

Earle Hyman and Frederick O’Neal: Ideals for the Embodiment of Artistic Truth

by Baron Kelly

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Histories of US theatre have often overlooked the contributions of Black trailblazers as agents of change. Instead of focusing on the knowledge, tradition, sacrifice, and artistry of these pioneers, mainstream histories have emphasized their acts of rebellion in ways that continue to frame their narratives in the context of the dominant white culture. While the “legitimate theatre”^[1] in the United States proved impenetrable to African American artists for many years, the histories of those Black performers who created dynamic careers merit a narrative that transcends their successful “invasion” of that long-forbidden territory. This brief essay explores the legacies of Earle Hyman (1926-2017) and Frederick O’Neal (1905-1992) who represent two shining examples of excellence in a long, and largely unknown historical context in which their long track record of achievements were not recognized or could not be fully acknowledged. Hyman’s career began in the early 1940s and continued well into the twenty-first century, encompassing several significant chapters in American theatre history. His career exemplifies progressive efforts to make the American theatre more culturally diverse and inclusive, to eradicate racial and ethnic stereotypes, and integrate non-white traditions, playwrights, performers, and multicultural audiences. Earle Hyman’s brilliant theatrical career spanned the US and Europe, and he became the first Black actor to play the title roles in four of Shakespeare’s masterpieces: *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, and *King Lear*, along with leading roles in Chekhov, O’Neill, Pinter, Soyinka, Albee, Fugard, Beckett, Hansberry, and Uhry. Hyman’s numerous successes established him as a leading man in the classical repertoire of the Western canon. During the 1940s and 1960s Frederick O’Neal led the way on and off the stage, working as an actor, theatre organizer, and union spokesman, advocating and working tirelessly for the inclusion of African Americans in American theatre. While Hyman was on the stage carving a career on stage in legitimate theatre, Frederick O’Neal, Hyman’s costar in *Anna Lucasta*, promoted the racial integration of American theatre. O’Neal insisted that the Black community and other ethnic groups had the right to act, direct, write, produce, and participate in all aspects of the American theatre. He focused on putting more “color” on Broadway. “I don’t mean in the sense of all-black shows,” he once clarified, “That will take care of itself. What I mean is a real commitment to the integration of the Broadway theatre.”^[2] Both men proved that their “revolutionary acts” of penetrating fields long closed to Black actors were only the *beginning* of their stories. I invite contemporary theatre scholars to return to their legacies and reconsider their impact on this history of Black theatre.

Earle Hyman: Two Ways of Life

In the mid-1950s, the immensely talented and stately African American actor Earle Hyman pushed his way through the closed doors of classical and contemporary theatre, demonstrating artistic versatility in his roles. Almost a century after Ira Aldridge broke barriers in Europe and Russia (Ira Aldridge had crossed the Atlantic in the early 1800s, but had never been permitted to display his talent in America). Hyman became the first African American actor to demonstrate artistic versatility in a range of both

Shakespearean and contemporary roles in legitimate theatre. In the late part of the twentieth century, Hyman's popular appeal came through his work as Russell Huxtable, Bill Cosby's television father, in *The Cosby Show*. However, in the professional theatre world, he was known first and foremost for performance in classic plays, especially his Shakespeare roles.

Hyman's period of prosperity in the 1950s should not be taken as evidence that the status of Black actors had generally improved to any great degree by that time. Before Hyman's successes, two African American theatre artists of exceptional talent, Paul Robeson and Canada Lee, succeeded briefly in forcing the classical theatre doors open with their Broadway performances in *Othello* (1943) and *The Tempest* and *The Duchess of Malfi* (1945, and 1946), respectively. Additionally, some Black actors, including Ruby Dee, Frederick O'Neal, and Frank Silvera, had been cast in roles that were not specifically Black roles, but they were the exceptions, not the rule. Major roles written by white playwrights for Black actors were limited, and Black theatre had been ghettoized in the US.^[3] Writing in the 1960s, author Roy Newquist defined the central challenge faced so many Black actors:

