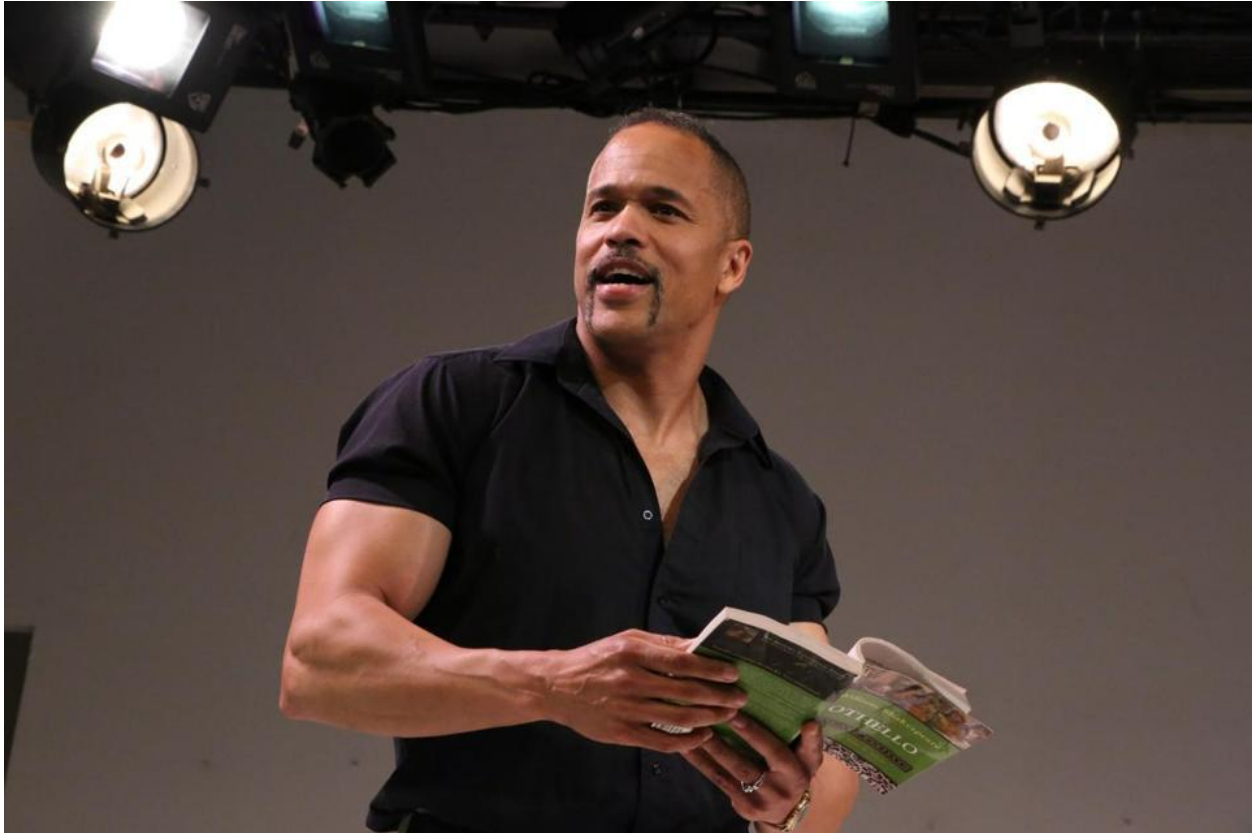


STAGE REVIEW

A spellbinding journey through Shakespeare and race in ‘American Moor’



Keith Hamilton Cobb is the creator and star of “American Moor.”

By Don Aucoin GLOBE STAFF JULY 21, 2017

Anyone who covers it for a living has to believe that theater is among the necessities of existence. Otherwise, why bother? There are plenty of other ways to fill the nights and weekends.

But some plays, and some performances, take the idea of necessary to a deeper level. In those rare cases, the critic’s adjectival exhortation “must-see” can almost border on the literal.

