

Casting Matters: Colour Trouble in the RSC's *The Orphan of Zhao*

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Casting is bound up in the dynamic relations that constitute the very production of theatre, including directorial interpretation/vision, style/genre, socio-political, economic and historical context of production, the conventions through which an audience objectifies a body, and the relationships between character and actor. The 2012-13 production of *The Orphan of Zhao* offers an invitation to recognise and reassess the significance and impact of casting processes. A play produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) that is not a Shakespeare play, in fact, not even a Western source text but a Chinese one, raises all kinds of issues concerning representation, cultural imperialism, interculturalism and Otherness.

In this article, I seek to argue for the importance of the analysis of casting, to explore why contemporary casting has the capacity to maintain or challenge social, ethnic and racial constructs, to ignite celebration or protest. In the first section, I explore the relationship between the actor's material body, notions of 'self' on stage, and the construction of role. Drawing upon the work of Judith Butler, I suggest that casting produces the materiality of the actor, and, further, that casting functions as a discursive performative speech-act that connects theatre with performance in the everyday. I argue that this is why casting can be so controversial. I apply this framework to Ben Kingsley's portrayal of The Mandarin in the 2013 film *Iron Man 3*, suggesting that the casting of Kingsley is relevant to the construction of textual meaning, facilitating a productively reflexive relationship between actor and role(s).¹ Finally, I explore the RSC's production of *The Orphan of Zhao*, questioning the

¹ *Iron Man 3* (2013), dir. by Shane Black, Walt Disney Studios.

deployment of integrated casting. I argue that British East Asian (BEA) actors were not present in the performance enough for it to live up to the attribution it was accorded in marketing (specifically, ‘the Chinese *Hamlet*’), but the fact that BEA actors were cast *at all* served only to exemplify how casting functions as a tool of discursive power that upholds the socio-economic dominance of whiteness in the theatre industry of twenty-first century Britain.

Mind the Gap: The Actor and the Role

Casting concerns the objectification of bodies. The casting couch, the infamous site of sexual encounter between actor and director/agent, highlights the significance of the (sexual) objectification of actors during auditions, and the power relations that constitute them. As Dean Carey suggests in his audition handbook, when you become an actor you have ‘chosen an art form which [...] uses *you*. *You* are its vehicle. [...] You front up and *become* your own product’.² In casting, the actor’s body is scrutinised as a site of semiotic meaning, the theatrical significance of race, gender, age, physiognomy and physical build of an actor is analysed.

Or is it? Colour-blind casting, a term credited to the American director Joseph Papp in the late 1940s, began as ‘a meritocratic model in which talent trumped all other aspects of an actor’s “personhood”’.³ Rather than focussing on physical attributes, casting considered the actor’s skills and training, even an actor’s attitude and demonstrable engagement with an audition, as a means to ascertain whether a productive collaboration might be fostered between actor and director. Yet, even

² Dean Carey, *Master Class: The Actor’s Audition Manual For Men* (London: Nick Hern Books, 1995), p. 3. The manual for women contains identical text.

³ Ayanna Thompson, ‘Practising a Theory/Theorizing a Practice: An Introduction to Shakespearean Colorblind Casting’, in *Colorblind Shakespeare: New Perspectives on Race and Performance*, ed. by Ayanna Thompson (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 1-26 (p. 6).

colour-blind practices allow for casting based on race in order to safeguard ethnic minority roles, or where it is deemed significant to character and/or text.⁴ Thus, whilst the racial significance of bodies may be emphasised or lessened in different casting practices, bodies *per se* always remain central to the casting process. The actor's physical features, the sound of the body (voice), the movement of the body in space (kinaesthesia), the capacity for theatrical transformation through make-up or costume: all are central to acting, to the body, and, therefore, are also central to casting.

Yet, whilst colour-blind casting is a slippery term, neither the RSC's website and annual report, nor the UK actor's union, Equity, deploy the term colour-blind casting in their literature. Rather, a document on the Equity website published in 2011 asserts its commitment to integrated casting, which it defines as:

- The casting of artists in productions (dance/drama etc.) so that the cast/ensemble, in its entirety, is multiracial in composition.
- Whilst African, Caribbean, South Asian, East Asian, Arabic and other minority ethnic artists continue to be the subject of discrimination they should be given preferential consideration in the casting of parts specifically written as from these ethnic minority groups.
- The casting of performers must be on the basis of their individual abilities as performers regardless of their racial origins.
- The range and type of work is in no way restricted or bounded by stereotypical traditions and conventions.
- The establishment and practice of an equal opportunities programme in every aspect of the entertainment industry.
- The casting of artists in production(s) that exceeds tokenism.

⁴ Ibid.

- Equity acknowledges that the practices known as ‘blacking-up’ and ‘yellow-face’ are offensive to many performers and cannot be justified except in very limited circumstances.⁵

Some parts of Equity’s statement clearly speak to the conception of colour-blind casting as outlined above, in so much as casting judgements should, unless specific circumstances dictate, be made regardless of race, and that casts should be multiracial where possible. But in its insistence on the term ‘integrated casting’ rather than ‘colour-blind’, on a lack of tokenism, and on the preferential treatment for actors from ethnic minority backgrounds in roles that pertain to them, Equity perhaps encourages, as August Wilson argued for, a *consciousness* of colour in casting.⁶ Yet, there is also a paradox in Equity’s statement, for it asserts on the one hand that ‘ethnic artists [...] should be given preferential consideration in the casting of parts specifically written as from these ethnic minority groups’, but that ‘the range and type of work is in no way restricted or bounded by stereotypical traditions and conventions’. I am unconvinced as to how these two seemingly antithetical ideas pertain to each other. Can an actor be given preferential treatment for a part that pertains to an ethnic minority group and, at the same time, resist stereotype? I wonder how often such opportunities present themselves.

It is here that the connection between actor and role raises questions around the actual materiality of the body, and concepts of the ‘self’, character, role and ‘other’. As Collette Conroy argues, ‘the real bodies of real actors are the materials

⁵ Equity, ‘Equity’s policy statement on integrated casting’, 6 April 2011 <<http://www.equity.org.uk/documents/integrated-casting-race/>> [accessed 30 May 2014]. Bullet points as in the original.