As restrictive as the issue of whether or not the Negro is allowed to act is the problem of what he can act in. Few plays, whether classical or contemporary, include good roles for Negroes. Since audiences are still prone to judge the Negro actor as a Negro first, then as an actor, it is difficult to integrate the cast of a play by casting a Negro in a basically 'white' part. Plays have been written, of course, for all Negro casts, and 'white' plays have been played by all-Negro casts, but the former have been produced frequently enough, and the latter become Negro theater, which is another matter entirely.^[4]

Indeed, Hyman entered a highly segregated world of theatre. Groups like the Actors' Equity Association (formed on 26 May 1913) engaged in constant battles with theatre managers for equal treatment, standard contracts, and basic standard civil rights for actors. Yet, throughout this struggle, they ignored the rights of Black actors. The April 1923 edition of *Equity News*, published by Actors' Equity, defined the union's position toward the Black actor:

Equity's policy has been that when colored performers act in white companies, they come under our jurisdiction and should belong to the AEA, but when they perform in all-colored companies, we don't seek their support because this group of people has many problems of which we know nothing and have at present no way of learning. As we don't wish to take their dues without giving something in return, we have always felt it would be infinitely better if they were to form a colored branch of Equity.^[5]

Equity's policies, while appalling, hardly seem surprising in the midst of the Jim Crow era. They explicitly tie professionalism to whiteness and acceptance in a white-dominated cultural system. Additionally, the language of "We" in the statement signals an entirely white leadership team in Equity, and a refusal to acknowledge Black performers as professional equals.

By the time Hyman began making his mark in the 1950s, African American activists had taken to the streets. Black protests for civil rights surfaced in American theatre as early as the mid-forties. Actors Fredi Washington, Canada Lee, and Paul Robeson attended civil rights rallies fighting for soldiers of

color and their rights. African Americans who had fought for their country during World War II came home with new expectations. In New York, Black theatregoers were allowed to purchase seats anywhere in the theatre in most Broadway houses that earlier had enforced segregated seating policies. Yet attitudes changed slowly among those who controlled the entertainment industry and access to opportunities for Black artists.

In 1956, after becoming the first and only African American actor cast at the American Shakespeare Festival Stratford in Stratford, Connecticut, Hyman achieved another artistic milestone when he secured the lead in, *Mister Johnson*, a stage adaptation of Joyce Cary's novel about colonial days in West Africa. Hyman had previously appeared on Broadway in small roles in *Climate of Eden* (1952) and *No Time for Sergeants* (1955). However, *Mister Johnson* was his first leading role on Broadway since *Anna Lucasta* in 1944 and it offered a chance to exhibit his versatility. In the title role of *Mister Roberts* he portrayed a young Nigerian elevated to clerk's status for the British Government. Langston Hughes and Milton Meltzer summarize the plot as follows:

Having adopted the appellation Mister, Johnson is no longer tribal, but neither is he civilized in the word's conventional sense. Hilariously funny yet sweet happenings occur between his would-be decent employer [Harry Rudbeck] and this Nigerian boy in a backwoods outpost of empire. The two men are friends, but the gulf between them is too great for genuine understanding. In the end, the black boy is sentenced to hang for an unintentional crime. Rather than suffer the noose's public indignity, he begs his white friend (who upholds the sentence) to shoot him. The white does. To paraphrase an old cliché of cowboy and Indian films, 'Another Negro bites the dust.' [6]

Langston Hughes observed that "on Broadway Negro characters do not shoot first. They merely get shot." [7] Despite its critical success, Hyman faced the same problem with *Mister Roberts*. It offers no Black hero and no character remains to carry on the Black character's legacy. Many playwrights of the 1950s framed Black characters as martyrs because those types of figures appeared less threatening to white audiences (and thus more commercially viable). The character of *Mister Johnson* reverted to that old theme stretching back to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*: the innate capacity of Blacks to suffer, especially for white folk.

