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1 Building Character

Alfred Hitchcock said that 75 percent of directing was casting. What he meant was that if the director gets the right actors in place, the majority of the storytelling work is done. Imagine, for example, if instead of casting Anthony Perkins in *Psycho* (1960) and James Stewart in *Rear Window* (1954), he reversed them. Both actors were white men of a certain age and both were clearly talented enough to be cast by Hitchcock. Stewart, however, as Norman Bates might have evoked George Bailey from *It's A Wonderful Life* (1946) for viewers, making him less mysterious and threatening. Just what does it mean to find the right actors and how do you know what makes one right and the other wrong? Casting, I argue, is not about mimesis or talent – though they may play a role in the decision; it's about creating a character at the intersection of the stimuli that get linked together when this actor walks on to play this role. Norman Bates is an idea; Perkins as Bates is a character.

Casting is how we build characters – this body, this actor, this text, this story, right now. Casting is how spectators can tell the difference between, say, Hamlet and Horatio. Making sense of the plot in a Shakespeare play can be difficult for audiences viewing contemporary productions; casting – particularly when directors cast celebrities – allows for spectators to quickly and efficiently accomplish the cognitive task of building a character where Ruth Negga and the text of *Hamlet* meet. What we know about the celebrity will help us anticipate the story we will see. Based upon what I know about Benedict Cumberbatch or Mel Gibson or Ruth Negga, I will expect a different production of *Hamlet*. Of course, spectators at Shakespeare's Globe had expectations for the character to be played by Richard Burbage or Robert Armin, too. But in a production of Shakespeare for contemporary audiences, casting is even more important, as most spectators do not bring to the story the same kind of character and story familiarity as an early modern audience would. Today, spectators may not walk into the theater with a wealth of information about Henry V or predictions about Malvolio based on his name, but when they know that Henry V will be played by Tom Hiddleston and Malvolio will be played by, say, David Hyde Pierce, they have a scaffold on which to make sense of the story.

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Directors use casting to comment on the plays and the world surrounding the production; casting is never politically or ideologically neutral, as Claire Syler reminds us (Syler, 2019: 3). While this has always been true to an extent, I will focus on the casting in productions of Shakespeare from 2017 to 2020 to demonstrate how casting functions to move us to see things differently, to literally change our minds about who can be what and what can be. An actor walks onstage to play Beatrice, for example, in *Much Ado about Nothing* and, even before she opens her mouth, we are making judgments about what kind of Beatrice this is, what kind of love story, based on the actor. We may wonder to what extent the actor's race or gender or body type will be relevant (and in what way), but we see it. Directors can use casting to reflect the world we live in – so there will be a variety of different kinds of bodies onstage, just like in most of our lives. Or the director can cast a body counter to our expectations in such a way that we are invited to challenge our categories for ruler, lover, villain. I will discuss what I call *counter casting*, where bodies are used by the director against type to change our minds, to stretch and alter our categories. In productions of Shakespeare today, the casting of the actors is like the design revolution of Robert Edmond Jones a hundred years ago:[1] directors are using the bodies of the actors to tell us how we are to understand this old story now. I will examine the casting and staging of key contemporary productions of Shakespeare to argue that through these counter castings we can see the future we are grappling with, a future that's paradoxically hyper-attentive to the body while destabilizing the categories of race/ethnicity, gender, and even the idea of the self. These productions of Shakespeare are using casting to tell the future.

The future we are being shown, I believe, is one where the ecosystem and the group matter more than the individual. Hamlet's question about how the actor could feel for Hecuba remains crucial: How and why do we access real emotions about fictional people? Humans are really good at running scenarios about future events; we can imagine what will happen if

[1] Robert Edmond Jones is credited with integrating conceptual ideas of the play into the production design. Prior to this, the set might be practical or aesthetic, but it was not thought to contain thematic or artistic meaning.

