American Dramaturgies

For the 21st Century

Julie Vatain-Corfdir (ed.)

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If all the world is a stage (as the title of this series supposes), the stage of the 21st century must be a site of remarkable anxiety—at once global and splintered, intensely up-front and relentlessly mediatized, ever fragmenting the collective and seeking to build it anew. How can theater, an art of intimate presence, rethink its aesthetics and reassert its mission on such a stage? More specifically, how have American dramaturgies chosen to engage with our new millennium? Relying on a broad understanding of "dramaturgy" as a dynamic process, this book explores some of the inspiring trends and arresting innovations of contemporary theater in the US, investigating both playwriting and performance-making in order to delineate formal experiments, the imprint of socio-political themes, and new configurations in spectatorship.

The chapters of the present volume delve into various aspects of theater-making, from courses in playwriting to controversies in casting or discussions about the democratic function of theater. The wide range of examples studied include development practices at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Center, the work of experimental companies (Ping Chong + Company, The Industry, New York City Players), and many plays by contemporary authors (Clare Barron, Jackie Sibblies Drury, David Levine, Charles Mee, Dominique Morisseau, Sarah Ruhl, Andrew Schneider, Paula Vogel, Mac Wellman). Conversations with Young Jean Lee and Richard Maxwell add the playwright's viewpoint to the prismatic perspective of the volume, which is dedicated to performances in the US but written from a decidedly international angle, thus implicitly querying what makes up the American identity of this rich body of work.

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PART II

Page, Stage and Gaze Reconfigured

"BLOND, BLUE-EYED BOY" TURNED "DARK AND DUSKY": WHY CAN'T EDWARD ALBEE'S NICK BE BLACK?

Valentine Vasak
Lycée polyvalent Joliot-Curie de Nanterre et Sorbonne Université

On May 17, 2017, a short *Facebook post* issued by Portland director Michael Streeter on his wall sparked a vehement controversy among American theatre circles. It went as follows:

> I am furious and dumbfounded. The Edward Albee Estate needs to join the 21st Century. I cast a black actor in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? [sic]. The Albee Estate called and said I need to fire the black actor and replace him with a white one. I refused, of course. They have withheld the rights.

Consequently, the production that was to be performed at the Shoebox theatre in Portland was cancelled. Arguably Edward Albee's most famous play, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* stages the often-violent verbal invectives of two couples of inebriated academics during a late night gathering after a faculty party. According to Streeter, Damien Geter, the African-American actor, had been cast as the young, ambitious professor in a deliberate attempt to subvert the race politics of the play, as he explained in an email addressed to a journalist working for the website *Jezebel* and reproduced in an article devoted to the controversy:

> This was a color conscious choice, not a colorblind choice. I believe casting Nick as black adds depth to the play. The character is an up and comer. He is ambitious and tolerates a lot of abuse in order to get ahead. I see this as emblematic of African Americans in 1962, the time the play was written. The play is filled with invective from Martha and particularly George towards Nick. With each insult that happens in the play, the audience will wonder, 'Are George and Martha going to go there re. racial slurs?'[1]

Yet, it is specifically the way the decision would reverberate on the audience's perception of the iconic couple that prompted the estate's refusal to support the non-traditional casting of the play. Indeed, a couple of months after the cancellation

1 Hazel Cills, "Did the Edward Albee Foundation Deny Rights to a Play Because the Production Cast a Black Actor?," *Jezebel*, May 18, 2017 (updated May 19, 2017).

of the show, another production featuring black actors cast for the parts of George and Martha was approved. It provided Jonathan Lomma, the agent representing the estate, with an opportunity to clarify both decisions and to prove that they were not necessarily inconsistent. An excerpt from the statement he issued was reproduced on the page of the online version of *Playbill* devoted to the debates:

> While it has been established that non-Caucasian actors in different combinations have played all the roles in the play at various times with Edward's approval, he was consistently wary of directors attempting to use his work to provide their own commentary by, for instance, casting only Nick as non-white, which essentially transforms George and Martha into older white racists, which is not what Edward's play is about.[2]

Lomma's clarification explicitly posits the casting choice as a misinterpretation of the text against which copyright provides a legal safeguard. If we follow Lomma's logic, the agent's duty would be to protect Albee's work against the ghastly evil of "directors attempting to use his work to provide their own commentary." Therefore, on grounds of artistic integrity, the decision very pointedly seeks to restrain the expression of the director's subjectivity, here depicted as coming in the way of the audience's engagement with the play as literary text. Besides, Nick's characterization as black is not dismissed *per se* (because it misrepresents Nick as a character) but rather shunned because of the light it sheds on other characters (embodied by white actors). The mere presence of a black body onstage would therefore completely reshuffle the power dynamics of the play, as if the skin color of the young academic ethically smeared the middle-aged couple by endowing their violent language with an added layer of racial meaning. Additionally, this declaration signals a wish to endorse productions in which the ethnicity of the characters would not change the meaning of the play, but just be a parameter among many others. By standing by non-traditional casting choices only to the extent that they don't affect "what the play is about," the estate professes itself open to colorblind casting but opposed to a color-conscious production, in which the discourse about race may supersede other theatrical stakes of the play. This article aims to examine the interpretative potential of both the casting choice and its legal response, in an attempt to uncover their political significance and study how they resonate with the literary potency of one of the most famous plays of American theatre. In order to see how this controversy allows us to locate race on the twenty-first century American stage, several threads have to be unraveled, including Twitter threads and

2 Adam Hetrick, "Albee Estate Clarifies Position on Casting Controversy Surrounding Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?," *Playbill*, August 24, 2017.

strings of Facebook comments. These scathing digital exchanges protract online the contractual negotiations at the heart of theatre making. This paper seeks to examine the legal and esthetic consequences of this virtual dramaturgy whose bellicose rhetoric and emotional intensity are part and parcel of the theatrical experience.

"WHOSE" AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF? THEATRICAL AUTHORSHIP IN QUESTION

The many online articles, comments and blog posts that took a stand on the Edward Albee estate's decision to block the production testify to the vitality of the debates surrounding theatrical authorship. If the immemorial question: "To whom does theatre belong?" is of course not to be solved in a few posts and pages, the terms and claims of the stakeholders of the conflict shed new light on the intellectual and economic context in which theatre is made and on the relations of power that tie together all the participants in this collaborative art form. Therefore, this study will first focus on the issue of ownership of the literary text both from a legal and artistic perspective insofar as it offers an insight into the conditions of production of twenty-first century American theatre.