Although *Mister Johnson* received mixed reviews, the top (white) critics proved unanimous in praise of Hyman's talent. He had accomplished the American actor's dream, "stardom" on Broadway, and a collection of glowing reviews. All the leading white New York critics heralded Hyman's performance. Brooks Atkinson, who had followed Hyman's career from the beginning, wrote: "The leading part is wonderfully well acted by Hyman, a gifted Negro who at last has inherited a Broadway part worthy of his talents. Mr. Hyman is a tall, supple, imaginative actor. ... [He] is superb." [8] Adding to Atkinson's praise, Robert Coleman wrote: "Hyman is magnificent as the well-meaning, essentially honest and irresponsible native trapped between two ways of life. His dreams, accomplishments and eventual destruction are realized with touches that are irresistibly amusing and enormously disturbing. Take our word for it, Hyman is going to win many a prize this season for a truly great performance." [9] And indeed, Hyman received a 1956 Theatre World Award for his performance. *Theatre Arts* declared Hyman the play's "principal onstage asset" [10] and dubbed him, "one of the brightest entries in Broadway's own future outlook." [11] Richard Watts, admitting that the play had challenges, concluded that Hyman's performance minimized these failings: "Mr. Hyman, in a part that dominates the evening and appears in

virtually every scene, gives a beautiful performance, which is at the same time warmly humorous and has the quality of tragic dignity. *Mister Johnson* certainly has frailties, but Mr. Hyman's characterization is so moving and real that they seem comparatively unimportant." [12] John Chapman of the *New York Daily News* wrote: "It is, mostly, Hyman's play, for the role is a long and hard one-and Hyman doesn't falter. This is good acting." [13] Other critics were equally impressed by Hyman's presence and ability to capture the audience. John McClain stated, "The evening is almost entirely Hyman's. Hyman dominates the stage and sustains you until the final curtain falls on his flattened figure." [14] The *New York Herald Tribune's* Walter Kerr wrote: In actor Hyman's hands, *Mister Johnson* is sunny, ingratiating, and strangely touching throughout the play. Mr. Hyman has an enormous emotional range." [15] Hyman was a handsome and extremely tall light-skinned Black man. He played to exclusively white audiences in the theatre bringing an exoticized and visceral truth to the stage that had not been seen before. [16] Hyman would later describe *Mister Johnson* as one of the high points of his career. But even Hyman's newly acquired "star status" did not guarantee *Mister Johnson* an extended run. Unfortunately, the lines did not form in front of the box-office, and the show closed after 44 performances. "Broadway was just not ready for *Mister Johnson*," observed Helen Martin. "It hit too close to home. The average American audience, composed of middle-class whites, was not open to the idea of seeing injustices perpetrated by them presented on the Broadway stage." [17] Echoing Helen Martin, Loften Mitchell observed, "The author had good intentions, but the mark of the handkerchief was on Mr. Johnson's head and Negroes did not like it." [18] An interesting commentary was the fact that director Robert Lewis never understood why they didn't. He lamented that Negro groups had not booked theatre parties for the show. [19]

Mister Johnson's Broadway fate offers one example of how Hyman both exceeded expectations for Black actors of his time but still had his success stymied by racism in the commercial mainstream US theatre. Like his character of Mister Roberts, Hyman found himself "trapped between two ways of life" – one in the mainstream white theatre that relegated him to certain types of roles, and one in the emerging Black American theatre. Once Hyman launched his career in Europe, he found himself able to move into the types of roles that shifted him away from the limited opportunities available in US theatre.

Frederick O'Neal: A Real Commitment

While Hyman carved a career on the "legitimate" stage in the US and Europe, Frederick O'Neal, Hyman's costar in *Anna Lucasta*, promoted the racial integration of American theatre. O'Neal insisted that the Black community and other ethnic groups had the right to act, direct, write, produce, and participate in all aspects of the American theatre. He focused on putting more "color" on Broadway. "I don't mean in the sense of all-black shows," he once clarified, "That will take care of itself. What I mean is a real commitment to the integration of the Broadway theatre." [20]

