

Directing Actors of Color in White Classic Texts:
Tony Award Winner Ron Simons and Justin Emeka in Conversation

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In reference to Offering 5 – “Seeing Shakespeare through brown eyes”

by Justin Emeka in *Black Acting Methods: Critical Approaches*

Abstract:

Justin Emeka and Tony Award winning producer Ron Simons discuss the importance of cultural specificity when directing and teaching acting. Emeka asserts that directors must ask actors to bring their full selves and cultural heritage into the rehearsal room. With this request, actors are able to work with all of the tools in their ‘tool box’ and they have the resources of their mind, body and spirit within their reach.

Ron: Although we were never in graduate school together, we both attended the University of Washington School of Drama at critical times in our lives. I finished the acting program a year before you started the directing program. What led you to pursue an MFA in directing?

Justin: Well, I had been directing and acting in Seattle for about seven years after I graduated from Oberlin College. There weren’t a lot of opportunities for directors and actors of color so I was self-producing mostly, as well as teaching and directing in public schools. It was the 90s and Hip-hop was in its golden years. Working with friends from around

the way, though none of us really knew how to run an organization, we started a theatre company called Jungle Creations and developed what we called original Hip-hop theatre productions using original scenes, spoken word, songs, and dance that we performed in night clubs, community centers, and schools. It was a very inspiring time as an artist but ultimately proved financially unsustainable. When I became a father and a husband, I had to think more strategically about how I could support myself and my family as an artist. One occasion I was invited to attend a special master class for promising local directors with the legendary English director Peter Brook who was in Seattle with a touring production of *Hamlet* that he directed featuring Adrian Lester in the title role. It was an amazing experience exploring the craft of directing with Brook and the group. Towards the end of the workshop I asked Mr. Brook how his vision of the production was impacted by having a Black man play Hamlet. Being from outside the US, he seemed somewhat unsure of what I was asking him to respond to and it led to a passionate, electric, and at times contentious exchange among all of us in the room. At the end of the session one of the University of Washington professors of directing, Valerie Curtis-Newton, who was in attendance, strongly encouraged me to consider applying for their graduate directing program--which I had never thought of as an option. After talking about it with my wife, I decided to apply and was very happy to be accepted.

Ron: That was an extremely competitive process--the school only accepted two directing students every other year. You and your classmate, Lydia Fort, made up the first all African-American directing class. Did that mean anything to you?

Justin: That meant a lot. I took and still take great pride in that fact. I am one, as you know, that tends to recognize the significance of race wherever I am. I am not a director that struggles to be seen as "just a director." I unapologetically recognize myself as a Black director in the American theatre. However, I might challenge your understanding of what you think I mean when I say that.

Ron: What do you mean when you say you are a Black director?

Justin: Well its use is really more significant of the context of the work. As Malcolm X said, “being from America made me extremely sensitive to matters of color.” Working in the American theatre, has made me acutely aware of my own Blackness as an artist. This is not in regards to what kind of work I can and can’t do—as I believe people often see Blackness as a limitation—which it is not. It just means the experience of being Black informs my perspective unapologetically and informs how I see the world as well as how I approach my art. How it impacts my work changes from project to project, yet is always for me to decide. The possibilities within Blackness are as numerous as the experiences of Black people on this planet—which I believe are infinite. In America, our identity is shaped by many things, for me none of them are more important than race. My Blackness does not limit me or dictate what I can and cannot do, as much as it informs how and even why I do it.

Ron: As a Black director, did going to a predominantly White school of drama scare or intimidate you?

Justin: To be honest, yes. I wasn’t sure if it was where I was supposed to be.

Ron: What were you afraid of?

Justin: That I would lose something by going to graduate school; that I would lose an essential part of myself, I think. It must have been on my face anyway, because I remember at an early event where I was introduced to the whole school, a young professor—Venus Opal Reese, an extraordinary sister who was teaching theatre history to undergraduates at UW--I remember she pulled me aside and told me that I shouldn’t be scared of being here and the education I might receive. She told me she could sense my apprehension and encouraged me to see this as an opportunity to become more of who I am and not less. All I needed was faith in myself.

Ron: That is powerful advice.

Justin: It was just what I needed to hear. In many ways her words allowed me to give myself permission to be who I am in the walls of the academy.

Ron: In your recent essay “Seeing Shakespeare Through Brown Eyes” you say, “Great authors often regaled with the title ‘classic playwrights,’ tell a ‘classic’ story that is exclusive to a unique cultural framework that can often be defined by “Whiteness.” What do you mean “defined by Whiteness?”

