark enough. I looked at Sidney Poitier and I loved what he did but I thought, 'no chance of me getting in there.' I just put it away from my mind as even an option."



9. I think every black person in America has heard at some point in their life that in order to succeed, you have to be twice as good as the white man. Do you think the same holds true in our profession?

"You have to be twice as good to achieve the same level of success. I think that's true in business, I think that's in anything because there's just so much automatically against you because of your color."

10. As a black artist do you feel a responsibility to be a "role model"?

"I never wanted to be but now I realize, whether you want to or not, you are. The main thing I would say to young black actors is 'don't do it.' 'Talent will win out' it is said but that's in the white community. Talent will not win out in the world that we live in that is mixed."

11. Recently 60 Minutes aired a program entitled, "Equal But Separate", which dealt with the national trend in our schools and universities of black and white students segregating themselves. Students have separate eating areas in the cafeteria, separate housing, proms, fraternities, etc. What are your thoughts on this?

"We cannot. It gives society a reason to continue institutionalized racism. Because we have pulled ourselves over into a corner they can say, 'Oh look, they have a nice little black this and that. Good, they don't have to be in ours.' That's like a little donut handed out to us under the guise of you having your own thing. We are doing it to ourselves a lot of the time even."

**D. Kevin Williams (Kevin)** is a native of Omaha and is a graduate of Central High School. Kevin attended Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa, and majored in computer science and marketing. His favorite roles include James Thunder Earlie in Dreamgirls and the King in The King and I.

Kevin had no exposure to theatre while growing up and no stage experience except for singing in his school choir and jazz band. Kevin's extra curricular activities in high school were football, basketball, and track. It was not until his sophomore year in college that he auditioned for and was cast as Jesus in his first musical, Jesus Christ Superstar.

1. Do you feel welcomed at local theatres when auditioning for a play?

"I feel welcomed in some instances and in others I don't."

2. Have you experienced racism working in the theatre?

"I auditioned at Chanticleer [Chanticleer Community Theatre in Council Bluffs, Iowa] for Little Shop of Horrors. Now I know I was the best plant. I know they couldn't find a better bass voice but I didn't get cast."

"I was the first and only black male actor they [Nebraska Theatre Caravan] ever hired, and I felt like an outsider."

3. Have you ever been made to feel you were too dark or too light, or not "black" enough for a role?

"[I have been told I] definitely don't sound black enough."

4. As a black artist do you feel a responsibility to be a "role model"?

"I don't think we have the responsibility of living somebody else's life. You need to be you for you."

5. I think every black person in America has heard at some point in their life, that in order to succeed, you have to be twice as good as the white man. Do you think the same holds true in our profession?

"There was one thing that was said a while back that really struck me. Whatever your problem, whatever circumstance you're going through, whatever your life is, add black to that then talk to me."

**Dion Brooks** comes from northern Louisiana where he attended Louisiana Tech University. Born in Omaha, his roots go deep within this community. A self-described "farm boy", Dion studied journalism and theatre in college. Dion is the lead singer in a band called Trouble Coming, and founded the Medieval Heritage Society, an actor combatant troupe for which he choreographs sword fights. Dion is just starting his theatrical career but in the last year, has been in four plays and appeared in three movies.

1. Were you encouraged by your parents or by a teacher to be an actor?

"My mother has always been 100% supportive. She's my best and my worst critic."

2. Do you feel welcomed at local theatre when auditioning for a show?

"People don't accept me probably because I'm a darker black man than most black men, plus I'm fairly large, fairly bulky, dress weird. I mean I have all the stereotypical scary black man thing going against me . . . "

3. Have you experienced racism working in the theatre?

"Yes. You would think entertainment people would be more accepting. I think they're better liars at it than anything. . . . I got a lot of reverse racism from black people because I talk like I talk, I did the things I did and they would be, you know, 'hey you're trying to be white.' This is the first time I've gotten along with a person of color in a production. I think they're hesitant to establish a relationship with another black individual because they think it may make a statement or something, 'oh well, they're black so they're hanging out together

and they don't want to hang out with us.'"

4. Do you think color-blind casting works?

"If there were more roles for black people, if there were a balance of roles for everybody, I would say cast a person in the role he is supposed to be in. We do not want to see a Chinese person playing this black character but there's not enough balance for that so you have to sacrifice some of the realism to be able to get a balance."

5. Why do you think black people and other people of color, generally, do not go to the theatre?

"It's overpriced for most of us. . . . You're not going to get many people of color that want to spend \$20 on something they've never seen, never done before."

6. Have you ever been made to feel you were too dark, or too light, or not "black" enough for a role?

"You have to treat it [sounding black] as a dialect and not as a lack of being smart."

7. As a black artist do you feel a responsibility to be a "role model"?

"I'm paid to be an actor and to entertain. That job belongs to the parents."

8. How do you respond to the statement, "I don't think of you as being black, you're just Dion?"

"I have no desire to be Caucasian. I have no desire to mimic any of them. I just don't have any fear of what I am, so I don't feel I have to cast myself or do something that's black."

9. Recently 60 Minutes aired a story called, "Equal But Separate", which reported on a nation-wide trend in our schools of black and white students segregating themselves

from each other. Students have separate eating areas in the school cafeteria, separate housing, proms, fraternities, even separate basketball games. What are your thoughts on this phenomenon?

"It's a natural tendency and I think it's getting worse. We are in an age of terrible change."

**Kathy Tyree** was born and raised in Omaha, and graduated from Tech High School. A multi-talented performer, Kathy thinks of herself first and foremost as a singer. Kathy's first stage experience occurred in high school when she was 16 years old and played Dorothy in The Wiz. She has appeared at the Playhouse in the Pied Piper, and Sophisticated Ladies. She has also performed at the Center Stage Theatre in Ain't Misbehavin'. Her most recent stage appearances have included Bee Hive and Suds for Cabaret Productions.

1. Who were your favorite actors when you were growing up?

"Diana Ross. She always had control and was so glamorous and so sure of herself. She [Diana Ross] doesn't have this dynamic powerful voice, and she's a tiny little woman but with a real big presence."

2. Were you encouraged by your parents or by a teacher to be an actor?

"Jim Eisenhardt [high school teacher] taught me everything. He hung in there with me and he made me make some choices. Do you want to hang out with the cool crowd or do you want to develop your talent? Jim Eisenhardt, Glen Burley [church minister of music] and my mother are the reasons I'm doing what I'm doing."

3. Do you feel welcomed at local theatres when auditioning for a show?

"The only theatre that I ever have any apprehensiveness about is The Omaha Playhouse."

