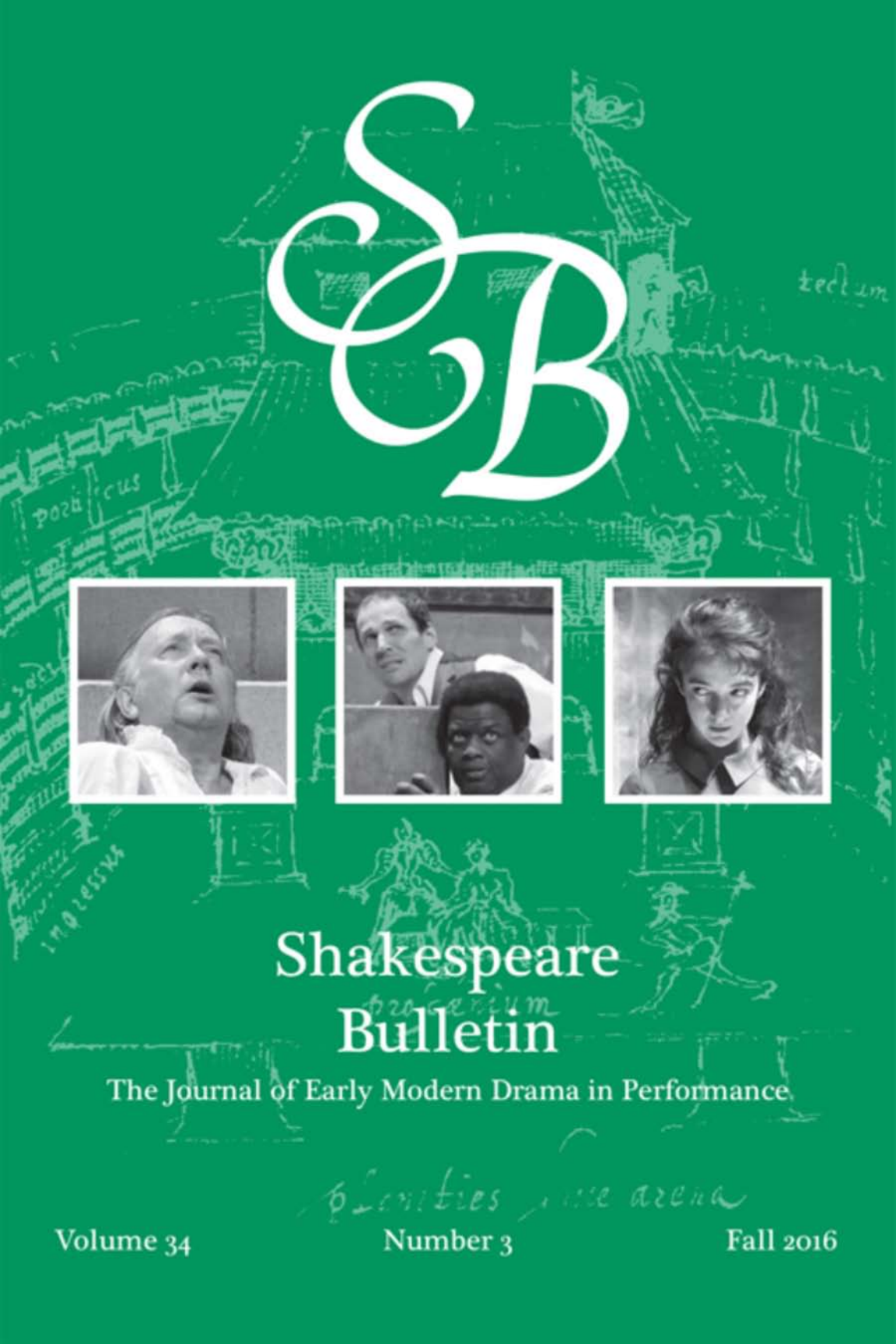

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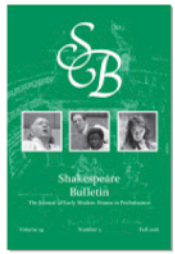
Kim F. Hall

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***American Moor***
Presented by **Keith Hamilton Cobb** at the **Phoenix Theater**, New York. April 21–May 10, 2015. Directed by Paul Kwame Johnson. Set and lighting by Tsuba Kamei. Graphic design by Monty Stilson. With Josh Tyson (Michael Aaron Miller/Director).

