Transcript of "African American Shakespeare: Past Present Future"
A Virtual Panel Discussion
Sponsored by ShakespeareAmerica at Southern Oregon University
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Moderator: David McCandless, Director of Shakespeare Studies, SOU

Participants:
L. Peter Callender, Artistic Director, African-American Shakespeare Company
Jennie Greenberry, Member of OSF Acting Company (Five Years)
Ayanna Thompson, Professor of English at Arizona State University and Director of the Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies.
Dawn Monique Williams, Director of OSF production of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*

David McCandless
Okay, then! Sorry to everyone about this awkward start – a long delay. Apologies to all our patrons, and all our panelists, as well. Nevertheless, I'm sure we're in store for a great discussion. I want to introduce myself, briefly: David McCandless, Director of Shakespeare Studies at Southern Oregon University. I'm also the Presenter of Events for Shakespeare America, which is a consortium of educators and artists from SOU and the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. We've done some events in the past, like Multicultural Shakespeare, Women's Part in Shakespeare. You've probably come to some of these; I hope you have! [We] interviewed Peter Sellars and Bill Rauch, had a great discussion last year with some directors talking about restaging Shakespeare in the 21st Century.

I want to get right to introducing the panelists for our event: "African-American Shakespeare Past, Present, and Future". Let me also say that we will be taking questions at the end, towards the end, probably more like 6:20 than what we might have originally envisioned, given the late start. But I'm sure you can maybe drop your questions in along the way as well. Don't hesitate if something occurs to you, just pop it in there.

It's my pleasure to introduce our first panelist, L. Peter Callender, who will be familiar to Shakespeare enthusiasts from the Bay Area. I was at [University of California at] Berkeley for a while and saw Peter perform many times at the California Shakespeare Theater, where he's been an Associate Artist for over twenty years. He's also the Artistic Director of African-American Shakespeare Company and has performed on- and off-Broadway, and at major regional

theaters. A native of Trinidad, a graduate of the Juilliard School: L. Peter Callender.

[*L. Peter Callender turns his camera on and appears on the screen*]

Welcome!

L. Peter Callender
Thank you, sir. Thank you very much for that lovely introduction; I appreciate that.

David McCandless
You're very welcome. Our next two panelists will be very familiar to fans of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. They've both been fixtures there. The first, Jennie Greenberry, was a member of the Acting Company for five years. She performed such Shakespearean roles as Ophelia in *Hamlet*, and Marina in *Pericles*, the latter production taking her to Washington, D.C. at the Folger Shakespeare Theatre and also the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis, where she subsequently performed Roxanne in *Cyrano de Bergerac.* I also must say, as a fan, that I well remember her non-Shakespearean roles as well, as I'm sure many of you do, including Belle in *Beauty and the Beast* and Polly Potter in the Marx Brothers' musical, *The Cocoanuts.* Welcome, Jennie Greenberry!

[*Jennie Greenberry turns on her camera and appears on the screen in the second row*]

Jennie Greenberry
Hello! Thank you so much for having me.

David McCandless
Our pleasure! I also want to introduce Dawn Monique Williams, who is another OSF stalwart, having worked there for many years as Artistic Associate and having directed *The Merry Wives of Windsor* in 2017, and she was all set to direct this really interesting play called *Bernhardt/Hamlet* last year and, alas, the pandemic happened and the production didn't, sadly. She's now Associate Artistic Director at the Aurora Theatre in Berkeley [CA]. Welcome, Dawn Monique Williams!

Dawn Monique Williams
Hi, friends, it's so good to see everyone again! Thank you, David.

David McCandless
Thank *you!* Finally, we have a major scholar here, Ayanna Thompson who's Regents Professor of English at Arizona State University and Director of the Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies. She's also written five books and edited four volumes of essays, most of them on the subject of Shakespeare and race. She's also a Scholar-in-residence at The Public Theater in New York City and is Chair of the Council of Scholars at the Theatre for a New Audience in Brooklyn [NY]. She's also on the board of *Play On Shakespeare*. Welcome, Ayanna Thompson!

[*Ayanna Thompson turns on her camera and appears in the second row*]

Ayanna Thompson
Thank you so much! Hi, everybody!

David McCandless:
Thank you! So, I think—to start with, I'd like each of you to describe your own experience with Shakespeare, as in, "when did you come to know Shakespeare and get involved with it, with him, with his plays, his work? Early, late, middle? Was it easy, difficult?" I thought we could just use the order of introductions for the order of response for this.

L. Peter Callender
Well, thank you, David, thank you.

[*David McCandless turns off camera, leaving the four panelists on-screen*]

What a pleasure to be here. My name is L. Peter Callender, as David said. I'm the Artistic Director of African-American Shakespeare company in San Francisco. My introduction to Shakespeare was very early. Like my fellow countryman Errol Hill, from Trinidad, who wrote the wonderful book *Shakespeare in Sable*, I'm a native of Trinidad/West Indies, and I lived in London for a number of years. When I came to the States, in the late '60s-early '70s, I had a great teacher, Barbara Glickenstein at P.S. 80 in the Bronx, and she took us to lots of theater. We did lots of theater in her class. I think that's where I got my thirst and my desire for theatre, specifically.

But it's when I went to High School of the Performing Arts (the *Fame* high school) in New York – that's when I really decided…it was, to coin a phrase, "thrust upon me" by a wonderful teacher named Roz Schein and Ruth Koehler at Performing Arts High School. That's when I got the taste -- the yearning -- to

read Shakespeare and perform Shakespeare and I had a keen understanding, an early understanding, for Shakespeare.