4. Have you experienced racism working in the theatre?  
"The Chanticleer . . . they asked me to come

audition for Guys and Dolls. The guy who was to play the love interest flat out told them, I will not have a black love interest on stage and so they didn't give me the part so I never auditioned there again."

"Dick Muller at the Firehouse [Firehouse Dinner Theatre], told me I just don't have anything for a young black female to do right now. That was his response to me. It was that cut and dry."

"The Center Stage has done some of its own discrimination as well. I know the Center Stage to let it be known that white people need not audition for particular shows. I've seen it in writing."

5. Do you think color-blind casting works?

"I think color-blind casting works when it's done sincerely. If you have the right cast, the right director, that makes a big difference. With the Wiz [Omaha Community Playhouse production] it was said that it was going to be a multiracial cast and I think it came across like some little project to see if they could put black people and white people on stage together and mix them all up."

6. Are there roles you would not accept because you consider them stereotypes?

"The typical maid, slave, those types of roles. I would only accept them if they reflected the character in a positive light."

7. Why do you think black people and other people of color generally, do not go to the theatre?

"I think it is a cultural heritage thing. For so long we weren't allowed to do things like that [going to the theatre]. We just simply don't take advantage [of it now]. And nobody can give me this crap about the tickets cost too much. I mean, let Luther [Vandross] come to town, they'll pay \$50 to go see him, so it's not the ticket price. It really disappoints me and I really don't fully understand it."



8. How do you respond to the statement, "I don't think of you as being black, you're just Kathy?"

"I kind of take offense at it . . . I take it as they're trying to make me think something other than what's really going on."

9. I think every black person in America has heard at one time or another that in order to succeed, you have to be twice as good as the white man. Do you think the same holds true in our profession.

"No because we get typecast. They have specific roles for us and we have to compete against each other for those roles."

10. As a black artist do you feel a responsibility to be a "role model"?

"Yes, yeah I do. In the shows that I do I always think would I want a young lady, a young black lady, to see me do this show and what would she think of me if she saw me do this."

11. Recently 60 Minutes aired a story called, "Equal But Separate", which reported on a nation trend in our schools of black and white students segregating themselves from each other. Students have separate eating areas in the cafeteria, separate housing, proms, fraternities, etc. What are your thoughts on this phenomenon?

"I think our society is going backwards. Things are worse now than they were 30 years ago. There is no respect. No respect for anything that's different from the way they [young people] believe things should be."

12. What do you think we can do as theatre artists to reverse this disturbing trend?

"I think that if theatre were a larger part of our society, I think that it would make a difference because even though there is racism and segregation within the performing arts, it is a universal type language and it brings people together."

**Camille Metoyer-Moten** was born and educated in Omaha and is a graduate of Burke High School. She attended college in New Orleans, and recently starred as Fanny Brice in Funny Girl. Camille is a recipient of the Fonda-McGuire award from the Omaha Community Playhouse for Best Actress in a Musical for her portrayal of Eva Peron in Evita.

1. Have you experienced racism working in the theatre?

"I had a music teacher in high school who refused to give me any leading roles. I used to feel really bad and I would go to him all the time after every audition and I would say, 'Well, what did I do wrong?' 'What can I do to improve?' When I graduated my drama teacher came to me and said the reason I was never given anything was because that man was a racist and said to her at every audition, 'I'm not having that black girl kissing a white boy on my stage.'"

2. Do you think color-blind casting works?

"Yeah, I do. I know that because I'm a lighter complexioned person that probably has, I don't know, helped a little bit or something but I think I could be as black as midnight and still be able to play those roles because people accept what they get. If you're a good actress, then they believe what they see. I think the problem is the people who do the casting."

3. Are there roles you would not accept because you consider them stereotypes?

"Yes absolutely. I wouldn't accept anything that was insulting or demeaning for blacks or for women."

4. Why do you think black people generally do not go to the theatre?

"I guess I've always thought that it just had to do with our, you know, it's an individual thing. Like why aren't there very many black

people playing tennis or golf? There are sports that are more expensive to participate in. Anybody can get a football and a basketball. It's [theatre] an extravagance that maybe we haven't always been able to afford."

5. Have you ever been made to feel you were too dark, or too light, or not black enough for a role?

"Yeah. When I was in college. I went to an all black university because I thought I would be happier there because I went to an all white high school. I was too light for everything. I had the same problem. . . . I remember at an audition at the Center Stage, it wasn't an audition, it was a rehearsal, and he [the director] said you're not talking black enough. You know I'm black and this is how I talk. It's got to be black enough."

6. How do you respond to the statement, "I don't think of you as being black, you're just Camille?"

"My response to that usually is I just tell them what I think. Yes I'm black and don't disassociate me from my race, and you're just saying that because you have a problem. You have a problem knowing a black person, and in order for you to justify within your own mind, I'm no longer black to you."

7. I think every black person in America has heard at one time or another that in order to succeed, you have to be twice as good as a white child. Do you think the same holds true in our profession?

"It's probably true. You'd have to really wow them in order for them to forget your color."

8. As a black artist do you feel a responsibility to be a role model?

"Absolutely. I think that so much of what our younger generation believes and feels comes through what they see. I think it's extremely important to be a good role model. I would never

play in a story like Chicago or something where there's a lot of profanity, and women are kind of you know stupid."

9. What are your thoughts on the "Equal but Separate" phenomenon happening in our schools which 60 minutes recently documented?

"I hate that. It's such a paradox because you see on the one hand there's so many more interracial couples, and then you hear about the rise of the Aryan nation and the Ku Klux Klan."

10. What, if anything, do you think we can do as theatre artists to reverse this disturbing trend?

"I don't know. I suppose color blind casting would help but then we're not really in the position to cast ourselves. I don't know that it could make much difference from the performing end of it really except if you consider how much kids are influenced by what they see. If there were more positive racial messages projected on television and in the movies."

**Billy Bohannon** is a theatre artist of many talents. Born and raised in Omaha, he is an actor, a choreographer, a costume designer and a director. Billy was and continues to be a creative force at the Center Stage, and at most of the theatres in Omaha.

1. Were you encouraged by your parents or by a teacher to be an actor?

"By a teacher very much so. My parents? It kept me busy and out of trouble so they didn't have a problem with it."

2. Was there a black actor who was your idol when you were growing up?

"Idol? No, I have to say I didn't have one because in the movies all you saw were poor black people, just as poor as you and me. I didn't think that was acting."

3. Do you feel welcome at local theatres when auditioning for a play?

"It depends on the person directing and how they make the people feel."

4. Have you experienced racism working in the theatre?

"I don't think it exists. Why would there be racism in the theatre? I mean there are times when I know I didn't get a part because of race, but I also think the director has a right to make that choice."

