

NON-RACIAL CASTING IN AFRICAN THEATRE AND CINEMA

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Abstract

Racial and non-racial casting in theatre and cinema has become a widely, and sometimes hotly discussed issue in European and North American performance. The debates are fuelled by the increasing popularity of experimental, post-colonial and inter-cultural performance. However, there has been little such debate in Africa, even though there are many examples of performances which play with cross-racial conventions and stereotyping. This paper interrogates indigenous traditions of non-racial casting, the influence of popular European forms such as minstrelsy, and problems of casting in the realistic tradition of African theatre and cinema. The dialectic of all these traditions impacts on identities in post-colonial and post-apartheid performance. The article uses analytic tools of theatre and performance theory to interrogate the casting practices and principles.

Keywords: non-racial casting, creative resistance, blackface, African theatre, stylized performance.

1. Introduction

When American actor, Ted Danson appeared at a New York Friars Club Roast in 1993 in blackface, a huge controversy arose, mainly because Danson's appearance evoked a history that resonates with the offensive and derogatory representations that minstrel performances evoke in the United States. In comparison, an all too familiar act appears in Leon Schuster's *There is a Zulu on My Stoop*, (Gray Hofmeyr, 1993) featuring the White-classified Schuster as a Black man [in blackface] and Black actor John Matshikiza as a White man [wearing whiteface]. Similarly, the Afrikaner-Jewish satirist Pieter-Dirk Uys has featured prominently in Black roles, such as his characteristic drag act and impersonation of Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, clad in cultural paraphernalia and a t-shirt imprinted with Nelson Mandela's portrait in *Truth Omissions* (Uys, 1996). Uys' performance highlights the contradictions and complexities of racial and gender categories; his self-casting poignantly spectacularises and draws attention to the actor's embodiment of the complexities. The appropriation of race and gender in Uys' performance also shows his dramatic technique of role reversal.

Another popular act is that of Johnny Clegg, famously dubbed the "White Zulu", and it is a well-known African performance that stages Clegg, the lead singer of the bands Juluka and Savuka, dressed in Zulu cultural costume and performing Zulu dances. Particularly, in the popular song "Scatterlings of Africa", Clegg and his dance companion appear in both blackface and whiteface. The appearance of Clegg

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and his fellow dancer in this song resonates with re-enactments of Esu the Nigerian god in Yoruba masquerade traditions. In these scenarios, the body is symmetrically painted white and black, and calls forth African traditional practices of body painting. Notably, Johnny Clegg's performance has been viewed as harmless and characteristic of the syncretic landscape of South African performance and not with the obvious and offensive racial overtones that America's minstrel tradition evokes. These performances, though very similar in their desire to stage Blackness, resonate differently for Black and White audiences. More pointedly, they bring to view the historical and locational specificities of racial and non-racial casting principles and significations. These casting practices and the responses they engender are part of the concerns of this essay.

Contemporary cross-racial and cross-cultural casting in sub-Saharan Africa needs to be related to a complex history of representing others in the continent's performance traditions. The history of representation reflects the continent's political and cultural history of racial contact and confrontation. While the forms of representation on stage and cinema largely shows the director's choice of casting, theatrical and cinematic traditions display the continent's engagement with representations of Blackness by White actors and Whiteness by Black actors. This article seeks to interrogate techniques of representation through casting conventions and principles. It discusses a general history of stylized performance reflecting racial and/or cultural identity. Questions of representation through casting choices are at the core of the discussion, for instance, examining the reasons for casting choices in African theatre and performance. How does casting manifest political ideologies and cultural practices? Given the context of the historical confrontation between Blacks and Whites, is there a preponderant image in terms of representation of Whites by Black actors and Blacks by White actors? Are there similar tensions in representations of White characters in Black stages? Are there constraints on African theatre and film producers arising from the difficulty in obtaining realistic White actors thereby limiting the staging of Whiteness to caricatures? What is the dominant style of Blackface and Whiteface? These and similar questions motivate the arguments and assertions made throughout the essay regarding casting practices in sub-Saharan African cinema and performance.