DELINEATING INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY

One first striking aspect of the dispute sparked by the decision is the fact that no one questioned the legal legitimacy of the estate's choice. Indeed, withholding the rights to a play by arguing that it disrespects the author's intentions is something that Albee's estate was absolutely entitled to do. Before a production is approved, the cast legally has to be submitted to the playwright or his legal representatives. This requirement is to be understood within the context of the legal counseling provided by the Dramatists Guild, a professional organization created in 1912 (then called the Author's League of America) that gathers more than 7,000 playwrights. Sometimes described as the closest thing to a union that dramatists have, the Guild provides support to authors when it comes to negotiating contracts or advocating their work. According to its mission statement, the Guild "assists dramatists in developing both their artistic and business skills."[3] This includes providing contracts that "embody the Guild's overarching objectives of protecting the dramatist's control over the content of their work, and

3 "About" tab on the website of the *Dramatists Guild*, "Our Mission" and "Our History" sections.

ensuring that the dramatist is compensated for each use of their work in a way which will encourage them to continue writing for the living stage."[4] Consequently, within the terms of Albee's contracts, the estate's decision is perfectly legal, a fact that has been plainly acknowledged by both the director of the production Michael Streeter and the performer Damien Geter. Therefore, in an article published on the website *BuzzFeed*, the latter foregrounds his criticism of the estate's choice on moral responsibility rather than on legal subtleties: "'Legally they have every right to do what they did.' Most experts agree that playwrights and their estates can approve or reject casting for any reason, including race. However [...], 'It's the ethics of it that I'm concerned with.'"[5]

Even if copyright laws in the United States traditionally tended to focus more on the rights of the producer of a performance than the moral rights associated with the French author's rights,[6] it has nonetheless become more and more customary for

American playwrights to maintain a tight control over the production of their work. Dramatists Play Service, the publishing company of the Guild, which holds the rights to the amateur productions of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (professional productions are handled by Samuel French) issues a warning at the beginning of each published play, this acknowledgement represents a good indicator of the status of the author of the theatrical work. It takes typographical disposition to ensure that the author's name will be advertised "as sole and exclusive author of the play"[7] and that "[t]he name of the Author must appear on a separate line, in which no other name appears, immediately prior to the title and in size of type equal to the largest, most prominent letter used for the title of the play." The capitalization of the noun "Author," a legal convention, sets the author apart making them more visible, in a competitive environment where only a handful of dramatists can live solely off of their royalties. The typography reflects the will to assert that the Author is the most crucial participant in the theatrical process and the text specifies that: "No person, firm or entity may receive credit larger or more prominent that that accorded the author."

These requirements—warranted by the Dramatists Guild—mainly entail constraints associated with publicity and communication. However, all Albee plays include the addition of a further capitalized note on the same page:

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4 *Ibid.*

5 Louis Peitzman, "This Actor Is At The Heart Of A Casting Controversy Over Race," *BuzzFeed*, May 23, 2017.

6 See Jules-Marc Baudel, "Le droit d'auteur français et le copyright américain : les enjeux", *Revue française d'études américaines*, no. 78, Oct. 1998, pp. 48-59.

7 The excerpts reproduced here are to be found on the first page of every play published by Dramatist Play Service.

> ALL EDWARD ALBEE PLAYS MUST BE PERFORMED IN THEIR ENTIRETY. NO CUTTINGS OR EXCERPTS MAY BE PERFORMED, AND NO CHANGES MAY BE MADE TO THE CHARACTER, CHARACTERIZATIONS OR LOCALES.

This addendum, that does not appear in plays written by other playwrights, is meant to defend the textual integrity of the play but the references to characters and characterization provide the Albee estate with the opportunity to have a say on all the casting choices. When transposed to a French stage these legal dispositions give way to some trans-linguistic visual oddities in the communication strategies, as exemplified by the following screenshot of the website of the Théâtre du Rond-Point, which advertises a production of *At Home at the Zoo* (**fig. 1**). The disquieting presence of the mark of the English possessive seems grammatically irrelevant and out of place when inserted within the foreign linguistic fabric of the translated communication materials.

1. Screenshot of the website of the Théâtre du Rond-Point advertising a production of *At Home at the Zoo*

Indeed, along with playwrights like Samuel Beckett or Arthur Miller, Albee was famous for maintaining a very tight control over how his plays were produced. In 1984, he refused to have *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* performed with an all-male cast and he could not stand his play *Three Tall Women* being interpreted by short actresses, as Abbie Van Nostrand, the director of corporate communications at Samuel French reports for the website *American Theatre*:

> "The Albee estate requires professional producers to submit production proposals, which include intended venue, casting, and other artistic elements," said Abbie Van Nostrand, the director of corporate communications at Samuel French, who handles the licensing of Albee's plays. When Albee was alive, he was notoriously particular about how his plays were presented and who could perform in them; it's even been reported that he requested approval of the heights of the actresses cast in *Three Tall Women*.[8]

It comes as no surprise then that the estate's decision was backed by the Dramatists Guild, which stressed the necessity to abide by the author's wishes when it comes to casting and drew a parallel with non-white authors who requested their plays to be cast with people of color. The website *Deadline* reproduced an excerpt of the statement issued by Tari Stratton, the Dramatist Guild's director of education and outreach:

> The Guild asserts that it is a playwright's fundamental right to approve of casting choices to ensure they reflect his or her authorial intent. We assert this right for Edward Albee and his estate, just as we have asserted it on behalf of Lloyd Suh and his work *Jesus In India* and Katori Hall and her play *The Mountaintop*. We also assert the right of playwrights to specify diverse casting for work that is not demographically specific. Playwrights own their work, and therefore have the right to make decisions about all aspects of its presentation.
>
> At the same time, the Guild is actively engaged in conversations and initiatives aimed at making the American theater a more inclusive place with greater opportunities for all playwrights and lifting the barriers that have for far too long severely limited opportunities for far too many. We remain firm in our belief that our art form can't achieve its full potential until it embraces our cultural and demographic diversity.[9]

Whereas the first paragraph foregrounds the absolute preeminence of the author's will and intent, the second paragraph voices an unease probably related to the racial content of the decision. Of course, the references to playwrights such as Suh and Hall are meant to counter the idea that the estate's motivation may have been racist, as the Guild's commitment to "authorial intent" has also reinforced the presence of non-white actors onstage. Yet, as noted by Damien Geter in an interview to *Oregon*

8 Diep Tran, "When a Writer's Rights Aren't Right: The 'Virginia Woolf' Casting Fight," *American Theatre*, May 22, 2017.

