

## Caliban/Tempest

The Tempest is just King Lear in reverse and vice versa. Read this from top down you have Lear, bottom up you have Prospero:

Now are my charms overthrown, all is forgiven, I am old, set me free

Look my daughter's getting married!

Who are these people disrespecting me?

Where's my wiseass servant?

I am filled with unresolved anger!

HURRICANE

One more thought about last night's otherwise terrific *Tempest*.

It bothers me that no one in the Company seemed aware of the painful irony of the curtain speech ("we acknowledge we perform on the traditional lands of the Pawtucket and Massachusetts tribes and express our sorrow for this history") right before a play that celebrates European subjugation of the New World. I feel this is a good example of how performative allyship prevents any honest discussion of Shakespeare, history and politics.

1) The land acknowledgment costs CSC nothing. It would be totally different if Steve Maler had announced that 50% of the donations tonight would be given to fight voter suppression of Tribal citizens in Arizona and North Dakota. I'm all for theater companies turning themselves into social justice resistance cells, but you really have to do it. Empty sloganeering isn't liberating anyone.

2) At some point, it becomes hard to distinguish performative allyship from outright appropriation. If it's uncool to call your baseball team "the Atlanta Braves" to honor "the warrior spirit of the ancestral inhabitants of Georgia," how is it different to introduce *The Tempest* with a feel-good statement of condescension to the Pawtucket and Massachusetts tribes?

3) I wouldn't have noticed this but for the fact that IT'S THE TEMPEST. Whatever magic and humanity and redemption is in this play, it is undeniably colonization propaganda. The natives are monstrous, naturally subordinate, and easily controlled by alcohol and violence. Caliban achieves redemption only by relinquishing his PERFECTLY LEGITIMATE claim to his island,



and submitting to the benevolent mastery of his European overlord. "How fine my master is! I am afraid he will chastise me." I'm just saying, you don't get to pretend you're honoring the Pawtucket and Massachusetts ancestors, and in the same moment pretend that this play is multicultural, equitable and inclusive for indigenous peoples.

4) This may make folks uncomfortable, because we don't want to let go either of Shakespeare or our post-George Floyd commitment to social justice. I'm just saying the choice isn't necessarily easy. The Al Pacino production of Merchant of Venice was so guilty about Shylock that they inserted an extra scene at the end where Shylock rejects his Christian conversion, puts his yarmulke back on, and defiantly stomps off the stage. Maybe that made the liberal audience feel better about the play, but that doesn't make it authentic. But if we're going to make that kind of revision, I would LOVE to see a rewritten final scene where Caliban marches in as Toussaint L'Overture, reclaims the island and evicts the Europeans, so that Prospero's final speech ("Now my charms are all o'erthrown") is really a confession that he just GOT HIS ASS KICKED by the indigenous resistance. Prospero as a losing General Custer, now that might be a step toward "gratitude for the Native forbears of the land."

On yesterday's post: I got some pushback along these lines: "yes, but this production of the Tempest didn't celebrate colonialism because it had a BIPOC Prospero." I have thoughts on this.

1) First off, this is disrespectful to John Douglas Thompson. I don't go to see him for the novelty of a Black Prospero. I go to see him because he is the best Shakespearean actor in America. If you're sitting through more than 15 seconds of his performance and your main thought is still "Look! a BIPOC Prospero!" you need to pay more attention.

2) The notion that racially diverse casting dispels anything that is not "equitable or inclusive" in Shakespeare is really dangerous. *American Moor* is all about this. Keith Hamilton Cobb says to his guilty white directors: "if I can't be evil, if I can't have power and wield it, if my BIPOCness disqualifies me from being just as bad and oppressive as you, then I'm not really human. I'm just a walking placeholder for your white guilt." So if Prospero's enslavement of Caliban is magically sanitized because the actors are black and white, rather than vice versa, then you're really saying that *The Tempest* can't be performed authentically by a diverse cast. I reject that.

3) I don't know if my problem is more with Bardolatry (the uncritical worship of Shakespeare) or with the authoritarian, distinctly un-progressive politics dominating theater these days. Because taken together, it means audiences congratulate themselves because someone gave a shout-out to the tribes that Shakespeare's own English contemporaries dispossessed, even as they uncritically laugh at that ridiculous Caliban and smile happily when he begs for his master's embrace. As someone who loves Shakespeare, I am heartsick when I see him ridiculing Caliban's "heyday! freedom!" I'm heartsick when I see Jack Cade (democratic freedom-fighter, the Thomas Paine of the 15th Century) slandered as a drunken terrorist. I cringe at how vicious Jew-haters like Gratiano and Antonio are rewarded with sex and happiness, or Katharina is broken like a horse into submission. I don't want to cancel Shakespeare over this, but I don't like the North Korean doublethink that makes people pretend it's not there.