

ArtsEmerson's 'American Moor' Reimagines Black Performance

APRIL 16, 2019

by Nicholas Whittaker

'American Moor' – Written and performed by Keith Hamilton Cobb (with additional performance by Josh Tyson). Directed by Kim Weild. Set Designer: Wilson Chin. Lighting Designer: Alan C. Edwards. Sound Designer: Christian Frederickson. Stage Coordinator: Tareena D. Barbe. Presented by ArtsEmerson at the Emerson Paramount Center through April 21st.

Who is *American Moor* for? For what audience is it meant? This question becomes complicated in any work directly concerned with race and racism, which always involves at least two parties: the marginalized and those who marginalize, the victims of racism and its perpetrators. The question of audience is in this case, then, political. If a production on Blackness is meant for Black viewers, then we might say it presents Black viewers with too-scarce representation, but we might also worry that it does nothing to change the hearts and minds of non-Black folks. But if that Black artwork is meant for non-Black viewers, while we may laud its potential to heal racial strife, we also may worry that Black audiences are, once again, being deprived of art for their own sake.

American Moor is unsatisfied with this double bind. Its creator and star, Keith Hamilton Cobb, refuses to compartmentalize his story, to limit its potential. Instead, he spins a stunningly nuanced and knotty yarn, one both deeply rooted in the Black experience, and yet expressly aimed for a wider audience. He does so not by universalizing that experience – such a thing, as he fervently expresses, is impossible – or by engaging in minstrelsy – a possibility he disgustingly decries – but by refusing to compromise his singularity, his intensely first-personal account.

Narratively, *American Moor* centers itself on a single moment: Cobb's real-life audition for the titular role in Shakespeare's *Othello*. This moment is interwoven with Cobb's memories of his introductions to Shakespeare and direct addresses to the audience. The play emerges as a stream of consciousness, rich with backwards glances and tangential musings and emotive outbursts, all flowing into each other with a desperate urgency. Cobb here proves himself to be as adept, nimble, and intelligent a writer as an actor (and what an actor he is!). The dialogue has a kind of breathy presence, with a stolid presence that never betrays overconfidence. Smart without being elitist, authentic without engaging in minstrelsy, complicated without tripping over itself, the work would shine even of its own.

It isn't Shakespeare, in many ways. This is not an insult. Cobb isn't concerned with being the Bard, with pretending to "get" him and be like him. One might argue that Cobb isn't really all that concerned with Shakespeare himself, the man from Stratford-Upon-Avon, and that he thus couldn't care less about imitating his personal lyricism. Cobb is writing as himself, for himself, and for Black Americans like him.

The most profoundly gorgeous moments in the play occur when Cobb first gestures to a certain Shakespearean passage and then, as though caught up in a feverish obsession, throws himself into the passage itself, reciting the four-century-old words with an ease and passion many other classical actors would envy. But then, importantly, the moment ends, and Cobb emerges with a glint of wonder in his eyes. Because Cobb sees what so few Shakespearean actors, directors, and scholars fail to see: not the "subtext", or the "historical context," or the "psychoanalytic murmurs," but the *words themselves*, vocalized by breathing, feeling human beings. The words of Titania and Romeo and, of course, Othello are real to Cobb, deeply felt both by the characters and himself. They are not mere subjects of academic study, or even mere theater, but are emotionally genuine artifacts of human existence. You can see it in his eyes as he speaks: Shakespeare's words are delicious, melting on his

tongue, not because of formal elegance but because they allow him, as he proudly proclaims, to live out the emotions too often denied by Black Americans. Before this production, they were so often his only way to vocalize the profound joy, rage, and sorrow that roiled beneath his and all Black folks' dark skin. Now, though, he reclaims his narrative, reasserting his voice, in whatever form it takes. Thus when Cobb's speech lapses into AAVE (African-American Vernacular English), filled with contractions and "nigga" and, in his words, "African American emotional arrogance" (just one of the absolutely lovely turns of phrase that uncurl out of his pen), it appears as deeply profound, choral, and elaborate as Othello's own. He treats both with equal reverence.

Cobb is a ferociously compelling performer. He commands the stage with all the poise of Olivier, and with a street-smart that Lawrence never could have dreamt of. A true expert in the classical tradition, he could make a list of cake ingredients sound like high art. And with his playfully explorative script, he proves his adeptness at bridging the line between the high and the low, between the past and the present. Bound by no one's words but his own, he takes the spotlight all for himself, and no one would dare, or even want, to wrest it from his grasp. But he refuses to isolate himself on the stage. He sees the audience, as surely as they see him. (In one nifty directorial trick, at one point this becomes quite literal.) Speaking with a casualness, a familiarity, he seeks not to raise himself above his audience any more than he wants to elevate Shakespeare above all others. He is on the same journey so many of us are on, to find a place in a nation, a theatrical tradition, that disregards, even despises, us.

Cobb finds an equal partner in Kim Weild, *American Moor's* director. The result of their collaboration is a stunning piece of technical wizardry. Unsatisfied with simply letting Cobb stand center-stage and rant for one and a half hours, Weild works to constantly keep the audience on their toes, shifting focus and attention across the stage (and indeed, across the entire theater – "I have broken the fourth wall," Cobb triumphantly yells as he

leaps off the stage into the aisle, indicating the production's playfulness with the spatial limits of theater). Her staging, buoyed by a gorgeous set and light design, is as dynamic and innovative as Cobb's production needs it to be.

How can you think you understand more about Othello than I, Cobb ferociously asks the white director from his nightmares. Cobb is an American Moor, like so many of us, linked to the Moor of Venice by an unbreakable chain of shared experience. Rather than seek to help white audiences "understand" or even "live" this, Cobb makes a compelling case for their trust, the trust any audience, any director, ought to give to an actor at the top of their game. Above, I wrote that *American Moor's* intended audience was neither Black Americans nor white Americans. The point isn't that Cobb's production doesn't care about race; this couldn't be further from the truth. Rather, the point is that Cobb begs the audience, whoever they are, to take him, and the Bard, at their own terms. This meant something different for every audience member. The many white folks in the theater were clearly astonished, confronted with a kind of Black performance that refused to either cater or mystify itself, forced into a new level of trust: trust that the actor, whether acting out Shakespeare or being Black, knows what they are doing. And the few Black folks in the theater, like myself, were able to see that rare phenomenon: a Black actor beholden to no one but themselves, exploring their own personal, irreducible, beautiful understanding of their existence. In this, *American Moor* is special. One would be wise not to miss it; who knows when such a theatrical anomaly will arise again? For tickets and information, go to: <https://artsemerson.org>