9 Jeremy Gerard, "Who's Afraid Of Edward Albee? Dramatists Guild Backs 'Virginia Woolf' Playwright In Casting Dispute," *Deadline*, May 22, 2017.

Live, the estate's decision definitely holds political significance as far as the Shoebox theatre production is concerned: "The thing for me is, they kept making reference to the physical attributes of Nick. But they didn't tell me I couldn't play the role because I'm bald ... so to me, that makes a difference." [10] Indeed, Geter's skepticism is rooted in the fact that to allude to the "physical attributes" of the characters denies the specificity of race, which, unlike baldness, is a social construct used to legitimize mechanisms of violence and oppression. Besides, denying the rights to the production deprived a racialized individual of an employment opportunity in a competitive work environment. One may also argue that it stifles the artistic voice and vision of the production that sought to introduce an added layer of meaning to a play that has been performed on many occasions very faithfully to the author's intent.

AUTHORIAL INTENT: THE YARDSTICK OF THEATRICAL AUTHORSHIP?

Whereas in the present case the legal lines are rather easy to draw, the estate's decision also posits the fact that the author of the play is the one and only source of theatrical authority. To a certain extent, the estate's attempt to fend off "directors attempting to use Albee's work to provide their own commentary" presupposes a very limited input of the artistic team of a production in the meaning-making process of theatre performance. It presents the director, cast and technicians as mere mediators, go-betweens connecting the Word of the author to the audience, with as little interference as possible. Given the necessarily polyphonic nature of the dramatic genre, this conception of theater plays down the artistic significance of the performance. Edward Albee himself would often say that the ideal way to access a play was to read it. In 1965, in an article entitled "Ad Libs on Theater," he claimed:

> When will we return the theater to the audience? Well, I don't think we should, frankly. Does the tree that falls in the forest, nobody hearing it, make any sound? I've always thought it did. The theater may well be the possession of the audience but the playwright is not. The play is not. [11]

Yet, the centrality of the playwright is far from being obvious. In an article entitled "Is There a Text on This Stage? Theatre / Authorship / Interpretation," Gerald

10 Amy Wang, "When a black actor is cast for a white character in 'Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?'," *Oregon Live*, May 26, 2017 (updated January 09, 2019).

11 Edward Albee, *Stretching My Mind*, New York, Carroll & Graf, 2005, p. 32.

Rabkin examines how the gap between written text and performance complicates the genealogy of authority on the theatrical stage and notes that since Antonin Artaud's seminal idea that the central participant in the theatrical moment is "the person who controls the direct handling of the stage," many directors, authors, ensembles, have qualified what Rabkin labels "text privilege." Therefore, the performance allows for the emergence of new interpretations, and the text becomes the fertile ground on which an artistic vision is sown:

> The function of the playwright was spread among members of the ensemble or subsumed by the director-auteur. Or—as in the early work of Grotowski and Schechner—a classic originary text became the unprivileged ground from which a radical performance text was created. [12]

To that respect, director Michael Streeter lamented the fact that the estate's decision froze the play in the fixity of its univocal interpretation, dooming it to inescapably remain "a museum piece." [13] The unquestionable fixity that the phrase "museum piece" suggests underlines the almost sacred nature of a play that definitely belongs to the American theatrical canon. When he was alive, Albee constantly underlined the necessity to maintain the integrity of the text, which would warrant its status as a literary work rather than as a mere script designed to be used for performances and discarded afterward.

In the case of the Shoebox theatre controversy, the issue is further complicated by the fact that the Albee estate withheld the rights posthumously, less than a year after Edward Albee's death. Therefore, it is a legal decision that is consistent with Albee's ruling principles in terms of casting, but one that was made once he could no longer approve or disapprove of it. As the debate around the decision gained momentum on social media, one of its most striking aspects was the inflammatory rhetoric used to refer to Albee as a person. Many commentators on *Twitter* and *Facebook* seemed to lament the fact that Albee's rigidity when it came to handling his rights had not died with him. Many mentioned Albee's curt personality in extremely violent terms. A few months after his death, a monstrous ghost was revived on the hyperbolic stage of online opinion through anecdotes relating unpleasant interactions with the playwright, and comments on his casting choices. In the cathartic outpour of social

12 Gerald Rabkin, "Is There a Text on This Stage? Theatre / Authorship / Interpretation," *Performing Arts Journal*, vol. 9, no. 2/3, 1985, p. 143.

13 Amy Wang, "When a black actor is cast for a white character in 'Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?'," art. cit.

media venom, the distorted, ghastly figure of an old white racist misogynist was brought back to life through vivid and colorful language. Here is a short sample of some of the most scathing epithets used to refer to the dramatist. In the comments to Streeter's initial post, Albee was described as a "total jerk," a "pisser," a "nit-picking asshole." Some virulent commentators used oxymoronic structures to both hail his talent and disparage his personality such as "genius prick" or the enumerative "OCD, ego maniacal, control freak, narcissistic genius." On *Facebook*, one user even regretted the fact that "assholery never dies."[14] Thus, like Hamlet's ghost, Albee almost seemed to have risen from the dead to speak his controversial posthumous truth. In the comments to Streeter's post, the estate's decision was referred to as a way to abide by "the spirit of Albee," and the posthumous nature of the controversy did little to restore the image of the deceased playwright. Indeed, the acute dramatization of the playwright's reputation and personality on social networks led to what one could be tempted to call "post mortem characterization." It seemed as if the retrospective anger triggered by the estate's choice reverberated on the dead playwright, burying him in a memorial of digital hatred and exacerbated personality features: enshrined in digital fabric, the supposedly acrimonious playwright became a stock character, a caricature of the type you only meet onstage.

