

First published 2019
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
52 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

© 2019 selection and editorial matter, Kathy A. Perkins, Sandra L. Richards, Renée Alexander Craft,
and Thomas E. DeFrantz; individual chapters, the contributors

The right of Kathy A. Perkins, Sandra L. Richards, Renée Alexander Craft, and Thomas E. DeFrantz to be
identified as the authors of the editorial material, and of the authors for their individual chapters, has been asserted
in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised
in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or
hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information
storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Trademark notice: Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks,
and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: DeFrantz, Thomas, editor. | Alexander Craft, Renée, editor. |
Richards, Sandra L., editor. | Perkins, Kathy A., 1954- editor.

Title: The Routledge companion to African American theatre and performance /
edited by Kathy A. Perkins, Sandra L. Richards,
Renée Alexander Craft, and Thomas E. DeFrantz.

Description: New York, NY : Routledge, 2019. |

Series: Routledge theatre and performance companions | Includes index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018028249 (print) | LCCN 2018029064 (ebook) |

ISBN 9781315191225 (Master) | ISBN 9781351751445 (Adobe Reader) |

ISBN 9781351751438 (ePub3) | ISBN 9781351751421 (Mobipocket Unencrypted) |

ISBN 9781138726710 (hardback : alk. paper) | ISBN 9781315191225 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: African American theater. | African American theatrical producers and directors. |
African American dramatists. | African American actors.

Classification: LCC PN2270.A35 (ebook) | LCC PN2270.A35 R68 2019 (print) |
DDC 792.08996073-dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018028249>

ISBN: 978-1-138-72671-0 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-19122-5 (ebk)

Typeset in Bembo
by Out of House Publishing

8

EARLE HYMAN

Scandinavian successes

Baron Kelly

No discussion of actors of color on the stages of Norway can exclude the career of Earle Hyman (1926–2017). Hyman was a distinguished African American actor who has been knighted by Norway for his work in *Othello* and his portrayal of Brutus Jones in Eugene O’Neill’s *The Emperor Jones*. What he is best known for is his television portrayal of Grandfather Cosby on “The Cosby Show” (later 1980s–early 1990s). His love of the works of Ibsen first led him to Norway. While there, one critic wrote of him, “He loves Norway and its people, and he acts “Othello” with a vengeance” (Hyman, “Black Actor in Norway” 33).

To an earlier generation, Hyman was a “real” Black man who could lend authenticity to the Black roles he was performing. The conundrum was that he was lauded as a great actor, embraced as good friend of Norway, but the bulwark of conventional theatrical realism in Norway prevented him from performing in a non-traditional role in the work of his beloved Ibsen. Hyman began to perform in Norway speaking the two official languages of Nynorsk and Bokmål used in the theatres of that country. He appeared also on the stages of Sweden and Denmark, where he spoke Norwegian while the rest of the players spoke their native tongue. Hyman’s first Norwegian performance was as Othello, for Den Nationale Scene in Bergen (1963). With Othello, Hyman created Norwegian stage history by being the first American to perform in Norwegian. In the over 50 years since Hyman first appeared onstage in Norway, issues of multiculturalism and non-traditional casting in Norway loom large.

Earle Hyman was 13 years old in 1939 when he saw a performance in a Brooklyn theatre of Henrik Ibsen’s *Gjengangere* (Ghosts) with Alla Nazimova playing the role of Mrs. Alving. The play was a present from his parents. His parents had moved the family up from North Carolina to Brooklyn so he and his siblings could get a better education in the schools up north. He was too young to understand the full complexity of the characters, but the haunting quality of the story captivated him to develop a life-long interest in the drama of Henrik Ibsen. Whether or not this was because Ibsen was the first professionally produced playwright he had ever seen, as far as Hyman was concerned, “first there is Shakespeare, and then there is Ibsen” (Interview). He was a Black kid in a white world bitten by a bug named Ibsen. Hyman began to read Ibsen’s translated works from *Catilina* (*Cataline*) (1849) to *Når vi døde vågner* (*When We Dead Awaken*) (1899), promising himself that one day he would read them in the original language. As an actor, he became aware of the complexity of Ibsen’s characters and felt that some of the subtleties inherent in the scripts might have been sacrificed as a result of translation into English.

Earle Hyman: Scandinavian successes

Hyman made his Broadway debut at age 18 in the now all-but-forgotten historic 1944 production of Philip Yordan's *Anna Lucasta*, about the return of a troubled, good-looking Black prostitute to her family. In the 1950s, Hyman, was forging a tremendous career in New York theatrical venues with his subsequent roles on Broadway, including the title role in *Mister Johnson* and Didi in *Waiting for Godot*. His Off-Broadway roles for the Phoenix Theatre included Dunois in Bernard Shaw's *Saint Joan* and Antonio in *The Duchess of Malfi*. Hyman was the first true pioneer of non-traditional casting in the United States. In 1955, he was the first African American actor in the United States to be hired to play non-traditional roles, including Sooth Sayer (*Julius Caesar*), Melun (*King John*), Horatio (*Hamlet*), and Autolycus (*The Winter's Tale*) for the American Shakespeare Festival in Stratford, Connecticut.

