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Introduction

When I returned to Sydney in 2001, after working overseas for ten years as an actor and director—primarily in New York theatre—I was shocked by how White the casts of mainstage productions were. I had grown accustomed to New York’s mixed-race casts and was astonished that the ethnic diversity that was so apparent on the streets was not replicated on Sydney’s stages. Not only had I heard tell of legendary performances like Gloria Foster’s *Mother Courage* and Morgan Freeman’s *Coriolanus*, I had seen Audra McDonald’s award-winning performances in *Carousel* and *Master Class*, David Harewood’s Antony opposite Vanessa Redgrave as Cleopatra, and Erika Alexander’s Bianca beside Allison Janney as her sister Kate in *The Taming of the Shrew*. Cross-racial casting was virtually, it seemed, a moral and political imperative in New York and, in the light of the profile that successive prime ministers were happy to trumpet of Australia as ‘a multicultural nation in Asia’, I could not help but wonder why that national identity was not reflected by the Sydney Theatre Company (STC), Company

B-Belvoir (Company B) or the Bell Shakespeare Company on the government-funded mainstages of its largest city.¹

Six years later, with a better understanding of the local political climate—and of the way in which ‘Whiteness theory’ can be usefully applied in theatre—my initial reaction has hardened into a determination to argue in this essay that Sydney’s mainstages remain reprehensibly White. This is not exclusive to Sydney; it is a national issue and it has been apparent for well over a decade. In 1995, director Jim Sharman described his career-long awareness of the exclusion of non-Whites:

From as early as the production of *Hair* [1969], I have attempted to accustom audiences to the world we are going to live in, rather than to the middle-class, Anglicised ghetto that so often prevails. Mainstream culture has only begun to address this reality; the delay in encouraging, training and learning from non-Western cultures has cost our theatre the possibility of truly reflecting our present society. [...] I recall, only a few years ago, wandering through the Art Gallery of South Australia behind [...] a few Chinese-Australian children. Their distress and dismay was obvious: they didn’t exist on the walls of that gallery. Chinese-Australians have been here since the gold rushes, but, as far as art was concerned, they were invisible. They are part of our invisible theatre.²

Twelve years on, Sydney is still waiting to see its first Chinese-Australian Lear or Indigenous Hamlet. Indeed, Barrie Kosky said recently:

Cross-Racial Casting

When I see *Cloudstreet*, I can appreciate it as a great Australian story, but it's got absolutely nothing to do with me. [...] I've always respected David Williamson. I think he's a brilliant Australian social commentator, but what he's commenting on is like Mars to me.³

Kosky's culturally-marginalised status gives him an 'enormously powerful outsider perspective',⁴ of course, but how many theatre artists have *not* been able to reframe a lifetime of cultural exclusion into an aesthetic tool, as he has? Why have our major theatre companies been so slow, compared to those of other countries, to put racially-diverse casts on their stages? To ask this question is to provoke an awful discourse of blame: agents blame casting directors; drama schools blame 'the industry'; everyone blames artistic directors; artistic directors blame writers and directors and directors blame the availability of actors. Often quick to point out the handful of cross-racially-cast productions in recent memory as significant achievements, White theatre practitioners invariably declare their personal opposition to any form of racism. They then subside into a state of helplessness, claiming not to know how to change a flawed system, before remembering to say that, in casting, talent matters more than skin-colour.

Little purpose is served by this discourse of blame beyond encouraging inertia: everyone agrees that it is wrong, but not their fault, so they end up believing there's nothing to be done. Helplessness dovetails well with the indignation that artistic enterprises should not be subject to the same anti-discriminatory policies