“American Moor” is one such play and one such performance.

This deep-from-the-heart spellbinder by Keith Hamilton Cobb is a blisteringly eloquent and penetrating meditation on the ever-urgent matter of race in America — though “meditation” seems far too tame a word for the dramatic force Cobb brings to the

subject in a performance that shakes the Plaza Theatre walls and audience complacency alike.

Cobb's multifarious achievement is to examine his own complex relationship with the craft of acting — and with William Shakespeare, the genius who towers over practitioners of that craft like none other — while illuminating the specific experiences and perceptions of a black man in a white-dominated profession, and country, governed by invidious racial assumptions.

Other dramatists, such as Stephan Wolfert, creator of the solo antiwar drama "Cry 'Havoc!'," have enlisted Shakespeare in the service of a larger social or psychological inquiry. But what Cobb executes so brilliantly in "American Moor," which is based on his own life and career, is to connect the experience of not being truly *seen* as an actor with the larger frustration, anguish, and fury of African-Americans at being unseen, or not accurately seen (which amounts to the same thing, as Ralph Ellison taught us long ago with "Invisible Man").

The prism through which Cobb tells his deeply personal yet far-reaching story is an audition for "Othello" at which a 52-year-old black actor, identified only as the Actor, is vying for the title role before a young white director (voiced offstage by Matt Arnold) intent on instructing him on how to play Othello.

With the pointed humor that courses through "American Moor," which is directed by Kim Weild, the Actor observes that "a little white man is asking me if I have any questions about being a large Black man, enacting the role of a large Black man in a famous Shakespeare play about a large Black man . . ." (Cobb is also incisive and amusing on the non-racial irritants of the acting life, especially for a veteran performer, such as hearing wet-behind-the-ears directors start sentences with "What Shakespeare was trying to say here is . . .")

Any notes of levity evaporate, however, when the director tells the Actor to re-do the scene of Othello's speech to the Venetian senate, but this time to have the Moorish general and war hero "ingratiate himself a little more to them" by adding an element of "obeisance."

The Actor's response to the director (and you'd better believe that we in the audience are also being addressed and implicated) takes the form of an internal monologue: "You're sitting there, looking expectantly at me, thinking we're speaking the same language. But you wouldn't understand a single word of all that's not being said . . . My anger, Othello's anger, the guard dog, forever snarling at his chain's end, sooner to strangle himself than acquiesce to your energy, he does not see you. He sees all the hovering forces in this room, in that senate chamber, in the world that have made you you, as they are all the same forces that have never allowed me to be me. . . . You stand in for so much, but I do too, and I cannot just be me, for you are never, ever, only you."

As that passage suggests, "American Moor" is concerned with the codes of speech and behavior behind which racism, or at least racial insensitivity, can hide. From the beginning of his career, the Actor's desire to play Romeo or Hamlet or Richard II has

been deflected by directors who have steered him instead toward minor characters in the Shakespearean canon, who just happen to be people of color. Or they have expected his Shakespearean aspirations to extend no further than one day playing Othello, a figure about whom he has complicated feelings.

So when the Actor deconstructs the unseen director's words in "American Moor," he is reacting not just to his own personal experiences but to all the unjust expectations and stifling categories that performers of color — and, of course, persons of color beyond the acting profession — have had to battle against.

For anyone who cares about a fuller understanding of what that has meant and continues to mean, and who wants to experience a performance that balances dynamism and lyricism with uncommon skill, "American Moor" is, yes, a must-see.

AMERICAN MOOR

Written and performed by Keith Hamilton Cobb. Directed by Kim Weild. Presented by O.W.I. (Bureau of Theatre) and Phoenix Theatre Ensemble. At Plaza Theatre, Boston Center for the Arts, through Aug. 12. Tickets: From \$35, 617-933-8600, www.bostontheatrescene.com

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