⁶ August Wilson, ‘The Ground on Which I Stand’, *Callaloo*, 20.3 (1997), 493-503.

with which we play. There are fictions, but there is also a reality'.⁷ But what is the relationship between fiction (the role) and reality (the actor's body)?

Ultimately, one supposes that the point of integrated casting is to render race irrelevant, to pluralise the representations a body might come to symbolise. But, deciding on the 'irrelevance' of race has implications. As Lisa Anderson has pointed out:

The presence of a black actor on stage recalls other representations, other plays [...]. [T]he meanings of blackness do not disappear simply because a director chooses to pretend that skin colour and race do not signify anything in our culture.⁸

Assuming whiteness to exist as the normative racial force,⁹ integrated casting runs a risk of masking prejudice across history, and in the contemporary, by closing its eyes to colour. Perhaps integrated casting, as Anderson argues, 'requires that we ignore three hundred years of history, or if not ignore them, render them meaningless'.¹⁰ It is indeed convenient for whiteness to wash out colour, to erase history, and to assert theatrical inclusivity as opposed to a genuinely socio-political and economic one. Yet, such a critique supposes that colour-blind casting exists only as a tokenistic practice, whereas 'integration' has, paradoxically, had demonstrably positive effects in raising the cultural *visibility* of actors from some ethnic groups. Such a critique also diminishes the dramatic possibilities for theatre by limiting actors to their ethnicity. Are there theatrical possibilities in the gap between ethnicity and role? Integrated

⁷ Colette Conroy, *Theatre & The Body* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 58.

⁸ Lisa Anderson, 'When Race Matters: Reading Race in *Richard III* and *Macbeth*', in *Colorblind Shakespeare: New Perspectives on Race and Performance*, ed. by Ayanna Thompson (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 89-102 (pp. 93-94).

⁹ Steve Garner, 'Introduction: The Political Stakes of Using Whiteness', in *Whiteness: An Introduction* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), pp. 1-12 (p. 5).

¹⁰ Anderson, 'When Race Matters', pp. 91-92.

casting perhaps suggests that there are, but to explain how, it is first necessary to outline a theoretical framework through which these possibilities might be described.

‘That which matters about an object is its matter’¹¹

In *Bodies that Matter*, Judith Butler asserts that bodies are not ‘simply and only a linguistic effect which is reducible to a set of signifiers’, for ‘such a distinction overlooks the materiality of the signifier itself’.¹² Instead, Butler argues that materiality and discourse are a necessary union, for ‘to know the significance of something is to know how and why it matters, where “to matter” means at once “to materialize” and “to mean”’.¹³

Butler’s suggestion that the very possibility of the material body is enmeshed in discourse is significant to a consideration of the relationship between actor and role. As Conroy points out, ‘Butler sees bodies as always already figured in language. Bodies are not inert lumps of matter that are there to be studied or interpreted but analytical tools to help us articulate and to investigate elements of human behaviour and action’.¹⁴ Thus, if we concur with Butler’s argument that materiality is produced by and through discourse, it follows that casting produces the possibility of bodily materiality on the stage through the act of casting. In other words, without casting, the actor’s body cannot appear on stage.

Yet, there are problems in attempting to apply Butler’s concept of materiality to casting in the relatively straightforward way proposed above. Casting can produce the materiality of the actor on stage, but what about outside the theatre? After all, an

¹¹ Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (London: Routledge, 2011), p. 7.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹⁴ Conroy, *Theatre & The Body*, p. 62.

actor can walk off stage, out into the street, and still quite legitimately call themselves ‘an actor’. We might, therefore, characterise the ambivalent relationship between the actor’s body and its role in theatrical performance as a corporeal battleground between different identities: the actor’s body and the character it carries can never be fully severed.

This raises the question: who is an audience looking at when they see an actor on stage? As Bert States suggests, the actor is:

always slightly “quoting” his [sic] character, though not as Brecht’s actor practices quoting – that is, not as a consciously estranged style. Even if he is quoting in the Brechtian sense there is quotation beyond this quotation. No matter how he acts, there is always the ghost of a self in his performance.¹⁵

The notion of a ‘ghost of the self’ suggests that, to a certain extent, we remain aware that an actor onstage is *performing*, and that there is a ‘real’ actor underneath the make-up – one we might bump into on the bus on the way home from the theatre. Yet, the notion of the real ‘self’ raises practical and theoretical quandaries. What if an actor appears on stage ‘as him/herself’? Might an actor simply be acting as they would in the everyday? Are they heightening a particular trait of their personality? Or have they invented a character to present to the audience as a means to separate their personal and theatrical selves? How would an audience even know? After all, in her essay ‘Imitation and Gender Insubordination’, Butler argues that gender and sexuality exist only as performed constructions which, given that an ‘original’ identity cannot be evidenced, serve to locate the notion of an original, stable, idealized identity only

¹⁵ Bert O. States, ‘The Actor’s Presence: Three Phenomenal Modes’, in *Acting (Re)Considered: A Theoretical and Practical Guide*, ed. by Philip B. Zarilli, 2nd edn (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 23-39 (p. 24).

in the very act of its performance.¹⁶ Thus, what is the ‘reality of the actor’s self’ we see on stage? Butler suggests that this is as performative as any role in the theatre, and, indeed, any actor on the bus. In both contexts, the discourse of materiality and its performance produces identity.

We need, therefore, to understand that casting an actor into a role means connecting two performing entities into one performative context. This can be most keenly observed in actors who have achieved fame: they are recognised both on stage and off. As Marvin Carlson has highlighted, famous actors are oftentimes chosen *because* an audience will recognise them, and this does not necessarily threaten mimesis, and may in fact serve to heighten the theatrical experience.¹⁷ In this sense, the concept of performance residue, the connection to past performances, becomes significant to the progression of an actor’s career, especially when past success can be invoked to generate economic interest in new projects.

