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Staging the Race Debate

Flipping the script on race and the Harvard dramatic community

By JILLIAN J. GOODMAN, CRIMSON STAFF WRITER February 22, 2008

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“Cat on a Hot Tin Roof” had already run a full weekend of performances in the Loeb Experimental Theater when directors Allegra M. Richards ’09 and Nathan D. Johnson ’09 saw their show nearly collapse. One of their actors, Delon J. De Metz ’10, was forced to drop out of the second weekend of performances, and the two directors had only three days to find and rehearse a new actor for the role.

On the directors’ behalf, Harvard-Radcliffe Dramatic Club (HRDC) board liaison Simon J. Williams ’09 sent an emergency e-mail to Christian C. Strong ’09, co-president of Black Community and Student Theater (BlackCAST), asking “if BlackCAST would be able to help out a Loeb show in crisis.”

“It is a walk-on role,” Williams wrote in the e-mail, “and not one with dialogue, but it is nonetheless crucial. Please let me know if you can help—we would all be extremely grateful.”

The role was that of a servant, and the directors wanted him to be black.

“It was on a quick, quick time deadline,” Williams says. “I figured the fastest way to get at a pool of actors was to email BlackCAST directly instead of sending indiscriminate mass emails.” As far as he knew, the BlackCAST presidents had no special reaction at all, but in reality Strong and his co-president were disturbed.

“When we receive an e-mail asking to fill the role of black servant, we can do more than that,” Strong says.

“What we immediately found worrisome is not that this is a black servant, but the fact that this is when we get recruited,” co-president Andrew C. Coles ’09 says. “That I found patently offensive, that this is the only time we have been called upon to help cast a role. It made me feel like I was the clearinghouse for black talent. What are we, 1-800-Cast-a-Negro?”

BlackCAST has been active on the Harvard campus since 1960, the beginning of an era that spawned the Black Arts movement and saw playwrights like Amiri Baraka and Edward Bullins employ a new discourse of black nationalism on the stage.

But it’s no longer 1960. The extreme and often violent rhetoric of the Black Arts Movement has faded, and Baraka and Bullins have ceded their territory to less radical theater artists like Suzan-Lori Parks and George C. Wolfe. At Harvard, BlackCAST is thriving, but the theater scene is still principally white. While BlackCAST continues to provide an avenue for black theatrical expression, its members still face the risk of becoming isolated from the broader Harvard dramatic community. Caught in a decades-old dispute between the need to acknowledge and the desire to erase racial differences onstage, BlackCAST struggles to reshape the discourse of race and drama at Harvard.

CAN ART BE COLORBLIND?

Harvard certainly isn’t the only community grappling with the political questions surrounding black theatre. August Wilson, a two-time Pulitzer Prize-winner who is, according to University professor Henry Louis “Skip” Gates, Jr., “the most accomplished black playwright in this nation’s history,” sparked a public debate on the matter with his 1996 speech at the Theatre Communications Group biennial conference.

In this speech before a largely white audience of the nation’s foremost theatrical professionals, Wilson specifically attacked Robert Brustein, theatre critic for *The New Republic* (TNR). Prior to the conference, Brustein had written several articles for TNR and *The New York Times* on the dangers of allowing sociological concerns overtake artistic merit in competitions for public arts grants.

“Brustein’s surprisingly sophomoric assumption that this tremendous outpouring of work by minority artists leads to confusing standards and that funding agencies have started substituting sociological for aesthetic criteria, leaving aside notions like quality and excellence, shows him to be a victim of 19th-century thinking and the linguistic environment that posits blacks as unqualified,” Wilson said.

Brustein shot back immediately. In a piece called “Subsidized Separatism,” he referred to Wilson’s rhetoric as “the language of self-segregation” and pleaded with “minority playwrights to

acknowledge, without any loss of racial consciousness, that they belong, as artists, to the same human family as everyone else.”

In addition to being a critic, Brustein is also the founder of the American Repertory Theater (ART), housed at the Loeb Theater in Harvard Square. According to acting artistic director Gideon Lester, Brustein founded the theater with a “colorblind” philosophy of giving the best actor the best part regardless of his or her race.

While diversity in casting is, Lester says, an institutionalized principle at the ART, he questions whether “non-traditional” casting, in which minority actors fill traditionally white roles, is particularly effective anymore.

“At a time when racial politics were very much at the forefront of the political agenda, it made a great deal of sense to provoke audiences into thinking about plays in new ways by mixing up the racial politics of the casting,” Lester says.

But that time, he says, has passed. “Frankly, once an idea reaches Broadway, it’s an indication that the idea is perhaps a little stale.”

A DIVERSITY OF SKILLS

Lester is referring to the all-black production of Tennessee Williams’ “Cat on a Hot Tin Roof,” a first for Broadway, which began performances February 12. Thanks to the high-profile staging and an A-list cast including James Earl Jones and Phylicia Rashad, the production has already sold out its six-week engagement. But as far as what the production may mean for minority actors, Lester says, “To cast James Earl Jones and Phylicia Rashad is not political, it’s big box office.”

“It’s really interesting that they are doing the show with an all-black cast, since race isn’t one of the forefront issues,” Johnson, a co-director of the Harvard production of “Cat,” says. “It will be interesting to see if they want to bring out the implicit tension that Williams knew was inherent in the play, or whether they will put a greater emphasis than is originally in the text.”