O'Neal's advocacy for Black actors started with his union involvement. The January 1944 edition of *Equity* magazine published an editorial entitled, "No Color Line." Twenty-one years after AEA had claimed its leaders had, "no way of learning" about the "many problems" faced by "colored performers," the organization seemed ready to reconsider some of its earlier policies. The editorial, "No Color Line," lauded *Equity* for ignoring the color line when it needed Black actors in white shows:

Equity adopted the policy thirty years ago when it was neither particularly expedient nor likely to obtain for it any commendation, but simply a matter of right and justice and good sense for a theatre which needed Negro actors and has benefited by their appearance. It still might be a good

idea for a lot of other organizations to approach the problem of Negro members from the same angle and in the same spirit.[\[21\]](#)

Frederick O'Neal decided to tackle the "problem" of Negro members when he joined AEA later that same year. In 1944, O'Neal chaired the Hotel Accommodations Committee. This committee addressed the difficulties facing AEA members on the road, especially minority members. No group of members was more deeply and adversely affected by not being able to secure lodging than Black performers who would have to undertake the discouraging and sometimes humiliating task of finding accommodations for themselves, however poor or inconvenient the accommodations might be. The committee and the AEA took steps to address this problem "[urging] the League of New York Theatre, the Association of Theatrical Agents and Managers, local house managers, and even the national Travelers Aid Society to make special efforts to provide adequate accommodations for minority performers on tour."[\[22\]](#)

From O'Neal's point of view, finding accommodations for minority performers on the road was only part of the problem. There needed to be more "color" in the audiences as well. But how could this become a reality when many theatres remained segregated? For example, in Washington, D.C. blacks were permitted to perform on the stage of the National Theatre, but their relatives and friends could not come to see them. Equity had been aware of this situation but felt little motivation to do anything about it until after World War II.[\[23\]](#) As a member of the Negotiating Committee of 1947, O'Neal helped to formulate the agreement with the League of New York Theatres which stated that beginning on June 1, 1948, "the actor shall not be required to perform at any theatre in Washington, D.C., where discrimination is practiced against any actor or patron of the theatre by reason of his race, color or creed."[\[24\]](#)

In the June 1952 edition of *Equity News*, O'Neal wrote an article entitled "Integration." He pointed out that theatre and all other forms of American entertainment were among the most powerful and influential medium of communication and education. Therefore, it was increasingly important that the role of the "Negro" citizen be adequately and accurately portrayed to reflect his/her significant presence in American society.[\[25\]](#) "In confirmation of the realities of the American scene today," he wrote, "we urge the portrayal of the Negro as a more general part of the scheme of our society, for example, as postmen, doctors and teachers, without the necessity of emphasis on race."[\[26\]](#) He stressed that in the recent past:

A well-intentioned but ill-directed sensitivity to this problem [of racial stereotypes] has worked inadvertent harm to the Negro artist. Apprehensive of doing injustice to the Negro citizens and offending humanity, writers and producers have tended to completely eliminate the Negro in comedy and servant roles. This policy, wellmeant though it may be, is unrealistic and has seriously curtailed the employment of the Negro artist.[\[27\]](#)

O'Neal's faith in his fellow Equity members and his belief that integration could solve the racial problems in the theatre culminated in a practical display of "mixed casting." With O'Neal as chair, the Equity Committee on Negro Integration, presented a two-hour program of scenes entitled "Integration Showcase 1959." The impressive cast of "Integration Showcase" included Ralph Bellamy (then AEA's president); Robert Preston, star of *The Music Man*; Geraldine Page, star of *Sweet Bird of Youth*; as well as many prominent Black performers, including Louis Gossett, Ossie Davis, and Diahann Carroll.

The producers of "Integration Showcase" did not "seek a forum to demand the indiscriminate casting of African Americans in roles where audience credibility would be strained," but "wanted merely to prove that more black actors could and should be cast in roles which are at present denied them arbitrarily." The producer of the "Integration Showcase," Windsor Lewis, stated, "the aim is to stimulate the imagination of writers, directors, and producers in every field of the entertainment world down to the level of community and amateur theaters."^[28] O'Neal added, "The point of the show is to show how the Negro actor can be used in 'other than Negro roles'-without disturbing the artistic intent of the play. In the so-called non-designated role we see no reason why we can't have a Negro."^[29] The star-studded event was presented to an invited audience of 1,500 actors, directors, agents, producers, and other theatre personnel connected with casting. It had taken two years for Actors' Equity to assemble all the players in New York City at the same time.

