



Feroza Syal—actress and social worker

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Integrated casting

All white on the night?

An aspiring actress, who happened to be of West Indian origin, was auditioning for a place at drama school. She chose to recite a speech from Shakespeare's "Antony and Cleopatra". When she had finished, the examiner said: "Now, tell me dear. Why did you, as a black actress, choose the part of Cleopatra?" He would not accept her assertion that her colour was not a significant factor in that choice, and a row developed. She did not gain a place at the school.

Sadly, this story is not apocryphal and it reflects one of the greatest problems faced by black actors in Britain today. (Throughout this article, "black" denotes non-Caucasian.) "What we are up against", says Equity's general secretary, Peter Plouviez, on the subject of the union's attempt to further integrated casting, "is not so much out-and-out racism, as a lack of imagination on the part of casting directors, writers, television programmers—an unwillingness to take chances."

Equity has adopted the expression "integrated casting", as it acquired its own name, from the American actors' union.

It describes the aim of Equity's policy, that parts should be cast on the basis of an artist's ability, rather than of his or her racial origins. Too often, however, directors fear that casting a black performer in a part where colour is not specified will give the role overtones that are not intended. A (largely white) audience might expect a plot centred on racial tension and become confused when none is forthcoming.

Theatre is not the only branch of the performing arts where black performers encounter this reluctance to take chances, but there has been progress towards integrated casting in both opera and dance. Last summer, the English National Opera's grant from the Greater London Council was frozen briefly after the black singer, Willard White, was not selected for a part in Jonathan Miller's production of "Rigoletto". Curiously, this incident served to highlight a more relaxed attitude to integrated casting in opera than in theatre. Mr White had formerly been a member of the company, and ENO gave assurances that its casting policy made no rulings on racial grounds. Tom Graham,

Mr White's agent, wrote to the company that "opera has been colour blind for 40 years". The Guardian quoted him further, saying: "I have often been told that producers will not accept blacks because it is not dramatically credible. It happens all too frequently when the producer involved comes from a *non-operatic background*." The conventions of opera (lurid plots and stylisation) demand a suspension of disbelief that would not be greatly taxed by multi-racial casting. The premium placed on vocal abilities also helps to offset considerations of dramatic realism.

Black dancers, too, have had problems. Personal experience of the prejudices of classical ballet companies led Arthur Mitchell to found the Dance Theatre of Harlem. Classical companies are still not employing many black dancers, uneasy at the thought of black faces disturbing the symmetry of the *corps de ballet*, but most modern dance companies show no signs of racial discrimination.

In Britain, many West Indian, African and Asian actors are not finding work (nor, indeed, are many white actors), but work, when they do find it, is restricted largely to stereotypical roles based on their ethnic origins. Critics of the scheme to develop The Roundhouse as a centre for black performance have deplored the "ghettoisation" of the arts. Others point out that, without groups like the Black Theatre Co-operative, many black performers would never get jobs and gain enough acting experience to compete on a purely artistic basis with their white counterparts. Repertory companies have traditionally been the place for actors to cut their teeth, but many were reluctant to employ black performers unless they were planning to include plays in the repertoire in which there were roles spe-



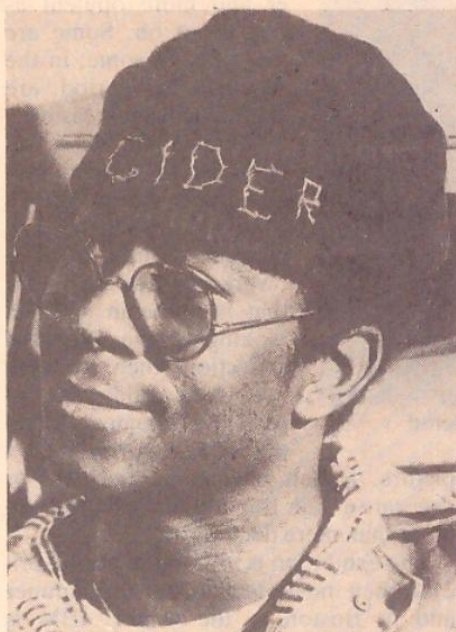
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cifically for black actors, as in Shelagh Delaney's "A Taste of Honey". Peter Plouviez, however, feels that repertory companies could have been persuaded to adopt more enlightened attitudes, and that attempts to promote integrated casting have been hindered by their recent decline.