Johnson and Richards, who writes for The Crimson’s magazine, chose to cast the important non-speaking role of the servant in the play as a black man. “When we were auditioning, we would have accepted someone not of color for the role, but when we looked at the cast as a whole, we felt that we had to stick to Williams’ script,” Richards says.

When De Metz dropped out, Johnson and Richards had to look for someone new. “We asked BlackCAST to think of anyone they could to fill the role at the last minute,” Richards says.

“Unfortunately, they never got back to us. We had to replace him with someone who was not of color, who was white.”

For the presidents of BlackCAST, Johnson and Richards’ request was an insult.

“Don’t you dare say to me, ‘You guys need to be more actively involved in coming out to our shows and all of this stuff when you only seek us out when you need a black character. It’s nonsensical,’” Coles says.

If Wilson and Brustein represent two polarized schools of thought—the self-described “race man” and the “colorblind” theatre critic—Coles and Strong fall squarely in the middle. Both of them expressed a desire to promote the works of black playwrights like Wilson, whose corpus might not be as well-known as that of Tennessee Williams. The other part of their mission is to change the way students perceive theatre and its participants, and Coles and Strong have been considering “non-traditional” options for next year’s BlackCAST calendar.

“BlackCAST is a multiracial organization, first and foremost,” Coles says. “All that people seem to know about BlackCAST is that, ‘Oh, you’re that theatre group that only has black people in it and only does black plays.’ Yes, we only do black plays, but the other part of that is completely invalid, and I don’t know where that comes from. A third of our cast for our spring production last year was white, and I think that says something.”

“By the black community it’s very much respected and very much a part of our black life here on campus,” says Christina L. Elmore ’09, who has been acting in BlackCAST shows since the fall of 2005. “But our audiences aren’t necessarily always filled with the mainstream audience.”

Elmore auditioned exclusively for BlackCAST during her freshman fall, something she says has less to do with race and more to do with comfort. According to Elmore, BlackCAST is simply “a warm and welcoming place, not just for a black person.” As Strong puts it, “I’ve seen lot of independent productions within the HRDC, but I find home within Blackcast. There’s family.”

This semester, Elmore chose to turn down the role of Dorothy in BlackCAST’s production of “The Wiz” and instead take the role of Olivia in Hyperion Theater Company’s production of “Twelfth Night.” It was difficult to say no to BlackCAST, she says, but even before the final cast lists went up Elmore talked about the importance of diversifying her experience.

“If I only did Sunken Garden Children’s Theater I would feel limited; if I only did Gilbert & Sullivan I’d feel limited; or if I only did shows by white playwrights and I never did shows written by Hispanics or Asians I’d feel limited,” Elmore says. “I think that people who are considered mainstream—or can’t we just call it white?—doing theatre should audition for BlackCAST. I think that’s all important for everyone.”

TAKING AN ACTIVE STEP

BlackCAST is not a fringe group, nor is it the sole outlet for minority actors on campus; it’s a much more fluid organization. However, its function within the Harvard community remains a pressing issue. Even after 47 years, BlackCAST mingles very little with HRDC. So how can it be better

incorporated into the mainstream campus theatre community?

“I’m a big fan of flipping the questions, because I think so often questions are posed from a majority standpoint,” Coles says. “What happens when the minority is asking the question? Why aren’t HRDC producers coming to us? Saying ‘Hey, I’d like to produce, I’d like to help out, I’d like to be involved?’ I’m saying that the majority needs to take active steps to include those who are not.”

Active steps like “colorblind” or “non-traditional” casting are a start. But, Coles says, nothing short of a frank campus-wide dialogue—one in which the responsibility for creating change is broadly distributed—will ever reconcile the differences between BlackCAST and mainstream Harvard theatre. The same goes for the debate between Wilson and Brustein.

“I am invested in the theatre community here at Harvard,” Coles says. “I am most immediately invested in BlackCAST, but I’m a huge proponent of theatre and art and the effect that it has both to reflect and inform society. And so any move towards bettering the theatre community here at Harvard, whatever steps need to be taken, I am wholeheartedly in support of it.”

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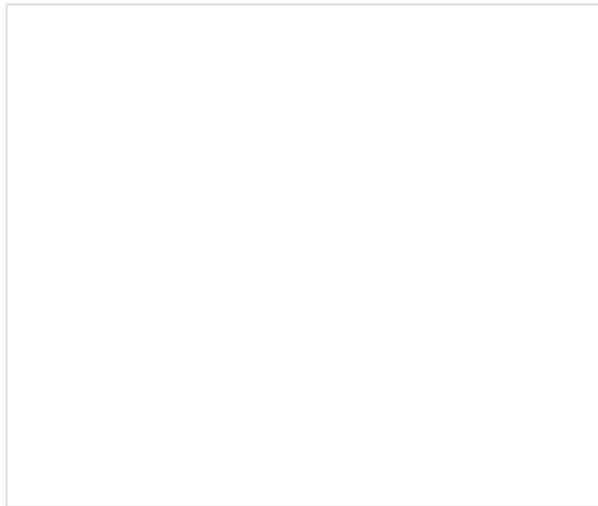
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