ALBEE'S RACE POLITICS: OBSCURING WHITENESS

The attacks against Albee's harsh personality, however, should not overshadow the centrality of the issue of race in the controversy. The claims of racism need to be addressed by considering both the dramatic works published by the playwright and the casting and production choices that sparked the animated polemic. One should of course, bear in mind that the limit between "The Man" and "The Work" is necessarily blurry and elusive—if not irrelevant—and that trying to delimit and locate such a pervasive mechanism as race oppression is an arduous—if not impossible—task. By addressing how racism entered the conversation in this specific case, I wish to question the ways in which an individual decision exemplifies deep-rooted mechanisms of systemic oppression rather than to linger on the interpretative speculations on the ethics of a dead man. One may nonetheless consider as a starting point the many instances when the qualifier "racist" became a central term of the acrimonious online conversation. I wish to dwell on two instances in which the noun "racism" was

14 All these colorful expressions were found in the comments to Streeter's posts or as a response to a thread started by a retweet of Streeter's post by journalist Mark Harris.

preceded with an adjective to describe the estate's decision. Damien Geter termed the withholding of the rights "Textbook racism" in an article published on the website *BuzzFeed*, arguing that refusing to grant the rights because an actor is black and not white constitutes a matter of discrimination, regardless of the context. *NPR* host Scott Simon used the term "convoluted racism" (that he opposes to simple racism) to account for the supposedly twisted logic at the heart of this refusal. [15] What does this deviation in the qualifiers used—from "textbook" to "convoluted"—reveal about race in Albee's plays and on the stage of Broadway in the late 2010s? This section will be devoted to trying to outline how the body of Albee's texts as well as his casting approvals and denials (and that of his estate) resonate with issues pertaining to whiteness and blackness on the American stage.

CONJURING UP THE RACIST GHOST OF EDWARD ALBEE?

In his interview with *Oregon Live*, director Michael Streeter takes pains to distinguish between the scope and consequences of the decision of the Albee estate and their intentions: "Unfortunately, there are people hearing of it and thinking that Edward Albee is a racist and that the estate is racist. The intent may not necessarily be there, the results may be—that's a distinction that a lot of people don't make." [16]

Let it be reminded that even if the overwhelming majority of Albee's characters are white, Albee did tackle the issue of race directly in his 1960 play *The Death of Bessie Smith*. The plot of the play is set in 1937, the year when the famous blues singer Bessie Smith died in a car crash. It was long believed that she was refused admittance in several whites-only hospitals and that her death was the direct result of Jim Crow Laws enforcing segregation. Even if this later proved to be a myth (she was taken straight to a colored-only hospital), this situation provides the basis for Albee's one-act play. The plot is centered on the figure of a white nurse at the admissions desk of a white hospital, the audience witnesses the contempt with which she treats the black characters and is led to feel sympathy for Jack, the black driver responsible for the accident who fails to save the famous singer. [17] The play also evokes the authoritative figure of a "Great White Doctor" who hovers above the play but never condescends to engage in healing anyone. First performed in 1994, the experimental play (or sit-around) *Fragments* is

15 A recording of his intervention is available online.

16 Amy Wang, "When a black actor is cast for a white character in 'Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?'," art. cit.

17 Edward Albee, *The Death of Bessie Smith*, in *The Collected Plays of Edward Albee: 1958-1965*, New York, Overlook Duckworth, 2007.

uncharacteristically vague regarding casting, save for references to the approximate age of the 8 unnamed female and male characters and one specific indication: "Man 2 must be cast with an African-American actor; beyond that, let common sense determine casting." [18] Finally, on a personal level, as early as 1963 and the international tour of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, Albee explicitly stipulated that his work could not be licensed to a theater in which segregation was enforced. This applied both inside and outside of the United States. In a 2004 interview, the playwright presented the casting restrictions demanded throughout his career as a way to claim full ethical responsibility for the content of his works:

> ALBEE – [...] It's my work up there, and I want it as close as it can be to my intentions. I'd rather take my own praise and my own blame than somebody else's. And that's why I've retained approval of all actors and directors in all my plays, from the very beginning.
> GREEN – What other restrictions have you found it necessary to place on productions?
> ALBEE – Early on, there were still segregated theaters in the United States, so I had to put in my contracts that my plays may only be performed in fully integrated theaters. [19]

Albee thereby resorted to the same legal apparatus that prevented Damien Geter to be cast as Nick in order to push a political agenda. It enabled him to voice his political disapproval of the South-African apartheid regime as well as the segregated states of the south of the United States. Besides, as an individual, Albee has on many instances expressed his sympathy to the Civil Rights Movement and he occasionally took action to voice his dissatisfaction with race inequalities and apartheid. David A. Crespy and Lincoln Konkle, who edited *Edward Albee as Theatrical and Dramatic Innovator*, wrote in their introduction to the volume:

> Though Albee had permitted race-blind castings of his productions in some cases, he has also apparently disallowed such requests when, again, to do so would undercut the realism of the play. This was by no means because Albee was racist. Early in his career part of the control he exercised over his plays was that they could not be performed in segregated theatres. [20]

18 *Id.*, *Fragments*, in *The Collected Plays of Edward Albee: 1978-2003*, New York, Overlook Duckworth, 2008, p. 388.

19 Jesse Green, "Theater: Edward Albee Returns to the Zoo," *The New York Times,* May 16, 2004.

20 David Allison Crespy and Lincoln Konkle (eds), *Edward Albee as Theatrical and Dramatic Innovator*, Amsterdam, Brill, 2019.

This excerpt almost presents Albee's commitments for the Civil Rights movements in the 1960s as credentials for his moral integrity, for his being "not racist," as if his involvement could shield him and his estate from any form of racial oppression. Besides, their defense of the playwright blends ethical and esthetic issues: if the racialized body of the performer is deemed in the way of "the realism of the play," it can be cast offstage for the benefit of authorial intent. The black body in performance is therefore dismissed as destabilizing the esthetic framework of realism by its mere presence. As I will develop later in this essay, Crespy and Konkle's allusion to realism refers to the fact that Nick's blonde features constitute a key element of his characterization, yet their remark also highlights the fact that casting is likely to disrupt the esthetic of a play and that the category of realism does not exist *ex-nihilo*. One could then question this need to safeguard the realism and verisimilitude of the play through casting choices that are deemed consistent with authorial intent. Indeed, in an article entitled "The Evolution of American Literary Realism," Eileen J. Herrmann asserts that *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* "destabilizes the boundaries between domestic realism and the experimentalism of the avant-garde by incorporating the non-real."[21] Could there not be room for unsettling and destabilization of authorial intent and racial boundaries in the equivocal undecidability of Albee's writing? Does not the polysemy of the play allow room for a conversation on race?

SHOULD COLORBLIND CASTING BE A HORIZON FOR BROADWAY?