I would get stopped in the hallway after a math class or after a boring Spanish class or history class, and Ms. Schein would say, "I need for you to memorize the first prologue to *Henry V* by next Thursday," and it's Tuesday. I would hustle home and forego all my other homework and memorize "O, for a muse of fire" and she would critique it and give me notes, and that was when the bug hit me really, really hard. I loved the language, I loved the rhythm, I loved the muscularity of the language itself.

Then, of course, Jim Moody was the first African-American actor in the first group at the Juilliard School. He came to teach at Performing Arts High School, and he became my mentor. That was it. That was the shot in the arm, that was the kick in the you-know-what, that was the slap in the face, however you want to put it. That was it, because this man spoke so eloquently, carried himself with deportment and style and grace and I wanted to be Jim Moody. I wanted to be that type of presence in a room. He coached me, and I got into the Juilliard School, and that was it for me.

Now, twenty-three Shakespeare plays later (directing about seven of them), and now I'm the Artistic Director of the African-American Shakespeare Company. I've come a long way. But that's when I started -- it started early. I'm blessed to have been touched and served by such brilliant people in my high school age.

Jennie Greenberry
That's fantastic, and I can't believe I have to follow that! Well, in my time at Yale with Meryl Streep—no, I'm kidding.

I was first introduced to Shakespeare (I think like many students in the United States) in my high school English class freshman year. I remember thinking, "Wow, this is the most boring thing I've ever read in my entire life. Why do we care about this?" It was just—I think it was presented in a very dry, scholarly type of way that was completely devoid of the richness of Shakespeare's language, and the musicality of it. I kind of just plodded along in my English classes in high school.

When I became a professional actor, I knew that I mostly wanted to focus on musical theatre. I am a musician. I think if you cut me I bleed in music, it's my first language…I sing, I do play several instruments, and that's what I really wanted to focus on. It wasn't until, actually, I got to the Oregon Shakespeare

Festival, where I got to work on *Pericles* with Ms. Dawn Monique Williams, who was Assistant Directing, and Joe Haj was our director, that I was first exposed to the brilliance of Shakespeare's language. For me, what hooked me into that was really the musicality of his language, and just how… it's like a song. All of Shakespeare's works, for me, when I read them and when I perform them is like—it's all musical, it's just performing this incredibly lyrical language, and I love it. I'm really grateful that I was able to study under the mentorship of Dawn and Joe, and, of course, our voice and text coach on that production, Rebecca Clark Carey, who is still an amazing mentor to me. I still call her, to this day, with any questions I have about certain Shakespearean texts.

That really turned my whole perception of what Shakespeare was, and could be, around. Because of my schooling, it was just—ooh, y'all, it was rough. But I'm very pleased to be firmly rooted and entrenched in Classical works today, and I cannot wait until the pandemic is over and we can get back to more of Shakespeare's work.

[*L. Peter Callender and Ayanna Thompson snap their fingers in agreement*]

Dawn Monique Williams
I love that I was there for your first deep dive into Shakespeare, Jennie! I remember we did two Shakespeares that season, because we also did *Antony and Cleopatra*. I remember how shocked you were that [*garbled, inaudible*] this season! Jennie was also in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* that I directed so, as she and I agree: they're all musicals! They're all musicals!

Like Jennie, I was introduced to Shakespeare in school. I remember being [in] 7th grade and being required to read *Romeo and Juliet* and I didn't. I didn't understand it. I didn't see how it applied to me. I was not a fan at all. I remember my mom taking me to Blockbuster (when those were a thing) and we rented *West Side Story* and she was like, "This is basically *Romeo and Juliet*!" So, I spent my formative years really hating Shakespeare, actually.

It wasn't until I was doing a conservatory program in San Francisco, at American Conservatory Theater, where I acted Shakespeare for the first time under the tutelage of Tommy Gomez, and that's when I experienced a shift and fell in love with Shakespeare, was in the playing of it. I wanted to be an actor back then, and Tommy said, "More actors of color get work doing Shakespeare than anything else, so you should learn to love it," and I actually did. That carried with me into my transition into being a director, and I've now made a career out of directing

classic plays. As the people on this call know, I have multiple Shakespeare-themed tattoos. I've shown them off in webinars.

Ayanna Thompson
I love that it's like the unveiling of Dawn's tattoos!

I think my story might be slightly in between these. I grew up in a household with a parent who loved Shakespeare, but we were working class, so I didn't go to any plays. Then, one year (randomly), my mother came into some money, and we went to England. I was 13, and all I wanted to do was hang out in London with the punk rock, and I was like "[*noise of excitement*] The Clash!" and she's like "As part of this trip we're going to go to Stratford-upon-Avon to see Shakespeare's birthplace" and I was like, "Why? No, no, this is the antithesis of cool." She got us tickets to *Romeo and Juliet*, starring Sean Bean as Romeo and Niamh Cusack as Juliet and Hugh Quarshie as Tybalt. They were in leather and riding motorcycles around and I was like, "I don't know, this is kinda cool and sexy and they're all so hot."

So, I just kind of had that in my back pocket. I didn't think of myself then as a Shakespeare fan, and certainly by the time I got to high school— Jennie, I think I had the same experience, except I'm sure I'm a lot older, because we listened to *Hamlet* on a record and it was deadly. It was the worst kind of thing. But still, I had this poster in my room of *Romeo and Juliet* from the RSC.

Then, by the time I was doing my graduate work, I ended up working backwards in time to get to the Renaissance, because I was interested in the history of constructions of race. Then I was like, "But these plays are all—" Reading *Titus Andronicus* in college, I was like, "It's all right here, everything we're talking about!" So yes, that's my trajectory.