In 1957, Hyman decided to take a two-week vacation and make his first visit to the land of Ibsen. Aware of Hyman's fondness for Ibsen, Romney Brent, an actor and former instructor at the American Theatre Wing, gave him a letter of introduction to Ibsen's grandson, the filmmaker Tancred Ibsen. The lineage on both sides of Tancred's family impressed Hyman. Tancred's mother was the daughter of Bjørnsterne Bjornson, the famous Norwegian poet, playwright, and novelist. Tancred's wife, Lillebil Ibsen, was one of Norway's leading actresses. The gracious and charming Ibsens introduced Hyman to many of Norway's leading actors and directors. Hyman was completely overwhelmed by their sincere desire to learn of his background and ideas about the theatre. Hyman recalls, "It was such joy to be in an atmosphere in which theatre was discussed as an art, and not as a commercial enterprise" (Interview). One of the people he met through the Ibsens was Ellen Isefiær, a director. Little did he guess that Isefiær would direct him six years later in *Othello* at Den Nationale Scene, Norway's oldest theatre. But Norway would have to wait; Hyman had his immediate theatrical sights set on London.

In 1958, Hyman's professional career would return him to London, where ten years earlier he had been so successful in the Broadway transfer to the London stage of the American Negro Theatre's production of *Anna Lucasta*. Hyman would garner good reviews acting in productions of Errol John's *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl* at the Royal Court Theatre and, most importantly, playing Walter Lee Younger in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*. In August of 1959, Hyman opened at the Adelphi Theatre in *Raison*. He remembered:

We had quite a nice run although at the time London was experiencing some unusually good weather. I suppose the people wanted to enjoy it, and at first we played to meager houses. It caught on after awhile, however, and the audiences seemed to love it. Many times we could hear them crying.

(Interview)

In the early summer of 1962, Hyman made another trip to Norway. Prior to his first trip in 1957, Hyman had taken Norwegian language classes in New York. While attending the Bergen Theatre Festival, Hyman met the theatre manager of Bergen's den Nationale Scene (the National Stage), Bjarne Andersen. Andersen was so impressed with Hyman's Norwegian language skills that he invited him to play the title role of *Othello* in Bergen in the spring of 1963. Hyman did not accept the offer immediately because he felt his language skills were not proficient enough, but he agreed to read the Larsen translation. Back in Oslo, Hyman wrote to Andersen on June 20, 1962, that he had read "Gunnar Larsen's translation of *Othello* several times," and he thought "it was a very good one." Hyman felt that Andersen "understood my feelings with regard to the preparation of the role in Norwegian." Hyman concluded with, "if there will be a performance of *Othello* in Bergen, I will give an answer the beginning of September" (Letter June 20, 1962). In the meantime, Hyman, who had previously signed to do

Othello at the Great Lakes Shakespeare Festival at Antioch College in Ohio, had to travel from Oslo back to the United States to begin rehearsals.

In order to better understand the difficult task that Hyman had assigned himself, perhaps it should be noted that the people of Norway have two different written forms of language but speak hundreds of dialects. Nynorsk and Bokmål are the two written languages and are mutually understandable. Hyman accomplished the unenviable task of mastering both. He commented that, "to my ears Norwegian is somewhere between English and German. What it lacks in vocabulary, it more than makes up for in the intricacy of the phrasing and inflection" (Interview). During the rehearsals of *Othello* in Ohio, he continued memorizing Gunnar Larsen's translation in Norwegian. Shortly after this, an interesting and amusing incident occurred. One night during a performance, Hyman noticed a very strange expression in Iago's eyes and unusual mutterings from the audience. Hyman suddenly realized that he was speaking *Othello's* lines in Norwegian (Interview). Hyman wrote back to Andersen on September 23, 1962, explaining that because of a heavy work schedule he was sending a late acceptance of the offer to play *Othello* in Bergen. Hyman was more confident with the script and wrote that, "there were just a few words that I find a bit difficult to pronounce" (Letter). Hyman concluded by saying, "I am still very interested to play *Othello* with you as Iago, and I am interested to see if terms could be met for engagement" (Letter).

When Hyman stepped off the boat in Bergen, Black people were a rare sight in Norway. If a Black person walked down Karl Johans Gate, the main street in Oslo, people would stop and stare. The Bureau of Statistics in Norway states that in the years 1961–1964, of the 3 million people in Norway, 300 were from African countries, and they were students. While it was rare to see ethnic non-whites in Norway, Norwegians were aware of the civil rights movement in the United States from newspapers, radio, and television coverage. Nevertheless, Hyman was not what Norwegians were expecting in an African American from America. Actress Karin Hox remembered:

We all lined up at the doorway to the theatre. A buzz went around that he was coming. When he entered we saw this cultured, good-looking, light-complexioned black man in a suit, speaking Norwegian. He was strange and fascinating. It was like, Wow!!
(Hox Interview)

Hyman was a tall man who had a commanding oratory that echoed that of Paul Robeson. His learning the Norwegian language because of his love of Ibsen's plays doubly impressed the Norwegians.