The debate around the estate's refusal assuredly shifted the focus of the conversation on race on Broadway. Edward Albee has often been reproached for his refusal to write beyond the boundaries of a white upper-class middle-aged heterosexual sphere. If this choice is mainly an artistic one and if it would not necessarily be productive to assess it in ethical terms, the way the playwright accounts for it deserves consideration. For instance, in 2011, Albee received a Lambda Literary Award, a distinction granted to gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender books. The author's acceptance speech sparked a fierce debate as he claimed that he did not want to feel limited in his expression by his gay identity, stating: "I am not a gay writer, I am a writer who happens to be gay." So, paradoxically, his wish to appeal to everyone is often translated onstage by the representation of dominant characters so that a discursively constructed "majority"

21 Eileen Herrmann, "The Evolution of American Dramatic Realism," in Keith Newlin (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of American Literary Realism*, New York, Oxford UP, 2019, p. 508.

could identify with them.[22] To a certain extent, one could consider that the characters onstage are often modeled after the demographics of Albee's Broadway audiences (white, middle-aged and affluent). For the dramatist, it seems that social criticism consists in magnifying the petty defects and shortcomings of the prototypical theatregoer rather than welcoming diversity onstage. The ambiguity of the playwright's discourse on diversity is best exemplified by his assessment of the Civil Rights movements expressed in a 1991 *New York Times* article entitled "Edward Albee and the Road Not Taken:" "'I involve myself in all civil rights movements,' he elaborates. 'But I'm leery of bandwagoning and opportunism. I wanted to warn people not to make the same mistake of separatism that a lot of people in the black civil rights movement did.'"[23] This quote clearly posits Edward Albee on the side of integration in the debate between integration and separation as suitable responses to racial oppression. African-American playwright August Wilson took the opposite stance in a seminal speech entitled *The Ground on Which I Stand* delivered on June 26, 1996, at the 11th biennial Theatre Communications Group national conference at Princeton University. In his keynote address, Wilson stated:

> I am what is known, at least among the followers and supporters of the ideas of Marcus Garvey, as a "race man." That is simply that I believe that race matters—that is the largest, most identifiable and most important part of our personality. It is the largest category of identification because it is the one that most influences your perception of yourself, and it is the one to which others in the world of men most respond.[24]

The mention of the legacy of famous advocate of separation Marcus Garvey allows Wilson to lay claim to a theatrical ground that would not require black performers to work as "mimics," that is to say to erase an identity whose specificity reflects the violence inflicted on black bodies by slavery, segregation and racism. In his words, the bodies of the performers become a site of embodied history: "The history of our bodies—the maimings, the lashings, the lynchings, the body that is capable of inspiring profound

22 This choice does not preclude the queering of Albee's heterosexual characters in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, as noted by Tison Pugh who describes "the protean force of a queer subtext in Albee's play." Tison Pugh, "Edward Albee's Sadomasochistic Ludonarratology in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?," *The Journal of American Drama and Theatre*, vol. 31, no. 1, Fall 2018.

23 David Richards, "Edward Albee and the Road Not Taken," *The New York Times,* June 16, 1961.

24 August Wilson, "The Ground on Which I Stand" (1996), reproduced in *American Theatre* online by permission of the estate of August Wilson, 2016.

rage and pungent cruelty—is not for rent."[25] For Wilson, the economic exploitation of the black body onstage in white plays and productions enacts an added layer of race violence that culminates in colorblind casting of black performers. In *Theatre & Race*, Harvey Young defines colorblind casting as follows: "Colorblind casting assumes that color is the least consequential or least significant element when evaluated alongside age, physical ability, and gender and that, as a result, it can be ignored or overlooked."[26] According to Young, the appeal of colorblind casting lies in the fact that "it treats the theatre as a place where universal stories that can be embodied by any person are told."[27] However, for August Wilson, the dismissal of color as a relevant category entails the violence of the negation of black people's lives and experience and must be strongly rejected: "We reject any attempt to blot us out, to reinvent our history and ignore our presence or to maim our spiritual product."[28] The mechanisms of erasure through which colorblind casting disposes of race as a site of production of meaning could also bear social consequences, insofar as it supports the illusion of what Brandi Catanese calls "a neutral white space," in which whiteness would be equated with a universally unquestioned form of neutrality. According to Catanese, colorblind casting could contribute to devaluing nonwhite cultures:

> An uncritical deployment of colorblind casting invites the question of whether race is truly irrelevant in American performance practices, or if the rhetoric of color blindness only diminishes the value of nonwhite cultures, while leaving whiteness intact. Is Michael Eric Dyson correct when he argues that "the cost of colorlessness is always an investment in whiteness"?[29]

Catanese views the stage as a place where whiteness is likely to be reinforced by the integration of black performers, while acknowledging how race as a socially constructed category impacts their lives.

This might explain why, like Michael Streeter, many theatre artists privilege the term "color-conscious" over "colorblind" as the aim of such a choice is to expose the socially constructed racializing strategies in a play rather than to erase it. Harvey Young underlines that "conscious casting actively draws attention to the ways in which race complicates or supports a production. It encourages audiences to see race and to think

25 *Ibid.*
26 Harvey Young, *Theatre & Race*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, p. 57.
27 *Ibid.*, p. 58.
28 August Wilson, *The Ground on Which I Stand*, *op. cit.*
29 Brandi W. Catanese, *The Problem of the Color[blind]: Racial Transgression and the Politics of Black Performance*, Ann Arbor, Univ. of Michigan Press, 2012, p. 34.

critically about its meaning and value in performance."[30] In an article published in the *Los Angeles Times*, Jessica Gelt describes the shift towards more and more color-conscious casting on the American stage:

> The shift from "colorblind" to "color-conscious" may be attributed partly to the growing diversity of stories being produced. In eras past, when the vast majority of tales unfolding onstage were written by white playwrights about white characters, it took colorblind casting for an actor of color to be seen.
> But now we're in the era of "Hamilton." A better term is "color-conscious," said Diep Tran, associate editor of American Theatre magazine, who writes a monthly column on equity, diversity and inclusion. "Color-conscious" means "we're aware of the historic discrimination in the entertainment industry," she said, "and we're also aware of what it means to put a body of color onstage."[31]

Lin-Manuel Miranda's musical, which revisits the birth of the United States with a racially diverse cast, is quoted as evidence that the onstage presence of black actors in a country fraught with racial tensions and discriminations is necessarily political and gives audiences an insight into a historical past that should not be silenced. Whereas the term "colorblind" is gradually losing its appeal—at least in artistic and progressive circles—, the term "color-conscious" has sometimes been contested. In her work *No Safe Spaces: Re-casting Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality in American Theater*, Angela Pao prefers to use the word "non-traditional casting," which historically alludes to the one of the first incentives in this field, the Non-Traditional Casting Project, launched in 1986:

> [Nontraditional casting] is inclusive in terms of both the people affected and the approaches developed. Perhaps even more importantly, it foregrounds the fact that what American audiences were accustomed to seeing on the stage before the era of multiracial casting was not a truthful correspondence to reality, as one might think from hearing many of the objections, but the application of historical conventions.[32]

By referring to a theatrical "tradition," Pao wishes to highlight the contingency of traditional casting, to present it as the remains of a historical past that bears little

30 Harvey Young, *Theatre and Race*, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

31 Jessica Gelt, "Authenticity in casting: From 'colorblind' to 'color conscious,' new rules are anything but black and white," *The Los Angeles Time*, July 13, 2017.