[*David McCandless turns his camera back on and appears in the second row*]

David McCandless
Thank you! One of the things I had in mind, listening to your narratives describing your trajectories was something I read that Tim Bond said (who was the Associate Artistic Director under Libby Appel). He talked about actually feeling like he wasn't—Shakespeare's language and world were not for him or he didn't feel welcome. He overcame that and came to think that it was actually a blueprint or a foundation for a very global and diverse world. But, initially (he said), he felt unwelcome. Did any of you experience that at all? I'm not hearing that, was that not really the case for any of you, or…?

L. Peter Callende:
You mean being unwelcome?

David McCandless
Well, in other words, somehow this particular artist felt like, "Shakespeare's not really for me, or I'm not welcome, the language and world are not for me and I'm not welcome in it."

L. Peter Callender
Yeah, very briefly -- I'm sure the other panelists will have a more in-depth response -- but, very briefly, when I was growing up in New York (again, Performing Arts High School and Julliard School), there was a reviewer by the name of John Simon. [*Observing the other panelists*] Everyone's nodding their heads…

Ayanna Thompson
Infamous reviewer!

L. Peter Callender
The infamous reviewer, John Simon, who basically said – and I am probably paraphrasing him, but I'm sure he said it sometime in his life – that Black people should not do Shakespeare. Either our lips were too big, or whatever— we just could not form the language, we couldn't speak the language properly. That lit a fire under my butt like nothing else in the world, just reading his material.

I used to work with Vinnette Carroll in the Urban Arts Corps (that's how old I am, my lord). She influenced me greatly, and I remember we were going on a TV interview show – I was one of her assistants. It was the WNEW Bob somebody. John Simon was to be on the panel. Vinnette Carroll got there and she said, [*doing an imitation of her deep, resonant voice*] "I refuse to be on this panel with John Simon!" and we walked, we walked away. Because John Simon said we couldn't do it, and he was one of the most-read critics of the time, and so many people listened to him. He actually spoke of Black dancers, when Alvin Ailey was doing his thing in New York and, of course, the premier ballerina of the world is Misty Copeland. So, we've come a long way.

But yeah, we were told that we couldn't do this. I am here because of my teachers, but I'm here because I disagreed with that wholeheartedly. I think Shakespeare is universal. The plays are written for us. The plays are written for everybody. I never once thought that I could not do this work – never, once.

You're right, Ayanna, incredibly infamous man who wrote horrible reviews of people -- spoke of their features and spoke of their height and their weight and— just awful. But that's the only person that I've ever heard tell me that I could not do Shakespeare.

Ayanna Thompson
It's interesting that he fueled you, because he fueled me, too. Because when I read those reviews, I was always like, "How is it that someone this explicitly racist was allowed to continue and have this storied career as a theater critic? How is it that there weren't other voices counteracting that opinion?" So, for me, I was like, "What's going on with the history of casting in Shakespeare that this is allowed to go on for decades?" It wasn't one or two nasty comments. It was over and over again for decades. So, we are fueled equally by the desire for revenge.

Dawn Monique Williams
Yeah, I quoted both John Simon and Tim Bond in my grad school thesis. Simon – one of the quotes from him was on Denzel's performance in *Julius Caesar*, which was just in the nineties. He really had a very pervasive and hateful career.

But, to your question, David, I didn't feel like I belonged, at all. It actually felt— I had a more militant ideology when I was in high school, too. I went to Berkeley High. It was the only high school in the country at that time to have a Black Studies department. I really felt like the narratives written by dead white men were really not for me -- were not applicable. Of course, we were watching horrible film versions, too.

I would have never have conceived of a career doing Shakespeare, dedicated to Shakespeare. I even knew I wanted to be an actor back then. I've always wanted to be in the theater, since I was six years old. So, I never thought that.

What I did think is that I would do August Wilson. At the time, when I was graduating high school, August Wilson had also just recently engaged in those debates and had done *The Ground On Which I Stand*, where he said Black actors shouldn't be doing Shakespeare. So, to further complicate it, I was like, "Well, this playwright who is writing for people like me says he shouldn't be doing it."

It really wasn't until I took that training program and had an acting teacher who was Chicano and had a completely breakdown moment, like "All I ever play is the chubby next door neighbor, or drug-addicted people" and he was like, "You got to bone up on your classics." It was really motivated by that, to be honest.

Jennie Greenberry

I definitely never felt like Shakespeare's works were for me. I didn't feel like I was invited to that table, because of the color of my skin and, also, because I think there's a bit of a classist element to it, where -- at least as I perceived it, coming up in my education -- it was like, "Shakespeare is for the highly educated elites and for the very well-to-do" and it was like, "That's not me, and I don't really want anything to do with that, so you can keep this strange dusty dead person that doesn't speak in a vernacular anyone has used colloquially since the 17th century."

I also never saw anyone that looked like me doing these Shakespeare plays. I've been a drama kid ever since I can remember. Coming up, even through middle school and high school, we would see these plays and it was like—I didn't see myself reflected in these characters or in these casts. It was like, "Okay, this is something we check off for our field trip assignments and it's back to the classroom."

There was definitely an element of feeling like, "This is not for me, so I can just take a back seat." But I'm so, so grateful that I've had people and mentors that were able to peel the lid back on that for me and say, "No, no, no. This—" You all talked about the universality of Shakespeare – it really is for everyone. That's what I hope more young people of color pick up and take with them and move forward. Because, boy, do we need them!

Ayanna Thompson

I will say that—because I alluded to reading *Titus Andronicus* in college and I think I had an "aha" moment because my professor was a super famous ancient guy then and then taught for many more years. He was completely unwilling and unable to address all of the explicit themes and issues around race in *Titus Andronicus*, and wanted to dismiss it as juvenilia. For me, I did see— Since I had a huge background in African-American Studies and Post-Colonial Studies, I was like, "Oh, this is all about empire-building and this is actually looking like an empire about to collapse and race is in the middle of it and there's slavery and there's a biracial baby."

