



The Singer's Library: "Black Acting Methods: Critical Approaches"

BY BRIAN MANTERNACH

Addressing important issues of acting methods, this publication is a much needed resource that rectifies a homogeneous approach to acting through history, critical commentary, and methodologies.

In the opening pages of *Black Acting Methods: Critical Approaches*, editors Sharrell D. Luckett and Tia M. Shaffer offer an initial description: "Black acting methods are defined as rituals, processes, and techniques rooted in an Afrocentric centripetal paradigm where Black theory and Black modes of expression are the nucleus that informs how one interacts with various texts, literary and embodied, and how one interprets and (re)presents imaginary circumstances." In the chapters that follow, more than two dozen additional contributors spell out specific rituals, rehearsal- and performance-tested processes, and culturally rooted techniques. They also make the case for why it is overdue for such practices and perspectives to gain their rightful recognition in contemporary actor training.

In the following interview, lead editor Luckett discusses the book as well as The Black Acting Methods Studio®, for which she serves as founding director.

In the Introduction to *Black Acting Methods: Critical Approaches*, you and Tia M. Shaffer refer to the book as a text for all actors that both pays homage to Black pedagogy and highlights the need for more culturally and racially diverse perspectives in acting classrooms. Do you feel this need applies to the classrooms where theatrical genres like opera and musical theatre are taught as well?

Absolutely. There needs to be racial and heritage diversity in all classrooms no matter the subject. All

students are being robbed of an excellent education when they are met with homogenous theory and ways to look at and interact with the world.

Issues related to racial injustice and inequality in the United States have moved much more to the forefront since the widespread protests that happened in the summer of 2020. The organization Broadway for Racial Justice was formed during that time specifically to fight for racial justice and equity in the Broadway and at-large theatre communities. Although *Black Acting Methods* was published in 2017, have you seen increased interest in your book and its subject matter due to these more recent events and efforts?

The book was always popular and selling well and, yes, my publicity efforts along with the BLM iteration of 2020 and COVID-19 catapulted the book to the #1 best-selling spot in Theatre on Amazon. The new interest seemed to primarily come from educators of the global minority and from Black actors and educators who wanted to make a concerted effort to further promote the book and its impact.

In the book, you identify theories that place the origins of theatre in Africa with the costumed rituals that shamans performed for tribal members—a perspective that is often omitted in theatre history courses. As such, you write that



Black Acting Methods is part of a call for more students to have “the privilege to engage with methods and techniques borne of Black lineage and culture” which, indeed, may be a much longer lineage than many of us were taught to acknowledge. For you, is bringing this information to a wider audience more of a privilege or a responsibility? Or is it a fair amount of both?

Unfortunately, having an equitable, factual education seems to be a privilege since there are so many lies about history perpetuated by whiteness. I also see my work as a responsibility to my ancestors and elders. They have worked too hard and have made far too many sacrifices for me not to contribute meaningfully to the field of

performing arts. I’m standing on some mighty, rich shoulders and I can only hope that I am making my people proud.

You are the founding director of The Black Acting Methods Studio (blackactingmethods.com), which is described as “a mobile and online training institute where actors of all heritages can gain in-depth knowledge about acting processes, methodologies, and philosophical underpinnings rooted in Black American culture and tradition.” Is the curriculum primarily an exploration of the methods presented in the book or does it go beyond what can be found within the pages?

The curriculum is primarily rooted in the Lockett Paradigm, a performance methodology that begins with the innate gifts of the actor, and that is rooted in actor

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Review

As lead editor of *Black Acting Methods: Critical Approaches*, Sharrell D. Luckett, Ph.D., brings wide-ranging education and experience to the book. Her extensive academic roles at the University of Cincinnati include serving as director of the Helen Weinberger Center for Drama and Playwriting and working as a Drama and Performance Studies professor in the Department of English & Comparative Literature. Additionally, she is an affiliate faculty member in the departments of Africana Studies and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, and she collaborates with the Acting and Musical Theatre concentrations in the College-Conservatory of Music (CCM).

Second editor Tia M. Shaffer holds degrees in Journalism (B.A.), Christian Education (M.A.), and Educational Leadership (Ed.D.) as well as a Theatre Educator Certification. Her past work as author, public school teacher, and church youth ministry director has focused on what she refers to as the transformative power of theatre arts in the lives of participants and viewers.

Following a foreword by Molefi Kete Asante and an introduction by Luckett and Shaffer, the main

chapters of *Black Acting Methods* are written by a series of guest contributors who are teachers, scholars, and practitioners of various aspects of theatre (actors, choreographers, directors, playwrights, artistic directors, etc.). The chapters are then divided into four main sections.

The first, "Methods of Social Activism," explores specific methodologies, including the Hendricks Method, SoulWork, the Medea Project: Theatre for Incarcerated Women, and Rebecca Rice's workshops on Black feminist improvisational theatre.

The second section, "Methods of Intervention," includes chapters on "Seeing Shakespeare through Brown Eyes," "Ritual Poetic Drama within the African Continuum," and an examination of Afrocentric approaches to directing new theatre works.

In the third section, "Methods of Cultural Plurality," chapters present information on "The Hip Hop Theatre Initiative," "Kadogo Mojo" (an Afrocentric approach informed by global customs and practices), and "#UnyieldingTruth: Employing Culturally Relevant Pedagogy."

The last section, "Reflections from Distinguished Practitioners," incorporates advice and best practices from 15 theatre professionals, divided between two chapters: "Rituals, Processes, Methods" and "Words of Wisdom for Actors."

Finally, an appendix offers recommendations in the form of two short lists for acting and performance programs looking to provide more equitable training. The lists address curriculum and performance opportunities as well as suggestions for faculty and cultural awareness.

Just as any history text must be evaluated by which events are highlighted and which are omitted, theatre history and pedagogy texts should be held to the same scrutiny. In this regard, *Black Acting Methods* is a crucial resource. Not only does it provide an honest, more thorough account of the contributions that Black people and culture have made throughout the development of theatrical genres, but it also provides important information regarding appropriate and authentic practices that have been conspicuously absent from traditional theatre education. As such, *Black Acting Methods* serves as a celebration of approaches that have been underrepresented for far too long.



Brian Manternach



Sharrell D. Lockett

The stated mission of The Black Acting Methods Studio is “to offer performance training that uplifts, sustains, foregrounds, and values Black American culture and aesthetics in the artistic process.” What are some of the reactions or primary takeaways of those who have undertaken this training?

Wow. We receive so many compliments and so much gratitude from participants in our many programs. One MFA graduate even said that she learned more about herself in our three-week course than she did throughout her three years in graduate school. So, I think that speaks to the testament of the work that we do.

It’s truly life changing. People from all walks of life study with us. The work that we do is heart-full. It’s real. And it’s rooted in something stronger than us.

Brian Manternach, DM, is an assistant professor at the University of Utah Department of Theatre and a research associate at the Utah Center for Vocology. He is an associate editor of the Journal of Singing and his research, reviews, articles, and essays have appeared in numerous voice-related publications. brianmanternach.com | drbrianmanternach.blogspot.com | bmantern@gmail.com

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creation. The other methods and ideas in the book are particular to those chapter authors. We teach about them in the Studio, but we do not practice them. We practice the Lockett Paradigm in the Studio.

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