32 Angela C. Pao, *No Safe Spaces: Re-casting Race, Ethnicity and Nationality in American Theater*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2010, p. 5.

resemblance with the racial and cultural diversity of twenty-first century American society. Besides, by stating that all-white casts are historically determined, Pao draws her readers' attention to the fact that this tradition can be replaced by new practices that better reflect the diversity of people who contribute to theatremaking and their prospective audiences. According to Pao: "Perhaps the most desirable attribute of the qualification nontraditional is its foreshadowing of its own obsolescence."[33] Indeed, the more non-traditional casts set foot onstage, the more their iterated presence challenges the boundary between what is traditional and what is not.

Nonetheless, the focus of the debate on the sole issue of casting somewhat obscures one of the main aspects of the argument: if all the theater enthusiasts who took part in the intense online exchanges seemed to agree on the fact that more racial diversity was welcome and desirable on the American stage, the issue remains as to whether a play that addresses racial issues only in a slant manner, and written by a white playwright, is the best locus to promote such diversity. What are the political consequences of the non-traditional casting of a character whose physical description is part and parcel of his characterization? Nick's blond hair is so constitutive of his persona that he is described physically before being named. At the very beginning of the play, Martha reminds George of Nick's physical appearance: "About thirty, blond, and... [...] Good looking."[34] As the play unfolds and the linguistic games become crueler, "Blondie" will become one of his nicknames. To what extent can a black performer fit into the standardized eugenic nightmare that Nick seems to embody in the eyes of George? Is this recasting a rewriting, and if so, is it an innovation or a betrayal of the play and racialized performers alike?

RE-CASTING AS RE-SEMANTICIZING

As stated by representatives of the Albee estate, recasting Nick as a black character introduces an odd disjunction between the silence on the issue of race and the violence with which the younger character is treated since signifiers such as "stallion" or "houseboy" would immediately appear as thinly-veiled racial slurs. In an article published in the *New York Times* and entitled "A Black Actor in 'Virginia Woolf'? Not Happening, Albee Estate Says," Michael Paulson quotes a spokesperson for the Albee estate:

33 *Ibid.*

34 Edward Albee, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, in *The Collected Plays of Edward Albee: 1958-1965*, New York, Overlook Duckworth, 2007, p. 160.

> Mr. Albee wrote Nick as a Caucasian character, whose blonde hair and blue eyes are remarked on frequently in the play, even alluding to Nick's likeness as that of an Aryan of Nazi racial ideology. [...] Furthermore, Mr. Albee himself said on numerous occasions when approached with requests for non-traditional casting in productions of 'Virginia Woolf' that a mixed-race marriage between a Caucasian and an African-American would not have gone unacknowledged in conversations in that time and place and under the circumstances in which the play is expressly set by textual references in the 1960s.[35]

This silencing of the issue of race actually raises many ethical questions: had Nick been black, the stifling atmosphere of repressed racism implied by the power relationships between the characters could have been unbearable to black audiences. The Albee estate actually found support in Tania Richard, a black columnist and Chicago actress who devoted a post to the issue on her blog "Writing my Mind." She contends that "[t]he reflexive cries for racism are misdirected" and that this casting choice and Nick's desire to fit in "is based in the presumptive belief that Black people want to neutralize or be the same." Tania Richard stresses the linguistic violence of forcing a black actor into a play that completely overlooks race:

> Mr. Streeter's casting of a Black actor within the time period, on a small campus with two predatory characters cannot happen unless the Black actor's skin color is ignored, overlooked and ultimately sacrificed for the story. Theatre is not the place where minority actors need to be sacrificed. It's been done.
>
> Theatre cannot simply sew minority actors into the fabric of American theatre by having them be surrogates. By the Albee estate taking a stand and wrestling back Albee's original intent it unintentionally forces the fact that the Black actor deserves an opportunity to tell a story that doesn't ask observers to ignore his entirety.[36]

Not only does Richard's post highlight the artificiality of the casting choice but it also voices its violence: the reference to "sacrifice" shows that the very act of silencing race despite the onstage presence of the black performer would be an erasure that could remind the audience of Wilson's aforementioned "blotting out." Similar criticism has been directed at the casting choices of *Hamilton*. Having black performers embody white historical figures, some of whom were slave owners, can also be read as a form of

35 Michael Paulson, "A Black Actor in 'Virginia Woolf'? Not Happening, Albee Estate Says," *The New York Times*, May 21, 2017.

36 The *original post* published on Richard's blog hosted by the *Chicago Tribune* is only accessible outside of Europe, but some excerpts of her post are available on the website of the *Chicago Inclusion Project*.

historical erasure, especially since the musical completely obliterates the role played by enslaved or free persons of color in the early decades of the new republic. As historian Lyra D. Monteiro remarks, "it is problematic to have black and brown actors stand in for the great white men of the early United States in a play that does not acknowledge that the ancestors of these same actors were excluded from the freedoms for which the founders fought."[37] The rejection voiced by Richard and Monteiro could therefore suggest that casting performers of colors in narratives from which characters of color are excluded appears as a meager substitute for giving them a voice that would not be a form of ventriloquism.