So, I felt like I had a toolkit that had been forged in African-American studies that I was able to use when reading Shakespeare that my professor was unable to— So, for me, I felt like, "Oh, wait, I know it's something that you don't know" so it didn't feel as alienating, but it was only because I had that other toolkit.

David McCandless
Great! Last year—I alluded to the panel discussion on directing Shakespeare in the 21st Century that we had last year, and one of the participants, Rosa Joshi, said that she felt like the future of Shakespeare was definitely people of color, that that's exactly what the theater needed right now. I was struck by—I guess it was Dawn who said that somebody said to her – your mentor at ACT perhaps who said, "Oh, well, you need to get into Shakespeare – that's where all the parts for people of color are."

So, it's interesting, on the one hand I've certainly heard other African-Americans say that they feel alienated or unwelcome. On the other hand, we have (it seems) a situation where there are actually lots of opportunities? Is that overstating the matter? When I hear someone say, "The future is BIPOC actors" and I see the diversity in productions at OSF, and in New York, sometimes, and other places as well, I'm sure, is that reassuring to all of you, or do you feel like—

Dawn Monique Williams
I think it's nuanced, I think it's nuanced. This was in the nineties when my mentor was saying there's a lot of opportunity, and we were still on the color-blind casting train. In regional markets like the San Francisco Bay Area or New York, where Joe Papp was casting a lot of people at the Public, you would see people of color in these Shakespeare plays far more than you would in the other precious Western canon – far more than Tennessee Williams or Arthur Miller or Eugene O'Neill.

It doesn't necessarily mean that they were the leads. It doesn't mean that they were being cast well. They might still be playing into negative stereotypes or tropes or certainly still in the minority, but the opportunity, certainly, for a professional actor to get some work weeks and have some health insurance did exist more with those plays because people could somehow wrap their head around this notion of color-blind casting as applied to that.

I'm going to put Ayanna on the spot a little bit, because I have watched your lecture on the Black canon--

Ayanna Thompson
I was just about to say—

Dawn Monique Williams
--more times than I should admit in a public space [*laughing*]. But Ayanna has talked a lot about the Black canon. I think probably since you've done that

lecture, we've seen a little bit of shifts, but not the radical shifts that we would hope.

But, certainly, when somebody like Jennie plays Marina and says a line like – I don't know your line exactly, but, like, "I have come from kings, my derivation is from the"—And every time I heard you say that, opposite of Wayne, I was like, "Absolutely, this play is about the African diaspora! How can you do it any other way?" Every time! But, Ayanna, yeah, I always love to hear you talk about…

Ayanna Thompson
I was just going to say—and I would be interested to hear Peter's thoughts too, but for a long time, in the past, there were more opportunities in Classical plays (particularly Shakespeare's) because there was an unofficial Black canon. So, you, Dawn, and you, Jennie, could always be cast as a witch in *Macbeth.* You might even be able to play Lady Macbeth, because that's the blackest of the "white plays." [*Laughing*] There are lots of other roles that we could name: the Nurse…there's a lot.

I think that was a lazy way to cast diversely. I'm hoping that we're going to change and be more intentional going forward. But it does take having conversations like this one, where people say, "We know what we did in the past. That was not good and we should change it going forward." But, Peter, of course, you're running a very different kind of company, so you've been able to break all those kinds of molds.

L. Peter Callender
Exactly, and thank you for that plug, there, Ayanna, thank you.

A quick anecdote: I was…before we all started, I spoke about *The Whipping Man*, that beautiful play by Matthew Lopez and Jennie's face lit up. I was doing that show in the Wells Theatre, in Virginia, and I was being interviewed by a local reporter – a Black woman. We were talking about—we were just beginning to, before we went on air, and so on, just talking.

Then we finally went on air, and she asked me a couple of very interesting questions. And then she said, "Well, talk to us about being the Artistic Director of African-American Shakespeare Company." I said, "Yes, we've been around for twenty-five years, I just joined the company a few years back. We do Shakespeare in color, that's our moniker, "Shakespeare in Color." And she said, "Before you go on, let me ask you this: you're an African-American Shakespeare

company, correct?" And, ladies and gentlemen that are listening, this is the absolute truth: she said to me, "How many times can you do *Othello*?"

I kid you not. I made one of those faces that we make like, [*he demonstrates a facial expression: swiftly pulling his head back, and twisting his lips in a look of surprise and disbelief*] She said, "No, I'm serious!" I said, "Well, we do more than *Othello* – I intend to do the entire canon before I'm taken to that special place in the sky. I would love to be able to direct most of the plays before I die. These are plays that are written for the world and are written for us. The rhythm of it is musical. As people of color, music is in our DNA. We sing, dance, we sing…as children we are taught songs, dance…In Trinidad, in Africa, we were taught rhythm as a child, and Shakespeare is all about rhythm and orchestration. We feel it, we understand it, we get it." I went on and on about my love for Shakespeare and the fact that we can do anything, at any time. She was actually taken aback by the fact that, yeah, that's true. She felt a little weird that she asked that ridiculous question.

Look, I—other than John Simon, [who] I mentioned earlier, I guess I was blessed that no one said I couldn't do it. When I went to England to study at the Webber Douglas Academy (now joined with another organization) I had the pleasure of working with Patsy Rodenburg. She was one of my teachers there. I will never, ever forget the enthusiasm she had for Shakespeare, and the language of it. Never once did she tell me that something was wrong – she told me how to do it better, but she never told me something was wrong. The great Edith Skinner at Juilliard – she was tough, but she was fair. She made us feel— She empowered us, the entire class, she empowered us to speak better and be proud of our language and be proud of being able to speak this language so beautifully. That also inspired me as a young actor and, certainly, as a young mentor of young people, as well.