Kim F. Hall, *Barnard College, Columbia University*

2015 was quite the year for "black" Shakespeare. Several performances (The Classical Theater of Harlem's *The Tempest*, produced as their annual "Uptown Shakespeare in the Park" at Marcus Garvey Park in New York City; Debra Ann Byrd and Dathan B. William's *The Sable Series: The History of Black Shakespearean Actors* at MIST in Harlem; and Lolita Chakrabarti's *Red Velvet* at Shakespeare & Co. in Lennox, MA) in different ways staged complicated, loving tributes to African American relationships with Shakespeare whilst salvos from the culture wars and debates over cross-racial casting blasted from both the US and the UK. Predictable outrage followed a June 2015 *Washington Post* blogpost featur-

ing a Sacramento, CA public school teacher who said she would prefer to stop teaching Shakespeare and instead offer her multiethnic students a wider range of literatures that speak directly to their experiences. A few weeks later, critics on social media questioned Sir Patrick Stewart's expressed desire to play Othello "as white" and Trevor Nunn's all-white Wars of the Roses at the Rose Theatre. The black performances that summer could be read as an intervention, a much-needed transfusion of energy and introspection into a conversation as anemic as it is loud and recursive.

*American Moor,* a solo show written and performed by Keith Hamilton Cobb, is a searingly honest, deeply humane theatrical biography told through the actor's experiences of first discovering a love of Shakespeare and then finding that, as an African American male, *Othello* is both the Holy Grail and something of a mirage for any black actor who wants to explore Shakespeare's canon.

The title, *American Moor*, suggests the United States' unique relationship to *Othello*. Since Paul Robeson's 1943 debut on Broadway, it has been a commonplace that Othello is a "black" role, an assumption confirmed by the credits of almost any black actor. (Watching the play, I was reminded of my own amusement at looking at the Playbill for the 1997 "photo-negative" *Othello* starring Patrick Stewart and discovering that almost every black actor in the cast—even the very young ones—had played Othello). Yet *American Moor* suggests that, like "acceptance" of black people in the US, the acceptance of black actors as Othello is entirely conditional. In the tradition of George C. Wolfe's *The Colored Museum* and Ntozake Shange's *Spell#7,* the play turns a politically savvy eye on this question of black ownership of Othello and, more broadly, on the ways—subtle and not—in which the theater excludes black actors.

We entered the theater watching Cobb stand in a corner of the almost empty stage with a copy of *Othello*; he waited for his *Othello* audition as we waited for him to begin. When the performance "opened," he moved center stage to tell us "the story of my life" through his blossoming love of Shakespeare: a love he has maintained while navigating the theater's—and America's—assumptions about blackness, which drive black actors into an endless stream of stereotypical roles. The policing of his place in the Shakespeare world began early, when, in acting class, he elected to perform Titania's "forgeries of jealousy" speech. In response, he was told in an agonizingly indirect fashion that he should perform something he's more right for: Aaron, Morocco, or Othello. In the face of "the play's relevance [being] urged . . . perpetually," Cobb rejected Othello outright, seeking

spaces where he could display the magic of his craft and of Shakespeare's language. *American Moor* gave Cobb the space to perform these denied opportunities. He appeared the ultimate code switcher, nimbly moving from Shakespeare's most eloquent verse—Titania, Richard II, and Hamlet made an appearance—to the multiple accents of New York City. The play's writing was equally seamless: afterward, several people remarked that they could barely tell where Shakespeare ended and Cobb began.

