

Race Free, Gender Free, Body-Type Free, Age Free Casting

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TDR Comment

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Suppose that there were a fine acting company made up of white actors and black actors and Hispanic actors and Asian-American actors; women and men; young actors, older, and old; deaf actors and the hearing; actors with other special characteristics. And suppose that one assigned roles freely, without prediction from history or from one's old habits of thought. What if one took non-traditional casting as far as one could?

—Zelda Fichandler, *American Theatre*, May 1988:20

[R]edefining the conditions of vision, as well as the modes of representing, cannot be predicated on a single, undivided identity of performer and audience (whether as “lesbians” or “women” or “people of color” or any other single category constructed in opposition to its dominant other, “heterosexual women,” “men,” “whites,” and so forth).

—Teresa de Lauretis, *Theatre Journal*, May 1988:171

As far as one could? Redefining the conditions of vision?

Herschel Walker dancing the Sylph? Helen Hayes as Juliet? Meryl Streep as Willie Loman? Robert de Niro as Blanche du Bois?

If body type, age, race, and gender are set aside what then would the criteria be for playing a character or dancing a role? Is training plus insight into a role sufficient? If so, should we assemble “mixed” casts where the gender, race, age, and body type of the performers are, as it were, not perceived? Or should we make productions where some kind of social and/or aesthetic comment, framed by the world of the artwork, is expressed by means of the casting? These two approaches are very different.

At present, American theatre and dance (and those of many other cultures as well) have two kinds of performing arts in regard to gender, race, age, and body type. In mainstream theatres and dance companies a nominal “open casting” policy is enunciated—but practice actually conforms to prevailing social values. In America these remain profoundly racist and sexist. Discrimination against the old and preference for certain body types are also prevalent. So casts on or off Broadway, in regional theatres, and among our dance companies are mostly white. Roles are not only race-bound but gender-bound, which in theatre means that most of the best roles go to men and in dance it means that certain kinds of movements are assigned to women and other kinds of movements to men (see Daly 1987).

The second kind of casting and company-making is particularist. Groups are formed according to gender or race or social class or disability or ideology or age. Theatres are gay, lesbian, black, Chicano, deaf, poor,

Marxist, Jewish, AIDS, Asian, native American, antinuclear . . . and so on. Some companies are both mainstream and particularist, such as the Dance Theatre of Harlem or the Negro Ensemble Company.

Concerning particularist groups, let me enunciate my strong support of them both in principle and in practice. At several points in my life I have been active in particularist groups advocating civil rights and opposing the Vietnam war. Even when I disagree with what this or that group advocates or represents, I recognize how healthy it is for the society at large and for the participants in particularist groups to robustly exercise an always-to-be-defended freedom of expression. Particularism is the way specific associations of people form and express their collective experiences and opinions. Points of view that otherwise would get lost in the dominant discourse find visibility. Often enough, today's particularist opinion becomes tomorrow's mainstream.

But this Comment is about neither the mainstream nor particularism. It is about two other kinds of race free, gender free, body-type free, age free casting that might exist: (1) mixed (or "blind") casting and (2) intercultural casting.

Many acting classes—needing to exercise all the students enrolled regardless of race, gender, etc.—employ the mixed cast technique. Peter Brook's *The Mahabharata* used people drawn from 18 countries, giving the production an intentionally intercultural tone. Why aren't the classroom etudes carried over into publicly performed professional productions? Why aren't there many more works like Brook's?