Det Norske Teatret's Artistic Director Tormod Skagestad traveled from Oslo to Bergen to see Hyman's performance of *Othello*. When Skagestad witnessed Hyman's powerful performance, he envisioned this power and intensity transferred to the character of Brutus Jones in Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*. After the performance, Skagestad approached Hyman to inquire about the possibility of an engagement for the fall of 1964. The only catch was that the play would be performed in Nynorsk, the New Norwegian language. Den Nationale Scene's *Othello* was in Bokmål. Hyman would have a year to learn the new language. Riding on the crest of the success of *Othello*, he agreed to an engagement with Det Norske Teatret, including guest performances of *Keisar Jones* at the Bergen Theatre Festival and Sweden's Royal Theatre Dramaten.

Always with an angle eye for selling a show, Skagestad, in a 1964 *Arbeiderbladet* interview, highlighted the similarities between O'Neill's *Emperor Jones* and Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*. He said, "både Peer Gynt og Keiser Jones handler om mennesker som bygger seg opp en strålende trone,

men i begge tilfelle overtar skjebnen styringen" ("both Peer Gynt and Keiser Jones—Emperor Jones—are about people who build themselves a glorious throne, but in both cases fate takes over the control"; Gjesdahl).¹

In 1964, America's Civil Rights Act was signed. In Norway, racist incidents in the United States were broadcast on television and radio, and many Norwegians were outraged at the treatment of Blacks by ordinary people in the United States. The performances of *Keiser Jones* (*Emperor Jones*) only added to the heated race debate already taking place in Norway. The play was described in *Aftenposten* as "et sterkt dramatisk stykke om forholdet mellom negeren og den hvite mann representert ved cockney kjøpmannen Smithers, og om negerens forhold til sitt egentlige opphav" ("a strong dramatic piece about the relationship between blacks and the white man, represented by the cockney merchant Smithers, and about the black's relationship with his real origins"; "Keisar Jones"). Skagestad knew that he would fill his theatre to capacity and also provide the Oslo theatrical debut of Hyman to Norway. Skagestad even scheduled a Racedebatt konferanse (Race Debate Conference) after one of the evening performances.

When *Keiser Jones* opened on September 14, 1964, it was a resounding success for Hyman and for Det Norske Teatret. Hyman received high praise for his Nynorsk, and Elizabeth Gording summed it up for every critic, saying, "vi fascineres av denne skuespillers imponerende sprogbruk" ("We are fascinated by this actor's impressive language skills"; Gording). Hyman's ability to take the audience on the character's journey was commented on when *Arbeiderbladet* wrote "ikke et øyeblikk får tilskueren hove til å føle seg utenfor. Han er selv med på denne flukten fra en ond og rettferdig skjebne. Så stor er skuespilleren" ("Not for one moment has the onlooker the opportunity to feel outside. He is participating in this escape from an evil and just destiny. The actor is that great"; "Keisar Jones"). Of Hyman's expression of character, Lisi Caren in *Dagbladet*, wrote "Mange vil ha meget å lære av Earle Hyman når det gjelder kroppsherskelse" ("Many people have a lot to learn from Earle Hyman with regard to body control").

The legacy of Earle Hyman must not be forgotten. Even though Hyman was a well-loved figure who spent a good deal of his adult life in Norway, he was still considered a visitor and not a native. The debates about migrants and (cultural) citizenship in general have led to a number of intercultural strategies and programs in the arts and education, most of which are more concerned about integration and social cohesion than about an open exchange of different values and world views. How can a country that propagates its own humanism and virtues, projects an image to the world and its people of being a tolerant, liberal, and humane society deny the development of its artists of color?

Note

- 1 All translations of review quotations are by the author.

Works cited

- Caren, Lisi. "O'Neill's Keisar Jones," *Dagbladet*, Sep. 16, 1964.
Gjesdahl, Paul. "Keiser Jones en seier for Det Norske Teatret" ["*Emperor Jones* a Victory for Det Norske Teatret"]. *Bergens Arbeiderbladet*, Sep. 17, 1964.
Gording, Elizabeth. "Keisar Jones." *Handel og Sjøfart*, Sep. 16, 1964.
Hox, Karin. Personal interview. Dec. 5, 2001.
Hyman, Earle. "A Black Actor in Norway." *Negro Digest*, Feb. 1964, pp. 33–36.
———. Earle Hyman letter to Bjarne Andersen. June 20, 1962. Bergen Theatre Archives. Bergen, Norway.
———. Earle Hyman letter to Bjarne Andersen. Sep. 23, 1962. Bergen Theatre Archives. Bergen, Norway.

———. Personal interview. Apr. 19, 2000.

"Keisar Jones for første gang i Norge" ["*Emperor Jones* for the first time in Norway"]. *Aftenposten*, Sep. 12, 1964.

"Keisar Jones mer aktuelt i dag enn for 40 år siden" ["*Emperor Jones* More Topical Today than 40 Years Ago"]. *Arbeiderbladet*, Sep. 12, 1964.

Norwegian Bureau of Statistics, www.ssb.no/en.