

Much Ado About Something

BY EUGENE BOGGS

When it comes to non-traditional casting, the film industry and those who write about it have a blind spot. While multiculturalism seems to be the fad of the moment, minority actors and women are routinely passed over for non-specific roles because Hollywood believes that their presence would be unnatural or distracting.

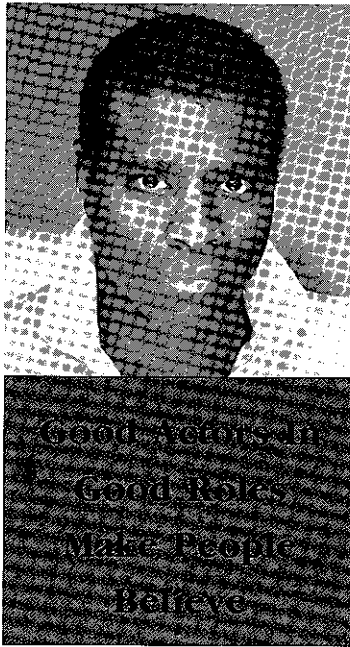
Some observers found fault, for example, with Denzel Washington in Kenneth Branagh's successful film of Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*. As film critic Ella Taylor wrote in *L.A. Weekly* — a local publication widely read in the Hollywood community — Branagh's "one glaring error is Denzel Washington, who as Don Pedro, Prince of Aragon, is reduced to a Black Presence, rather like the black judges who are grafted onto courtroom dramas . . ." This particular review found no shortcomings in Washington's performance, not in his delivery nor with his diction—it was just his skin color that was objectionable.

What is striking and noteworthy about these reviews is how very consistent their approaches are with casting attitudes and practices widely observed in Hollywood regarding ethnic and minority actors.

The notion of a black Don Pedro or even a black judge in filmed entertainment is likely to be considered a casting risk at best and even an "error" as one reviewer termed it. Of course, the time-honored casting of actors such as Laurence Olivier and Orson Welles as Shakespeare's *Othello* was never greeted with such a reaction. But, for Hollywood, the casting of Paul Robeson as *Othello* — a role he was born to play — was beyond consideration, despite his triumph in that part on stage.

In the classical theatre of Shakespeare and Moliere, and even in the neo-classical works of Chekhov, Ibsen and Shaw, non-traditional casting is an accepted creative option today, and has been for some time. However, Hollywood still considers such practices "artsy" theatre experimentation, which — while fine in its place — is incompatible with the constraints of mass-audience entertainment.

Such theatre productions and unconventional films like *Orlando* and *Much Ado* have proven that audiences of the widest possible variety will respond favorably to capable artists (including those traditionally not even considered, much less cast, in such roles). They will hate a black Richard III; they will feel ambivalent about an Asian Shylock; they will pity a Latino King Lear. (Would Raul Julia as Don Pedro of Aragon have been merely a "Brown Presence?" Not for me, certainly, and I



believe, not for millions of others.)

In spite of this institutional industry bias, minority and female artists and those who represent them must go on making the case at every meeting they take and every audition they attend that good actors cast in good roles almost always make people believe. I say "almost" always because the willing suspension of disbelief necessary to appreciate any dramatic work can be inhibited by prejudice, which is, after all, just a synonym for narrow-mindedness and ignorance.

Such inhibiting prejudice can be displayed by the audience for a dramatic work or it can be a product of the production itself, as in the traditional casting of white males in inaccurate and demeaning portrayals of Africans, Asians, Native Americans, Latinos and other minorities. An increasing segment of the audience is too culturally diverse and enlightened to accept comfortably even significant works

like D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*, much less Warner Oland's *Charlie Chan*.

Some would have you believe that actors like the late John Hancock, an African-American who played the recurring role of a judge on *L.A. Law*, are simply unbelievable "Black Presences." I never thought so; he seemed the very image of the judge to me. In Blake Edwards' film *10*, that same John Hancock played Dudley Moore's psychiatrist. I remember a psychiatrist who was, to be sure, black. But apparently, many in Hollywood would argue that Hancock's portrayal was only yet another inappropriate dark apparition.

Those of us who are trying to earn our daily bread (and perhaps gain some measure of recognition) as lawyers, professors, and yes, actors, and happen to be non-white and/or non-male, are not surprised at being dismissed as mere "tokens." When we assume roles to which we have not usually been assigned or given access by the so-called mainstream society, we are seen as "Black," "Brown," "Red," "Yellow," or "Female Presences." That is, indeed, the reality of life in America for far too many of its citizens.

I attended the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights hearings in Los Angeles in June, where this point was made over and over again in testimony from civic leaders and Hollywood insiders. These hearings, like the review quoted above, served as distressing, but nonetheless valuable reminders that in Hollywood there are many doors and minds yet to be opened to the full potential of non-white and female artists, that there are battles yet to be won and that the struggle continues. ■

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