At African-American Shakespeare Company, we try to employ young actors who are coming out of universities and conservatories and say, yeah, "Come through with us – we are here for you. We are going to give you this opportunity to play Oberon, to play Aaron, the Scotsman in the Scottish Play (I'm still superstitious, sorry). To play all these roles – we're going to give you that opportunity. It's there for you. It's yours to play."

I read a question earlier, in the question and answer (you all should look at that question, by the way – please do. It's an interesting question in the Q&A. Ayanna, you read it.) [*She nods*]

We do Shakespeare not as white actors playing these English characters – we play it as we are. We play it so that people in the audience can say, "That looks like my uncle. That guy talks like my— This guy behaves like my…" It's not about Black actors playing "white roles." It's Black actors – African-American actors – recreating these great roles.

I'll close with this: when people say, "Break a leg" -- someone years ago told me this. She said-- There are lots of things—When you bow, break your knee, the cuff of your pants, whatever these other folkloric things are but the best thing I heard was, "The word 'legend' begins with 'leg' and it was always 'break a legend' – be better than the person who played it before you." To me, that inspired me even more, to just be better and better and better than the people who played it before you, no matter what that role is. That is why I'm still here today, because I was fueled by that desire to always be better, always try to— My favorite quote is, "Perfection is unattainable, but if you chase perfection, you might catch excellence." That's another thing I constantly live by.

David McCandless

Circling back to the question I asked before, or maybe coming at it a different way: when you think about your experience as Shakespeareans, does the "We See You, White American Theatre" treatise -- does that resonate with you? Or do you feel as though things are getting better, there's less barriers, there's more embrace of color-conscious, as opposed to color-blind [casting]? I wonder how you're feeling about that at this particular moment. Of course, this is a difficult moment, because there's no theater. You know what I mean? Does that question make sense?

Jennie Greenberry
Yeah, I think-- kind of like Dawn said earlier, I think in regards to this question, too, that is incredibly nuanced and it depends on who you're talking to. All of us, as Black artists, we all carry different baggage with us. It's different-- If you're an actor who's a part of the theatre machine, it's different than if you're a director or a producer or a designer.

I think that, for myself, I am heartened by the "We See You" movement, and I think that comes with a few caveats. On the whole, I appreciate that we are finally (in this day and age) taking the time to address the inequalities and the poor theatrical practices that we've just glossed over for the past few decades.

We don't really talk about it. Certainly, to my taste, I think there have been huge leaps forward in terms of color-conscious casting, and I think there's always room to grow. I appreciate movements like "We See You" as a catalyst to bring about that change, to have these conversations, and to bring these very important issues forward.

I think where I hesitate is...I don't want people to be...I don't know. Sorry, my covid brain -- I have the attention span of a gnat, thanks to all of this time indoors so keeping track of my train of thought is a little tricky.

But I love where the movement is taking us and I guess my only reservation is I don't want us to come to a place where we are only focused on matters of color in theatre, because there is definitely work to be done, but we are more than [*holding up her wrist*] the appearance of our skin. We can do it all. I think that our color and our culture and our heritage is such a boon to us. I don't ever want it to be seen as something that will hold us back or pigeon-hole us for fat, sassy nurse in *Romeo and Juliet* or what have you. I hope some of that made sense.

Ayanna Thompson
Juliet's sassy friend? [*Laughing*]

Jennie Greenberry
Yeah! [*Laughs*]

Ayanna Thompson
I was deeply appreciative of "We See You, White American Theatre", because I think it articulated in very clear, coherent terms, what's been the problem and ways to solve it.

I think (at least, with several theater companies that I've been working with pre- and during -pandemic) there's a lot of good will to change. But we have no idea what will happen to that will once the theaters actually open, and once money is involved again. Right now, there's no money, so people are dreaming things. But then, once there is money, it's going to have to-- like "Oh, we thought we wanted to do this, but actually, we have to pay this white guy again, because he's a good white guy."

I'm hopeful, but I'm cautious, because I know there can be a lot of backsliding even when the intentions are good.

Dawn Monique Williams
Yeah, I would echo both of my friends here. I think it is nuanced and there is a lot of-- We will have to see over time.

I am very grateful for "We See You" for the very reasons that have been articulated. It shed a light on things I felt like I had been experiencing. I'm very, very, very excited to see so many theaters out there doing the work. As a result, I suspect, in the last year I've been on so many Shakespeare panels, these exact Shakespeare-for-BIPOC-folk conversations. I've done more in the past year than I've done in all my years prior. I'll be eager to see if that translates to work.

I think sometimes we stick the actress out in front and think that our work is done. For me, as a director, there's still a lot of white men that are acting as gatekeepers. That's why I've had such gratitude for African-American Shakespeare being in my community for some twenty years. Sherri Young, the founder, is somebody I looked to when I was a very young woman as a beacon of hope. That she and Peter have hired me to work over there has been really great. But that's, like, one, you know?

I think we'll see. We just will have to see what happens over time. We're not producing theatre. Like Ayanna said, there's not a lot of money right now. I've been very busy during the pandemic -- very, very busy. I've had the great fortune of being a working director. I've not been asked to do a single Shakespeare. I don't know if that's because that's not what people want to watch from their living rooms -- and it might not be, because it already exists! Really well-produced Shakespeare we can already watch on our TVs, so maybe we don't need Zoom Shakespeare right now. But I'm doing a lot of these panels. But those theaters aren't offering me gigs. So, we just have to wait and see. But I am going to assume good will, until I learn otherwise, about particular and specific organizations.