Equity held a conference on integrated casting in March, 1983. It has its own Afro-Asian Artists' Committee, and publishes a casting directory in which its black members can advertise more cheaply than in Spotlight. It has resisted imposing formal quotas on employers, so it does not force them to hire one black performer for every set number of whites hired. That policy has been implemented in America, where integrated casting is generally acknowledged to occur with far greater frequency than in Britain, but many British Equity members fear that the policy would prove divisive and lead to "token" casting of blacks in insignificant roles, which also occurs in the United States.

Feroza Syal, an actress, writer and founder member of the Asian Theatre Co-operative, is one of Equity's black members who is not satisfied with the union's efforts to further integrated casting. She feels that the Afro-Asian committee is "nominal", and was offended by the Equity president, Derek Bond's trip to South Africa. In the 18 months since she became a professional actress, of the roles offered to her, a preponderance has specifically been intended for Asian women, generally in plays which explored racial and cultural problems. "You become not just an actress, but a social worker, a representative of the Asian community", she says. "I like to think I take that responsibility seriously." She has done a great deal of work in community theatre and theatre in education, also performing a one-woman play about an aspiring Asian actress, which she co-wrote. The role of writers, according to Miss Syal, is crucial. They can create the parts for black performers, and ultimately move the focus from racial problems, which white writers tend to emphasise, to more universal subjects.

Oriental Casting is a theatrical agency specialising in Afro-Asian performers. Niall Toland, who runs it, displays the same reservations about Equity as Miss Syal. "Nobody else", he remarks, "is in a position to do anything." He believes that Equity should institute a system to monitor integrated casting, whereby theatres and television companies would register each instance. Peter Plouviez shares this view, so perhaps such a system will be implemented soon. Mr Toland has found it easier to obtain work for his Indian and Pakistani clients than for the others in the



Clarke Peters—the Sky's the limit now

wake of the Indian bonanza—"Gandhi", "Heat and Dust", "The Jewel in the Crown", "The Far Pavilions", "A Passage to India", "Mountbatten"—but, ironically, these films and television series represent two further areas of strife. "Gandhi" used Indian actors where British-born Asians might have been employed. "The Far Pavilions" is one of the many celebrated examples of white actors "blacking-up" (or "browning-up", as Niall Toland would have it) to play ethnic roles.

"Mountbatten" is merely the most recent piece of casting to cause resentment among Britain's black actors. In a notorious example in 1979, Equity prevented the black American actor, James Earl Jones, from playing Othello in the BBC production, in order to protect the British membership. The white actor, Anthony Hopkins, was given the part.

Some British theatres, notably the Leicester Haymarket and the Royal Exchange in Manchester, have demonstrated that integrated casting is artistically feasible and can be a resounding success. Art Malik gave a performance in the Royal Exchange's "Cymbeline" that must help to dispel the notion of Shakespeare's plays (apart from "Othello") as a white preserve. The Royal Shakespeare Company's own production of "Love's Labour's Lost" boasts a black Rosaline, Josette Simon, and the National Theatre's production of "Guys and Dolls", due to open on June 19th, at the Prince of Wales theatre, London, has almost certainly made history by casting the black actor, Clarke Peters, in the role of Sky Masterson.

Until the industry follows these shining examples, however, black actors will be

struggling to survive. Advertising, which supplements the income of so many white actors, is often not a realistic alternative. Although advertisements for various service industries show black people enjoying their benefits, few other advertisements do. Black characters are not seen to reflect the target audience (or the target audience's aspirations) for products.

The rule books on advertising issued to advertising agencies by corporations may stipulate that no ethnic minorities be included in campaigns. When a well known fast food corporation was about to mount its British campaign, it consulted the American head office about including black actors in the advertisements. "Go ahead and use them", was the verdict, "but don't show them anywhere near the food". Hard to credit, but true.