Justin: To say it simply and plainly, they are writing stories about White people. The characters are all White, even though their race may never be mentioned by the author, they exist very specifically within the confines of a White experience. Now, in making such a statement it is not my intention to try and identify the boundaries of what is and isn't White, but rather to acknowledge the existence of Whiteness as a cultural reality that shapes and informs identity, as well as aesthetic. Whiteness is as diverse as it is specific—just like Blackness. Often times, we don't recognize or discuss Whiteness because we are not trained to see it. Whiteness is often mistaken for “universal.” So that a play by William Shakespeare or Tennessee Williams is no more or less universal than a play by Dominique Morisseau or Ntozake Shange. They all use characters shaped by a very specific cultural perspective to reveal the universal experience of human emotions. And so just as August Wilson, Lorraine Hansberry, and Wole Soyinka may all be considered Black Theatre of sorts; Ibsen, Chekov, and Miller may all be known as White theatre.

Ron: Don't we have to be careful in calling them White plays because that may imply that only White people can perform them?

Justin: Yes, there will likely be those who hear that in what I'm saying, but that is not my intention. For artists and audiences alike, I believe it's important to recognize the specificity of the source. Art is inclusive even while being specific. Like food, for example—when we say Chinese food, we don't take that to mean it is food only eaten or prepared by Chinese people—we all can enjoy it. And if I make some good Chinese food in my home—I can't then say it is no longer Chinese just because I made it. Art is meant to be shared, but it is important to recognize the source even as its influence evolves. There are many different kinds of Chinese food in America, some of which don't even come from China.

Ron: This is true.

Justin: As we talk of art, I think there is a fear of becoming boxed inside any one term. But our identity is fluid even while being fixed. The terminology we use is only relative to how specific we want to be and what conversation we want or need to have in any given moment. There are times when it is necessary to speak of women's theatre, or New York theatre, or South African theatre, or high school theatre—yet it's all theatre, the first word is just an adjective to define the context for our discussion. In my own experience, I have encountered a particular aversion to talking about race as it relates to theatre that I try to address in my work.

Ron: You note in your own practical experience that a Black actor who is asked to participate in color-blind casting is often required to deny their cultural aesthetic as a reference point for the sake of becoming “race neutral” or “universal.” Are you suggesting that Black actors who find themselves colorblind cast are actually being treated unfairly in a sense because their White actors are not being asked to deny their cultural history?

Justin: That may be one way to say it, but for me it is not so much about fair and not fair as it is about recognizing what works and what doesn't work. When a Black actor is cast in a color-blind production if race is not addressed as it relates to character, they may be working without access to all the resources that will help them deliver an honest and successful performance. As a director, I am most concerned with leading a rehearsal process that allows and encourages all actors to do their best work.

Ron: Do you think there is something about actors of color that can uniquely help them interpret White classic texts?

Justin: Yes, I believe there is something wonderful within all actors that uniquely prepares them to interpret classic texts, and that is their own experience, memory, and imagination---those are the actor's greatest resources. An actor must have full confidence and permission to fully engage them while creating character and pursuing action onstage. Ultimately, this discussion we are having is about encouraging actors of color to

look within and take full advantage of the genius that lies within. If there is no agreement as to the function of race, some black actors can subtly become absorbed in a strange sort of imitation of, for lack of a better word, “whiteness” because they don’t have permission to bring their full self to the process.

Ron: That’s interesting. Are you saying that Black actors need permission to be Black in a White classic play?

Justin: Well, culturally speaking, yes. White theatre is culturally specific and as Black actors and other actors of color are integrated into these plays it is important to be conscious and deliberate about what this means. Some people feel this jeopardizes the original intention of the playwright and shouldn’t be done. I strongly disagree. Even though I recognize it potentially changes how the audience will experience the play—I believe this is no different than every new cast and production team that engages in bringing a script to life. Each new collective of artists brings exciting, new dimensions that come from their own individual personalities, experience, and vision that impact how the characters are shaped and ultimately how the story is delivered to the audience. A challenge or goal of any rehearsal process is to effectively engage the unique qualities and skills of the artists involved. So a play that was written in Russia is not going to be the same play when it is performed by Americans in America. Does that mean it shouldn’t be done? Of course not. That is what is so exciting about theatre; the creativity of how a text is revealed within the context of a unique community. I think some people don’t want to think that hard about race, but there is no way to be completely neutral, no way to force the audience to completely ignore their perspective of race. So the production team is wise to make conscious choices about how they want the audience to think about race in the world of their production.

Ron: So then do you think that every facet of the production must undergo a change when incorporating race and culture into a vision for a production, and if so who is responsible for leading that research and discussion—the dramaturg?