2. Casting in indigenous performance traditions

The most revered "theatre" tradition in Africa is that of the masquerade dance. In this tradition, "actors" do not impersonate characters; they allow their bodies to be temporally consumed by ancestral spirits which manifest themselves as mysterious, sacred ancestors in the form of abstract or zoomorphic masks. Other less important, less solemn ancestors are manifest as anthropomorphic stereotypes intended to warn the audience against or to criticise audience members guilty of anti-social behaviour.

Sometimes, the satire is directed against other ethnic groups, partly as comic satire and partly as a way of reinforcing the community's culture and ethical values. In pre-colonial Nigeria, for example, Yoruba *Egungun* masqueraders satirised neighbouring Yoruba groups with slightly different cultural practices or even very different, more distant ethnic groups such as the Hausa or Fon.

The satirical aspect of anthropomorphic masks allowed the opportunity for non-racial "casting" through the creation of masks based on European, Arab, Asian or other non-Black character types. To some extent, this was a form of comic ethnic stereotyping deployed as resistance to migrations or military invasions. For example, the *Gule wa Mkulu* masquerade theatre of the *Nyau* cult among the Chewa people in South-East Africa lampooned Arab slave traders and Portuguese or British colonialists in the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries, with masks that imitated the facial characteristics of the invaders. The function of these masks was partly satirical criticism of the alien habits and appearance, but also a creative resistance to invaders. David Kerr writes about the *Gule wa Mkulu* as an example of aesthetic resistance to colonialism. Of such resistance, Kerr observes:

The origins of Nyau's opposition to colonialism lie in its reaction to Catholic missionaries who attempted to discourage what they perceived as heathen and sexually immoral rituals. The innovative potential of the masquerade to absorb, and thereby psychically disarm alien iconography, allowed the creation of satirically grotesque stereotypes of St. Joseph, St. Peter and Mary, which were incorporated into indigenous masking tradition (Kerr, 1998, p. 31).

Additionally, behind their masks, the masquerade performers enacted "indirect resistance to exploitation and to the destruction of indigenous social cohesion" (Kerr, 1995, p. 49).

The type of racial impersonation found in indigenous masquerades was obviously very stylised; the non-racial dimension of which was matched by non-gender casting. Almost all sub-Saharan African masqueraders were male. This meant that female "characters", whether local or other, were performed by men wearing female masks. Thus the *Gule wa Mkulu* character of *Maliya* (a bawdy, grotesque anti-Christian parody of the Virgin Mary) was performed by men. African women, however, also had opportunities to perform as men, African or non-African. An example of the latter is provided by spirit possession dances such as *Vimbuza* and *Mapira* which provided marginalised women in the early 20th century with an outlet for their domestic subjugation (both by men and colonial administrators) through assuming the spirits of alien, powerful men or women. Matthew Schofeleers (1997, p. 19) gives an example of a woman, Mai Menala,

becoming possessed in the *Madzoka* ritual with the spirit of a White colonial soldier, in which she gave husky military commands in English and fired an imaginary gun at the audience. What these examples of non-racial casting suggest is that indigenous African traditions of performance had strong elements of psycho-dramatic force that impacted on individuals and communities either as resistance to alien power or as a way of incorporating and domesticating that power. Such casting also provided an opportunity for licensed satire that provided a type of release from the normative disciplines that society imposed.

The impact of colonialism was neither universal nor instantaneous. The coastal areas were the first to be influenced, and some of the major ports became hubs for the dispersal of global culture filtered through innovative African adaptations. Dances such as *Beni* in Kenya and *Goumbe* in Nigeria and Ivory Coast were semi-satirical, mimetic dances imitating European military drills.

