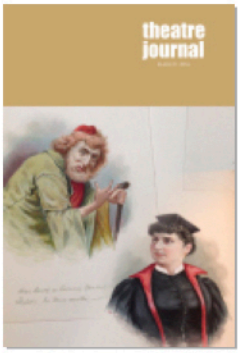
theatre journal

MARCH 2016

PROJECT MUSE®

American Moor by Keith Hamilton Cobb (review)

Lindsey R. Swindall



Theatre Journal, Volume 68, Number 1, March 2016, pp. 108-109 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: 10.1353/tj.2016.0020

Keith Hamilton Cobb in *American Moor*.
(Photo: Gerry Goodstein.)

AMERICAN MOOR. By Keith Hamilton Cobb. Directed by Paul Kwame Johnson. Phoenix Theatre Ensemble, The Wild Project, New York City. 9 May 2015.

Keith Hamilton Cobb's one-man show *American Moor* enables the audience to silently observe what is usually a private, closed-door event: an audition for the role of Othello. Not only do audience members watch the audition unfold, but they are also privy to the actor's internal dialogue as he prepares for the encounter and as he responds to the director throughout the interview. The stage becomes a revelatory space in which the actor divulges his innermost thoughts about playing the character of Othello before a white director, as well as inhabiting the role of a black American in a predominantly white society. It is a deeply personal and one-sided play that nevertheless applies more broadly to historical predecessors and/or contemporary events.

Upon entering the theatre the audience found Cobb already onstage. Even though the play had not formally begun, it was clear that Othello is a role with which Cobb had been grappling for some time. The actor (perhaps Cobb himself) furtively read a dog-eared copy of *Othello*; he sighed, fidgeted on a metal chair, and then ultimately flung the book to the floor in annoyance. These acts of discomfort and frustration set the tone of the piece and, as Cobb later explained in an interview, encouraged the audience to enter the world of this actor, which is also the world of a contemporary black American male. As seen through Cobb's eyes it is a world that too often is misunderstood or misrepresented, one that leaves him struggling to be perceived on his own terms and heard in his own words.

When the play officially started, the actor disclosed his passionate identity as a player: acting Shakespeare was less a choice than a compulsion for this performer. Yet, he shared that his potent desire has frequently been met with impediments. Beginning in acting school, suggestions to play Aaron, Morocco, and inevitably Othello confined the potential of his creative range. Othello was treated as the primary role he should pursue, but, frustratingly, no one seemed open to his ideas about how to portray the character. He points out that "people in our culture" have no place for and "no tools to deal with" a black man who raises his voice. The play implies that the idea of a black actor offering insight into Othello's character before an unresponsive director is tantamount to an African American man explaining his experiences to a mostly deaf white society. The black voice is not embraced in either space. This phenomenon was highlighted when a voice from the back of the audience called the actor to come forward for his audition. The audience soon learned that the disembodied voice belonged to the director of the *Othello* production.

The rest of the drama of *American Moor* unfolds as the actor tries out for the role of Othello. Cobb was momentarily blinded by the stage light when

he entered for his audition. He squinted into the audience until he appeared to glimpse the director with whom he engaged. Having the director seemingly situated within the audience made it feel as though the director's lines might represent conventional ideas about race, as if he spoke on behalf of the masses. Although the audience never saw the director, it was made plain that he was young and white and had fairly concrete ideas about the play that did not involve engaging in a meaningful dialogue. The director, for instance, immediately made a superficial comment about the actor's physical size. Cobb bristled at being objectified while clearly yearning for a more substantial conversation about the character. After he performed Othello's Senate speech, the director urged the actor to be more obsequious before the Venetian Senate. At this point the actor struggled to contain his angry reaction, knowing that he would surely lose the job if he disclosed the depth of his exasperation.

The director seemed to only relate to the character Othello, as well as to the actor himself, from a preconceived framework about black identity rooted in his position of white privilege. The scene established a striking parallel between Othello, a journeyman soldier, making his case before the Senate and the journeyman black actor vying for a job before the director. It also implied another parallel: that of an African American male speaking his lived truth before a predominantly white audience.

At the close of *American Moor* the actor challenges the director to have the courage not to indifferently dismiss him, but to talk to him and demonstrate that the director possesses something more than "privilege of place." The actor sincerely solicits the director to "see me" and "really listen to me." This was a profoundly moving moment because it was born out of a long history of African American actors who have portrayed Othello and used the role to question the racial assumptions of the times in which they lived. In the nineteenth century Ira Aldridge rejected the prejudice upholding the antebellum slave system by being a successful Shakespearean actor outside of the United States. During 1915–32 the Lafayette Players used *Othello* to challenge the racial strictures of the early twentieth century. Deriding segregation in the 1940s, Paul Robeson shattered the notion that a black actor could not play Othello on Broadway. If contemporary theatregoers take its message to heart, Cobb's call for honest racial dialogue through *American Moor* has the potential to be groundbreaking as well. Dialogue, however, must be two-sided: Cobb has proffered one half of the discussion, but it will be up to those who are touched by his ruminations to continue the conversation.

LINDSEY R. SWINDALL
Stevens Institute of Technology