However, the impact of typecasting, specifically its curbing effect on the availability of parts for an actor, takes on particular significance when discussing race and representation. It is, perhaps, self-evident that the repeated attribution of particular characteristics to actors, especially when they are of a specific race, is more than ‘ghosting’. In these instances, residue may have real, discernable effects in the social realm, and furthermore, may even play a part in constructing the rules within which a social role must be played. Here, casting not only impacts upon the performance text, but also on the everyday. Thus, if Butler contends that the body is always figured in discourse, then the act of casting, and in the case of famous actors, repeated castings, has an impact that extends beyond the theatre. Casting establishes

¹⁶ Judith Butler, ‘Imitation and Gender Subordination’, in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, ed. by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 722-30.

¹⁷ Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), pp. 85-89.

both a theatrical and a social narrative *through* a body, a narrative that interweaves the aesthetic, cultural, socio-political and economic constructs into a specific moment in history.

How does this narrative take on agency in a specific historical moment? It is, perhaps, productive to consider how a synonym of ‘to cast’ is ‘to mould’. This synonym highlights the linguistic connection between casting in the theatre, and the shaping of bodies to make them discursively meaningful. Perhaps the most succinct means of expressing this is to typify casting as an utterance that has discursively performative effects, in other words, a ‘speech-act’. As J. L. Austin stated in his 1955 essay *How to Do Things with Words*, performative utterances:

have on the face of them the look – or at least the grammatical make-up – of ‘statements’; but nevertheless they are seen, when more closely inspected, to be, quite plainly, *not* utterances which could be ‘true’ or ‘false’ [...] [I]n saying these words we are *doing* something.¹⁸

It is interesting that Austin uses the words ‘face’ and ‘make-up’ in relation to the term ‘statement’. That an actor’s face can manifest itself as symbolically meaningful according to a system of conventions (a kind of visual utterance?) is, perhaps, obvious. Yet, this utterance takes on an emphatic discursive agency, especially when placed within a syntax prescribed by directors, playwrights and casting agents. Within this matrix, casting produces a potent sign in both social and theatrical discourses: it expresses narratives pertaining to nation, community and communal identity, and relations between self and other.

In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler develops her critique through a discussion of Michel Foucault’s analysis of materiality and power. Butler highlights how, for

¹⁸ J. L. Austin, *How to do Things with Words*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), pp. 12-13. Emphasis in original.

Foucault “‘materiality’ designates a certain effect of power or, rather, is power in its formative or constituting effects’.¹⁹ If the production of materiality is both the effect and the assertion of discursive power, then casting – the process of producing the materiality of the actor’s body as a theatrically discursive entity – is bound up to same dynamic. Casting produces bodies in relation to dominant discursive modes and to particular socio-political and economic modes at a specific time in history. In the case of twenty-first century Britain, whiteness and patriarchy, and their relationship to the capitalist economy, remain significant normative forces in the way casting is deployed, and its effects perceived.²⁰

In returning to a general discussion of the ‘famous actor’, the more an actor is known, the more recognised they are, the more money the box office draws in, and the more economically valuable the ‘star’ becomes. Actors who can cultivate a famous ‘self’ enter into, if they are lucky, a sustaining and nourishing economic cycle. Visibility for an actor from an ethnic group is much harder to gain. Authentic casting practices may provide visibility, but they might also confine ethnic minority actors to representing a narrow range of tropes. This makes it more difficult for an actor from an ethnic minority to enter into the economic flow of capital outlined above, and simply become ‘an actor’. In any case, is this actually ever possible, and even desirable?

One of the arguments against the possibility of attaining true colour-blindness is that fact that identity politics remain constrained by dominant (white) ideologies. As Shane Phelan has asserted in relation to lesbian sexuality:

If [...] essentialism is linked to oppression, then [...] essentialism is understandable; when one is presented with a stigmatized identity, it makes sense

¹⁹ Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, pp. 9-10.

²⁰ Garner, ‘Introduction’, p. 5.

to challenge the stigma surrounding that identity. [...] [P]erhaps there is no single core to [...] identity and thus [...] our identities rely on politics rather than ontology – indeed, that ontology is itself an effect of politics.²¹

If identity construction is ultimately a political act that is rooted to the imposition of essentialism, then it is important to examine how theatre constructs ethnic essentialisms in casting.

On the website *Spotlight*, an online database used by performers to market themselves to casting directors in the UK, actors are asked to describe their physical appearance by choosing up to three racial identifiers under the heading ‘normal appearance’. Thus, an actor might assert that they are, for instance, ‘East Asian’, ‘Chinese’ and even ‘Japanese’, even though they were born, and had always lived, in Britain. Although *Spotlight* permits an actor to identify as ‘mixed race’, more nuanced options such as ‘British East Asian’ or ‘Black British’ are not deemed to be relevant: actors are asked to identify according to race (i.e. purely racial characteristics), not ethnicity. At an ideological level, this decision constrains resistance to the repressive ascription of essentialisms described by Phelan. Indeed, if viewed through the lens of whiteness studies, this racial objectification of the actor (which seems to me to be anathema to the project of colour-blindness) may contribute to an essentialised ‘white self/coloured other’ dichotomy, for there is no means to assert a more complex and nuanced ethnic position. An actor cannot be both ‘self’ and ‘other’ in racial terms. On a theatrical level, this approach also implies an ‘authentic’ relationship between physiognomy and character; through *Spotlight*, an actor’s ethnicity *remains* crucial to being invited to audition.

²¹ Shane Phelan, *Getting Specific: Postmodern Lesbian Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), p. 51.

The objectification of the actor raises further sensitive questions about the nature of the body, body image, and body health. For instance, *Spotlight* does not make the disclosure of an actor's weight mandatory. Perhaps weight is not considered a mandatory requirement on *Spotlight* because it is considered malleable. Similarly, disabled actors are asked to identify the nature of their disability according to 15 broad categories, and document anything outside those categories as 'other'. That disability is deemed to be significant to the casting process is also a sensitive issue. Actors may wish to assert a presence through their bodies as a means to challenge normative perceptions of ability and disability, and the question of whether the condition of a body should be read as theatrically significant or not depends on the performer, the work, and the context of the performance.