3. Casting in colonial and post-colonial dramas

The introduction of colonial drama in the late 19th Century to cater for White settlers in Africa initiated “casting” as a concept, initially by White theatre companies. These sometimes included minstrel-style satirical stereotyping of Black Africans by White actors through blackface make-up. Michael Pickering (2006) has traced the complex motivation which lies behind Whites wearing blackface. In addition to the racist motive of denigrating African culture, there was a subsidiary envy for African lifestyles, a carnivalesque desire by White performers for rebellion against conventional “white” constraints.

Similarly, borrowing on the observations of Lott (1995), Gabbard argues that “White Americans, especially when they are working class, base their expressions of joy, anger, and sexual desire almost entirely on what they perceive to be the behaviour of Black Americans” (Gabbard, 2004, p. 19). The dramatization of Blackness by White actors through blackface, according to these scholars, hence elaborates perceptions of Blacks by White working class audiences, and supports the view that White culture became dependent upon Black culture for identity representations. This essay echoes this observation by noting that when one looks at popular cultural products, almost all of the White popular culture practices are dependent upon histories of Black culture.

Some African hybrid genres of theatre during the colonial period, notably Ghanaian Concert Party, though rooted in indigenous culture, imitated aspects of Western theatre as a form of “colonial mimicry”. As Homi Bhabha would have it, the representation of Blackness through this form of staging functioned to subvert and turn back the gaze of the colonizing Other (Bhabha, 1985, p. 173). Black actors in the 1920s were exposed to the White minstrel tradition, due to colonial performances

at elite clubs as well as to the popularity of films by Al Jolson and other blackface White artists. At the same time, the indigenous tradition of men playing women's roles carried over into Concert Party in Ghana, making it a very complex form of theatrical hybridity.

Performance historian, Catherine Cole has researched the significance of the Ghanaian Concert Party and the use of blackface in this popular theatre form. Her main concern was to investigate whether the mimicry of minstrelsy came with the psychological baggage of dependency or whether it offered a form of resistance to colonial culture. Cole observes that late 20th Century Concert Party practitioners seemed "blissfully unconcerned about the origins of their art form" (Cole, 1996, p. 187). She argues that "For Americans, blackface is a highly charged signifier, intimately tied to an unresolved history of racial exploitation, segregation, and derisive stereotyping of people of African descent. Whites created minstrelsy to represent Blacks, and the images they presented were overwhelmingly degrading. Blacks were portrayed as either dandies or buffoons, with a transition between these two extremes woven into the very dramaturgy of the shows" (Cole, 1996, p. 195). She maintains that many actors in the Ghanaian Concert Party associated blackface not with the minstrel tradition but with indigenous forms of masking and body painting practised during initiation ceremonies. As Cole further argues, "While actors wore minstrel makeup inspired by Al Jolson, they infused imported elements with local reference and idiosyncratic embellishments (p. 184)". Further, "When European immigrants flooded New York at the turn of the Century, Blackface offered Irish, Italian, and Jews a means of becoming 'American', for burnt cork erased their ethnic differences and highlighted their racial affinities with 'hegemonic culture'" (p. 193).

The notion of blackface thus echoes issues of the way American minstrel performance represented African American experience and identity. In the context of the Ghanaian Concert Party, however, the practice carried no obvious racial significations. Rather, the performance privileged the connection between face painting and liminality, where ritualized body-painting was associated with religious and social traditions. These practices, which, in effect, involved Blacks imitating Whites imitating Blacks, were partly a playful way of appropriating Whiteness as a signifier of modernity, but partly also highlight the importance of liminality as a source of non-racial, non-gender characterization through elaborate conventions of stylization and humour. Cole comments, "Female impersonation, non-naturalistic staging, the percussive rim shots that punctuate each scene, and blackface all function in Concert Parties as framing devices, creating a comic distance between the actors and their characters" (p. 206).

Even when European-influenced realistic traditions took root in African colonial and post-colonial theatre, a complex psychological dialectic arose.

