



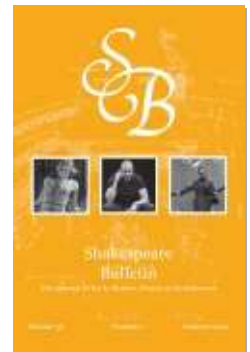
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American Moor (review)

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American Moor

Presented by **Red Bull Theater** at the **Cherry Lane Theatre**, NYC, August 25–October 5, 2019. Written by Keith Hamilton Cobb. Directed by Kim Weild. Scenic design by Wilson Chin. Costume design by Dede Ayite. Lighting design by Alan C. Edwards. Sound design by Christian Frederickson. With Keith Hamilton Cobb (Actor) and Josh Tyson (Director).

KEVIN EWERT, *University of Pittsburgh at Bradford*

The following review continues our recurring series of “Second Looks,” in which reviewers who enjoy an especially intimate relationship to a play or company—for example, those who have edited its text, directed a production of it, or have published elsewhere on the company and its productions—revisit productions we have previously reviewed from their own area of expertise or academic interest. Here, Kevin Ewert, who has a longstanding relationship with Keith Hamilton Cobb’s American Moor, revisits a play previously reviewed in Shakespeare Bulletin 34.3 by Kim F. Hall.

I teach an online Black cinema course, and one of our films is a 1960s neo-realist piece about life in the Jim Crow south. The main character, Duff Anderson (Ivan Dixon), trades his carefree-ish itinerant existence on a railroad section gang for the stability of married life, but finds “stability” is dependent upon not standing up for himself in the face of White bosses and/or tormentors. Late in the film, Duff is working at a gas station when he is called out on a tow job. He arrives to find a sheepish White driver who has plowed his car into a tree, and the encounter does not go well. The White driver tells the Black tow truck operator how to do his job, the tow operator says he’s got it, the car slips a bit as it’s being raised up, and that sets in motion a string of ugly events ending in threats of violence and another lost job.

I’ll often see Black students analyze this scene as a racist encounter. I’ll sometimes see White students say things break bad because Duff is terse, even hostile, giving attitude in the face of the White driver’s friendly chit chat. Here’s what happens. “Sure glad to see you, boy”—those are the first words the driver says as Duff pulls up. But as students post their analyses in a running blog, I’ll occasionally see them not just missing the historical implications of “boy” but rewriting the script: they misquote that first line as “Boy I’m sure glad to see you!” That’s an old-fashioned phrasing they understand, but that changes where the encounter begins.

The infantilization of “boy” is strategic, and second nature. Should one mishear that first line, as Duff gets to work the driver says it again:

“How you doing, boy?” He offers to hold Duff’s flashlight, and Duff demurs. “Just trying to be helpful,” he says. “Most folks round here got no use for—” and he uses a racial slur. He then smiles and continues: “Gotta understand them, that’s all.” For some students, the friendly face and tone must deflect the jolt of the slur. Again he says “How you doing, boy?” The driver doesn’t think Duff has hooked the car up properly, Duff thinks he has, the car slips while being raised, and the driver shouts “Trouble with you boys, don’t listen when a man tells you something.” To be clear: the cinematography shows the car is wrecked. The front end falling a few inches to the ground is nothing. But it’s enough. Duff says it didn’t make things any worse, the driver says it didn’t do any good, and Duff mutters that it was driving the car into the tree that didn’t do it any good. “Boys” aren’t supposed to talk back to adults, and this gets the response you might imagine. So yes, after several racist provocations Duff gives some attitude, but I think it takes a lot of mishearing/seeing to believe Duff creates the problem that leads to threats of violence and to his subsequent firing. It also requires being unable to see the importance of the film’s title: *Nothing But A Man*.

“Speak of me as I am, nothing extenuate.” Keith Hamilton Cobb’s self-penned solo(ish) show *American Moor* had its highest profile run to date in the fall of 2019 at the off-Broadway Cherry Lane Theatre. It is a compelling piece of new writing; it is also probably the best version of *Othello* I’ll ever see. The play is concerned with seeing what’s actually in front of you, in a couple of salient ways: it allows that a Black man may actually know something about playing a Black man on stage, and it asserts that actors may best operate as individuals in their own right rather than as delivery devices for a director’s conception of a playwright’s intention of what a character is supposed to be. These things are not unrelated, and in Cobb’s deft and fiery feat of mixology each allows us to feel the other with greater urgency.