Casting against gender, race, body type, and age has a history in European and American theatre and dance. Remember Orson Welles' black *Macbeth*, Sarah Bernhardt's Hamlet, or for that matter, Debby Holmes' Lear in my 1981 *Richard's Lear* or the Lee Breuer/Mabou Mines *Lear*?¹ Often, casting against type is the stock-in-trade of parody and travesty—witness the many plays Charles Ludlam wrote, directed, and starred in or the all-male Trocadero Ballet. Sometimes the intention is political—as when women play males at WOW Cafe or when Chicano farm laborers play white bosses at the Teatro Campesino. Furthermore, certain roles are increasingly being accepted as race, gender, and to a degree, body-type free—so we see on stage (even more in films and on TV) a smattering of black and women doctors, lawyers, police, business execs, and teachers; a detective in a wheelchair; a deaf heroine or two. But these examples are exceptions to the rule. The American theatre reserves the majority of its best roles for white males—not because these are the best performers available (sometimes they are, sometimes they aren't) but because the characters to be represented are white males. As for dance, youthful, slim body types prevail, and most companies are predominantly white. When non-white performers are "integrated" into mainstream companies and media they either need to perform stereotypes of their presumed racial type or adopt the performative idiom of the mainstream leaving behind ethnic, racial, or regional dialects of speech and movement.

Clearly, American audiences are not color or gender blind anymore than they are body-type or age blind. Our theatres and dance companies reflect the values and attitudes of their audiences. Gender, race, age, and body type each signal specific sociopolitical meanings. The categories themselves are definable only within specific contexts. That is, what constitutes a "black" or a "white" person is not some fixed objectively measurable entity, but a shifting set of circumstances that have emerged in America over the centuries and are continuing to change. Similarly, what constitutes a "woman" or a "man," an "old person" or a "young person," a

“thin person,” “normal person,” or “fat person” (to use three of many possible body types) are all determined by flexible and changing criteria responsive to various social circumstances. Nor are the definitions in use objective indices—they are powerful determinants of social privilege (and desipement). It is impossible for spectators to see performers cast “against the text” (a narrative text, a body text) without wondering what such casting means.

But to understand the problems brought up by nontraditional casting, one must probe a little deeper into why it is that “traditional” casting, that is, casting according to type, is preferred in Western dance and theatre.

It is preferred because the baseline, the normative expectation concerning theatre and dance, is naturalistic. This term, like the others just discussed, is not objectively determinable. It refers to a socioaesthetic tradition dominant in Western arts since the Renaissance, that posits daily experience as the basis for reality. Attempts to destabilize this faith in daily experience—movements like surrealism and abstract expressionism in the arts or trance and speaking in tongues in religion—have only been minimally successful. The realities proposed by various artistic avant-gardes and the charismatic churches are not wholly taken seriously by mainstream people who continue to measure “what’s real” by the yardstick of “common sense.” Even scientific propositions regarding entities like “strange attractors” or “quarks” are not understood by many people—and are accepted as real only when these abstruse ideas, often enunciable only as mathematical equations, have been translated into “practical results” (bombs or energy sources, for example).

In terms of performance, the naturalistic bias trains spectators to desire a neat fit of who the performer is to what the performer represents. Sylphs are female, young, slim, and graceful—“light, dainty, and airy beings” (according to my Random House dictionary)—and no Herschel Walker type can dance them. Or if someone like Walker were to dance the Sylph, the performance could only be received as parody or travesty.

My object in this writing is to stake a claim for opening a much wider gap—a possibly playful and subversive space—between representers and represented. Staking such a claim means calling for the development of performing arts whose codes of representation are overt and therefore susceptible to critical analysis through practice, training, performance, and scholarship. And where such codes exist—as in ballet and modern dance—these established systems of representation might allow for a radical flexibility in terms of body type, age, gender, and race that is not in play at present (except as parody and travesty).

A stringent requirement of a close fit between the representers and represented is not always demanded, even in Western arts. Novelists are not required to be like their characters. Storytellers are likewise free to speak for and as characters as diverse as they can imagine. The emergence of critical and theoretical writings that move back and forth between extremely personal assertions and wide-ranging, abstract constructions is becoming more acceptable. But the stage—always, it seems, the most reactionary of the arts, possibly because its existence requires a concrete physical place of public assembly—enforces its own especially binding naturalistic rigor: any wide gap between performer and character must be “justified.” Or if a gap does exist—as when an actor like Robert de Niro “stretches” to play widely diverse roles or when an older dancer like Margot Fonteyn continues to perform “young roles” even though she is not age suited to them—audiences marvel at such performers’ abilities to

mask the gap, to “become” who or what they are representing. Little delight is taken in the double and separate awareness of role and performer.