Bhekizizwe Peterson (2000) has analysed this with respect to the theatre of South African playwright, journalist and black activist Herbert Dhlomo during the 1930s. The Bantu Players, as his group was called, used all-Black casts in productions of British classics such as Oliver Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer*, and Oscar Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan*, but also in Dhlomo's own plays, such as *The Girl Who Killed to Save*. At the same time, other members of the South African Black intelligentsia were trying to revive, or reinvent aspects of pre-colonial culture. Peterson comments:

The inter-war years were particularly marked by numerous acts of social gymnastics by members of the African elite as they dealt with the choice between traditional imperatives grasped in fixed anachronistic terms and embracing imperial cultural practices as strategic responses to the ambiguities and paradoxes of conquest and modernity (Peterson, 2000, p. 15-16).

Similar examples of "social gymnastics" have marked certain genres of literary or theatre in Africa up to the present time, whereby African playwrights such as Sarif Easmon in *The New Patriots* and G. Oyono-Mbia in *Trois Pretendants un mari* have mimicked the conventions of European "well-made" drama while trying to explore African culture and dilemmas. Other African genres, however, are more flexible, often drawing on the popular syncretic modes of African performance which emerged during the colonial period, particularly drawing upon conventions of social satire and comic stereotyping. Such stylised genres have proved themselves more open to non-racial and non-gender casting.

One of the most fertile areas for non-racial casting is the South African anti-Apartheid protest play. Athol Fugard in such plays as *The Blood Knot* (1964), *Boesman and Lena* (1969) and *Valley Song* (1996) assumed the role of "coloured" (mixed race) characters. In *The Blood Knot*, Fugard (who also directed the production) plays the character of Morris, the light-skinned coloured man who fantasises about passing for White in the drama, while Black actor Zakes Mokae is cast as Zachariah, his dark-skinned brother. Fugard's deliberate casting of himself—a White actor as a coloured man—underscored the essence of bonding and blood-brotherhood, and destabilized notions of racial purity and White supremacy of the time. As theatre scholar Loren Kruger correctly observes, *The Blood Knot* "probes the contradictions but also the emotional truth of Morris's internalization of white supremacist fictions as he seesaws between attachment to his brother and (self)loathing of his color" (Kruger, 1999, p. 105). Arguably, Fugard does the same in *Boesman and Lena*, where he deploys non-racial casting by playing the coloured Boesman, though with equivocations of the effects of apartheid on the Blacks. The casting choice performs differently than that of Danny Glover and Angela Bassett in director John Berry's

(2000) film adaptation of the same title. Casting black actors Glover and Bassett by African American directors and producers heightens the racially-charged action and theme implied in the text.

Meanwhile, in Black Consciousness plays like Maishe Maponya's *The Hungry Earth* and Mbongeni Ngema's *Asinamali*, the fluid, workshop-styled technique allowed black actors to switch roles, genders and races with comparative ease. Notably, casting here served a variety of functions, including re-presenting the lives of black miners, protesting the brutalities of Apartheid, and lampooning Whites.

An example from post-colonial African theatre and cinema is *Woza Albert!*, a play devised and written in 1981 by Percy Mtwa, Mbongeni Ngema and Barney Simon, in which two black actors impersonated White colonial or apartheid masters (as well as numerous other roles) using minimal make-up and props. In this classic anti-colonial protest theatre piece, Mtwa and Ngema in their slapstick performance satirized the ideology of apartheid and deployed indigenous African performance traditions to create resistance. The other important function was the use of Black actors to perform ancestral memory, as seen in the way the characters summoned a pantheon of dead Black leaders of the struggle onto the stage to enhance the insurgent spirit of the living in their acts of resistance to apartheid patriarchy. *Woza Albert!* also provides a good example of non-racial casting through the use of minimal props, such as the deployment of pink noses to construct whiteness. As these examples demonstrate, stylization and realism are two traditions through which to understand the manifestation of casting principles in African cinema, theatre, and performance.