L. Peter Callender
Very briefly, I was lucky enough to have done a couple of Shakespeares on Zoom here, with American Stage, and also with African-American Shakespeare Company. We did *Twelfth Night*. It was an hour-long version. It was not the entire thing. So, that's a caveat, right there. We also did a— We did *Twelfth Night*, and we did *Othello*, I played Othello. There's nothing more strange than doing a run-through of *Othello at 7am* Pacific Time…anyway. I still haven't gotten over that. I've done readings of *Henry V*, so, as Dawn said, I've been very busy over the covid as well, thank God. But there's still a thirst for it; there's still a need for it; there's still a desire for it.

Granted, there are some of Shakespeare's plays, by nodding of heads [*referring to fellow panelists*], that we can veer away from for a little while. I think *Taming of the Shrew*, I think we could not…[*makes a forward flapping motion with his hand, as if to push the play away*] yeah. I think that treatment with Kate and all that, unless you have an incredible conceptualization, or maybe a woman playing Petruchio, that would be interesting. But yeah, we can bypass that. There are a handful that I would say, "Okay, enough of that." But most of them are still there for us to do.

What I'm trying to do, constantly, is to get that new generation. We all spoke of who influenced us when we were young. We all spoke about that teacher, that mentor, that— Tommy, who I love Tommy Gomez. Please, next time you speak, give him my best. I want to make sure that we continue to influence the young people. I directed a production of the Scottish play [*Macbeth*] "rewritten", "reconceptualized" by Migdalia Cruz, a wonderful piece. [*Thompson makes a celebratory gesture*] Right? Yay!

Ayanna Thompson
Play On! Play On Shakespeare!

L. Peter Callender:
Play On, baby, Play On! I was on the fence when that first came out, and now I'm all for it. [*Dawn Monique Williams gives two thumbs up*] Yeah, absolutely, I mean… [*Imitating his own thought process with a funny voice and British accent, comically drawing his body back in horror*] "What? Change Shakespeare? Are you nuts?" But then we did it! My first preview— because I had rap music, I had poetry, it was quite wonderful. It was a homeless encampment in San Francisco; it was really beautiful.

My first audience was about eighty-five high school kids. Two hours, no intermission. **I** sat in the back row, and I said to myself, I said, "The first cell phone glow…" you know that glow, of the cell phone? "The first glow, I failed." I gave myself that bar, that high of a bar. I said, "The first phone that gets pulled out, I have failed what I wanted to do." And for two hours, straight not one cell phone got popped up. I thought to myself, "Okay, this is great," and they were talking about "Man, this was Shakespeare? Holy cow! I loved it! I understood so much more of it! Wow! When that dude came out with the headset, man, that Malcolm dude, because he didn't want to listen to nobody's s-h-i-t, yeah man, that was cool." I thought, "Yeah, that's it!"

I'm hoping that out of that eighty-five students or so, four or five or even one walks away with that new knowledge, that desire to go read it. That desire to go read, maybe, *Romeo and Juliet*, maybe *Othello*, maybe whatever. That is what I live for. That is why, I think, we're all here -- to just keep influencing the young folks that come up afterwards, that will be on panels like this in ten years, and say, "Oh, yeah, I remember when Dawn Monique Williams directed…" and I think that's what we're all there for. That thrills me more than anything in the world.

David McCandless
I'd be curious to know (I hope I'm not overreaching, here, or asking an impertinent question) but Peter, given your vast experience with Cal Shakes, and Dawn and Jennie at OSF, and Ayanna, I know you've written very interestingly about Oregon Shakespeare Festival and how race is constructed in their productions.

I just can't resist asking, if you're able or willing to talk a little bit about those institutions, and your experience as artists or scholars, interfacing with it, and to what extent that has been a positive experience or to what extent you would say, "maybe there are some things that still need to be worked on" at those institutions. Am I okay asking that, are you okay talking about it? [*Jennie Greenberry gives a thumbs up*] Okay!

Ayanna Thompson
They all have things they have to work on. All of them. There is not one that doesn't. But to connect, David, your question, with what Peter just said: you know that they all have things to work on because the average age at our Shakespeare institutions is still in the sixties. Sixties! We're doing something wrong. Clearly, we're doing something wrong if we cannot lower the average age of the audience in the Shakespeare theater.

L. Peter Callender
Absolutely. Hear, hear. Hear, hear. I totally agree with that. There's something wrong when— I was an Associate Artist at Cal Shakes for twenty-three years. I loved it. Michael Addison, thank you so much for giving me that opportunity to come through at Cal Shakes. My first show there was Laertes, with the wonderful Robert Sicular (you may all know Robert). Anyway.

Looking out at that audience—and yes, we would have the student matinees, absolutely, which is all students, which is great. But you're right, Ayanna, that audience needs to grow younger, because that is who we will be working for in the future. Yes, it's nice to have that sixty-year-old, seventy-year-old in the front

row with the text [*mimes flipping pages*]. [*Laughing*] We had a lot of that at Cal Shakes – in the front row, with the book and the thick glasses, and until we cut something or cut-and-paste something, the pages will turn [*mimes someone frantically flipping pages*] and they wouldn't know where they are.

But we do-- They all need to do something better. Cal Shakes has done a great deal over the years. African-American Shakespeare Company has done wonderfully over the years. I'm sure Oregon has. Everyone is working. But everyone needs to make sure that we still fuel the fire of the youth. Without that, we will disappear.

Dawn Monique Williams
Cal Shakes is the first place where I saw a Black actor in a Shakespeare play. I had been going to Cal Shakes for a very long time, years before I ever worked at OSF. I have a sort of fond nostalgia for it, while knowing, also, at the same time, that the number of Black directors that had ever worked at Cal Shakes, the number of Black women directors… It was nil until when Liesel did *Hamlet* and you all did *Spunk* with Patricia. That was the first—

L. Peter Callender
That's right.

Dawn Monique Williams
--and that's in really recent memory.