When Cobb was called for his "audition," the fact that the play mirrored *Othello* became increasingly clear. In the first movement, we were co-conspirators getting to hear Cobb's sarcastic, irreverent asides: the things he could not say because he was the student who needed a grade or the actor who needed a part. In the second movement, we were still insiders, but we were also the Venetian Senate watching Cobb/Othello make his case to the Duke/Director. The playbill cited Othello's final words, "Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate; / Nor set down aught in malice" (5.2.342–4), but we mostly remained in act one's moment of tense possibility when Othello tells the story of his life and courtship. Othello's position in Venice mirrored Cobb's experience in American theater: it needs his power, his confidence and physicality, yet is filled with Brabantios who see him as an exotic who merely serves his own desires, never stopping to consider that the actor's "extensive experience as me and your limited experience of folks like me" gives him insight into the character and the play.

Hamilton's beautiful writing, humor, and eloquent outrage propelled the performance (Fig. 2). We moved from his visceral rejection of kinship with Othello—who is, after all, a dupe and a murderer ("I was ashamed of him")—to a reluctant embrace and then to his subtle realization that the struggle against Othello and the narrow bigotries of the American theater had given him a deep understanding of Othello's character. His copy of *Othello* accompanied this journey from curiosity to rejection to love: he hurled it across the stage, abandoned it, then lovingly smoothed back the pages and talked to it.

The minute the actor accepts that he actually has a connection to Othello and explores what *Othello* means to him, what he knows about Othello from also being a black man in a white elite world, he discovers that *Othello* is in fact only on loan, given provisionally. Teachers and directors give him *Othello* only to make the black actor their mouthpiece for how *they* understand blackness or difference. During the play, the disembodied director insisted that *Othello* be understood, not through cues the text gives us about the Venetian Senate, but through the direc-

Fig. 2. Keith Hamilton Cobb in his 2016 production of *American Moor,* directed by Paul Kwame Johnson. Photo courtesy of Colin Hovde.

tor's insistence that *he* knew what the Venetians were thinking in a way that the better-versed, Italian-speaking black actor never could. This dialogue, the production showed, is one-sided. It is not a conversation between people *about* Shakespeare; it is a conversation with a white man given the privilege of authority who speaks *for* Shakespeare to the black man directed to ventriloquize that understanding.

I don't walk around thinking about philosopher Franz Fanon all the time (OK, I do a little bit), but throughout I was really struck by *American Moor*'s parallels with Fanon's *Black Skin/White Masks,* which is a stinging critique of racism and dehumanization under colonial rule, but also a fervent plea for communion and transcendence. Underlying that text's outrage and tonal shifts between anger, humor, biting satire, and despair is a plea for the black man's full humanity, which is only realized in profound connection with other people. Cobb similarly performed a range of black experience and frustration. Even with people the actor loves, like his agent, there was a fundamental disconnect ("He believed in me, but he couldn't understand my lament"). The piece was full of interrupted conversations about race and missed opportunities for mutual understanding. The sometimes gentle, sometimes harsh, pleas for real conversation ("Talk to me, show me that you have something besides Brabantio's privilege of

place") accelerated as the play progressed and the actor's "audition" time ran out. Cobb's response to the slings and arrows of outrageous micro-aggressions is a Fanonian desire for authentic communication, indeed communion, but here using a mutual love of Shakespeare to break down false assumptions about race and blackness. He seemed to say, "If I am Othello, then let me tell you who Othello is—and who I am. We could figure out this play (and the predicament of race) if you could only talk with me." The play ended on either an uncertain or hopeful note: the audience had been swayed, but had the director?

In addition to making a space for a black actor to draw from the full range of Shakespeare to move and delight audiences, Cobb has made *American Moor* a much-needed space for a discussion of race. During the show's run, Cobb did talkbacks with Shakespearean scholars, with community leaders, and by himself. In these, his readings of various Shakespeare plays; the audience's histories with Shakespeare; the economics of theater; the protests in Ferguson, Missouri; the Black Lives Matter movement; and the need for community healing all became part of the conversation. At one talkback I attended, a black mother said, "I feel I understand my son, his anger, better now." In addition to offering a gripping performance, Cobb is willing to do the hard work of listening deeply and pushing for understanding in the goal of an honest and uninterrupted conversation about race and love. If only theater on both sides of the pond can follow his lead.