Despite the concerns that a bi-racial performance may trigger, other productions starring black actors have since been approved by the estate. A few months after Michael Streeter's post, director Chris Jackson presented a version of the play introducing a black George and Martha. Hugh Iglarsh, who reviewed the production for the website *New City Stage*, considered that the casting choice "render[ed] those avatars of dessicated [sic] WASPdom more universal."[38] This statement posits an updated definition of universality which runs counter to the version defended by Albee in his 2011 Lambda Literary Award acceptance speech during which he argued that he wrote heterosexual characters as a way to "transcend self and write about the needs, the beauties and the anguishes of us all."[39] In this speech, Edward Albee playfully defined himself as a minority as he was "male," "white," "educated," "creative" and "liv[ed] in what passes for a democracy," a remark which was welcomed with laughs from the audience. By underlining these specific characteristics, Albee ironically makes use of the word "minority," which is here to be understood in a purely quantitative sense, to acknowledge his many privileges. But this remark also points out the paradoxes of his discourse: the "transcendence" of his gay identity and minority status to appeal to the greater number establishes racial, economic and heterosexual privilege as the vantage point from which humanity at large is to be addressed. The argument of the universal appeal is hinted at in August Wilson's refusal to cast black performers in plays written by white authors that only reveal their inadequacy to account for the African-American experience:

37 Lyra D. Monteiro, "Race-Conscious Casting and the Erasure of the Black Past in Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton*," *The Public Historian*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2016, p. 89-98.

38 Hugh Iglarsh, "Painful with a Purpose: a Review of Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf at Pulse Theater," *New City Stage*, August 10, 2017.

39 Albee's full acceptance speech is available on the platform *Vimeo*.

> To mount an all-black production of a *Death of a Salesman* or any other play conceived for white actors as an investigation of the human condition through the specifics of white culture is to deny us our own humanity, our own history, and the need to make our own investigations from the cultural ground on which we stand as black Americans. It is an assault on our presence, and our difficult but honorable history in America; and it is an insult to our intelligence, our playwrights, and our many and varied contributions to the society and the world at large.[40]

When one bears in mind Wilson's words, the endorsement of Chris Jackson's production may appear as a way for the Edward Albee estate to move beyond the controversy that broke out a few months before, to rebrand the Albee trademark and dispel the suspicions of racism, and to broaden the scope of the writer's claim of universality through "transcendence of the self." But this assimilation of the black performers's bodies, even in all-black casts, raises suspicion of tokenism. Brandi Catanese reiterates Josephine Lee's association between non-traditional casting and liberalism when she claims that "nontraditional casting is an extension of the politics of liberal integrationism, which seek at once to acknowledge and efface difference, reifying the desirability of the ideological institution into which the raced body is meant to be assimilated."[41] Lee and Catanese denounce the "depoliticizing" of such casting practices even if one could argue that some productions of the play succeed in achieving a form of artistic agency from all the black artists who get involved in the creative process. In the months that followed the Shoebox production scandal, many well-researched articles traced back a genealogy of diverse castings of Edward Albee plays. In fact, as early as 2001, Vera Katz, described by the website *Arts Integrity* as "the first white theatre professor at the historically black Howard University,"[42] reached out to Edward Albee to make some slight changes to the script to make it fit for an all-black cast for a university production. Director and playwright worked hand in hand to make these adjustments and introduce the names of historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and adapt the references to the characters' physical traits to the cast. In the Howard production, the purely linguistic offspring of the middle-aged couple was no longer a "blond blue-eyed child" but a "dark dusky child." The will to maintain the poetic quality of the alliterative sonorities opens up new semantic possibilities and

40 August Wilson, "The Ground on Which I Stand", *op. cit.*

41 Brandi W. Catanese, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

42 Howard Sherman, "Contrary to What You've Heard, You Can Cast Albee Plays Diversely," *Arts Integrity*, August 18, 2017.

shrouds the fictional child in an added layer of textual obscurity: the references to "darkness" and "dusk" suggest a liminal space of uncertainty, and echo the character's undecidability, as the son is neither completely fleshed nor absolutely absent.

CONCLUSION: THE SECOND CONJURING UP OF THE GHOST, A SPECULATIVE READING OF BLACK NICK

Upon closer examination, one may be surprised by the diversity of casting choices of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* sanctioned by Edward Albee and his estate. As it appears, over the years, black performers have played all the roles in different configurations. This endows the refusal to grant the rights to the Portland production with even more potency. Why is there such anathema upon this specific casting arrangement (white Martha, George and Honey and black Nick)? To investigate this issue, let us conjure up a second ghost, a "spook" to use the same word as Philip Roth's Coleman Silk in the novel *The Human Stain*.[43] As in Roth's novel, academia becomes the setting for a scene in which the dialectic between the absence and presence of black individuals reveals underlying racial tensions. To a certain extent, the ghostly presence of a black Nick would make Martha's use of words such as "stallion," "poor little bastard," "houseboy" almost unbearable. The references to Nick's remorseless ambition would therefore lead George and Martha to voice the anxieties and fears of miscegenation that have left their mark on American history. Nick's subservient black body, as well as the animalizing *lexis* used by Martha would unmistakably rekindle the slave-owning past of the protagonists' historical namesake George and Martha Washington.[44] For instance, George's evocation of Nick's career plans would resonate with a myriad of historically and racially charged meanings: "[You could turn into] an inevitability. You know… Take over a few courses from the older men, start some special groups for myself…plow a few pertinent wives…"[45] Casting Nick as a black character in a play that was written less than 10 years after the murder of Emmett Till would

43 In Philip Roth's *The Human Stain,* Coleman Silk, a seemingly white academic gets in a judicial quagmire for calling two absentee students "spooks," unaware of the fact that they are in fact black and that this qualifier will be construed as a racial slur.

44 After they settled in Philadelphia, the first president and his wife took their slaves with them. Under the law of the state, the enslaved workers who spent six months on Pennsylvanian soil had to be enfranchised, so the Washingtons sent their slaves back to Virginia before the deadline to circumvent the legislation. In *Never Caught,* historian Erica Armstrong Dunbar sheds light on the fate of Ona Judge, an enslaved woman who ran away from the Washingtons.