5. Do you think color-blind casting works?

"It's just that if the subject matter is on like the really deep south and everything . . ."  
[Could you see a black woman playing Blanche DuBois?]  
"Oh very much so."

6. Are there roles you would not accept because you

consider them stereotypes?

"I've never done that. A good example is I wanted my Equity card really bad, and I got my Equity card doing Steppin Fetchit. I wanted it that bad. I did it."

7. Why do you think black people and other people of color generally do not go to the theatre?

"A lot of it's how we were brought up. . . . Some of it's laziness. Just like at Center Stage, we have a free ticket for everybody in the South OHA [Omaha Housing Authority] projects and they don't come."

8. Have you ever been made to think you were too dark or too light or not "black" enough for a role?

"Only by other black people. I take it back. I did have a director once who asked me, 'Why are you being a black man being white?' I said, 'I'm not. If you want him to be ethnic that's fine but I don't consider myself a minority, I consider myself an equal to you.'"

9. As a child I often heard that in order to succeed, you had to be twice as good as a white child. Were you told that? Do you think that saying holds true in our profession?

"You know I have never been told that. My father's big thing was, treat people the way you want to be treated and you'll have no problems. I guess if I work twice as hard, it's not because I'm black but because of Dwayne. Dwayne Ibsen [Billy's high school acting teacher] instilled in me that although you just have two lines, let those people remember you with those two lines."

10. As a black artist, do you feel a responsibility to be a role model for black youth?

"I get very upset and I get very embarrassed

when other black people are in shows and they do stupid stuff . . . not showing up for performance or committing to some gig and not being there."

11. Recently 60 Minutes aired a story called "Equal But Separate" which dealt with students segregating themselves in our schools and universities. What are your thoughts on this?

"Once again I say what comes around goes around."



### Producer/Directors Interviews

The following interviews were conducted with six local producer/directors in order to get their views on non-traditional casting. They are: Cindy Melby-Phaneuf, Linda Runice, Carl Beck, James Larson, Laura Partridge-Nedds, and Charles Jones. I was particularly interested in whether their theatre organizations had a policy on, or an awareness of, using black actors, training programs for minority actors, and an audience development strategy to bring people of color into their theatres. Like the actors interviewed in the previous section, these artists were selected because of their prominence in theatre and frankly, because they are among the people who cast actors in Omaha. The comments found in these interviews were also recorded and edited into selected passages pertinent to the questions

**Cindy Melby-Phaneuf** is Co-Founder and Producing Artistic Director of the Nebraska Shakespeare Festival. She is a Professor of Theatre at the University of Nebraska at Omaha where she teaches acting, directing and contemporary theatre. Cindy received her Ph.D. in Fine Arts from Texas Tech University, and was recently elected to the Executive Board of the Shakespeare Theatre Association of America.

1. What is your Theatre's mission?

"To present professional Shakespeare free to

all the people of Nebraska."

2. How do you feel about color-blind casting?

"I support it. I think you just have to make it clear to the audience if it's supposed to be an issue or not. I've seen plays at the Guthrie with very mixed casts made up of Asian, black and white actors, and for a while I wonder if this casting is suppose to mean something. Once I figure out that it is not a primary issue, I focus on the relationships. On the other hand, non-traditional casting can open exciting possibilities. I saw an exciting production of Othello at the Folger in Washington, D.C., that was done with a black Iago as well as a black Othello and Emilia. This casting created a different kind of connection between these characters and intensified the trust and the betrayal. You knew in that play the casting of black actors in these key roles was a definite artistic choice."

3. Do people of color audition at your theatre?

"We have no problem finding Equity actors of color. What we haven't found is qualified actors of color that are non-equity. There's a big gap. Those classically trained equity professionals are very much in demand. They can also do film so they command at least double the money we have to pay."

"The problem that many producers/directors have found is finding actors of color to audition for the festivals who are trained. Many artistic directors complain that when [MFA] programs get actors of color, they train them for ethnic specific plays, so African American actors do Fences and they don't always get their hands on the classics and then when they get out, they're not as prepared."

4. The terms cultural diversity, multiculturalism, and mainstreaming have become fashionable concepts in the arts and in education in the past few years. Do you feel pressured to make a special effort when casting the festival

to use minority actors?

"I do feel pressure but I've decided not to give into the pressure just because it's the thing to do. I want to hire the best actor I can find for the role, regardless of race or cultural background."

5. Do you think it is important to have that kind of representation, that cultural diversity on stage?

"Yes, I think it would be wonderful to see our community's diversity represented on our stage. The diversity makes the company richer and more unique."

6. Have you been successful in attracting people of color to your theatre? If so, what methods have you used to draw them to your productions?

"We don't have a lot of people of color come to the Shakespeare Festival. I think we need to attract a board member that would have access to those communities and know what, if any, barriers there are to getting people of color to come. Some of it may be transportation or just awareness that the festival is available. Sometimes I feel self conscious as a white person. Who am I to assume that these people want to come? I don't want to presume that this dead white European male is going to appeal to the world."

**Linda Runice** is the Executive Director of Center Stage, a theatre which is located in one of the oldest and most culturally diverse communities in Omaha. Center Stage was founded fourteen years ago and its mission according to Linda is "to provide artistic opportunities for minorities and children." Linda also stated that to her knowledge "Center Stage is the only theatre in Nebraska and western Iowa with that specific mission." Linda has been the guiding artistic force at Center Stage for the last four years [The Center Stage Theatre has recently gone out of business].

1. Does your theatre have a policy on using actors of color in your productions? Do you hire black actors?

"Certainly actors of color are given preference but on the other hand, it's not a token thing because I think that's insulting. That's also insulting to the person to say, I want you just because you're a black man, or you're an Asian female, and I need that. I used to call it color-blind casting. Now it's a new term, non-traditional casting. We do a lot of minority specific works but we also cast with whoever is best for the role."

2. How do you personally feel about color-blind casting?

"Why can't you play Lenny [Of Mice and Men]? Are you saying these things don't effect everybody? They do. . . . It's got to be more than Denzel Washington playing Malcolm X. It also has to be Denzel Washington playing in The Odd Couple."

3. Have you been successful in attracting people of color to your theatre? If so, what methods have you used to attract them to your productions?

"We have not educated the community enough to say come here, this is the place where we are. We want you. We went to three churches and did workshops and got those people in and 90% of them had never been to Center Stage."

4. Do you have any programs that help train minority actors?

"In the spring we started a training program with PMMO [Presbyterian Metropolitan Ministries of Omaha] bringing in kids from their program. It is their mission to offer affordable arts training for everyone so they have a lot of minority kids who come in. Something else we have tried to do is have a mentoring directors program and pair up someone who would like to get into directing so we can have more minority directors."

