

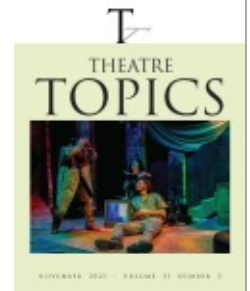


PROJECT MUSE®

Casting a Movement: The Welcome Table Initiative ed. by
Claire Syler and Daniel Banks (review)

Detra Payne

Theatre Topics, Volume 31, Number 3, November 2021, pp. 273-274 (Article)



Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/tt.2021.0054>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/840725>

Hierarchy of Controls, highlights the difference between codes and standards, and explains what it means to comply with the codes used in the governance of work environments. He recommends specific training and certifications that will help educate the organization's members, and then summarizes the information into a clear guide for compliance. He neither castigates nor implies that this work is simple; instead, he explains the subject matter in a manner that allows the reader to imagine a better way to work.

In chapter 7, Reynolds offers various tools that can help us define injury prevention and risk-reduction strategies. While he acknowledges that all productions are different, he isolates those processes common to all production models, whether professional or educational. Of particular interest is his discussion of risk identification and assessment. This vital part of the process is often overlooked because of a mistaken belief that the problem will not occur if we do not mention the risk. Reynolds's inclusion of tools and techniques that facilitate early identification and recognition of risks, and more importantly, his explanation of what to do with that information, comprise one of the most helpful sections of the book. Production teams must revisit risk assessment and response planning throughout the production process, even after opening. The adoption of these tools will help make this task accessible to practitioners at all levels of proficiency.

Throughout *Safety and Health for the Stage*, the author focuses on empowering the reader to work within their organizations to create and maintain a "culture of safety." This culture must have the support of the highest level of the organization. However, the program's development must include people from every level, because safety is everyone's concern. Reynolds's book is a tremendous resource for anyone tasked with designing, implementing, or managing the safety protocols within their organization. I recommend it to educators, industry professionals, and students at all levels of their development.

TED KRAUS
University of Arizona

Casting a Movement: The Welcome Table Initiative. Edited by Claire Syler and Daniel Banks. Routledge, 2019, pp. 266.

In a time when theatre-making is under scrutiny—that is to say, artists are questioning how theatre should be made—*Casting a Movement: The Welcome Table Initiative* is vital. This book of essays, edited by Claire Syler and Daniel Banks, offers examples that demonstrate the importance of the casting process to racial equity and inclusion. The essayists provide commentary on how better to include BIPOC/Global Majority artists, artists with disabilities, and artists of other identities into the creation of Westernized theatre and why it matters. Through seven parts that each include three essays by some of the leading practitioners and scholars of theatre, the book informs the reader of the realities of casting theatrical productions with respect to cultural, ethnical, and racial identities as priority. The book also includes poems by

Caridad Svich, Ty Defoe, and a collection of email messages and responses developed into prose by Elaine Ávila.

The foreword by Liesl Tommy offers a prelude to the book's argument about the need for inclusivity. This is followed by an introduction by coeditor Syler and reprints of sections of coeditor Banks's 2013 essay "The Welcome Table: Casting for an Integrated Society," which examines the problematic uses of terms like "non-traditional," "mixed-race," "cross-race," "race-blind," "color-blind," and "race-conscious" casting. In his afterword, Banks revisits these terms in light of how they have been explored by the contributors in the collection's essays.

Part 1, "Culturally Conscious Casting," opens with Ayanna Thompson's essay "The Chasm Between," which takes into account the audience and education in casting. This essay is followed by Justin Emeka's "Playing with 'Race' in The New Millennium," where the author tackles the art of reinterpreting white text through the lens of the Black or Brown experience by examining his directing Shakespeare's plays with actors of color in the title roles. The part ends with Brian Eugenio Herrera's "Nevertheless, Whiteness Persisted," which covers the use of "whitewashing" in traditionally ethnically specific productions.

Part 2, "Approaches to Casting Middle Eastern American Theatre," brings to the forefront Yussef El Guindi's "Casting Pearls Before Authenticity," where he shares his experience as a playwright working to cast his plays regardless of the challenges of not finding authentically Middle Eastern actors to perform the characters. In the second essay, "ReOrienting: A Middle Eastern American Casting Case Study," Torange Yeghiazarian shares the experience of establishing the first theatre company in the United States devoted to the Middle East. In the final essay in this section, "Casting Middle Eastern American Theatre: Cultural, Academic, and Professional Challenges," Michael Malek Najjar tackles cultural representation in casting, the difficulties of the academic world of theatre, training as an actor, and the hardship of becoming a professional Middle Eastern actor. He discusses the lack of material available for Middle Eastern actors and whether DNA matters in the process.

Part 3, "Casting and Disability Culture," opens with Christine Bruno's "Casting Disabled Actors: Taking Our Rightful Place Onstage?" which reminds all of us that "[d]isabled people are America's largest minority, representing twenty-five percent of the population . . . yet disabled artists remain grossly underrepresented on our stages" (85). She educates the reader on the appropriation of disability by nondisabled actors, and notes the fact that such acts are not only encouraged but are celebrated and even rewarded as examples of an actor's talent, while often excluding disabled artists from performing at all. Carrie Sandahl's essay, "The Difference Disability Makes: Unique Considerations in Casting Performers with Disabilities," discusses the limited numbers of professionally trained disabled actors working, and argues that often disabled student actors are discouraged from joining training programs due to assumptions that there will not be roles for them to perform. She offers

ten suggestions for actionable adjustments to normalize the inclusion of disabled artists. Concluding this section is an essay by Victoria Lewis, "A Great and Complicated Thing: Reimagining Disability," that delves into the misrepresentation of disabled characters in scripts, which often present these individuals as victims, villains, overcomers, or self-pitying malcontents. She presents strategies that can introduce creative and inclusive collaboration to aid in the casting process and change how disabled characters are cast.

