Harvard's American Repertory Theater designates performance of *Macbeth In Stride* for "Black-identifying" only

David Walsh
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-What's the newest grief?
-That of an hour's age doth hiss the speaker:
Each minute teems a new one.
***Macbeth*, Act IV, Scene 3**

On October 29, the American Repertory Theater (A.R.T.) at Harvard University designated a performance of *Macbeth In Stride*, a musical reimagining of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* created by Whitney White, "to be an exclusive space for Black-identifying audience members," according to the theater's website.

The A.R.T. website and advertisements for the event placed with other publications continued, "For our non-Black allies, we appreciate your support in making this a completely Black-identifying evening. We invite you to join us at another performance during the run." The theater termed this a "Black Out Performance."

This act of racial segregation by a theater affiliated with Harvard, the country's most prestigious academic institution, is deeply reactionary. Prior to the date, the *Bay State Banner* approvingly described the October 29 performance as "a safe space for Black-identifying audience members to attend." For what pitiful or ill-starred portion of the human race does attendance at a performance at the Loeb Drama Center on Brattle Street in Cambridge, Massachusetts constitute an "unsafe" experience? Furthermore, the implication that whites and blacks occupying the same "space"—even for a few hours!—might be somehow hazardous is obscene, a concession to the most extreme nationalist and racist conceptions.

The A.R.T. describes *Macbeth In Stride* as a "dazzling theatrical event," performed by White and an acting ensemble with a live band. The production "examines what it means to be an ambitious Black woman through the lens of one of Shakespeare's most iconic characters." The production "uses pop, rock, gospel, and R&B to trace the fatalistic arc of Lady Macbeth while lifting up contemporary Black female power, femininity, and desire."

White pays tribute to the impact of Shakespeare on her life and her art, explaining that, originally a singer, she "fell in love with theater, and I truly fell in love with the words of Shakespeare." Although productions of his plays didn't "represent my experience … Yet, when I read Shakespeare, I totally hear my world. I hear my friends and family, and I see the world that I live in. So I wondered how I could unite all these worlds that I love: music, Shakespeare, really high-quality performative art, and entertainment."

We cannot comment on whether White's effort is successful artistically, but it is to her credit that she told an interviewer from the *A.R.T.Guide* that music "has always felt liberating to me. Music has no prejudice. You turn on the Rolling Stones, Tina Turner, or Nirvana, and men, women, children of all ethnic backgrounds and religions can be drawn into the same space and feel united. Music has this incredible way of making people *a people*."

However, White can then turn around and tell the *Bay State Banner* that the "Black Out Night" on October 29 is "a beautiful thing to be able to make work for the community that I came from … The music is very 'us'—it's literally inspired by soul, gospel and rock." As *Macbeth*'s Macduff cries out, "Confusion now hath made his masterpiece!"

The same newspaper notes that the cast of *Macbeth In Stride* is "predominantly black." Were the non-black members, who, from photographs of the rehearsal process, appear to include white musicians, allowed to perform last Friday? Was the co-director Tyler Dobrowsky permitted to view the production he had helped to bring to the stage? And what about scenic designer Dan Soule, wig, hair and make-up designer Rachel Padula, sound designer Alex Georgetti and stage manager Emily McMullen—were these apparently "non-Black allies" blocked from entering the theater that night?

Macbeth in Stride's other co-director, Taibi Magar, is Egyptian American, and the music director, Steven Cuevas, is Filipino American. We have no way of knowing with which "race" they identify. By this point, with any luck, the reader is as disgusted with the ethnic rundown as this writer is at having to provide it. "Proof of vaccination or negative test results" was required for entrance October 29. What about DNA test results on this "Black-identifying evening?"

The logic of policies based on race and blood is implacable, and always filthy, no matter which past injustices are invoked and arguments mustered. The next step must surely be separate performances for "whites" and "Asians" and "Spanish speakers." Who says A must say B. Why only one show, what would be wrong with an entire run? And little then would stand in the way of opening separate theaters for whites and blacks. No white supremacist-fascist of the David Duke variety could be unhappy with this development, which serves the interests of the capitalist ruling elite as a whole and its life-and-death goal of dividing the population along ethnic lines.

In the Jim Crow South and apartheid South Africa, theaters of all kinds were segregated. In fact, strictly enforced racial separation came relatively late in South Africa. One commentator notes that from 1950, " *apartheid* laws prescribed that Shakespeare's plays be performed before racially segregated audiences." In Germany, the Nazis banned Jews from theaters and other public places in the second, even more savage wave of anti-Jewish legislation in 1938. It

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is impossible to escape these comparisons.