45 Edward Albee, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, *op. cit.*, p. 229.

confront twenty-first century audiences with the fears and prejudices historically expressed by white populations such as the fantasy of the sexual potency and lust of black men. It would also put in the limelight the humiliating treatments of an athletic young black man who experiences the violence of the academic hierarchy in his own flesh. Finally, the 2017 Portland production of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* would have been contemporary with artistic works that tackle the issue of black eugenics and white anxiety, such as the thriller *Get Out* by Jordan Peele. Indeed, *Get Out* presents its audience with a derelict white-supremacist aristocracy that kidnaps black individuals selected for their potency and capabilities (some are athletes, and the main protagonist is a photographer with an acute eye for artistic composition…) to revive its decaying genomes through insane scientific experimentations. In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, George, the old university professor, acknowledges being fascinated by "the pragmatic accommodation by which you wave-of-the-future boys are going to take over."[46] In a way, George's cues would—if addressed to a black Nick—also express this "racial replacement" fantasy and the Nazi reference would recede in the dark only to be replaced with post-colonial tensions and violence. To conclude, with this speculative conjuring up of the racial ghost, this hypothetical interpretative gesture, I wished to dwell on the racial violence and unresolved tensions that the casting choice would have triggered. Whether the presence of a black Nick onstage would have allowed an "Exorcism" (to quote the title of the third act) or merely staged another black man's sacrifice—as Tania Richard propounds—remains to be debated online and offline. For the time being, black Nick has been banned from the stage but has been fleshed out by the voices of infuriated online commentators, forever a creature of fiction trapped in the limbo of theatrical absence, forever a "dark dusky child."

Yet, this article, adapted from a paper given in 2018 and developed in 2020, in the immediate wake of the murder of George Floyd, could not end on the visual absence of the black body. Floyd's death and the many protests, gatherings and demonstrations that ensued brought to the attention of white academics such as myself the political potency of representing and circulating violent images. The spectacle of police brutality has been instrumental in raising awareness but has also awakened the historical ghosts of the visual staging of lynching, which treated the murder of black people as a family entertainment.[47] It is no longer possible for those of us working in the field of theatre, a genre etymologically dedicated to sight, to turn a blind eye on how whiteness has

46 *Ibid.*, p. 224.

47 See Melanye Price's article "Please Stop Showing the Video of George Floyd's Death," released in *The New York Times* on June 3, 2020.

long occupied centerstage in the American theater. In the dreadful context of race violence and a global pandemic leading to the cancellation of the 2020 Tony Awards, the organization Broadway Black organized the first Antonyo Awards, an online ceremony designed to celebrate black artists and theatre professionals working on and off-Broadway. It was broadcast on June 19, 2020, on Juneteenth, the anniversary of the emancipation of enslaved African-American workers. In the midst of the Black Lives Matter protests, this initiative appeared as an opportunity to address issues pertaining to systemic racism in theatre and to promote increased visibility of black theatre professionals. On the shaky theatrical ground on which we currently stand, one can hope that this redirecting of the spectatorial gaze is ripe with potential for political change. Finally, I wish to mention one action that builds activism on a reversal of the focus of the theatrical gaze. "We see you White American Theatre", the collective of

Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) theatremakers published a statement and list of demands to address "the devaluation and violence against Black bodies in the world." on their website. Written in powerful alliterative style, it derives its strength from its ability to shift the theatrical focus and expose the violence of theatre as a professional environment. Therefore, I wish to end my essay on an excerpt from this powerful statement, which, I hope, will pave the way for new eye-opening political perspectives on deliberately anti-racist theatre:

> We have watched you exploit us, shame us, diminish us, and exclude us. We see you.
> We have always seen you.
> And now you will see us.
> We stand on this ground as BIPOC theatremakers, multi-generational, at varied stages in our careers, but fiercely in love with the Theatre. Too much to continue it under abuse. We will wrap the least privileged among us in protection, and fearlessly share our many truths.
> About theatres, executive leaders, critics, casting directors, agents, unions, commercial producers, universities and training programs. You are all a part of this house of cards built on white fragility and supremacy. And this is a house that will not stand.
> This ends TODAY.
> We are about to introduce you...to yourself.
> Signed,
> **The Ground We Stand On**

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Notice

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Abstract

On May 17 2017, Portland director Michael Streeter posted an infuriated Facebook status lamenting the fact that the Edward Albee Estate had not granted him the rights to *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* because he had cast a black actor as Nick, the ambitious and handsome young academic who shows up at Martha and George's late night afterparty. This post triggered a heated online debate: charges of racism were leveled at the estate whereas other commentators claimed that the author's intent should always prevail. To what extent does non-traditional casting introduce a re-semanticization of the theatrical text as literary object? What does it reveal about the power relationships within the competitive work environment of the American theatre circuit? This paper seeks to investigate this digital era dispute, to unravel its threads of online comments in order to outline the race politics of one of the most famous American playwrights of all times.

Key words

Edward Albee; Michael Streeter; Damien Geter; Tania Richard; *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*; American theatre; color-conscious casting; race; diversity

Résumé

Le 17 mai 2017, dans un statut Facebook aux accents rageurs, le metteur en scène Michael Streeter s'émut de ne pas avoir obtenu les droits de la pièce *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* du dramaturge Edward Albee car il avait décidé d'octroyer le rôle de Nick, le jeune blondin ambitieux, à un comédien noir. Au sein des cercles théâtraux new-yorkais, cette déclaration déclencha une vive polémique dont les réseaux sociaux et la blogosphère se firent la caisse de résonnance. Tandis que certains commentateurs criaient au racisme, d'autres soulignaient que l'intention de l'auteur devait primer quelles que fussent les circonstances. Il s'agira donc de s'interroger sur ce que nous disent ces échanges souvent houleux du statut du dramaturge aux États-Unis et de la manière dont les tensions raciales s'invitent au spectacle. En quoi les choix de distribution rebattent-ils les cartes interprétatives ? Comment peuvent-ils infléchir le sens du texte et les rapports de pouvoir au sein de l'environnement professionnel impitoyable qu'est le monde du spectacle ?

Mots-clés

Edward Albee ; Michael Streeter ; Damien Geter, ; Tania Richard ; *Qui a peur de Virginia Woolf ?*; théâtre américain ; casting et distribution ; race ; diversité

CRÉDITS PHOTO

Visuels de couverture : *YOUARENOWHERE*, créé et interprété par Andrew Schneider, 2015 (photographie de Maria Baranova) ; Adina Verson dans *Indecent*, créé et mis en scène par Paula Vogel et Rebecca Taichman, 2015 (photographie de Carol Rosegg) ; Elizabeth Jensen dans *Eurydice* de Sarah Ruhl, mise en scène de Helen Kvale, 2017 (photographie de Jasmine Jones) ; Quayla Bramble dans *Hopscotch* créé par Yuval Sharon pour The Industry, 2015 (photographie de Anne Cusak / *LA Times*, droits réservés). Avec nos remerciements aux artistes et photographes.

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