L. Peter Callender
That's right.

Dawn Monique Williams:

With the leadership change there, I've seen a lot of things shift, and it's very promising. Even, you know, hat tip to Jonathan Moscone, who told me directly to my face that he was somebody who never believed in term limits as a politician's son, but realized that the work that needed to happen at Cal Shakes…he was not the person to do it. So, with dignity and grace, stepped down and aside, so that a new thought leader could come in and really make some shifts (and that's my buddy, Eric Ting, who I adore).

So, yeah, they all have work to do, but it's nice to see them doing the work. I only ever went to Oregon Shakespeare Festival because I thought that they were setting a national standard. Of course, once you see how the sausage is made, you're like, "Oh, this is how the sausage is made" but, still, to think about the

young people, that you talk about, Peter-- to think about the student audiences that got to see Jennie as Marina, that got to see Christiana Clark as Beatrice… and that OSF has been doing this for years and years and years. And not in a refined way! At first, it's like, "Yeah, we'll stick in two Black people here and on to the next" so it's an evolutionary thing.

But I really— I've worked on many a Shakespeare play there, and it was a great point of pride for me to work at OSF, knowing that we're still really effing up and effing up a lot and regularly. Ayanna has heard me talk about— I was the production dramaturg on the 2018 *Othello*, and Ayanna has heard me talk how, "Oh…I think maybe…yeah, I think maybe we didn't…maybe we didn't nail it on that one. Maybe we actually undermined ourselves by making some of the choices, because we were trying to be so radical or…"

So, there's plenty of work to be done. But these are institutions that, I think, especially in this moment, with Eric and Nataki at the helm—These are organizations that are bearing down to do that good work. So, I'm still a fan, very much.

Jennie Greenberry
Absolutely. I know that I am. When I got to the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, I had never heard of it before I got there -- I had no idea what I was in for. When they sent me my contract offer, I thought that there was a mistake because of the fact that they were like, "Yes, we're running from April to October," and I was like, "What?" And also, "you want me to play Cinderella? Are you aware that I'm not white?" I literally, I thought, I was like, "Do they know?" Because I'd never seen it!

Dawn Monique Williams
They know now! They know now!

Jennie Greenberry
They know! I can say, without any doubt or hesitation, that my time at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival changed my life. It changed me as a person, it changed me as an artist, it opened my mind to possibilities I didn't even think of dreaming up. I think that says a tremendous amount about the work that they do put in to have these conversations and to really put artists of color at the forefront of these movements and at the forefront of their work, and just inviting us to the table. I'll speak for myself: that's all that I truly hope for, for all of my BIPOC artists, that we have the same seat at the table as everyone else. I think OSF was the first institution where I saw that in action.

What I loved, especially being a part of *Pericles*, was that I got to be a Black, biracial actor on that stage as the stage daughter of an interracial couple. That reflects my life. I have a Black father and a white mother, and I've never been able to be a part of that family dynamic onstage. That was the first time, and I've been acting professionally since 2008!

So, it was really interesting to be able to do that, and to have-- There were plenty of Black women, other biracial women that were coming to me-- I remember, very specifically, this one sixteen-year-old girl (that we're still in contact on social media, we check in with each other) and she said, "Thank you so much. I saw *Pericles.* I've never seen myself onstage before I saw you in this production." It was all I could do to keep from crying, because it was like, "Oh, this is so amazing, and so freeing, and so encouraging" and I only want this for other artists coming up after us.

There are definitely ways to improve, as well. [*Laughing*] Dawn, you bring up *Othello*, and I remember that was a huge conversation for a lot of the Company Members at OSF, in terms of: what are they going to be doing with this? Do we really want to see another *Othello* in 2018? Do we need that right now? [*Ayanna Thompson makes a hand gesture and shakes her head as if to say, "No, we don't"*] I know a lot of us were interested in maybe seeing-- [*noticing Thompson's gesture*] Right? Right, Ayanna? A lot of us were interested in seeing, "Well, what happens if everyone in that production is Black, and we talk about a colorism issue?" (Because that is alive and well in the Black community.) That got dismissed out of hand. What we ended up with was sort of the same thing that most every other production has done. Everyone in it was fabulous, but--

Ayanna Thompson
But with accents! [*Laughing*]

Jennie Greenberry
[*Laughing*] But with accents, and a few more brown people here and there!

I remember there was a time-- One of the productions I did, I was having a conversation with a designer -- and this was in the midst of our big push to talk about Equity, Diversity, Inclusion -- and I had a designer (a white designer) talking to me about a wig (Ayanna!) that they wanted to do in this particular piece. They said, "Okay, now, for this look we want you to have dreads, because your character is kind of wild now" and I said [*Pulls body back from camera with one finger held up, with a wide-eyed, appalled facial expression, laughing with disbelief*] I

was like, "You know this is problematic, right? We have to have this conversation -- the fact that you are associating a natural, protective hairstyle with wildness and with danger." She said something to the effect of, "Well, I don't really want to have a conversation about Black hair and politics right now." And I was like, "Oh! Oh, but you have to. [*Sarcastically*] This is fun."

There are things that happen like that, but there's always room to grow and room for improvement. I will say, in that designer's favor, that they did, eventually, sit down with me. We had a one-on-one with stage management involved. She listened to what I had to say. She came away from that conversation thanking me and saying, "Okay, I understand what was wrong with that now. Thank you for taking the time to share that with me. Let's change this to make you more comfortable, to make this design not racist." I was like, "You know what? Thank you. Thank you for sitting down and having that conversation." There's always room for improvement, but as long as there are people like that in the world, who are willing to sit and listen and absorb and move forward, there's hope.