Cinema is a medium which most obviously opens itself to realism. But even here, examples of popular, political satire and comic ethnic stereotyping can be seen in the performances of Leon Schuster and Pieter-Dirk Uys both of whom have used humour to criticise South African apartheid policies and to comment on other social realities. Their performances take shape at the intersections of race, politics, culture, and gender identities. Throughout his films such as *Panic Mechanic* (1996), *Mr. Bones* (2001), and *There's a Zulu on my Stoep* (1993), Leon Schuster impersonates black, white, and interracial men and women to lampoon racial and cultural imaginaries in the context of South Africa. Schuster also draws attention to notions of role reversal through his casting practices. For instance, in *Panic Mechanic*, he persistently wears blackface to parody Apartheid policies, to satirize obsessions with colour, and to lampoon South Africa's acts of ethnic stereotyping. Similarly, Uys uses satirical stereotyping for both stage and television performances as a strategy to parody political figures and to create the space for self-reflection at the moment of reconciliation and nation building. Performances by both Schuster and Uys are also very stylized, deploying blackface and cross-dressing for comical effect. The performances and "casting" practices became popular not only because of the

humour they evoked, but also because they addressed issues of collective national and cultural concern.

More pointedly, in southern African theatre and cinema, non-racial casting considerations function in tandem and in tension with national and/or cultural sentiments. Once realism found an outlet in cinema and television drama, controversy arose among African critics about the use of African-American actors such as Denzel Washington, Whoopi Goldberg, and Morgan Freeman in African films, especially those set in southern Africa. The casting of Washington as political icon Steve Biko in *Cry Freedom* (Richard Attenborough, 1987), Goldberg as Mary Masumbuko in *Sarafina!* (Mbongeni Ngema, 1992), and Freeman as Nelson Mandela in the sports drama film *Invictus* (Clint Eastwood, 2009) engendered negative responses from critics who pointed to the directors' motivation of pushing local actors to the periphery in favour of famous foreign stars. The success of local films such as *Tsotsi* (Gavin Hood, 2005)—an adaptation of Athol Fugard's novel—which cast local actors in leading roles has been used as an indication of the value of local actors in the South African film industry.

In Botswana, the casting of “bankable” African American actresses Jill Scott and Anika Noni Rose, British actor Idris Elba and South African actor Desmond Dube in the film *The No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency* (Minghella 2008) for example, has been critiqued as a practice that diminishes Botswana cultural authenticity, particularly noting that the film is a commercial product that has been packaged for entertainment by western producers and directors. The main argument is that this alien (though racial) casting is a type of economic cultural imperialism, where the concerns of Box Office trump linguistic and cultural “authenticity”. These examples demonstrate how casting practices and conventions extend towards notions of cultural and linguistic authenticity, and underscore the view that in contemporary sub-Saharan African cinema, theatre and performance, the notion of casting is more of a nationalistic rather than a racial issue.

So far, the analysis has tended to use a periodization which constructs relatively discrete historical stages from the pre-colonial through the colonial to the modern post-colonial and post-apartheid. In this final section we look at a variety of performances (not necessarily theatrical performance) which could loosely be described as post-colonial, and possibly post-modern, but which also draw upon a general history of stylised enactments reflecting racial or cultural identity. These examples show different ways of assuming non-racial or cross-racial cultural exchanges in order to negotiate the complex identities which have arisen in southern Africa.

