

Theatre in Review: *American Moor* (Red Bull Theater/Cherry Lane Theatre)

By David Barbour

"You see, I have broken the fourth wall." This statement, made by the actor **Keith Hamilton Cobb**, is hardly necessary, since he has stepped off the stage of the Cherry Lane and, for a moment, stands in the center aisle. More to the point, it is redundant: Almost from the get-go, the actor has shattered the barrier separating actor and audience, enthraling us with his presence and superb technical skill. Even so, he is only getting started. *American Moor*, which Cobb also wrote, is a probing interrogation of prevailing attitudes about race and art, wrapped in a single, tension-fraught confrontation; no one is likely to leave without feeling profoundly affected.

The Moor of the title is, of course, Othello, and, as a reminder, **Wilson Chin's** uncluttered, yet starkly effective, set design features a nearly bare stage decorated with a couple of pillars -- one of them featuring the Lion of St. Mark, the symbol of Venice -- along with some chairs and road boxes. As An Actor, a fictionalized persona no doubt rooted in his personal experience, Cobb wastes no time in baring his early infatuation with the stage -- "Like somebody is gay I am an actor," he says. "It was never a choice" -- and the seductive power of Shakespeare. (He has some cattily amusing things to say about his training, especially his exposure to The Method, which he associates with "some old Russian guy, and Lee Strasberg, and about a bazillion paychecks for American acting teachers over the last seventy years." As he notes, with entertainingly undisguised contempt, "We sat around a lot being all still and quietlike, waiting for some external stimulus to enter our bodies and compel us to act.")

Still, there is the siren call of Shakespeare. Quoting one of Hotspur's speeches from the first part of Henry IV, he adds, "I could say that as well as anyone, and infused with every ounce of glorious African-American emotional arrogance, it would sing." He's right about that: Tall, imposing, gym-fit, and losing not a bit of expression or musicality as he plumbs the lower end of the vocal scale, he is clearly equipped to take on any of number of the great classical roles, not only those in the Shakespearean canon.

The Actor, who freely admits that his skill has been hard-won over time, is clear about the obstacles he has faced. He makes a telling sketch out of an acting class assignment to deliver a Shakespearean monologue. His first, counterintuitive choice -- Titania's "forgeries of jealousy" speech

from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* -- is shot down by his teacher. (The actor morphs amusingly from Titania, grandly leaping about the stage, to his instructor, his arms wrapped around his head and shoulders in a pose of pure irritation.) His passes at Romeo and Hamlet are turned down, too, and then comes the blow: Why not try Aaron the Moor, from *Titus Andronicus*, his teacher wonders? Or perhaps the Prince of Morocco, one of Portia's suitors in *The Merchant of Venice*? Not yet out of college, he is already being racially profiled.

All of this is relevant because the Actor is auditioning for a resident theatre production of *Othello*. He eloquently describes his long-running love/hate relationship with the role: Time and again, older actors have told him that he will one day make a great Moor; his default response has been, "What? I'll make a great emotionally unstable misogynist murderer?" He all but shudders as he recalls how Othello, inflamed by irrational jealousy, says of Desdemona, "Her name, that was as fresh/As Dian's visage, is now begrimed and black/As mine own face." Even at a time when so much of Western art is being scrutinized for its cultural biases, this fearless examination of Shakespeare's words is invigorating. The Actor, without ever doubting Shakespeare's greatness, is brutally frank about their toxic effect -- not least as spoken by a black man faced with the daily burden of being a figure of fear and suspicion.

Then again, using his three decades of life experience and acquired acting skill, he puts together a commanding Othello, painting a portrait of him as an unusually gifted general, resignedly aware that he is something of a novelty act for the Venetian power structure -- "I'm sure Colin Powell has had to deal with this sorta stupid shit too," he notes, acidly -- and he has grown progressively tired of playing the part. He performs the section of the scene in which Othello is summoned before the Venetian Senate to defend his marriage to Desdemona. (Brabantio, her father, is enraged that his daughter has eloped -- with, of all people, a black man.) Taking into account Othello's singular social position, his weariness with war and his employers, his obvious delight in Desdemona, his aging and sense of physical decline, and his sense of dignity, he delivers a brief performance that is lucid, highly layered, and shot through with irony and profound feeling. It is the best reading of this speech I've ever heard -- and I've been seeing *Othello*, in one production or another, since 1970.

It's too bad, then, that he is auditioning for the character known as A Director, a genial hack who refers to the play as "The Big O" and whose take on it is that of a tabloid melodrama inspired by the case of Lisa Nowak, the vengeful astronaut who drove cross-country -- wearing a diaper to forestall bathroom breaks -- to deliver a comeuppance to her ex-lover. (**Josh Tyson** is nerve-wrackingly on point as this perfectly tone deaf

character.) Armed with equal parts arrogance and ignorance, he urges the Actor to redo the speech in a smilingly ingratiating manner, an approach that, after what we have seen, is both reductive and hideously patronizing. Deeply pained, the Actor holds his ground, but his ideas fall on deaf ears. Musing over the Director's tactics, which make use of a familiar argumentative trope, he says, "Nobody ever plays the devil's advocate. They play their own advocate and hide behind that stupid idiom to avoid having to take responsibility for it."

Shifting effortlessly from the audition room to inside the Actor's head -- **Alan C. Edwards'** lighting, aided by sound designer **Christian Frederickson's** subtle effects, ensures that we always know where we are -- *American Moor* becomes a rousing indictment of the racist poison that infects both life and art. Convinced, not without evidence, that his conception of Othello is rooted in ideas about black masculinity that are too threatening for the white Director, the Actor lays bare the frustrations of a lifetime spent avoiding playing "the black sitcom buffoons or the victims/scoundrels of America's preferred African-American reality," while preparing himself for great roles that may never come. Is he arrogant? You bet. A bit overbearing? Possibly. Does he have something unique to offer? Without a doubt. In any case, he is painfully aware that his opportunities are limited because "there are colleagues of mine who will be all too happy to be your Othello. And they'll proudly stamp it on their resumes, right there next to Walter Lee Younger and seven or eight roles by August Wilson." To ask for more is, apparently, presumptuous.

At a time when black Americans face so many threats to survival and quality of life, the Actor's fury, less deftly handled, could have come across as trivial or self-serving, another bitter rant from a show-business also-ran. But Cobb's text and performance, especially as guided by the director, **Kim Weild**, expands the argument in a way that implicates us all. An artist's considerable gifts are being expended in stereotyped characters and "cookie-cutter" (his words) renditions of classic roles, and the theatre is poorer for it. Now apply that argument to the world at large: The more people of color and other minorities are held back, the more all of us are diminished. Racism, however unconscious, is a knife that cuts both ways.

Indeed, as this remarkably rich and rewarding evening hurtles toward its wrenching conclusion, Cobb makes us see the absurdity -- and the resultant sheer waste -- of our failure, after so many years, to hear what must be heard. Speaking to the Director -- but also to us, and to the world at large -- he says, "Meet me here, in this sacred space, with half the courage of a Desdemona and I will lift you, in life and love, in death and despair." Are we really not ready to have this conversation?