5. Have your financial sources encouraged you to include multicultural/multiethnic shows in your season?

"That's just what we do. UAO (United Arts Omaha) instituted a minority fund set aside specifically for minority projects. They had certain guidelines which you had to have to qualify for this. We had to come up with a whole new program to qualify for that money when we were the only ones in town doing it in the first place."

6. Do you think your audience would accept or have they accepted non-traditional casting?

"I think the first time it was ever done at Center Stage it could have been a problem. Maybe for the first five minutes people are going--'now wait.' But I think you get over it. I think at Center Stage it's not a big deal. People expect it."

**Carl Beck** is an Associate Director at the Omaha Community Playhouse. His primary responsibility at the theatre is the casting and mounting of plays. He is a graduate of the University of Oklahoma at Tulsa, and has worked at the Playhouse since 1983.

1. Tell me about your theatre. What is its mission, its philosophy?

"To offer a training and performance opportunity to community actors as well as the highest attainable quality of entertainment to its audiences."

2. Does your organization have a policy on using actors of color in your productions?

"I don't think there's any at all, any official policy. . . . I think it's totally up to the discretion of any individual who's putting together the show."

3. How do you personally feel about color blind casting?

"I am completely in favor of it. There are instances I think where it calls attention to itself unnecessarily. I instantly think of companies of A Christmas Carol. We're doing a very traditional Dickens approach to Christmas Carol and frequently have black actors or actresses who are members of the core company, and it's always a jarring look because you're attempting this white bred period English piece and it is instantly jarring to look and see a black actor in one of those roles. I suppose the point of it is to educate an audience to let them get over their initial surprise, or shock or fear so that they are groomed and it becomes second nature to them and not a surprise."

4. Why do you think producers and directors are reluctant to cast actors non-traditionally?

"It's a new tradition. It's a new thought

process. You have to break old ways of thinking and old perceptions to be made aware of it. It is much easier to present say an all white cast, a traditional casting, and to give audiences what they expect.

5. Do people of color audition at your theatre?

"This theatre is such a white bred theatre, in a white bread neighborhood with a white bred membership, that a conscious effort has to be made to attract people of color. I mean even to attract the black community of performers over here."

6. Do you have any programs that help train minority actors?

"Not specific. What would a minority performer be trained in that would not be a general training? I know the answer is no. Is there a general awareness on the Playhouse staff on the issues you are raising? I would have to say no."

7. Have your financial sources encouraged you to include multicultural/multiethnic programs or plays in your season?

"Financial sources, ticket buying public?  
Financial sources corporate?"

8. Corporate financial sources. Federal and state grant money?

"I don't think so but I don't know specifically. The only instance I've ever heard of specific grant money based on race was you. I don't know of any other instance where a black was brought in because we needed a token black or we needed to look politically correct or it would make money happen."

9. Have you been successful in attracting people of color to your theatre? If so, what methods have you used to attract them to your productions?

"No we have not been particularly successful."

I assume [the reason] our percentage of black audience members is so small is that we do not offer black plays, black experience. The Center Stage is obviously going to, is geared for that, and if I were black I would be going to the Center Stage more often. No we do not go out and actively seek black audiences or try to. I think the only way the white bred Playhouse is going to become any more sensible, sensitive to the whole issue is to have it be brought up and be confronted with it. . . . No one confronts us on the issue."

10. What do you think we as theatre artists can do to help reverse this increasing trend of separatism of cultures and races in our society?

"I think what you're doing by raising consciousness you're certainly making me think of spending time that I would not otherwise be thinking about gender bending, cross racial casting . . . so yeah, I think exactly what you're doing is a fascinating thing."



**James Larson** is the Artistic Director of Omaha's Emmy Gifford Children's Theatre. He directs and teaches at UNO and in community theatres.

1. Tell me about your theatre? What is its mission, its philosophy?

"Its mission, organizationally, is to service all of the children of Omaha by presenting high quality live theatre and that has some significance in terms of the audience because by saying servicing all of Omaha, it means we have to make a conscious effort to see that children of all economic backgrounds and then also ethnic backgrounds are able to come."

2. Does your organization have a policy on using actors of color in your productions?

"The goal that I'm working on now is for us not to have a multicultural program anymore but to be a multicultural theatre. I don't think that's going to happen until we have three or four actors of color who are [on staff] you know, with very high professional skills . . . then every show will be a multicultural experience. It won't be that we have one play or we have two plays that have multicultural themes. . . . I think it's more important for Omaha, it's more important for theatre going audiences to have plays that have a cast that is representative of all ethnic backgrounds, particularly African-American so that every play that we do becomes a multicultural experience at its very foundation."

3. How do you personally feel about color blind casting?

"All I'm interested in, I'm ruthlessly interested in talent. So on the one hand we have an ensemble company structure here so we already cast against type a lot of the time. It's no big deal to cast someone of color in a role that you normally don't think of being color."

4. Do you have any programs that help train minority actors?

"In terms of the programming itself we have a multicultural program which specifically serves African-American, Native-American, and Mexican-American Children. We have an internship program for those educational activities that involve training people specifically of those ethnic backgrounds to be teachers in creative drama and theatre arts."

5. Have you been successful in attracting people of color to your theatre? If so, what methods have you used to attract them to your productions?

"By offering one or two multicultural shows a year, and for every show we do, we have a performance which is dedicated completely to a kind of invited recruited audience which oftentimes consists primarily of young people of color."

6. What do you think we as theatre artists can do to help reverse the increasing trend of separatism among cultures and races in our society?

"I think that initially when we started the multicultural program here a couple of years ago, Laura Partridge Nedds felt it was important we have classes exclusively for Native-American, exclusively for Mexican-American, exclusively for African-American students and there were a lot of reasons for that. Probably the primary reason in explaining it is that all of these things were kind of growing, they were nonexistent so they were fragile and they needed a chance to really develop a structure that was going to be effective. But we're really at the point now where educationally we want to start blending a lot of this a lot more and certainly by bringing on a number of actors of color full time that would just change things instantly."

**Laura Partridge Nedds** is the Director of Multicultural Programming at the Emmy Gifford Children's theatre. She is also the Artistic Director of Soul Fire, an organization which provides theatre training and cultural awareness for Junior and Senior high school students.

1. How do you personally feel about color blind casting?

"For us, for people period to be able to reach their full potential no matter who they are, all those options have to be available, and people who want to go for that have to have that door open to them."

2. Do people of color audition at your theatre?

"It comes down to some real basic needs that we're still dealing with, trying to handle within our community, and you can't talk to people about the arts when food is an issue and survival is an issue."

3. Do you have any programs that help train minority actors?

"I don't know if you'd call them minority actors, they're our kids . . ."