Ironically, in 2016, the *Harvard Gazette*, the university's official press organ, reported on an exhibition celebrating the performance of African American actor Paul Robeson in Shakespeare's *Othello* at the Brattle Theatre in Cambridge in 1942. "A year later," the publication proudly noted, Robeson "took the role to New York for a production that still stands as the longest-running Shakespeare play on Broadway—296 performances before a national tour. Robeson called the shots … insisting on performing only for integrated audiences."

In regard to the latter issue, the chairman of the English Department at Baylor University in Waco, Texas wrote the producer of the 1943 *Othello* tour, John Haggott, "a 1935 Harvard grad," informing him that it would not "work at all for the whites and negroes to sit together. That would not be allowed in Texas where the Jim Crow laws are enforced quite definitely." Haggott wrote back, quoting the theater's contract: "There shall be no segregation, grouping or setting apart of audiences because of race, creed or color."

How far the American Repertory Theater and Harvard have advanced! All the way forward into the 19th century!

There are further ironies. Well-known critic, producer and educator Robert Brustein founded the A.R.T. in 1979 and served as its artistic director until 2002. During his tenure, in January 1997 in New York City, Brustein engaged in a well-known debate with the African American playwright August Wilson. The latter argued for a distinct black theater, insisting that what existed at the time was merely "white theater" and that the lives of African Americans could not find expression without a separate cultural form. "Let's make a rule," Wilson infamously proposed, "Blacks don't direct Italian films. Italians don't direct Jewish films. Jews don't direct black American films."

Reporting on the debate, the *Washington Post* commented that Brustein had "long regarded Wilson's agenda as a wrongheaded bid for separatism, and he once again warned that Wilson was harking back to the 1950s, when 'separate but equal' was the catch phrase used by bigots to justify egregious racial inequities. A longtime opponent of multiculturalism, Brustein subscribes to 'a single value system' by which all art should be measured. Drama, he insisted, investigates 'the workings of the human soul, which has no color.'"

A.R.T.'s current artistic director (since 2008), theater and opera director Diane Paulus—who must have approved or overseen the segregated performance last week—told the *Atlantic* in 2017 that "democracy in a country of over 320 million" actually requires the ability and willingness "to share space, time, and life with people whose feelings and circumstances are different from our own."

Paulus continued, "As audiences, we sit side by side with strangers, performing the democratic possibility of a collective experience from multiple positions and perspectives. We share space, and vulnerability, and wonder; we disagree; we do not turn the story off. Beyond exhibiting empathy, audiences cultivate the power of compassion." Not if they are prevented physically from sitting next to people whose "feelings and circumstances are different" from their own!

-You see, her eyes are open.
-Ay, but their sense is shut.
***Macbeth*, Act V, Scene 1**

The "Black Out Performance" is not only morally and political repugnant, but presumably illegal. Financial support for American Repertory Theater programming is provided by Harvard, as well as the Massachusetts Cultural Council (a state agency) and the federal government's National Endowment for the Arts, all of which must have provisions stipulating that funding recipients will not discriminate on the basis of race, gender and so forth.

This type of racialist disgrace plays into the hands of the extreme right, enabling these vile forces to pose as the enemies of discrimination and advocates of democratic rights for all. They seek to discredit socialism in the eyes of the working class by relentlessly, vociferously associating the identity politics frenzy, which is not popular, with the "left." Meanwhile, the *New York Times* and the pseudo-left hangers-on of the Democratic Party maintain a discreet and sympathetic silence.

White, Paulus and the A.R.T. speak grandly about progressive human values and uniting people of all backgrounds while, in practice, pursuing ethno-communalist policies. This is the gravitational pull of race and gender politics, reflecting the selfish needs and aspirations of upper-middle class circles. The latter are driven along by the crisis of American society sharply worsened by the pandemic, distant from and unable or unwilling to orient to wide layers of the population. "They float," writes Shakespeare of King Macbeth's frightened Scottish subjects, "upon a wild and violent sea each way and move."

This affair and the attacks on Bright Sheng at the University of Michigan work against everything that the classical tradition of staging and studying Shakespeare, at its best, has stood for—more profound insight into human emotions, including the most heightened and even titanic; a greater ability and willingness to put oneself in another's shoes, even the shoes of the most despised and downtrodden; a stronger appreciation for lyrical beauty and the protest it implies against existing conditions.

"Unnatural deeds do breed unnatural troubles." The crisis of bourgeois society is so deep that, under the hammer blows of identity politics and postmodern philosophies in particular, even once "universally" accepted cultural values and assumptions are increasingly abandoned and discredited. Analogous to processes taking place in other important spheres, the complete and genuine protection of past culture—upon which, in the final analysis, the development of vital new forms depends—today falls to the working class and those artists and intellectuals who adopt its historic cause. It will become more and more evident, even to the skeptical, that only the Marxist movement is thoroughly preoccupied with and takes responsibility for "the defense of Shakespeare."

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