The theme expressed in the 1959 Integration Showcase, "We see no reason why we can't have a Negro," has echoed in the outcries of the '80s and '90s and among those who have thrust "non-traditional casting" into the limelight. In a 1992 collection of interviews with actors to determine the effect of non-traditional casting on their lives, one young actor, Mary Lee, translated O'Neal's goals into the jargon of the '90s saying: "We can cut through much p.c. rhetoric in casting if we simply ask of any role: Is race (age, gender, physical ability) germane: if yes, simply cast it so. If no, give all actors an equal opportunity."^[30]

While O'Neal maintained that caricatures and stereotypes should always be censured, he denied that there was anything denigrating about comic or servant roles if they were included as a part of American life. On the other hand, when Blacks were presented *exclusively* in such roles, it distorted their representation and impeded any attempts at integration. Again, Mary Lee's argument echoes O'Neal's, but brings his argument into more contemporary conversations:

Sometimes the roles are stereotyped as written, sometimes not. Sometimes roles that have depth and dimension are directed as stereotypes. This is especially true for culturally specific roles. When there are more ethnically-specific lead roles out there that command our attention and respect, there will be much more respect for non-white actors in all roles, traditional or not.^[31]

O'Neal was a man of even temperament, who had experienced the pain of the racial divide, but believed, ideally, in an integrated society and fairness. He fought tirelessly for Black actors to be engaged for roles not racially designated.

Conclusion

The cultural politics of casting, access, and representation continues in the twenty-first century (most recently in the 2019 volume, *Casting a Movement*). In her 2010 study, *Passing Strange*, Ayanna Thompson pondered the slowness of contemporary theatre to become truly multicultural. Thompson argues that even though directors as early as Orson Welles or Joseph Papp employed color-conscious casting, the mission of countering whiteness through intentional casting against color is still seen as a challenge, and as a new idea.^[32] She probes the inconsistencies in contemporary casting practices. Although most regional Shakespeare festivals profess to be multicultural, their actual practices can be divided into four categories: (1) colorblind casting, assigning actors of color according to ability without

regard to race; (2) societal casting, assigning actors of color to roles that were originally written for white actors; (3) conceptual casting, assigning actors of color to roles that will enhance the play's social resonance; (4) cross cultural casting, moving the play's milieu to a different location or culture.[\[33\]](#)

Black theatre artists in twenty-first century America have evolved from a sense of pride, struggle, history, and achievement from those like Hyman and O'Neal who found numerous ways to surmount obstacles set before them. Their resistance to racism and their unrelenting demands for *equity* in access and representation wrought significant changes in US theatre. Hyman and O'Neal stand as examples of those who led the way with their artistry, integrity, talent, and intelligence bringing honor to the profession. Their stories defy the familiar, mainstream narratives of Black artists to illustrate that Black performers could offer layered and complex characters in any setting. Interestingly, Hyman never described the characters he played as "white" characters. He described them as aggressive, frustrated, loving, victimized, etc. He brought his experiences to his characters and wove those experiences into the given circumstances. Similarly, O'Neal remained adamant that performers should not be confined to certain roles based on color. For O'Neal, acting meant revealing the inner worlds of the *characters* rather than commenting on the circumstances of the performers.

Reclaiming O'Neal's and Hyman's unique perspectives on the role of the Black performer illuminates an era in US theatre history when Black actors struggled to establish both equity *and* equality in casting practices. Both men serve as vital links connecting African American trailblazing ancestors of past years when only a select few were able to walk in the corridors of legitimate theatres, to the stars of the present day as they usher in a new era in the American theatre.