4. Recently 60 Minutes aired a story called "Equal But Separate", which reported on a national trend in our schools and universities where black and white students are choosing to segregate themselves from each other. Students have separate eating areas in the cafeteria, separate housing, proms, basketball games, fraternities, etc. What are your thoughts on this?

"Well the way we went at integration is what I think was, is the problem because it wasn't

equal integration. It had the tone 'you're less than and we're letting you in.' It was the same way with busing . . . to take kids out of an environment which is obviously economically less and take them into a situation where they are on the outer with the clothing they wear and the homes they come from, that they have less, so less keeps being what's put into their heads. I don't need to sit beside you to learn anything any better or be in the same building with you."

5. What do you think we as theatre artists can do to help reverse this increasing trend of separatism of cultures and races in our society?

"From my way of seeing things, my job is to equip our kids so that they have confidence and feel good about who they are. Because when you start out here and you don't have any sense of who you are and you're measuring yourself against something that appears to be wonderful and glorious. They started everything, they made everything . . . the only reason we aren't going to have it is because we're not smart enough, we're not aggressive enough. That's why kids are killing each other on the streets. They don't value their own lives so if I don't think I'm valuable then it's really easy for me to kill somebody else who looks like me."

**Charles Jones** is the Executive Director of the Omaha Community Playhouse, and Founding Director of the Nebraska Theatre Caravan. Charles was born in Columbus, Georgia and holds certificates in Arts Administration from London Polytechnic and in Theatre Production from the British Theatre Association. His undergraduate degree is from LaGrange College in LaGrange, Georgia. Charles has written or adapted: A Christmas Carol; A Hans Christian Andersen Storybook; Monkey, Monkey; Monkey and the Golden Sunrise; The Dragon and St. George; and My Antonia.

1. Tell me about your theatre? What is its mission, its philosophy?

"To provide an opportunity for every person in Nebraska to see and experience excellent live theatre."

2. How do you personally feel about color blind casting?

"My first experience with trying to cast and utilize people of color came from Columbus, Georgia at the Springer Opera House. . . . I came under the influence of a black artist whose name was Freddie Marshall. Miss Marshall was Leontyne Price's standby in the world tour of Porgy and Bess. Her talent was so overwhelming that I could put Freddie in any part and it just didn't matter."

"I feel that casting always has to be purposeful. I understand the term color blind in that the talent of the players match and embrace one another."

"I'm always discouraged when I have someone audition for a role and I have to think, no, no, no, the audience will not buy this if one member of that family is a different race."

"I don't think the audience would have any trouble

at all accepting an all black Loman [Death of a Salesman] family. That's not a problem. But to mix it up and have some, you know, Biff is white, and Happy is black. The mother is white, the father is white. That would be, I think, very distressing, very confusing to the audience."

3. Do people of color audition at your theatre?

"It's an effort, a concerted effort to be sure people feel welcome."

"Over the years we have tried to have minority artists in the Caravan Company. Our problem has been finding minority artists who have the talent and training level that would qualify them to be a member of the company. That's been a big problem just finding people who had the training and ability to perform on the same level."

4. I often hear the same complaint from other producer/directors that they can't find black actors who are trained. This has been your experience?

"I honest to God don't think that's a cop-out. For example, our production of Cole Porter's Can Can . . . the best male dancer who came to the audition, the best male dancer we could find to play the lead role of the serpent was in fact a black dancer, and of course he played the part. We didn't worry about the fact that Eve was this little corn-fed Nebraska white girl. And we've done that many times when we find the people of talent."

"The skill and talent thing really makes a difference, and it's not a matter so much of not being willing to cast. It's a matter of, so often they don't present themselves. They won't come to us or we can't talk them into it then we can't put them into a cast."

"I have felt at times that the black community isolates itself here and it's surprising to me that I think that but that's certainly been my opinion over and over again."

5. Do you have any programs that help train minority

actors?

"No."

6. Have your financial sources encouraged you to include multicultural/multiethnic programs or plays in your season?

"I would say the pressure has been negligible."

7. Have you been successful in attracting people of color to your theatre? If so, what methods have you used to draw them to your productions?

"Not fully. We could not find the Asian population for M. Butterfly. We could not find Asian Americans who would participate in that production or who wanted to come and see the play."

8. What do you think we as theatre artists can do to help reverse the increasing trend towards separatism of cultures and races in our society?

"I don't know. I think the kinds of programs you and Carolyn [Rutherford] are working on now, Jim Hass's "Heroes Project" [being role models to children at risk] whatever. Maybe it will help."

"We can keep providing the possibility of opportunities and as long as we keep ourselves open to possibilities, and see how those possibilities evolve, then at least there's the chance things might either change or improve. It's always going to basically come back down to the individual isn't it? The individual who has the savvy to move into any given situation."

## Chapter 4

### Call to Action

Most people agree, at least in theory, that actors should be cast in roles because of their talents and skills but in fact, that is seldom the practice. Obviously, not every actor is right for every part. Casting is by its very nature discriminatory. Those are the cold hard facts of the business which every actor quickly learns. You are a "type" and you often are hired because of the way you look. However, black and other actors of color often carry the additional burden of being stereotyped because of their ethnicity. Being perceived only as ethnic has not only limited employment opportunities for minority actors but it has also depleted the pool of talent available to producer/directors because they only see skin color and not the essence of an actor. We are seen as black actors, black playwrights and black directors and film makers, rather than artists who happen to be black.

We live in a racist society. That fact is not a new revelation to most Americans. In a recent article in Theater Week entitled, "Just My Opinion", Gary Larcán offers a breakdown of Actors' Equity membership by race which helps to corroborate the fact that most non-white performers are excluded from the mainstream of America's professional theatre:



From Equity News, December 1992; 68.1% response  
from 38,323 members of Actors' Equity:

Caucasian	90.2%	Multi-Racial	.7%
African-American	5.2%	Disabled	.4%
Hispanic/Latin	2.3%	Native American	.2%
Asian-American	1.5%		

(Larcan 31).

The above percentages add up to slightly more than 100%. The actual figure is 100.5%. I assume the discrepancy lies in the fact that the racial categories overlap. For example, .4% of Disabled actors might also be included in 1.5% of Asian-Americans.

Where do we go from here? How do we affect change in our theatre so that it accurately reflects all of the people who live in this society? I think discussions about "multiculturalism," "non-traditional casting," "cultural diversity," etc., etc., will remain an exercise in semantics until theatre makers take responsibility for the images they present, and are willing to sit down and face the reality of racism in our theatre. Keryl McCord, Director of the Theatre Program of the National Endowment of the Arts points out:

We have to stimulate a serious and prolonged discussion of race and racism. One which encompasses considerations of power, control, decision making, validation, respect, integrity, intent. . . . It is only through extended contact, discourse and sheer struggle in the concrete--between director and actor, between artistic director and playwright, between board and staff--that progress is possible.