This raises the question that if casting can be colour-blind, can it also be body-blind? Should it be? When actor Nadia Albina, whose right arm ends at the elbow, was cast as Blanche Dubois in Tennessee Williams's *A Street Car Named Desire* directed by Sean Holmes,²² one blogger apparently described the decision as 'ludicrous'.²³ In her article in *The Guardian*, even Lyn Gardner suggested that 'visible disability can enhance a classic text in fascinating ways, both emotional and political'.²⁴ Perhaps casting is so inculcated with the normative that the notion of body-blindness, of discerning no symbolic correlation between the condition of the body of an actor and the roles they represent, would render the entire casting project obsolete. Such an argument might prove sympathetic to Butler's conclusions, where she suggests that whilst exclusions need to be perpetually overcome, that which sits

²² Secret Theatre Company, *Secret Theatre Show 2 [A Streetcar Named Desire by Tennessee Williams]*, dir. by Sean Holmes, Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith, London, first performed 9 September 2013.

²³ Lyn Gardner, 'My disability helped me understand Blanche DuBois, says Streetcar actor', *Guardian*, 2 June 2014 <<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/jun/02/disabled-actor-plays-blanche-dubois-streetcar-named-desire>> [accessed 5 June 2014].

²⁴ *Ibid.*

outside of discourse must retain its disruptive force.²⁵ For casting to retain its efficacy as a producer and maintainer of discursive power, casting *is obliged to make bodies matter*. Further, as Butler suggests, its exclusory effects necessitate perpetual scrutiny: questions of *who* performs, *for whom*, *how*, and *where*, become central to the analysis of all acts of casting.

In drawing these theoretical strands together, it is important to stress that the relationship between the everyday and the theatrical, between an actor and character, is ontologically performative. Whilst there may be biological facts to a body, it is also a conduit for narrative. Thus, if casting is understood only in terms of corporeal authenticity, that a body must look like the role it plays, this might be framed, as Nascimento argues, as an unwillingness to engage with the inherently performative nature of identity *per se*.²⁶ Nascimento's argument seems to call for a celebration of the performative (and, by implication, of colour-blind casting), but she is less clear about how the socio-political and economic power relations I have outlined above might complicate such performative undertakings. There can be no doubt that exposing the antagonism between the materiality of the actor and the character they portray has the potential to open up a potent site for the deconstruction of identity essentialism. Indeed, Ayanna Thompson has called for analysis that is not 'blind to the actor's race, ethnicity, and/or colour', highlighting instead 'precisely those moments where tensions exist between the performer and the text'.²⁷ But how might this actually happen in practice? Before moving on to *The Orphan of Zhao* and the criticisms this production raised through its casting, I first analyse the casting of The Mandarin in the 2013 film *Iron Man 3*. In doing so, I seek to highlight how the

²⁵ Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, p. 25.

²⁶ Cláudia Tatinge Nascimento, *Crossing Cultural Borders Through the Actor's Work* (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), p. 56.

²⁷ Thompson, 'Practising a Theory', p. 17.

casting of Sir Ben Kingsley – one of only a few British ethnic minority actors who have obtained superstar status – enables the framework I have outlined above to be applied.

‘He’s here, but he’s not here. It’s complicated.’

The television erupts with the sound of white noise. An image flashes across the screen. It shows two crossed swords surrounded by a ring of ten interlinked circles, each with Arabic script written inside. Behind, broad lines of colour signify a television test card. Suddenly, the screen cuts to a man. The upper part of his body is shown, his back to the camera. He is walking away from the hand-held camera, but it follows him, wobbling and jerking. He seems tall, thin, and is wearing a Chinese-styled robe, reminiscent of the formal *xuanduan* gowns worn by Han officials from at least the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368 C.E.). He is either addressing or inspecting a crowd of seated men, all wearing turbans. The location is indistinct, the atmosphere shrouded with dust. Then his face is seen, but as the sun is behind him, details are hard to discern. He is wearing circular sunglasses, has a longish greying beard, and his black hair is arranged in a topknot. ‘Some people call me a terrorist’, announces a voiceover, which we assume to be the voice of the man we see. ‘I consider myself a teacher. America, are you ready for another lesson?’

This is the first entrance of The Mandarin, the arch villain of the first half of *Iron Man 3*, and a figure that evokes both Osama Bin Laden and a Fu Manchu-like Asian villain. The Mandarin was played by the British actor Sir Ben Kingsley, a decision that raised eyebrows before the film’s general release. As Frank Digiacommo posted on the website Movieline:

In the Marvel universe, [T]he Mandarin is the son of one of pre-Revolutionary China's wealthiest men and an English noblewoman, as well as a descendant of Ghengis Khan. So, why ... did the job go to a half-Indian, half-English actor?²⁸

Digiacoimo implies that an actor with at least some East Asian heritage should have played the role. Such demands are not anathema even to colour-blind casting, which, as stated above, allows for casting based on race where it is significant to the character and/or text. Indeed, as documented elsewhere in this Special Issue, given that British East Asian (BEA) actors often feel marginalised during the auditions process, even when roles might pertain to East Asian identities, surely an actor with East Asian heritage should have played The Mandarin? Why *was* Kingsley cast? Certainly, one could point to the fact that Ben Kingsley is a 'brand' with box office appeal. The 'star actor' has economic power, both in terms of securing box office returns, and, as a consequence, greater financial investment in the production as a whole.

Yet, I would argue that there is more to this casting decision than pure economics. It is important to first recognise that, in the narrative of the film, The Mandarin is not all that he seems. He is not, in actual fact, the arch-villain that he appears to be, but the creation of a jobbing actor called Trevor Slattery (also played by Kingsley). Slattery explains that, by virtue of his drug habit, he ended up performing the role for a criminal network in return for more drugs and a wealthy lifestyle. When asked by Tony Stark (Robert Downey Jr.) where The Mandarin is, Slattery insightfully replies: 'he's here, but he's not here. It's complicated'.