David McCandless
Thank you for that; that was wonderful. We're running down here. I was just wondering if we should take-- Looks like we have two questions. Do you want to turn to those?

[*Assent from all panelists*]

It seemed like you were about to say something, though, Peter, so I don't want to cut you off.

L. Peter Callender
Oh, no. As far as change is concerned (very briefly), as far as change is concerned (and this is not a Shakespeare story, but) I directed *Cat on A Hot Tin Roof* (speaking of Tennessee Williams -- I think one of us spoke of Tennessee Williams earlier). I directed *Cat on A Hot Tin Roof* with my theater company.

This woman, this white woman, came up to me afterwards-- To me, theater is like church -- you know how the pastor is always at the door, shaking hands as people come in, shaking hands as they-- That's what I do. She came up and she took my hand and she squeezed my hand tightly. She said, "I thoroughly loved this. Oh, my gosh, I loved it. I had the pleasure of seeing *Cat on A Hot Tin Roof* in London with a Black cast. I saw it on Broadway with the wonderful Anika Noni Rose; she was wonderful. And now I'm seeing this wonderful Black cast." She

looked at me very earnestly, and she said, "Do you think this play can be done with white actors?" [*Laughs*] I said, "I don't know; we should give that a try!"

I've encountered that throughout my career. I played Dr. Treves in *The Elephant Man* and during a talkback, a woman complimented the work, and then she said, "I didn't know Dr. Treves was a Black man." And I said, "Yes, yes, actually. Yeah."

So, I know that there's a shift happening. How broad the shift is is what we should talk about, and what we should plan on broadening. But there is a shift happening. I strongly believe that. Jennie, you are absolutely right.

Sorry, David.

David McCandless
No, no problem! That was a great story. Well, we have just a few minutes. You can see the questions, I guess; would you like to address them? Or one of them, maybe?

L. Peter Callender
Let me read this one: "In your experience in productions, what conversations and choices happen around Shakespeare's imagery of darkness and African ("Ethiope") as negative compared to light, which shows up in so many places?"

Dawn Monique Williams
It's interesting--

Jennie Greenberry
I remember--

Dawn Monique Williams

Oh, I'm sorry! Go ahead, Jennie.

Jennie Greenberry
No! I was-- No.

Dawn Monique Williams
I was going to say that I am one of these contradictory types of people, because I use those references to prove one point and then, depending on if I'm directing, I might excise some of them to prove another point.

The very first Shakespeare role I ever played was Hermia, back when Tommy was my teacher. He calls her a "tawny Tartar", he calls her an "Ethiope", he calls her a "dwarf." I don't have the condition of dwarfism, but I'm *le petit.* For me, I was like, "See? This part was actually written for somebody who's my color. I am tawny." I used it as this proof that we already exist in the world of Shakespeare, not just the, "Well, how many times can you do *Othello*?" or "How many times can you do *Titus*?"

L. Peter Callender
Yes. Yes.

Dawn Monique Williams
Rosaline in *Love's Labours*, they talk about-- So, for me, sometimes I-- The academic me leans into: this is evidence. But then, the director me tries to behave with some care. When I directed *Romeo and Juliet*, everywhere where "black" was a substitute for "evil", I took it out. I used "dark" or I used "evil." I tried to keep it so that it would still scan, but when "black" was code word for something bad, I changed it. When it was just a poetic word, I would leave it. Or, if it felt like an actual, useful descriptor, like in *Othello*, like when he says, "Black is mine own skin," I leave it. For me, it's like, "See?"

I don't have a singular approach to it. I both appreciate that it's there, and academically, (sometimes) really lean in. Then, conceptually, it really depends on the aim of the production or casting, as well.

L. Peter Callender
Yup.

Jennie Greenberry
Yeah, to your point, back to what I was going to bring up is *Love's Labours Lost*. Having done that production at OSF and also Chicago Shakespeare and was slated to do it in New York this past year, but…[*sarcastically*] thanks, corona! That is a conversation we had with both versions of that production, especially because, in the second one, I was playing Rosaline. We ended up removing all the references to "Ethiope" and "dark," purely because it's an aged reference. Not everything in Shakespeare's works age well -- I mean, hello, *Merchant of Venice.* [*Other panelists make gestures of agreement*] You know, bye!

So, we cut it because, textually, it doesn't make sense in the 21st century.

Ayanna Thompson
But, you know what also needs to be cut are all the references to fairness being the ideal! If we're going to cut (which I think we should) the locating blackness as ugly, undesirable, evil, then I think all the references to fair and beauty and goodness and purity are equally problematic, at least for me. I would love to see a production that takes all that out, too.

L. Peter Callender
Yeah, I agree. I do have a concept in my mind for *Merchant of Venice* with a Black, Ethiopian Jew -- it's something that's been percolating for a little while. Someone mentioned that to me like nine years ago and it's been percolating for a while. But yeah, there are these plays that let's just-- And I do the same thing, exactly the same thing, that Dawn spoke about and Jennie spoke about, just excising those catchphrases, those triggers. We don't necessarily need them today.

I know we're running late on time.

David McCandless
I think we do have to end -- we always try to end on time, if we can, even though I'm sure all of us (myself included) would like this to go on. I want to thank each of you very much for taking part in this panel discussion and for saying so many wise and insightful things. I deeply enjoyed it, and I'm sure everybody who attended did as well. It also has been recorded, so it will live on! Thank you all very, very much.

L. Peter Callender
Thank you so much, David! What a pleasure, thank you.

Dawn Monique Williams
I look forward to seeing you all again!

Ayanna Thompson
We'll be on another Zoom, I'm sure, Dawn.

L. Peter Callender
Jennie, nice meeting you. Ayanna, nice meeting you. Dawn, keep up the great work, everybody! David, thank you, again.