One performance with a long, well-documented history is that of the self-styled “Coon Carnival” or *Ghoema* of Cape Town. The entertainment derives from

celebrations by former slaves for the abolition of slavery throughout the British Empire in 1833. This developed into an annual carnival early in the New Year, and in turn became a competitive event like the militaristic mimes of *Beni* and *Goumbe* (Kerr, 1995, p. 60). Competition was judged not only on the dancing, singing and music, but also costume and make-up. The influences became very eclectic; onto the colonial militaristic original uniform were added garish colours and popular musical forms, such as choirs, vaudeville costumes and “whiteface” make up in imitation of the minstrel shows. All of this sounds as though the subaltern participants created demeaning introjections of European values and culture. But, as with the minstrel influence in Ghana, the reality is that of a performance which mediated many layers of identity. One strand is the opportunity Ghoema provided to subaltern Cape Town inhabitants with a cultural expression for modernisation. The “Cape Coloured” population which dominates the carnival consists of a mixture of indigenous San and Xhosa along with Afrikaans, British and Malay strands. This unique combination of races has produced a relatively autonomous culture, different from both Black and White. The carnival provides an expression for this multiply-syncretic culture.

Cape Coloureds felt that the marginalisation they experienced under white Apartheid continued under what they perceived to be predominantly Black ANC rule. The carnival evolved into a multi-cultural creative experience in which the 19th century military, minstrel, choral and vaudeville strands became enriched by cultural influences from classical music, jazz and the mass media. Altogether, it provided for the inhabitants of Cape Town a post-modern escape from surviving racial divides, and an instrument for sustaining and exploring “Cape Coloured” identities.

A totally different example of non-racial casting was a common feature in the Zimbabwean theatre group *Zambuko/Izibuko* in which Whites routinely play Blacks and vice versa, entirely without special make-up or masks. For instance, the main White actor in the troupe, Robert McClaren, played the part of a comic, fast-talking Black taxi driver in *Simuka Zimbabwe!* (1995-96). The actor’s fluent chiShona and siNdebele, as well as his African body language, quickly convinced Black audiences that he could inhabit the role. The artistic policy reflects a company ideology of racial equality. This may suggest that in African theatre, language authenticity is a more important marker than melanin for the representation of ethnicity. It has to be said that the convention has not become popular elsewhere in Africa for dialogue drama, probably because its widespread adoption requires non-racialist cultural practice to catch up with egalitarian national constitutions.

There is one area of performance, however, which does seem to be moving towards non-racial casting, namely physical theatre. This is a particularly popular movement in South African drama schools. In Hazel Barnes’ production of David Lan’s 1996 play, *Desire*, about spirit possession as an appropriate African way of

dealing with violence, a racially-mixed cast at the University of Natal, recreated a cast of African villagers. The casting choice underscored the play's tropes of unity and reconciliation.

Moratiwa Molema achieved something similar at the University of Cape Town in 2008, with her mixed media dance drama, *Water Feels*. Perhaps the most significant feature of *Water Feels* is that non-racial casting is not the play's dominant motif. The playwright of this performance is a young woman from Botswana with skills in choreography and multi-media arts. The topic of the performance is, in her words, "traditional culture in a contemporary world", although the title *Water Feels* is perhaps more revealing in attempting to fashion the interplay of live performance and screening which express the dynamism of post-apartheid South Africa. The cast consisted of White drama students in goat-skin costumes who Molema trained in San and Setswana dances, but also intermixed indigenous culture with jazz and popular music. In addition, a Setswana dance troupe "imported" from Botswana added to the complex "layering of cultures". The total effect was to make water an "archetypal symbol of renewal" (Molema, 2011, p. 109). It also focused on the complex cultural strands to illustrate the philosophical notion of botho/Ubuntu, or African humanism. This encapsulates the notion of the old living on in modern art (Molema, p. 115). Another way of expressing this is that the "intangible dimension exists and has effect on the physical world" (Molema, p. 109.) Most importantly, *Water Feels* deploys non-racial casting and thereby underscores the deployment of ethnic boundary crossing in physical theatre.