(McCord 5)

The question which now faces us is how do we go about

making changes and start to include minorities in the theatre process here in Omaha? The following suggestions may help local theatre organizations who are interested in serving the entire community:

1. **Acknowledge racism.** It is in all of us whether subliminal or overt. Make a sincere effort to overcome it. Do not expect people to adhere to certain qualities because they have a particular ethnic background. Put aside assumptions about people that we all have accepted without question for so long.

2. **Make a commitment to non-traditional casting.** It is a new way of looking and thinking about the actors which you cast and the way in which you perceive characters in plays. It takes courage. Issues that involve race, gender or sexual preference threaten the status quo. Theatre is a powerful weapon for change. Non-traditional casting, like any new endeavor, can make you feel unsure but forge ahead. Do not let fear of failure or fear of audience disapproval stop you.

3. **Strive for racial and cultural diversity** on your staff and on your board of directors.

4. **Develop minority training programs.** If you are unable to find actors of color--a complaint often given for not using minority artists--develop your own talent pool of actors through training programs. The Creative Casting Initiative, an organization which I recently started

at the Omaha Community Playhouse, will partially fill this need by providing a workshop laboratory where talented black actors are able to explore and hone their skills beyond playing stereotypical roles. It is my intention that this organization will, in its initial stages, present a potpourri of scenes to Omaha's theatre elite and to the theatre going public, as a credible demonstration of non-traditional casting in action. Hopefully from this organization a company of players will emerge dedicated to presenting classic plays non-traditionally, as well as new works which speak to all segments of contemporary society.

5. **Produce plays by ethnic playwrights.** This commitment does not mean doing an occasional "black" musical or an August Wilson play during Black History Month. It is not just a question of employment for minority actors. We must expand our repertoire beyond the European point of view and encounter playwrights who are writing out of the black, Asian, Latino, and Native-American experience. Only by exposing the audience to these different cultures will we be able to share in and celebrate our human condition. It is erroneous to think that audiences can only understand works based in European culture.

6. **Cultivate "outreach" programs** for building a diverse audience. It may mean going to black churches, alternative media, boys and girls clubs, Chicano awareness

centers, etc. Do whatever it takes to aggressively attract this new audience to your theatre. You cannot simply open your doors and expect people of color to just walk in. Going to the theatre is not something most poor people and people of color do for entertainment. Why would black people want to go to the theatre if the stories being told do not include them, and the faces they see do not look like their own? After so many years of neglect, it will take hard work, trust, and an on-going dialogue in order to win over this new audience and to give them a sense of ownership in the theatre.

7. **Educate people**, especially children, as to the value and importance of theatre in their daily lives.

The above suggestions are only the first steps in finding solutions to the problems of racism and exclusion in the theatre. I would also urge any theatre group to contact the NTCP. They can give you advice on how to get started and provide your organization with a listing of ethnic playwrights. If you are a professional or Equity theatre, the NTCP has a computerized "Artists Files Online" which should be operational by mid-1994 that can provide you with a listing of ethnic professional actors.

What we have learned from history is that audiences do have the capacity to suspend disbelief regarding the color of actors playing roles. Nowhere is this more evident than in the Hollywood films produced in this country. The

examples are many and include: Warner Orland as Charlie Chan; Marlon Brando as Zapata; Ava Gardner as Julie in Show Boat; and Laurence Olivier as Othello. As Jonathan Pryce, (Caucasian actor cast in Asian role in Miss Saigon) has so eloquently stated, "Changing our appearance is what we do as actors. . . . The art of the theatre is the art of transformation" (Brustein 36).

There is a movement among young black men and women in this country who are fed up with proving themselves to the white establishment. They are segregating themselves from their white counterparts in an effort to preserve everything about them that defines their blackness--their speech, their walk, their dress and their attitude. While understandable, it is my contention that black people cannot allow racism, to be used to exclude them from the mainstream of American theatre. The doors are open if only a crack. Historically, the greater the oppression of black people in America, the greater our progress. The force of our presence must be seen and heard in the theatre, if not for our own sake, for the sake of our children.

If theatre aspires to reveal truth and not just the replication of reality, non-traditional casting should not be a problem. Good acting is good acting. There should not be a limit to the roles ethnic actors perform if they are seen first and foremost as individual artists. I know it is hard to imagine a theatre with this type of

flexibility. America is not, nor has it ever been, a melting pot. I think what we can hope for, what we should strive towards, is a theatre in which situation specific casting decisions are made. The four types of non-traditional casting--Societal, Cross-cultural, Conceptual, Color-blind--are not meant to be rigid guidelines which must be strictly adhered to but only starting points to help overcome the usual attitudes about casting a play.

There are times when we want to see a person's color and there are times when we ignore it. In A Little Night Music, Fredrik's color is not essential to the character's or to the play's development. Fredrik is from Sweden because the playwright said he was. If one insists on being literal, by virtue of my skin color and my features, Fredrik is Swedish but of African descent. That was the extent of my concern with Fredrik's color. My job as an actor was to create, to the best of my ability, a believable and dynamic character.

Eventually, theatre artists and audiences alike may be able to distance themselves from self-conscious concerns about our differences, and concentrate on what we share in common. I was deeply moved by Audra Ann McDonald's acceptance speech when she won Featured Actress in a Musical at the recent 1994 Tony awards. In her speech she thanked her director, Nicholas Hytner (1994 Tony winner for

Direction of a Musical), for his courage in casting a black actress as Mrs. Snow in the Lincoln Center Revival of Carousel. Concerning his non-traditional approach to casting, Mr. Hytner is well aware that critics on both sides of the Atlantic, in London and in New York, were all too eager to point out the fact that few if any blacks were found in 19th century New England fishing villages. Commenting on this criticism Hytner stated:

It isn't because people don't notice. Rather, it taps into the very roots of the theatre--the actor's ability to transform himself. . . . The Carousel audience welcomed Clive Rowe [English black actor playing Mr. Snow in London production] not because we conned them into believing that coastal Maine in 1900 was a mutli-racial paradise, but because we took seriously their imaginative capacity, so they agreed to suspend their disbelief. Which is what audiences like doing most (Goldstein 18).

I believe non-traditional casting offers us hope and is key to creating an American theatre that accurately reflects the diversity of our society. A theatre where actors, directors, producers, and technicians are limited only by their talent and their vision. There is no limit to the roles ethnic actors can play if given the opportunity to participate in a theatre which sees them as individual artists and not as stereotypes.