Part 4, "Casting and Multilingual Performance," has an essay by Eunice Ferreira, who uses her experience directing a multilingual production of Caridad Svich's *The Orphan Sea* to emphasize the benefit of the interdisciplinary collaborative process, as well as the importance of dramaturgical research to help viewers fully understand and appreciate the production. The final essay in this part, "Creating Emergent Spaces: Casting, Community-building, and Extended Dramaturgy" by Ann Elizabeth Armstrong, analyzes the ways in which community engagement can aid liberal arts theatre departments and institutions in transforming their productions and making casting practices more inclusive. She encourages theatre departments to approach production development like community-organizing.

In part 5, "Casting Contemporary Native American Theatre," Randy Reinholz (Choctaw) and Jean Bruce Scott document the cofounding of the organization "Native Voices at the Autry" and offer best practices for the casting of Native individuals in plays that require Native/Indigenous performance-based customs. Closing this section is Courtney Elkin Mohler's "Decolonial Practices for Contemporary Native Theatre," in which she details the process of uplifting Indigenous stories while simultaneously decolonizing Westernized theatre—a process she calls "Indigenoous theatrical praxis."

"Whose Story Is This to Tell?" by Mei Ann Teo begins the sixth part of the volume, "Dismantling Stereotypes." Teo shares her approach using context, intent, and impact to answer the questions about who should be on the creative team and why this ultimately matters due to problematic narratives that can arise based on the production team's makeup. Dorinne Kondo's "Casting, Cross-Racial Performance, and the Work of Creativity" uses the *Miss Saigon* casting controversy (1990–91) to illustrate the challenges that arise when "creative labor" and "creative vision" are misaligned. This part's final essay, "Artists of Color/ Cross-Racial Casting" by Donatella Galella, "historicizes and theorizes the racial paradigms of people of color playing ethno-racial identities separate from their own" (190).

Part 7 of the book, "Casting Across Identities," provides an essay by Priscilla Page, "*Collidescope 2.0*: Performing the 'Alien Gaze,'" which revisits the collaborative process of staging and performing *Collidescope 2.0* with guest directors/collaborators Ping Chong and Talvin Wilks at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. This is followed by Brandi Wilkins Catanese's "The Spatio-Temporal Logics of *Collidescope*'s Welcome Table," drawing upon Banks's essay in response to issues concerning representation in casting and site specificity in the production.

Casting a Movement takes its reader on a journey through the offenses of casting that often take place, while at the same time offering ways to avoid those offenses. It is a book for artistic directors, directors, producers, playwrights, and actors in the professional world. But it is also for theatre departments in high schools, colleges, and universities, where often the damage caused by misrepresentation and lack of inclusion begin. As academic and professional as well as community theatres begin to acknowledge their complicitous acts of systemic racism, and hopefully make concerted efforts to rectify them through the decolonization of their seasons and casting choices, this book can be used as a guide to best practices, leading them to achieve the ultimate goal of inclusion and equality onstage and beyond.

DETRA PAYNE
Northwestern University

Black Acting Methods: Critical Approaches. By Sharrell D. Luckett, with Tia M. Shaffer. Routledge, 2017, pp. 254.

When I considered what it would mean to write a book review on *Black Acting Methods* in the midst of both a pandemic and a social call for change, my instinct was to look at the book's structure as a whole, including some components that are not usually considered in a review. The book has an anti-patriarchal, decolonized, and ritual-based aesthetic, so its form mirrors its content. Keeping this Afrocentric aesthetic at the forefront, I will use this review not only to examine the chapters themselves, but also to embrace the driving heartbeat that its structure exudes to the reader. Furthermore, this review will consider the impact of the book, which was published in 2017, on university theatre training in a time when the authors of "We See You, White American Theater" and others are calling for transformational justice for Black, Indigenous, and people of color, who have endured attempts at erasure of their identities for over four centuries.

The book begins with an inclusion of all the contributors' biographies and connection to the authors, Sharrell Luckett and Tia Shaffer. This is akin to a "coming to circle" ritual of matriarchal societies where, from the youngest to the oldest, all are considered and counted. We then swiftly move to the unconventional "blessing" by the esteemed Molefi Kete Asante, an early adopter of Afrocentricity, who centers us all in how essential this book is for the American theatre to move through conflict and achieve a more inclusive acting practice. He writes that "Luckett and Shaffer have made their work our work and they have achieved the highest aim of professional life: to create the rubric that defines what comes next" (xvii). Before we have even arrived at page 1, this book feels reverent, ritualistic, and divine.

The introduction, called "An Affirmation," is co-written by the authors. They connect the book to its ancestral wellspring by making the case that it "broadens the theatrical canon and provides a culturally-specific contribution to performance pedagogy" with its Afrocentric approach (1). They proceed to paint the picture of a utopian world in