The production of *Sarafina! in Black and White* similarly re-presents the historical experience of the 1976 Soweto uprisings through the use of cross-racial casting. Gibson A. Cima (2014) identifies three incarnations of *Sarafina!*, namely (i) the 1987 version which was strongly anti-apartheid in its style, (ii) Mbongeni Ngema's 1992 production which was a notoriously expensive and glitzy commodification performed in New York, and (iii) *Sarafina! in Black and White* directed by Josias Moleele at the Tshwane University of Technology in 2013. The third production was very interesting because of its casting policy and practice, specifically Moleele's policy of non-racial casting. In *Sarafina! in Black and White*, Moleele made the provocative choice of casting the Black actor Boitumelo Lesejane as the main character in part one of the production while part two was played by White Afrikaans-speaking actor Suzaan Helberg. Gibson Cima suggests that the 1987 version was obviously ant-apartheid while the 2013 version was "a utopian vision of a non-racial, non-sexist future" (Cima, 2014, p. 210).

The choice and policy of the director also evidently plays a significant role in casting practices. It was not uncommon for a director—specifically in the context of South African protest theatre—to deploy blind casting in order to "highlight

the commonness of humanity in general, rather than oppressive racial categories” (Tomaselli, 2015, p. 10) as is the case with Athol Fugard, in an attempt to interrupt systems orchestrated through Apartheid. Another important variable in the history of casting practices in African cinema was language. It has been observed that the politicised decision made by Afrikaans directors to the effect that “black characters in S.A. cinema when it was in English was quickly okayed, but not in Afrikaans films. There were several films made in indigenous languages and English with mainly black casts...” (Tomaselli, 2015, p. 10). The interplay of language, realism, and casting practice in African cinema is thus an important area for further investigation.

A rather different style of South African physical theatre can be found in Jane Taylor’s *Ubu and the Truth Commission*, directed by William Kentridge for the Handspring Puppet Theatre. This adaptation of Alfred Jarry’s *Ubu Roi* uses puppets and a crew of on-stage multi-racial puppeteers to portray witnesses (and their comforters) at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. King and Queen Ubu are played by a White male actor, Dawid Minnaar and Black female actor, Busi Zokufa, but both portraying White Afrikaners. The dazzling mix of puppets, live actors, animations, and slide/film projections make the non-racial casting seem an unexceptional part of this radical, post-modern style production.

Perhaps such productions are a sign that the fraught issues around non-racial casting may be evolving from conflicted spaces towards an African future in which stereotypes do not always dominate the domain of casting, but are one of many social paradigms with which actors and dancers can play. Ironically, this might bring non-racial casting back to the satirical, playful mode which marked pre-colonial African masquerade performances.

4. Conclusion

This essay sought to investigate the practice of non-racial casting in southern Africa. It examined a general history of stylised performance reflecting racial and cultural identity. Illustrations are drawn from theatre and cinema, African indigenous expression, and performances that demonstrate ways of appropriating blackness and whiteness and the significations of these scenarios of identity representation. Manifestations of non-racial casting display the ways in which actors draw on popular syncretic modes of African performance and borrow conventions of satirical criticism and ethnic and/or comic stereotyping for creative resistance to oppressive systems.

The locational specificities of racial appropriation is another key factor that was considered in examining non-racial casting practices. The space of performance was seen to inform reception of casting practice and policy, specifically in contexts with a history of racial tension such as the United States. Racial appropriation

and displays of blackness and whiteness in these contexts recall the reception of blackface makeup and minstrel performance. The deployment of blackface and its link to non-racial casting in sub-Saharan Africa is comparatively more complex, with varied intents and purposes, and generally with less controversy. The perception is generally culture celebration and reclamation rather than racial stereotyping. This essay observes further that in the appropriation of race in performance, the preponderant image in terms of representation of whites by blacks and blacks by whites is caricature rather than denigration. The practice of casting thus draws attention to satire rather than racist stereotypes, evidently signalling the body as a site for re-inscriptions of power and creativity, that is, the site of “body politics” (Gilbert and Tompkins, 1996)—that enables actors to use humour and mimicry as theatrical devices in cross-racial performance.

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