The first time I encountered the show—when I brought it to my university in February 2017—I saw mostly the first aspect. The subject was American Blackness: Keith came to dinner with members of our African American Student Union; he visited the nearby federal correctional institution where I was teaching a Black theater class and where the script spoke directly to the Black incarcerated students; and the show played in our Black History Month series of events. I was less aware of the crucial importance of the second prong: the infantilization—the lessening or “extenuation”—of the actor at the hands of the director, within a second-nature, taken-for-granted theatrical hierarchy.

The show's set-up is elegantly simple: we watch and hear the (mostly) interior monologue of (as early promo materials put it) an intelligent, intuitive, indomitable, large, Black, American Actor auditioning for the part of Othello before a young White Director (the recorded voice of Josh Tyson the first time I saw it, embodied by Josh Tyson in the seventh row of the theater at Cherry Lane). The White Director tells the Black Actor how to do his job, the Actor tries to say he's got it, the audition piece slips up a bit under the increasing pressure and frustration, and that is enough to set in motion a string of theatrically entertaining, culturally illuminating, but psychically ugly events that end (it seems) in another lost acting job.

The Director-within-the-play means to be helpful. His chit-chat while the Actor is trying to do his work seems friendly enough. He believes he understands Othello. The Actor's point—that the middle-aged Black man actually in the room may know something about the middle-aged Black character in the play—is not going to stand a chance in this context, as he well knows and says to us if not to the young man in the seventh row:

You ever get that? The dudes who say things like, "And what Shakespeare was trying to say here is . . ." And you wanna say, "I didn't know you knew him like that, Slick. So youz two was thick as thieves. You knew what was on his mind?" It never bodes well, they start with that shit.

Bode well it does not. The Director has already crashed Othello and *Othello* before the Actor arrives on the scene of the wreck, conceiving "what Shakespeare was trying to say" in terms of the "irrational jealousy" displayed by the disgraced astronaut Lisa Nowak as she drove cross-country, in adult maximum-absorbency garments, to confront her lover's new lover. The Director hopes his idea "makes some general sense" and the Actor again shares his thought with us: "Prodigious and powerful Black man . . . ridiculous, petty, neurotic white people . . . *in diapers* . . . The analogy is strikingly clear" (emphasis in performance). A great laugh line, skillfully delivered—but, watching the play in New York, I heard in the infantilizing analogy and the Director's "Anything I can make clearer to you before we start?" something else: "how you doing, boy?" When the Actor started dropping lines in his audition monologue—unable to balance his boss/tormentor's "help" with his own lived experience and considered analysis—and the encounter became more strained, now I heard "trouble with you boys/actors, don't listen when a man/director tells you something."

Hans-Theis Lehmann's *Postdramatic Theatre* charts a shift toward "the authentic presence of individual performers, who appear not as mere



Actor (Keith Hamilton Cobb) in *American Moor*, dir. Kim Weild, Red Bull Theater, 2019. Photo by Carol Rosegg.

carriers of an intention external to them—whether this derives from the text or the director”; this is a shift away from the mode of the “classical director” who “lets the players speak ‘his’ discourse, or rather that of the author, whom he takes under his care” (Lehmann 32). I quoted this in my 2018 book on Shakespeare and directing, but couldn’t see on my 2017 encounter that *American Moor* was Exhibit A for both why this should be and how it could be done. This “classical” model thrives on extenuated/infantalized actors (“in diapers”) working in service of the text, which means in service of the director’s ideas about that text. Perhaps this wouldn’t register as vividly in a play with a White actor, belonging as they do to the larger culture that usually operates in service of them. For the intelligent, intuitive, indomitable, striving-to-just-be-his-authentic-damn-self Black actor to be trapped “in service of” a White Daddy Director with ideas about “his” Othello—that’s a different story. It throws this limiting, insidious, second-nature theatrical hierarchy into the sharpest relief, especially when this Actor actually talks back to his Director. Luckily, it’s only the Actor’s audition-within-the-play that fails. Cobb’s play proper thrives on his authentic presence, not “in service of” but utilizing *Othello* in an individualized and highly personal performance skewering what is wrong with the “classical” way Shakespeare often gets produced. In *American Moor* at least, Cobb gets to be nothing but the man he always actually brings into the room with him.

Works Cited

- Lehmann, Hans-Thies *Postdramatic Theatre*. Translated by Karen Jurs-Munby, Routledge, 2006.
Nothing But a Man. Directed by Michael Roemer, DuArt, 1964.