But it is more delightful to see the gap than to mask it. Brecht’s *Verfremdung* (making the familiar appear strange and the strange appear familiar²)—where the audience enjoys, and learns from, the dialectical tension between player and played—is rarely used in American theatre and dance. *Verfremdung* is a technique for opening a space between role and performer into which spectators may enter, admiring the performer while, say, critically evaluating the actions of the character. Brecht himself wanted to use *Verfremdung* as an educational tool, a means of communicating ideas, even propaganda. But the technique can have many uses (see Diamond 1988). It need not reduce audiences to single reactive units; it may encourage diverse, individual responses. At present, when *Verfremdung* is used, it usually takes the form of comedy or social comment (as Brecht himself often used it). In American dance and theatre, given as they are to sentimentality as well as naturalism, evoking responses of tears or sheer wonder by means of artistic distance is nearly unheard of.

Not so in kabuki. How clearly I remember Nakamura Utaemon VI’s 1982 performance of Hanjo in *Sumidagawa*:

Hanjo is an old woman searching for her son who was kidnapped by slave traders. Utaemon is elegant in her/his perfectly placed gestures of grief and madness; her disheveled hair is messy in a precise way with a few black wisps straggling across her white-as-paper face. Her bony fingers play the empty air as if it were full of harp strings. Hanjo meets a compassionate boatman who tells her of a sick child who was nursed by villagers until he died, his mother’s name on his lips. In that instant, both Hanjo and the boatman know the boy was her son. Utaemon strikes a silent pose of grief, and lets escape a thin, shrill cry. More than Helene Weigel’s silent scream for her dead son Swiss Cheese, less than Melina Mercouri’s roars for Medea’s murdered children. Utaemon’s pose and cry are both male (the actor) and female (the mother). He/she is resplendent and pitiful in silk brocade and nearly voiceless despair. Yet, and this is the art of kabuki, such “unnaturalness” evokes in us responses of genuine emotion (Martin and Schechner 1982:40).

This scene works because the code of representation which enunciates “Hanjo” is very overtly separable from the skills of Utaemon VI. The role of Hanjo in kabuki is analogous to what Lee Breuer says about Hamlet: “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” (1988:22). And more. Hanjo is also the very particular conventions and techniques of kabuki. Utaemon VI can interpret the role (as any Western actor can interpret Hamlet); he can, additionally, interpret the kabuki code, specifically the portion of the code that articulates the *onnagata* tradition where men perform roles representing women. What most Western theatre still lacks is a clear sense of the abstract qualities of a role—underlining the fact (pointed out by Breuer) that a role does not equal a person but is rather a summation of the role’s own historical eruption, placement, and continued development.

Let me here insert a qualifying note lest I be nailed for idealizing Asian genres. In regard to celebrating the distance between performers and roles, genres such as kabuki, kathakali, and jingju (Beijing opera) can be learned

from. But these forms have their own problems relating to gender stereotypes, male privilege, and reactionary narratives.

In Western theatre there are no codes of performative behavior distinctly separable from the codes of behavior prevalent in everyday life. Actor training is under the aegis of the Stanislavski system which is based on the construction of a psychology of everyday life. Even when actors wear masks, portray fantasy characters, or perform dadaist or surrealist pieces, the baseline is ordinary life, which may then be denied, rejected, or mocked. An exception to this tendency is puppetry where the puppeteer stands in relation to the puppets as storyteller to story. But puppetry in America is still a deprived genre—even acknowledging the recuperative work of Peter Schumann and Theodora Skipitares, among others.