## Appendix

Survey of UNO Acting I and Introduction  
to Theatre Classes

1. When you see an interracial couple (black/male, white/female, white male/black female), what are your feelings about them and their relationship?

31 people said they had no feelings about interracial couples. Typical responses were:

"I personally don't have a problem with it."

"It makes me take a double take at first, but there is nothing wrong with it."

"If the differences work fine, that's all right with me."

16 people stated that seeing interracial couples made them uncomfortable.

"It gives me an uneasy feeling. It bothered me throughout the play and wasn't believable."

"I am very uncomfortable because of my high school years . . . the beautiful women dated the black guys, usually the athletes."

"Unless I know them personally, it is very easy to judge one or the other as lowering their standards."

1 person said their marriage is interracial.

1 person is currently in an interracial relationship and said, "I do hear all the whispers."

2 people had been involved in interracial relationships.

25 people thought interracial couples were "Great" and "No big deal":

"I am definitely all for it."

"I feel progressive and good about race



relations."

2. Would you date or marry a person from a different culture or race?

45 people said they would date or marry a person from a different culture or race.

6 people said no they would not.

6 people said they were not sure.

2 people said they would date or marry a person from a different culture but not from a different race.

3. What was your response to the interracial casting in UNO's production of A Little Night Music?

18 people were not bothered by the interracial casting. Typical responses to the question were:

"Frankly, the fact that you [Fredrik] were black and Desiree was white never really interrupted, or even influenced my thinking at all."

20 people were very enthusiastic and positive in their response to the interracial casting:

"Bravo!!"

"A really good idea and it worked very well."

"A bold and wise casting choice."

"I thought it was great, because it puts it in the audience's face to deal with."

18 respondents were unsure and felt confused by the interracial casting but eventually thought it was successful:

"Because of the appearance and voice of the character--it actually didn't bother me much at all.

"At first it seemed a little incongruous but it soon vanished as the play progressed."

"I really only thought about it at the beginning and then I didn't even notice Fredrik was black."

"Hesitant at first but ended up really liking it."

3 audience members could not accept the color and racial differences in the cast:

"I didn't like it and honestly thought that they just couldn't find anyone who was talented enough to fit the part except for you."

"Very interesting; hard to reconcile Henrik as Fredrik's son by looks, but actors very competent; still seemed a little strange."

"Why weren't the children mixed?"

4. Within the imaginary world of the play, were you able to accept an African-American actor playing a turn-of-the century Swedish lawyer?

58 people questioned answered yes.

6 people said yes they could except a black actor playing a Swedish lawyer but:

"Swedish lawyers can be black so that wasn't what bothered me. The fact that the son was white was the bothering factor."

"Mr. Glenn played the role in a very white manner--not with the usual black culture integrated so it was easier to accept."

"Since you didn't concentrate on it, I didn't."

5 People said "No" for the following reasons:

"No simply because it wasn't realistic for that time period."

"No it just didn't fit."

"I doubt that the chances of it happening were realistic."

"It was a little off base."

"An African-American actor did not bother me, but in terms of the play and setting--I often had to remind myself that he was playing a traditionally White role."

5. Could you accept him as the: (a.) parent or (b.) father of white children?

53 people said they could accept him as both parent and father of white children.

4 people accepted him as the father. One person stated: "I didn't even think about Fredrik and Henrik being different skin tones."

7 people accepted Fredrik as the parent.

1 person said "No" they could not accept a black man as father or parent of white children.

3 people found a black father/parent with white children difficult and confusing.

6. What was your response to seeing passionate kissing between a white woman and a black man in the play?

48 people thought it was fine and had no problem with the kissing.

"The same as any coupling, romantic and sensual."

1 person wondered how they [the actors] felt about it.

2 people were bothered by the kissing.

"the whole sexual content the play . . . I don't like watching sex scenes or kissing scenes at all."

8 people claim to have had no response at all.

2 people found it "exciting."

3 people found it "odd" and stated that it made them "a little uneasy."

6 people saw actors fulfilling their roles: "I just saw two people, actors, not anything black

or white."

7. Would you have preferred seeing an all white cast of A Little Night Music?

3 people said yes they would have preferred seeing an all White cast. However, one person said, "After seeing it, I don't see a problem."

14 people said they had no preference and thought there would be no difference in seeing an all black or an all white cast:

"Actors are actors."

"It didn't matter--kind of interesting seeing a mix."

"Indifferent, but would like more of a racial balance."

7 people felt that the best actors, black or white, should be cast regardless of skin color.

1 person said, "it's only a play, it doesn't matter."

47 people answered "no," they would not have preferred an all white cast:

"No--I would have liked to have seen more cultural diversity."

"No it adds a little spice to the cast."

"No--I would have rather seen an all African-American cast--I love their soul in singing."

8. Do you think an all black cast of A Little Night Music would work?

7 people said no:

"Turn of the century Sweden, it wouldn't be believable."

"No--because it is in Sweden--I'd love to watch an African American play or a contemporary play

with an all black cast"

9 people were not sure:

"I'd have to see it."

"I think it might change the beat of the music."

"Perhaps if they changed the setting."

54 people said "Yes," an all black cast of A Little Night Music would work:

"I think it could, but I believe a mixture is always better in a play. It gives them more depth, real life feel."

"Yes . . . but interaction of two or more races adds flavor."

"Yes why not? It would probably be pretty cool."

"I think that the play would of had more passion, African-Americans are extremely passionate people."

2 people said "yes" but qualified their answers:

"If the actors believed they were Swedish--sure."

"I think it would work but I would question it a little more."

9. Did you feel you could not relate to the characters in the play because of your racial, ethnic, or cultural background?

68 people said they had no problem and related just fine:

3 people said they could not relate.

"The time period, the dress and behavior were things I've rarely experienced."

10. Do you think a performer's race, ethnicity, gender or physical capability should be taken into consideration

when being cast in a play?

20 people said "yes" to the question:

"If the role simply does not call for a person of color then they should not be placed in that role to stay true to the integrity of the play. Should there be black Nazis in Sound of Music or an all white cast in Fences?"

"It's important to make the characters and the situations on stage believable for the audience or the play just doesn't work. For this particular play it would have been more believable to have an all white cast."

28 people said "no" to the question:

"No, only in so far as it prohibits him/her from performing."

"In college theatre, I would hope not. But unfortunately, I think I would rather see a white, British man play Hamlet than any other race or gender. I think some roles were meant for your own interpretation and others are set."

"No not at all! It's just like going for a job. I hate the idea that we need to fill jobs with so many woman and different races. The jobs should go to whoever performs the best."

"No I strongly believe in blind casting all types."

18 responses were "middle of the road" answers to the questions. These people could see both sides of the issue of non-traditional casting.