²⁸ Frank Digiacoimo, 'Marvel Studios Says Iron Man 3 Villain Isn't Chinese: He's International', *Movieline* <<http://movieline.com/2012/10/22/iron-man-3-ben-kingsley-the-mandarin-not-chinese/>> [accessed 23 January 2014].

This utterance, spoken when The Mandarin is first exposed as a character (as a performance by an actor and not a real villain), highlights a reflexive relationship between the actor (Kingsley), the actor in the film (Slattery), and the character (The Mandarin). In order to analyse this reflexivity in more detail, it is useful to turn to Bert States's discussion of the actor's presence. States identifies three principal modes of acting:

I (actor) = Self-expressive mode
 You (audience) = Collaborative mode
 S/he (character) = Representational mode²⁹

The Self-expressive mode enables the audience to appreciate the artistry of the actor performing the role (the *actor* as character). The collaborative mode places the audience in a state of complicity with the actor; the spectators become active agents in the world of the play (such as in the comedic aside). Finally, the representational mode places emphasis on the actor 'becoming' character (the actor as *character*), and the audience entering the world of the play are positioned as apparently objective spectators. Significantly, States asserts that all three modes of presence may be working collaboratively in the same performance.³⁰ Drawing on States' framework, it can be argued that The Mandarin, Trevor Slattery, and Ben Kingsley, occupy these three modes at various points in the film. At the start, the impact of The Mandarin rests upon accepting the character through the 'representational mode'; as a viewer I am positioned to believe that this character is a credible villain in the narrative. Subsequently, when The Mandarin is revealed to be Trevor Slattery, I am positioned in the 'collaborative mode', laughing at the pretence of the implausibility of Slattery as a credible villain. Yet, I am always aware of the 'self-expressive mode', that

²⁹ States, 'The Actor's Presence', p. 24.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 25-34.

Kingsley is the actor. Sometimes this is relegated to the background: when I first encounter *The Mandarin* the camerawork obscures my reading of him, and I am only given glimpses of his face and body. Once *The Mandarin* is revealed as Trevor Slattery, I am able to recognise the skill of Kingsley as he moves between the two characters he has created with apparent ease, foregrounding the Self-expressive mode. The manipulation of these expressive modes become crucial to the point the film is expressing, for the ‘performance of threat’ connects *The Mandarin* to the televised broadcasts of Osama Bin Laden. Yet, the revelation that *The Mandarin* is ‘just’ an actor implies that such mediated threats can be subject to manipulation, perhaps even to work in the service of domestic politics.

In analysing the relevance of Kingsley’s appearance, it is clear that his own ethnicity, history and experience, provides another layer of reflexivity to this discussion of identity performance, including in the everyday. Kingsley was born in North Yorkshire with the name Krishna Pandit Bhanji, the son of an Indian doctor of Gujarati decent. Kingsley has openly admitted that adopting a stage name that sounded more ‘English’ was significant to opening doors at the start of his career.³¹ Given his track record,³² Kingsley was cast for a number of reasons, including his star status, his reputation as a classical actor, and the possibility of a playful mockery of that reputation through the character of Trevor Slattery (itself a product of, and a marked exhibition of, Kingsley’s technical skill). Yet, Kingsley’s background gives a deeper resonance to the ethnic pretence and processes of casting already inherent in the choice of him as *The Mandarin*. Kingsley’s reflexive performance, a kind of

³¹ Cole Moreton, ‘The Dark Family Secret That Drove Ben Kingsley To Success’, *Daily Mail*, 21 May 2010 <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/home/moslive/article-1277638/Ben-Kingsley-The-dark-family-secret-drove-success.html>> [accessed 23 January 2014].

³² Kingsley cemented his reputation through a fifteen-year stretch at the RSC, participating in productions such as *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (dir. by Peter Brook, 1971) and *Hamlet* (dir. by Buzz Goodbody, 1975).

‘racial crossing’, deconstructs ethnic stereotypes, and argues both for the performance of ethnicity in the everyday, and the possibility of its contestation. Indeed, as The Mandarin jeeringly asserts in *Iron Man 3*, ‘true story about fortune cookies. They look Chinese. They sound Chinese. But they’re actually an American invention. Which is why they’re hollow, full of lies, and leave a bad taste in the mouth’. Thus, the film draws attention to the fact that ethnic signifiers are manifestly theatrical.

Kingsley’s casting in the role of The Mandarin highlights how an acknowledgement of colour in colour-blind casting can serve to productively open the gap between actor and role. The casting of Kingsley was, therefore, a discursive act that materialised his body through the performance of a number of destabilising identity narratives. Interestingly, whilst there was much discussion of the casting of Kingsley in the role before the film was released, there was little criticism afterwards. It would seem that the ethnic pretence offered by Kingsley was too knowingly reflexive to sustain charges of racism.

The Reification of Identity in the RSC’s *The Orphan of Zhao* (2012)

The same cannot be said for the RSC’s 2012-13 production of *The Orphan of Zhao*, which ignited controversy and protest, before and after its premiere. Protests began on social media, but in October 2012 the press picked up on the story, with articles appearing in *The Stage*, *Guardian*, and *Huffington Post*.³³ The debacle was

³³ See: Alistair Smith, ‘East Asian actors call for public forum to discuss casting concerns’, *The Stage*, 30 October 2012 <<http://www.thestage.co.uk/news/2012/10/east-asian-actors-call-for-public-forum-to-discuss-casting-concerns/>> [accessed 16 July 2014]; Matt Trueman, ‘Royal Shakespeare Company under fire for not casting enough Asian actors’, *Guardian*, 19 October 2012 <<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2012/oct/19/royal-shakespeare-company-asian-actors>> [accessed 16 July 2014]; ‘“The Orphan of Zhao” Controversy: East Asian Actors Demand Apology from Royal Shakespeare Company’, *Huffington Post*, 31 October 2012 <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/31/east-asian-actors-address-_n_2050353.html?utm_hp_ref=uk&ir=UK> [accessed 16 July 2014].

subsequently mentioned in most reviews of the production. If casting an ex-RSC actor in *Iron Man 3* can be used to evade charges of racism through performative reflexivity, why was *The Orphan of Zhao* different? In order to explore this, I analyse my own experiences of witnessing the performance to argue that the marketing of the production laid the RSC bare to charges of cultural imperialism. As a consequence, I propose that integrated casting – if it was really achieved – served to further locate the play in an authentic paradigm, which closed down the theatrical gap between actor and role(s).

