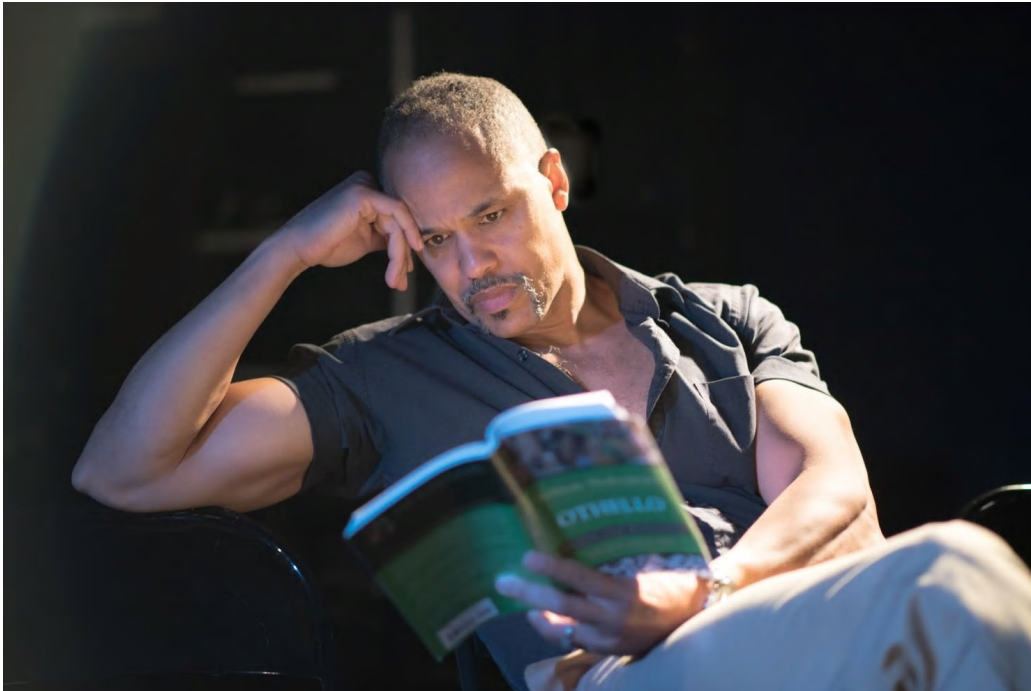


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After ‘American Moor,’ you may not see Shakespeare — and a lot of roles played by black actors — quite the same way



Keith Hamilton Cobb, author and star of “American Moor” at the Anacostia Playhouse through Feb. 3. (Chris Lang)

Tell us how you *really* feel.

The unnamed actor played by Keith Hamilton Cobb doesn’t hold back in “American Moor,” Cobb’s 90-minute diagnosis on race and theater at the Anacostia Playhouse, and the wrath and anguish spark a lot of heat and light. As the actor auditions for the title role in “Othello,” a misguided (and largely unseen) young white director with a “concept” drives him nearly to tears.

The tense audition unfolds, Cobb shares with us the actor’s usually unspoken frustrations, and the pushback gets pretty (insert profane adverb here) furious. At the same time, Cobb’s earnest, reasoned script slashes so precisely that you may not see Shakespeare — and a lot of roles played by black performers — quite the same way for a while.

Cobb's real-life résumé includes Shakespeare, television roles and apparently even [getting fired](#) after being cast as Othello, creative differences that plainly stoked this project (which has been evolving for [several years](#)). He has been in love with Shakespeare since his college days three decades ago, when a cruel acting teacher told him all the roles he shouldn't play.

That's the kind of personal history that found its way into this script, so it's hard sometimes not to see "American Moor" as Cobb's own idiosyncratic manifesto. It's inside baseball – deeply detailed about "Othello," about too-short rehearsal periods (a major gripe) and the too-recognizable high spots of a black leading man's stage résumé (a grim joke with an August Wilson punchline). Right down to the touchy diplomatic dialogue with the director, played with a lightly entitled edge by Josh Tyson, the observations all feel lived.

Playwright and actor Keith Hamilton Cobb doesn't hold back in "American Moor." (Jabari Jefferson)

But this actor-director conflict also is inevitably the story of race. The white voice in the dark defines the role. The actor who lives the part wants at least a voice in the process. Does that mean the actor is "playing the race card"? The actor snorts: For crying out loud, the subject is Shakespeare's "Othello."

"You just picked up the race *deck*," he says.

Maybe you don't need to know "Othello" and theater to be kept on edge, but it certainly helps. So does Cobb's engaging, inquisitive presence, which is nicely framed by Kim Weild's cool, understated direction. Cobb is an exacting speaker, sometimes funny yet always dead serious. His script follows suit as the actor parses Shakespeare (a *lot* of Shakespeare) and, in the next breath, parses some slice of what it means to be a black man in America. That, the actor insists, is the project: How can you meld the two? Especially if the pivotal stakeholder never really gets a say?

Is the director a straw man? Sure, but he's hardly improbable. Are theater dressing rooms awash with stories of systems small and large squelching voices they purport to celebrate? You wonder whether the next woman coming in to audition for Desdemona may want to have a word, too.

American Moor, by Keith Hamilton Cobb. Directed by Kim Weild. Lights, John Alexander. About 90 minutes. Through Feb. 3 at the Anacostia Playhouse, 2020 Shannon Pl. SE. \$40. anacostiaplayhouse.com.