Another exception is the work of auteurs such as Tadeusz Kantor, Martha Clarke, Robert Wilson, and Richard Foreman who make performance texts the way painters paint or novelists write. But these auteurs privatize their approaches, and are apparently inimical to establishing schools to teach their methods of making performance texts. Their works form “styles” rather than codes of performative behavior that can be transmitted through time.

However, in Western classical and modern dance there are codes of performative behavior as rigorous as any found in Asia. Codes of “performative behavior” rather than codes of “representation” because the naturalistic paradigm still imposes what ages and body types are “allowed” on dance stages. For every Fonteyn there are dozens of other capable dancers who are forced to retire when they no longer “look” right; and in dance there is little gender switching even though there are many women strong enough to lift men and many men capable of dancing so-called female roles with appropriate “lightness.” As far as refiguring dance roles originally conceived for sylphs (female or male) for heavy, bulky bodies, this would appear to be anathema—even though the dancers of the late 20th century are skinnier and lighter than those of earlier epochs. When prevalent strictures on body types are rejected, as in the 1970s work of such groups as Grand Union, or in contact improvisation, the tendency is to make the movement ordinary or “pedestrian”—a strong affirmation of the naturalistic.

One of the marvelous and startling things about Pina Bausch’s Wuppertal Dance Theatre is the way their balletic training intersects Bausch’s casting. Bausch’s company consists of people who are more varied in body type, age, and style of physical expression than any other ballet or modern dance company I’ve seen. Bausch’s choreography—often embodying gender tensions and violence expressed through irony and satire—frequently includes such actions as women lifting men and cross dressing.

Kazuo Ohno³ is an old Japanese dancer in a woman’s dress eliciting from an elite audience at New York’s Asia Society in 1988 an admiration untinged by parody or travesty. Would this audience as easily bestow such unsnickered praise on an American dancer doing the same thing? Or on an old woman in men’s clothing? I remember that in 1985 in Toronto when I first saw Ohno dance, I laughed at his gnarled movements, his blatant display of emotions, his weird mixing of Japanese and Western styles, his persona. I granted him his art, but located it as travesty. In 1988 I watched him differently, seeing this time more clearly Ohno’s struggle against decrepitude written in the lyrical movements of his 82-year-old body. Instead of masking his years and celebrating the agile beauty of youth, as an aging *onnagata* might do, Ohno concentrated on being an old man in a kind of drag that referred to but did not attempt to imitate a woman.

Ohno's dances emit a special resonance not so different from certain moments in Bausch's *Carnations* where men put on dresses not to "become" women but to expose the gender tricks of orthodox dance. Women in men's clothing, common enough on the streets, where there is little or no deception, are less frequent on mainstream stages where males are allowed to dress down as women but women are not allowed to dress up as men. Such appearances are saved for lesbian stages like WOW Cafe. But theatre and dance, as body-based art forms, ought to be where cross dressing that ranges from the nondeceptive to totally convincing transformations should be systematically practiced, explored, and critiqued.

Performances such as Ohno's and Bausch's are not just about gender-busting or drag. They sidestep the usual canons of beauty (of the kind Martha Clarke drenches her spectators in) and go "against nature." That is, Ohno and Bausch are not offering representations that celebrate the socially idealized body (as advertising and the Olympic Games do). For Ohno and Bausch the body is an opaque instrument, the actions undertaken have their own logic, and the works as wholes are coded utterances whose meanings are not readily apparent. In other words, these artists do not collapse performer, techniques of performance, and performance text into a "unified production." Rather they tease out both the contradictions and congruencies among these "presences," creating thereby an extremely thick theatricality.