In casting the *A World Elsewhere* season, the RSC met with the basic demands of Equity's call for integrated casting. Actors of Black-British and Middle-Eastern ethnicity were cast alongside three BEA actors, who were, themselves, of different ethnicity: Scottish-Chinese, British-South-East Asian and British-Eurasian of Japanese descent. Given that the majority of the cast played more than one character, it would seem that the audience were not expected to read the relationship between actor and role as authentic. So, what was it about this production that seemed to anger other BEA actors?

After all, BEA actors *were* present, and in all three plays in the season. In fact, the RSC might have been commended for staging *The Orphan of Zhao* as a means of bringing the history of drama in China to the attention of British audiences. There can be no doubt that the RSC gave new emphasis to a play that is key to the Chinese dramatic canon, but was unfamiliar to a general theatre-going audience in Britain. Further, the integrated casting of Shakespeare plays might be argued to have a universalising effect. If Shakespeare is both 'universal' and 'timeless', then assembling racially diverse integrated casts might support such claims. By adopting integrated casting processes in *The Orphan of Zhao*, it could be argued that the play,

like Shakespeare, might also transcend cultural specificity. Chinese culture was thus empowered to enter the common culture of humanity.

Gregory Doran dubbed the play in his introductory programme notes ‘the Chinese *Hamlet*’.³⁴ This problematic attribution, which was subsequently cited in many discussions of the play in newspapers and in advertising, positioned *The Orphan of Zhao* as significant *through* its contemporaneous relationship to Shakespeare (despite the play being attributed to Ji Junxiang, who lived some 300 years earlier). Although one might be tempted to dismiss this attribution as nothing more than marketing gimmickry, Shakespearean references were abundant in the staging of the play itself. Towards the beginning of Scene Two, the villain of the play Tu’an Gu, played by Joe Dixon, introduced himself and then stated that ‘to be powerful, one must be feared, really feared’.³⁵ In the performance I witnessed,³⁶ Dixon inserted a pause, turning the line into ‘to be... powerful, one must be feared, really feared’. As he said ‘To be’, Dixon raised his right arm, which was holding his helmet, and extended it outwards, evoking the iconic image of Hamlet holding Yorick’s skull. The audience recognised this iconic symbol, and laughed. Further, in Scene Four of the play, an assassin was sent to kill the Head of the Zhao household, Zhao Dun, and, in a strikingly similar moment to Act Three, Scene Three, of *Hamlet*, he cannot commit the murder because he finds Zhao Dun on his knees, praying before incense. In Scene 19, the orphan of Zhao was finally reunited with his mother, the Princess, who had been confined to a palace for most of the action of the play. The script suggests that the Princess may have gone mad, and the production implied visual parallels between Ophelia and the Princess, the latter dressed in white, carrying

³⁴ Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC), *The Orphan of Zhao*, dir. by Gregory Doran (adapted by James Fenton) The Swan Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, 14 December 2012, Theatre Programme, n. p.

³⁵ James Fenton, *The Orphan of Zhao* (London: Faber & Faber, 2012), p. 5.

³⁶ RSC, *The Orphan of Zhao*, dir. by Gregory Doran, The Swan Theatre, first performed 30 October 2012. Performance witnessed: 14 December 2012, 7.30pm.

flowers and walking listlessly with a vacant expression. Although I witnessed the performance in the middle of the run, these references appeared to be too systematic to have crept in organically across the season. One is left to speculate as to whether *The Orphan of Zhao* was considered of interest because it related to Shakespeare, the yardstick of choice for measuring the worth of the ‘Other’.

If the play was not the real *Hamlet* but a *Chinese Hamlet*, then the existence of any BEA actors in the cast raised questions of cultural ownership and the spectre of authenticity: why were all the actors not BEA? I argue that integrated casting created an absent-presence for BEA actors in *The Orphan of Zhao*. BEA actors were not in the production enough to be able to claim it as East Asian, and thus the Chinese *Hamlet* attribution faltered at the level of casting. Yet, perhaps more controversially, that BEA actors were in it at all meant that integrated casting could not dispel racial authenticity. It strikes me as impossible to read East Asian physiognomy as insignificant in the ‘Chinese *Hamlet*’. Rather, the presence of BEA actors authenticated the significance of race in *The Orphan of Zhao*, preventing the kind of reflexive relationship between actor and character explored above in relation to Kingsley.

As the casting ‘de-integrated’, so the roles that BEA actors performed were scrutinised. In a comment piece on *The Guardian* website, Anna Chen, a BEA writer, poet, journalist and broadcaster argued that:

This 13th-century Yuan-dynasty masterpiece may be the first Chinese play to make it to the hallowed RSC, but the only parts given to actors of east Asian heritage are two dogs. And a maid-servant. Who dies. Tragically.³⁷

³⁷ Anna Chen, ‘Memo to the RSC: east Asians can be more than just dogs and maids’, *Guardian*, 22 October 2012 <<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/oct/22/royal-shakespeare-company-east-asians>> [accessed 8 February 2014].