Baron Kelly is a four-time Fulbright Scholar and a Professor in Theatre and Drama at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Currently, he serves on the boards of the Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare and Social Justice Series Editorial Advisory Board, the Harold Pinter Review, Comparative Drama Conference, Stanislavsky Institute, and the American Society for Research's Executive Committee. In addition, he serves on the Fulbright Review Panel and is a member of the National Theatre Conference. Acting assignments include Broadway; Royal National Theatre of Great Britain; Stratford Shakespeare Festival of Canada; Edinburgh Theatre Festival. Performances for over 30 of America's resident theatres including the Oregon Utah, and California Shakespeare Festivals; The Guthrie; Yale Rep; Mark Taper Forum; Old Globe San Diego; Shakespeare Theatre Company, Washington, D.C.; Actors Theatre of Louisville; among others. His teaching of acting has led him to more than a dozen countries on five continents and in 20 American states.

[\[1\]](#) The term "legitimate theatre" refers to serious drama and classical theatre work including classical comedy. It simply indicates a divide, supposedly implying that art and mere entertainment are somehow in separate camps.

[\[2\]](#) Loftin Mitchell, *Voices of the Black Theatre* (New Jersey: James T. White, 1975), 181.

[\[3\]](#) Sluts . . . slaves . . . servants . . . salt-of-the-earth southern were the stultifying stereotypical s's. These

were the roles available to black actors at the time. Most were written in some white writer's ersatz pidgin-English version of dialect. When the theatre world would be graced by the illuminating hands of August Wilson, the spoken rhythms of the Black rural poor would be perceived as folk music and take their place beside the lilting Irish brogue of Sean O'Casey and the Welsh inflected rhythms of Dylan Thomas.

[4] Roy Newquist, *A Special Kind of Magic* (New York: Rand MacNally & Co., 1967), 113-114.

[5] *Equity News* (April, 1923), 16.

[6] Langston Hughes and Milton Meltzer, *Black Magic: A Pictorial History of the Negro in American Entertainment* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1967), 125.

[7] Langston Hughes, "The Negro and American Entertainment," in *The American Negro Reference Book*, ed. John P. Davis (New York: Educational Heritage, Inc., 1966), 820.

[8] Brooks Atkinson, "Mister Johnson," *New York Times Theatre Reviews*, 31 March 1956.

[9] Robert Coleman. "Mister Johnson is Superbly Acted," *New York Theatre Critics' Reviews*, 1 April 1956.

[10] *Theatre Arts* 15 (June 1956): 16.

[11] *Theatre*, 16.

[12] Richard Watts Jr, "Portrait of a Man of Good Will," *New York Theatre Critics' Reviews*, 31 March 1956.

[13] John Chapman, "Mister Johnson is a Touching Play," *New York Theatre Critics' Reviews*, 31 March 1956.

[14] John McClain, "A Real Hit? May Well Be," *New York Theatre Critics' Reviews*, 30 March 1956.

[15] Walter Kerr, "Mister Johnson," *New York Theatre Critics' Reviews*, 30 March 1956.

[16] Gifted Black actresses such as Hilda Simms, Jane White, and Janice Kingslow had suffered brutally stunted careers in which, as light-skinned Black females, they had been considered uncastable in white roles because they looked too much like white.

[17] Helen Martin, personal interview in her home 12 June 1996.

[18] Loften Mitchell, *Voices of the Black Theatre* (New Jersey: James T. White, 1975), 181.

[19] Mitchell, 181.

[20] Mitchell, 181.

- [21] *Equity News* (January 1944), 58-60.
- [22] *Equity News* (January 1944), 58-60.
- [23] *Equity News* (April 1960), 14.
- [24] *Equity News* (April 1960), 14.
- [25] *Equity News* (June, 1952), 19.
- [26] *Equity News* (April 1960), 14.
- [27] *Equity News* (April 1960), 14.
- [28] Windsor Lewis, quoted in "Integration Showcase," *Ebony* 14, no.10 (August 1959), 73.
- [29] Frederick O'Neal, quoted in "Integration Showcase," 73.
- [30] Mary Lee, *New Traditions* (New York: New Traditions,1992), 3.
- [31] Lee, 3.
- [32] Ayanna Thompson, *Passing Strange* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 99.
- [33] Thompson, 76.

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