But what would it mean for a big-boned heavy-set person to dance the Sylph? Or for a woman to play Willy Loman not as "Wanda Loman" (as Fichandler suggests) but as a woman manipulating the stage codes for "man." That is, for women, blacks, Hispanics, Asians, native Americans, fat people, or "senior citizens"—to name categories whose gender, race, body type, or age are currently "visible"—to be cast with as little regard for these categories as is given today to the ethnicity of American men performers who have northern European foreparents? Or to put it another way, sometimes the race, gender, body type, and age of performers are extremely important and should be taken into account in the development of a choreography, a *mise-en-scène*, or a company. At other times, race, age, gender, and body type can be effectively represented by someone who is not of the particular kind being performed (as when an Englishman plays Othello, a Japanese woman dances the bride in Martha Graham's *Appalachian Spring*, Fonteyn dances a young role, or when Debby Holmes, both young and female, plays King Lear in *Richard's Lear*). And sometimes, these categories are, or should be, irrelevant.

Thus I am arguing for a dance and theatre where several different kinds of responses are possible: times when perceiving the race, gender, etc., of performers matters; times when spectators perceive the categories but it doesn't matter; and times when it should not even be perceived—not because of disguise (like in *Le Cage aux Folles*) but because spectators have been trained to be race, gender, age, and body-type "blind."

It is extremely difficult even to spell out this kind of situation because it is so unlike what currently goes on in America. It is hard to imagine flexibility with regard to these categories which are felt to be either "naturally" or "historically" fixed. Some Americans are barely able to slip in and out of certain kinds of Euro-American ethnicities—being very "Irish" or "Polish" or "Italian" on some days for some occasions (a parade, a picnic, a religious celebration) and very "just like everyone else" (which means behaving like white Americans whose ancestors came from northwest Europe) on other days. Furthermore, led by the Black Freedom Movement originating in the 1950s, many Americans have just recently come through

a hard-fought period of winning the right to assert various “roots,” rejecting the “melting pot” idea of a homogenized society. This right to be different, and to proudly and publicly express these differences, is the source of many particularist movements.

What I am arguing for is not the melting pot, which would be regressive, reimposing mainstream mid-American values, but an extreme flexibility that allows for situation-specific decisions regarding when to use, when to ignore, and when not to see race, gender, age, and body type.

Can spectators (and producers, directors, performers, choreographers) be trained to be responsive to these categories in some cases and not in others (as in sports where there is an effort toward race blindness)? How long would it take for differences in race, age, gender, and body type to “not be seen”? And why would such a state of intentional socioaesthetic blindness be a good idea?

First, it would mean some kinds of dance and theatre were in the process of developing codified systems of representation strong enough to exist independently of the particular individuals manipulating these systems. Second, it would give individual performers the chance to play roles that today are off limits to them by virtue not of their skills but because of their gender, race, age, or body type. Third, it would encourage spectators to see, savor, and critically examine the interacting performance texts that comprise a whole performance rather than insisting on a simple-minded identification of performer with role. Fourth, performers and spectators alike would be more able to see gender, race, age, and body type not as “biological destinies” but as flexible, historically conditioned categories.

In Minneapolis the Mixed Blood Theatre Company has for years followed a color-blind casting policy. We need many more companies like Mixed Blood—in fact, color-blind casting should be the rule now in mainstream dance and theatre. But color-blind casting is not enough. It is time to break the chains binding the performing arts to a narrow vision of human possibility. We need to see on our theatre and dance stages women and men dancing and acting in roles previously reserved for one gender or the other; old people playing a variety of parts; and a full-fledged parade of body types. Sometimes we ought to see the body’s opacity: the color of the skin, the lines on the face, the muscles’ elasticity or lack thereof—all the textures of class, age, weight, ethnicity, race, gender. But sometimes a performative code is so mastered that the body is rendered transparent, almost nonexistent. A spectator sees through the body to the mastery of the code. Then life on stage becomes what Zeami said in the 15th century about his father, Kanami: “His *shin-no-hana* [profound skill] survived until he became old without leaving him, like an old leafless tree which still blossoms” (1968:24).