To be fair to the RSC, BEA actors played a wider number of roles in the production than Chen suggested. Some roles had emotional significance for the play, such as Chris Lew Kum Hoi in the role of Dr. Chen Ying's son, who, murdered in place of the Zhao orphan, is re-united as a ghost with his father at the end of the play. Yet, in other instances, Hoi and the Scottish-Chinese actor Siu Hun Li simply sat in opposite corners of the stage, making gurgling noises to accompany the baby orphan as he was passed from one adult character to the next. The placement of these actors to the side, their lack of lines, and their literal infantilization, physicalized the decontextualization of the play from its context, privileging other ethnicities with the right to speak. Indeed, during the performance I witnessed, when the actor Siu Hun Li finally did deliver a line (somewhere in the second half), and did so with a Scottish accent rather than the 'Chinglish' so often stereotypically ascribed to Chinese characters in British popular culture, the audience literally gasped. In a 'Chinese Shakespeare', BEA actors might reasonably be considered to be playing 'authentically Chinese characters', and it was within this context that the very idea of BEA actors playing 'dogs and maids' seemed, to some critics, to appear to be racist.³⁸

Perhaps the most problematic moment of staging in this respect came in Scene 19, where the Zhao orphan and his 'father', Tu'an Gu, went hunting. The actors of these two roles, Jake Fairbrother and Joe Dixon, climbed on to the back of Hoi and Li, both of whom pretended to be their horses. If integrated casting had been successful in rendering race irrelevant to the production, such an image would have passed by as nothing more than playful, non-realistic, staging. Yet, in the context of the Chinese *Hamlet*, race *had* become significant, and the cast literally riding on the back of BEA actors became a powerful metaphor both for the production's deployment of East

³⁸ See, for example, Letters from the Mezzanine, 'Is the Royal Shakespeare Company Racist?', 19 October 2012 <<http://lettersfromthamezz.com/2012/10/19/is-the-royal-shakespeare-company-racist/>> [accessed 8 July 2014].

Asian signifiers in marketing, the staging of the play, and the noticeable absence of East Asian actors in leading roles.

Furthermore, cultural homogenisation was discernable in the inexplicable appearance of a Japanese Ninja warrior in Act One, who became the assassin at the request of the villainous Tu'an Gu. Perhaps integrated casting was supposed to express the inclusive ideologies of what Gerald Delanty has defined as British liberal communitarian multiculturalism – that is, multiculturalism that is not sanctioned by the state, but where difference is recognised but a dominant group remains, symbolised by the concept of the 'salad bowl'.³⁹ In doing so, it also confirmed the centrality of whiteness (through the invocation of Shakespeare) as the dominant force that constructs otherness in this particular branch of multiculturalism.⁴⁰ This homogeneity was expressed through the reduction of East Asian representation to a compound of stock references (such as the Ninja) for the consumption of audiences patronising The Swan Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon.

Perhaps the controversy ultimately arose from a genuine disparity between the artistic decisions underpinning *The Orphan of Zhao*, and the way in which those decisions were interpreted. Such discrepancies are not uncommon, and have been observed by Angela Pao, who has suggested that:

Felicitous reception derives from a tacit agreement between practitioners and audience members to accept the exaggerated divergence between reality and representation on stage that this particular form of non-traditional casting entails. If the protocols to be applied are not clearly indicated, even the most willing spectators can be confused about whether the matching of actors of one race with characters of another is incidental or central to the production concept.⁴¹

³⁹ Gerald Delanty, *Community* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 102.

⁴⁰ Garner, 'Introduction', p. 5.

⁴¹ Angela Pao, 'Ocular Revisions: Re-casting *Othello* in Text and Performance', in *Colorblind Shakespeare: New Perspectives on Race and Performance*, ed. by Ayanna Thompson (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 27-46 (p. 27).

In the instance of *The Orphan of Zhao*, Pao's analysis provides some context to the dynamics of the argument; of why the RSC stood by, and why BEA artists felt so justified in criticising, the artistic decisions behind *The Orphan of Zhao*.

Yet, this particular case also brings some of the broader questions around integrated casting, most specifically whether it can ever be really 'integrated', to the fore. For instance, the casting of David Oyelowo as Henry VI by the RSC in 2000⁴² – the first time a Black actor had been cast in the role of a King in a Shakespeare play – was celebrated by some as a landmark moment in the casting of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) actors.⁴³ But if casting is supposed to be integrated, then should it matter who plays whom? The fact is that, all too frequently, it *does* matter, and this suggests that integrated casting is at its most effective only in those instances when the acting company can be most differentiated. In other words, and despite the rhetoric, integrated casting is most fêted when it highlights its own processes, when it 'de-integrates' the cast to shine a light on the *differences* between the ethnicity of actors as a means to draw attention to its own casting choices as socially progressive. As a result, I would argue that integrated casting practices actually demonstrate the normative power of whiteness, for as long as integrated casting elicits any kind of comment on the choices that are made (the first *black* Shakespearean King etc.), it cannot achieve the integration it supposedly seeks. Undoubtedly, this troublesome dynamic fuelled *The Orphan of Zhao* controversy because some critics felt that the process of casting had denied BEA actors their 'moment'.

⁴² Royal Shakespeare Company, *Henry VI* (dir. by Michael Boyd), The Swan Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, first performed 30 November 2000.

⁴³ See, for instance, Fiachra Gibbons, 'RSC casts black actor as English king for first time' *Guardian*, 19 September 2000, <<http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2000/sep/19/fiachragibbons>> [accessed 8 July 2014].

Thus, whilst we can read the integrated casting of *The Orphan of Zhao* as an effect of ‘salad bowl’ multiculturalism (further reflected in the RSC’s decision to stage the *A World Elsewhere* season), we can interpret the failure of integrated casting as an expression of marginalisation of BEA’s in British theatre. If BEA actors were cast to the edges of the stage in *The Orphan of Zhao*, then this is not integrated casting, and more a material reality of BEA’s access to British theatre and its canon. To paraphrase Butler, if casting ‘matters’, the latter meaning ‘at once “to materialize” and “to mean”’,⁴⁴ then *The Orphan of Zhao* espoused the dominance of whiteness. Indeed, there is greater significance to the casting of *The Orphan of Zhao* if it is viewed as non-traditional. As Thompson suggests, non-traditional casting is where ‘actors of colour have been cast in roles traditionally associated with race, colour, or ethnicity in order to make socio-political statement about the character’s subjugation, outsider status, untraditional knowledge, and so on’.⁴⁵ If we consider non-traditional casting as a discursive act that produces bodies as meaningful, then the placing of BEA actors as subservient to the main action in *The Orphan of Zhao* was a highly charged act, expressing BEA actor’s subjugation and outsider status in British theatre practice.

Casting Still Matters

In drawing conclusions from the above case studies, it is important to note the ontological differences between *Iron Man 3* and *The Orphan of Zhao*. Film is a form often associated with realism, a term that, in media studies, describes the:

⁴⁴ Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, p. 7.