"I could write for an hour but basically it's all dependent on the play."

"All of these things are directors' rights to choose. I don't think that just because someone is black or a female, they should automatically be cast into a part. That's all we need is quotas in the theatre. This would in fact put the emphasis on skin color, rather than on skill, and ability."

"Only if it's absolutely necessary to the message

of the play, i.e. Malcolm X needed to be played by a black actor. Children of a Lesser God needed a deaf actress. But otherwise I don't think it makes a difference."

"If the script allows, go to [do it]. But I don't know if I, as a Caucasian, could play a traditionally black role (i.e. Fences) or star in Miss Saigon and have it accepted. I'd like to though."

5 people thought that only physical capability should be taken into consideration when casting a role:

"A wheelchair bound Hamlet or MacBeth or Othello would be most difficult to bring off I should think, but who knows what a great actor (actress) might do."

## Works Consulted

- "Actors Union Calls Conference: Should Black Actors Be Cast In Roles Written For Whites?" Jet. 15 Dec. 1986: 56-8.
- Archer, Leonard C. Black Images in the American Theatre. Brooklyn: Pageant-Poseidon, 1973.
- Banfield, Stephen. Sondheim's Broadway Musicals. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1993.
- Breuer, Lee. "How Tall Was Coriolanus?" American Theatre May 1988: 22.
- Brustein, Robert. "Lighten Up, America." The New Republic. 10 & 17 Sept. 1990: 35-37.
- . "The Use and Abuse of Multiculturalism." The New Republic. 16 & 23 Sept. 1991: 31-34.
- Davis, Clinton Turner. "Directors On Cultural Diversity: A Forum." New Trends. Summer 1993: 3-4.
- Davis, Clinton Turner, and Harry Newman, eds. Beyond Tradition: Transcripts of the First National Symposium on Non-Traditional Casting. New York: Non-Traditional Casting Project, 1988.
- Deboo, Ana. "The Non-Traditional Casting Project Continues into the '90s." The Drama Review. 34 (1990): 188-191.
- Driscoll, F. Paul. "In Review from around the World--New York City." Opera News. 8 Dec. 1990: 61
- Fichandler, Zelda. "Casting For A Different Truth." American Theatre. May 1988: 18-23.
- "Forum: Race And Relationships." American Theatre. Sept. 1992: 24-25, 60-61.
- Gevisser, Mark. "Black Faces, White Masks." Village Voice. 13 Mar. 1990: 103.
- Gill, Glenda E. "Canada Lee: Black Actor in Non-Traditional Roles." Journal of Popular Culture. 25 (1991): 79-89.
- Goldstein, Michael. "The Madness of Nicholas Hytner." Theater Week. 21 Mar. 1994: 15-21.
- Gordon, Joanne. Art Isn't Easy: The Achievement of Stephen



- Sondheim. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1990.
- Gottfried, Martin. Sondheim. New York: Abrams, 1993.
- Grate, Gail. "Actors & Non-Traditional Casting: What Do They Think?" New Traditions. 1.3 (1992): 3-8.
- Heath, Gordon. Deep Are The Roots: Memoirs of a Black Expatriate. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1992.
- Henry, William A. III. "More than Song and Dance." Time. 16 June 1986: 90.
- . "Master of the Musical." Time. 7 Dec. 1987: 80-82.
- Hill, Errol. Shakespeare in Sable: A History of Black Shakespearean Actors. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1984.
- Hill, Errol, ed. The Theatre of Black Americans. New York: Applause Theatre Book, 1987.
- Horn, Miriam and John Lee. "Broadway's Age of Wit and Glitter." US News & World Report. 1 Feb. 1988: 52-54.
- Hornby, Richard. "Interracial Casting." The Hudson Review. 42 (1989): 459-466.
- Hunter, Stephen. "Actor Learns to Survive Stardom." Sunday World Herald [Omaha, NE]. 1 Aug. 1993: 2.
- Jones, Rhett S. "Orderly and Disorderly Structures: Why Church and Sports Appeal to Black Americans and Theatre Does Not." Black American Literature Forum. 25.1 (1991): 43-52.
- Kolin, Philip C. "Williams in Ebony: Black and Multi-racial Productions of A Streetcar Named Desire." Black American Literature Forum. 25.1 (1991): 147-181.
- Larcan, Gary. "Just My Opinion." Theater Week. 4 April 1994: 30-32.
- Lochte, Dick. "No, Not Those Damn Clowns." Los Angeles Magazine. June 1991: 120, 123.
- McCord, Keryl. "Granting Diversity: A Forum with Funders." New Trends. Spring 1994: 5, 8.
- Mitchell, Lofton. Voices of the Black Theatre. Clifton:

- James T. White, 1975.
- Newman, Harry. "Holding Back: The Theatre's Resistance to Non-Traditional Casting." The Drama Review. 33 (1989): 22-36.
- . "Casting a Doubt: The Legal Issues of Nontraditional Casting." The Journal of Arts Management and Law. 19.2 (1989): 55-62.
- O'Brien, Mark and Craig Little, eds. Reimaging America: The Art of Social Change. Philadelphia: New Society, 1990.
- Podhoretz, John. "The American Musical's Last Hope." American Spectator. Mar. 1988: 28-29.
- "Reviews: A Little Night Music." Variety. 27, May 1991: 102.
- Rivers, Amoja Three. Cultural Etiquette: A Guide For The Well Intentioned. Indian Valley: Market Wimmin, 1991.
- Robinson, Marc. "Rights & Passage." American Theatre. Sept. 1992: 18-25.
- Schechner, Richard. "Multiculture at School." The Drama Review. 36.1 (1992): 7-9.
- . "Race Free, Gender Free, Body-Type Free, Age Free Casting." The Drama Review. 33.1 (1989): 4-12.
- Schiff, Stephen. "Deconstructing Sondheim," The New Yorker. 8 March 1986: 76-87.
- Schultz, Roger. "Multicultural Casting Providing Opportunity for Minority Actors While Stimulating Innovative Productions." The Drama Review. 35 (1991): 7-13.
- "Should Non-Ethnic Actors Play Ethnic Roles?" Jet. 3 Sept. 1990: 60-63.
- Simon, John. "Theatre: Pinned In and Pent Up." New York. 20 Aug. 1990: 120-122.
- Sondheim, Stephen. "Words and Music." New York Times Magazine. 4 Sept. 1988: 12.
- Sun, William H. and Faye C. Fei. "The Colored Theatre in Los Angeles." The Drama Review. 36.2 (1992):

173-181.

Woll, Allen. Black Musical Theatre: From Coontown to Dreamgirls. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1989.

Zandan, Craig. Sondheim & Co. New York: Harper, 1986.