The “nature/nurture” or “biologically determined/socially constructed” debate is a classically irresolvable conflict. Categories of race, gender, body type, and age are in fact social categories constructed from the interpretations of “biological data”—but the biological data themselves are always changing in terms of social constructions and interpretations. Seemingly “objective” or fixed data are not only open to revision as new data are presented (the scientific method) but are interpretable in many different ways according to specific sociohistorical circumstances. Thus, when I lived in the deep South in the late 1950s through mid ’60s, “race”—as it pertained to black/white distinctions—was variously interpreted as being determined by “blood” (ancestry) and/or “skin color” (direct visual observation). These determinants were put forward (by racists especially) as objectively verifiable. But sometimes they contradicted each other—

persons with “black blood” looked “white” while others looked “black” but were considered “white.” A lot depended on who was doing the determining and for what purposes. At present, people speak of “male” and “female” hormones. But I foresee a time when sex-gland related blood chemistry is referred to as “gender hormones” measurable not according to a rigidly dimorphic scale but along a continuum. I suggest that race and gender are not atypical examples—that many if not all “scientific data” are in fact negotiations among what is observed, what is believed, and what is desired. From Heisenberg to the new historicists, the rationalist solidity of “objective data” has been undermined. Observation, belief, and desire all interact with and affect one another.

In the context of today’s historical circumstances, race is entirely a social not biological category, while age (if considered simply as the measurement of elapsed time since birth) appears to be an “objective” category. But the social consequences of this “objective measurement”—jobs, retirement, assumptions concerning sexual activity, what’s good to look at—deobjectify age, merging it with the category of body type. Gender—today’s hot potato—appears to be both a social and biological category. The messy problem is a little more tractable when seen in historical and processual perspective. Interpretations (what is fancily called “hermeneutics”) are always changing in response to sometimes open and sometimes hidden agendas. At this moment in American and perhaps world history, race and gender are at the center of a number of political as well as social, economic, and aesthetic conflicts. But hold on, age and body type are climbing through the ropes to enter the arena.

—Richard Schechner⁴

Notes

1. According to a story in the *New York Times*, during the summer of 1988 members of Mabou Mines under Breuer’s direction were working on a *King Lear* that “transposes Shakespeare’s tragedy to 1950s Georgia, reverses characters’ sex, mixes their racial backgrounds and gives them Southern accents. Lear becomes a mean-spirited and narrow-minded blue-collar matriarch, and Gloucester is a rural black woman presiding over a household not of knights but of dogs. The Fool is played as a mincing transvestite with a candy-cane phallus dangling around his neck, and Oswald turns into a Caribbean-accented prostitute in hot pants” (Yarrow 1988:C15). *Lear*, which will have been produced by the time this comes to print, is not Breuer’s first transgression of race, gender, or genre boundaries. His *Gospel at Colonus* was a rendition of Sophocles’ *Oedipus at Colonus* as a black gospel sing/church service.
2. It is well known that Brecht found in the 1935 performance in Moscow of Mei Lanfang, a master of jingju (Beijing Opera), a precise embodiment of what Brecht had been groping toward for several years. In 1936 Brecht wrote about Mei’s performance in “Alienation Effects [*Verfremdungseffekte*] in Chinese Acting” (1964:91–99). This was Brecht’s first writing about the V-effect. Brecht scholar John Fuegi explains *Verfremdung*: “Brecht marveled at the fact that this male actor [Mei], performing in a Western dinner jacket, created extremely powerful women’s parts. The term *Verfremdung*, once adopted by Brecht, would lead to endless confusion particularly when translated into English as ‘alienation’ or into French as ‘distanciation.’ What Brecht himself originally had in mind, wholly consistent with his Russian source [the formalist Victor Schklovski], was something richly and provocatively ambivalent. [. . .] The paradoxical trick is to disrupt the viewer’s normal or run of the mill perception by introducing elements that will suddenly cause the viewer to see familiar objects in a strange way and to see strange objects in a familiar way” (1987:82–83).
3. See writings by and about Ohno and the genre he dances, butoh, in TDR 30, no. 2 (T110):107–170.

4. This Comment was developed and written in collaboration with the TDR New York editorial staff. Rebecca Schneider's close readings and criticisms were particularly helpful.

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—The Editors