Justin: I believe the presence of Black culture has the potential to re-define everything it touches—so it might change how the play sounds, how it looks, how it feels. The director is ultimately responsible for making sure every facet of the production is clear in telling the story; so creating a vision for how we integrate unique cultural presence into the production--this is the director's responsibility. The dramaturg, the actors, the designers, must bring their talents and ideas to the table, but the director must ultimately make the decisions to create a unified collective expression. This is essentially the craft of directing.

Ron: What advice would you give young directors of color who are interested in directing classical work through the lens of Black and Brown actors?

Justin: In addition to reading more plays and directing as much as possible, I think an essential part of director training for Black and Brown artists is for them to take at least some time to immerse themselves in experiences that help provide self-awareness. To spend time reading and studying the “classic” stories buried in the cultural history of their families and friends—to gain a stronger sense of self as each one defines. To build a foundation, in addition to learning from the canon of the majority culture. It is essential to study the legacy and traditions that we feel a personal and emotional connection to. We have to make space in our life to listen and experience the complex rhythms, music, and movement of the people we hope to reflect onstage.

Ron: As a producer I have seen how so much of what stories get to be told is determined by producers. In this way, producers serve as gate keepers and are often reluctant to produce classic work populated with Black and Brown actors because there is a fear that audiences will not accept them.

Justin: Yes, it is important to recognize that audiences have been trained not to empathize with Black pain, Black love, Black life onstage.

Ron: How do we teach audiences to do that?

Justin: I think our theatres—artists and producers--must invest in the idea that Black life matters onstage and off. In this way, the Black Lives Matter movement is more than just a momentary reaction of political protest, but a movement to encourage us to celebrate Black humanity in every facet of our nation.

Ron: How do you think the Black Lives Matter movement informs our specific conversation we are having today about theatre?

Justin: Well, historically the American theatre was not only used as a tool to ignore Black life, but actually to assault it. Minstrelsy, was the first truly American form of theatre and was used as a way to denounce the humanity of Black people--justify their enslavement and oppression, even while entertaining the nation. As minstrelsy declined and other forms of drama arose, Black stories, Black lives were deliberately ignored or marginalized in roles that were virtually invisible or expendable—teaching audiences that Black people were unworthy of our full attention and empathy. In this way theatre, television, and film trained audiences for many, many years to not value or see themselves in Black life; to not empathize with Black pain. In order to reverse these affects, it requires artists, producers, and institutions to celebrate Black life at the center of our national experience. Audiences may be unaccustomed at first, but I believe a well-told story has the ability to revolutionize and transform how we think about each other, as well as ourselves.

Ron: Amen, brother.

Justin: That is why I am so inspired by your extraordinary vision and tireless efforts as a producer to support Black life on stage and in film. More than you know these conversations that you and I have, as well as your persistent support and encouragement of other artists of color is a source of tremendous inspiration that affirms the importance of my work.

Ron: Well, in many ways, I never had the benefit of having a mentor to help me navigate and negotiate profound challenges in my work and life, and I know what it feels like to walk alone, so I tend to take a special interest in nurturing voices that might be

overlooked or might not receive the attention they need or deserve--to be successful.

That has become a part of my life's mission.

Justin: Well, as always, I am inspired by our time together. And I sincerely hope that we are making a place, not just for you and me, but for many yet to come. I believe these seeds we are planting on stage have the potential to transform how future generations understand what it means to be an artist, an American, and more importantly what it means to be alive.

Justin Emeka is a director, actor, writer and professor that specializes in developing new approaches to classic texts by integrating Black cultural traditions into the fabric of his productions. Some of his significant directing work includes: *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Romeo and Juliet* at Classical Theatre of Harlem; *Julius X* at the Karamu House in Cleveland; *The Glass Menagerie* at the University of Washington's Ethnic Cultural Theatre; *Death of a Salesman* featuring Avery Brooks at Oberlin College. He also served as the movement coordinator and played the role of Edgar in an African-American production of *King Lear* at the Yale Repertory Theatre.

Ron Simons is the founder of SimonSays Entertainment and a five-time Tony-Award winning producer whose Broadway credits include *Jitney*, *The Color Purple*; *The Gin Game*; *Porgy and Bess*; *A Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder*; *Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike*; and an African-American re-casting of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Ron has a special eye for cultivating talent and was an early supporter of Justin's work and vision. As a former board member of the Classical Theater of Harlem (CTH), Ron introduced Justin to CTH's artistic director Ty Jones, who hired Justin to direct his first New York production, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* set in Harlem, which is discussed in Justin's chapter titled "Seeing Shakespeare Through Brown Eyes." Both Ron and Justin attended the University of Washington School of Drama and have developed a deep friendship through conversations and shared visions of diversifying the American Theatre.