⁴⁵ Thompson, ‘Practising a Theory’, p. 7.

relationship between representation and a physical social ‘reality’ exterior to such representations. Realism may be applied to fictions as well as non-fictions, because realism does not imply that what has been represented is true and ‘real’ in all aspects.⁴⁶

Interestingly, Kingsley’s portrayal engaged playfully with different layers of realism, even the subversion of an expectation for realism, in *Iron Man 3*. The conceptual framework that underpinned Kingsley’s performance was more performatively reflexive – one might even say, more theatrical, and certainly more corporeally intercultural – than might be expected from a Hollywood action film. Indeed, the way the film’s narrative facilitated the unravelling of different layers of performativity, across different cultural reference points, could be considered akin to the deconstructive approach of theatre companies such as The Wooster Group (the performance of Japanese Kabuki-inspired dance by a cross-dressing actor in black face in *The Emperor Jones* being an obvious example). Thus, Kingsley’s performance might be regarded, perhaps, as the first example of deconstructive yellowface in film.

If Kingsley’s own identity performance became relevant to *Iron Man 3*, this was partly the result of his fame, and partly his appearance in film texts that facilitated a discussion of his own background. I refer specifically to Kingsley’s portrayal of Gandhi in the 1982 biographical film of the same name directed by Richard Attenborough, which enabled Kingsley’s ethnic heritage to be popularly explored in relation to his casting in the film.⁴⁷ That both *Gandhi* and *Iron Man 3* can be viewed repeatedly means that they stay in the public consciousness for far longer than a theatre performance, and the residue of character may be attached to the actor for a longer period of time.

⁴⁶ Torben Grodal, ‘The Experience of Realism in Audiovisual Representation’, in *Realism and ‘Reality’ in Film and Media*, ed. by Anne Jerslev (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2002), pp. 67-92 (p. 68).

⁴⁷ *Ghandi* (1982), dir. by Richard Attenborough, UCA Studios.

Of course, some BEA actors have broken through into mainstream cinema (for instance, Benedict Wong appeared in Danny Boyle's 2007 film *Sunshine*,⁴⁸ and Ridley Scott's 2012 film *Prometheus*⁴⁹) and the situation continues to improve for some. Yet, only a handful of BEA actors would be recognised for their work in British theatre, and fewer still would be recognized internationally, and whilst some BEA actors are experienced, many are at the start of their careers. Is this a question of quality? Maybe. Did this make it difficult for the RSC to cast more BEA actors than they did? Perhaps. Ultimately, however, the number of BEA actors in the cast of *The Orphan of Zhao* is not really what is at stake.

After all, it is possible to argue that the choice to deploy integrated casting corporeally embodied the fact that *The Orphan of Zhao* was an adaptation, by attempting to move away from authentic casting. Yet, one might equally argue that this approach simply made *The Orphan of Zhao* a *British* play about China, with the eradication of difference through the decontextualizing process of its adaptation. Indeed, as Amanda Penlington has pointed out in relation to a number of British productions of Shakespeare, 'despite casting actors of different ethnic origins, references to other cultures (both in appearance and voice) are reduced and 'neutralized' in the service of the dominant English discourse (whose accent is located as middle-class home countries)'.⁵⁰ Did the RSC *really* put on the Chinese *Hamlet* they claimed to?

Perhaps the representation of BEA actors in the production became politically charged precisely because the RSC is such a significant global theatre institution. Some members of the BEA acting community felt that the RSC had done them an

⁴⁸ *Sunshine* (2007), dir. by Danny Boyle, Twentieth Century Fox.

⁴⁹ *Prometheus* (2012), dir. by Ridley Scott, Twentieth Century Fox.

⁵⁰ "'Not a man from England" Assimilating the Exotic 'Other' Through Performance, from *Henry IV* to *Henry VI*, in *This England, That Shakespeare: New Angles on Englishness and the Bard*, ed. Willy Maley and Margaret Tudeau-Clayton (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), pp. 165-84 (p. 179).

injustice, had paid lip service to Equity's minimum requirements, and operated a tokenistic casting policy that denied actors preferential treatment in relation to roles that could be seen to relate to their ethnicity. Yet, this is also a problematic argument to propose, especially since the contestation of BEA identity tropes is only just beginning to filter into academic circles, let alone into the consciousness of the general theatre-going public. In other words, in attempting to claim cultural ownership of a thirteenth century Chinese play, BEA actors risked wilful submission to authentic casting practices, marking themselves as the *Chinese* purveyors of Chinese culture, rather than British, British Chinese, British East Asian, or the myriad identity positions that in reality construct any ethnic grouping. If, as Phelan suggests, power relations construct visibility through essentialism, then the idea of casting BEA actors in a *Chinese* play at the RSC was a double-edged sword that promised cultural stereotyping as much as it offered visibility and the chance of work with a global theatre institution.

Paradoxically, and despite the protests, only by casting BEA actors in non-Asian roles might this situation change. If actors of any ethnic heritage can perform plays from East Asia, then it follows that BEA actors can play any role in British theatre. Currently, this is rarely the case, and until a BEA actor takes a leading role in a West End production of a quintessentially British play, as opposed to the authentic casting deployed in productions such as Lucy Kirkwood's *Chimerica*,⁵¹ I remain sceptical that integrated casting has really achieved all that much for BEAs. Ultimately, therefore, what is at stake in *The Orphan of Zhao* controversy is the invitation to assess the dramaturgical possibilities for highlighting ethnic performativity, and to eschew reductive casting practices that assert authenticity

⁵¹ Almeida co-production with Headlong, *Chimerica*, dir. by Lyndsey Turner, Almeida Theatre, London. First performed 20 May 2013; transferred to Harold Pinter Theatre, London, first performed 6 August 2013.

between actor and role. But it also invites an argument about power; an argument against the dominance of whiteness – a dominance that seems to uphold the white actor as an apparently colourless blank canvas (a true colour-blindness), but seems to relegate BEA actors to the paradigm of racially authentic casting. To move forward, what works for one must now work for the Other.