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the toddler follows the ball into the busy street or if we finally get that big promotion. It turns out, though, that we are not very good about predicting how we will feel in those situations. According to studies by psychologists Daniel T. Gilbert and Timothy D. Wilson, people tend "to overestimate the initial impact and/or duration of an emotional event" (Wilson & Gilbert 2013, 740). We think we will be happier and for a longer time if, say, our team wins the big game. Gilbert and Wilson suggest this hinders our ability to make smart decisions because we fail to accurately match past emotional experiences with potential future experiences and we think pleasure and pain will be greater than they actually are. Although thinking and feeling are often separated – as if one can think "clearly" without emotions or that emotions can "cloud" our thinking – they are inseparable. Our thinking about the future – our ability to see the trajectory of climate change or the future of democracy – evokes and requires feelings. Theater gives us a place to feel and imagine what the future might look; it allows us to live in the future. The future that directors are putting on stages today give us practice feeling the joy, the discomfort, the pathos, the surprise, of different bodies telling stories differently. These experiences might allow us to titrate our vision, our reactions, to the future because we have experiences that match. We are facing a future of ecological and social change; to face it, we need to change our metaphors and recast ourselves, our allies, and our stories.

Sometimes you have to go back to move forward.

1.1 Some Groundwork: Casting Is a Cognitive Process

Casting is a creative task of a director, but I also use the term to think about the process by which each of us organize and schematize information about the people on stage and all around us. The man in the coat becomes the doctor, the woman with the ruler becomes the teacher, and once these individuals are categorized – cast in a role – we can quickly make sense of how to interact with them.[2] Casting involves a process of compression,

[2] For a thorough discussion of the research in cognitive science that I draw on to make this argument, I refer the reader to *Building Character*. I argue there that casting is the process of creating characters at the intersection of stimuli and that it

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efficiency, power, and complexity that is similar to the cognitive process involved in face recognition and our ability to look at a map and understand it as standing in for the place we are trying to navigate. How a play or film is cast shapes the thinking that is possible with and through that story in the same way that the degree to which we recognize a person's face influences the behavior called for by an interaction with that face. I'm fascinated by how we create characters and how we work through fiction to make sense of what we don't yet understand. My larger claim is that casting is part of how we stage who we are and who we can be. I talk about casting as a cognitive process – a way of categorizing and responding to the world around us – and I integrate theories of embodied and distributed cognition to make sense of how we process bodies in performance.

To suggest that casting is a cognitive process and that it is affectively and cognitively powerful is not to suggest that it is complicated, time-consuming, or specialized. The popularity of memes provides an excellent example of my meaning here. The "distracted boyfriend meme," wherein a man walking with his girlfriend is ogling another woman walking in the other direction, takes an instantly recognizable scenario with three clear characters and allows users to "cast" others into the role of the ogling boyfriend or a possible new girl. It's not necessary to "cast" people in these roles; in one version I saw, the boyfriend was labeled "me" and the girlfriend was labeled "productivity." The meme made it into the *New York Times* because it so quickly and efficiently was able to communicate what was going on between three car companies. On the front page of the business section on May 29, 2019, the *Times* illustrated their story about the imminent merger between Fiat Chrysler and Renault by casting the distracted boyfriend as Renault, the girlfriend upset at his ogling as Nissan, and the girl he's ogling as Fiat Chrysler. Without reading the article, I can guess what's going on by how

functions as a cognitive shorthand: "Though done most visibly by casting directors, all of us create characters by connecting bodies with roles. Characters, then, are a by-product of a cognitive system that can cast people. In this way, all characters are fictional" (Cook, 2018, 32). Here I will intentionally limit the theoretical scaffolding in order to focus on the performances under discussion.

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the *Times* had cast these companies as the characters. Here's what the *Times* says in the article about the merger:

> If Jean-Dominique Senard, the chairman of Renault, can hold together the alliance while also merging with Fiat Chrysler, the combined entity would dominate the planet. . . . [Hiroto Saikawa, Nissan's chief executive] reacted warily to the proposed merger with Fiat Chrysler, which he learned about only days before it was announced. . . . Mr. Saikawa said that the merger could ultimately be beneficial, but that he needed "to closely examine it from Nissan's perspective." (Jack Ewing, Neal E. Boudette, & Ben Dooley, 2019: B1)

The car makers' situation both is and is not like the distracted boyfriend picture, but what the casting in the meme does successfully communicate is important enough to override the potential confusion it might bring to readers.

Readers did not think that Renault and Nissan had become boyfriend and girlfriend or that they were human or that one was male and the other female. On the other hand, where the text explains that Renault is hoping to have a relationship with Fiat Chrysler while maintaining its relationship with Nissan, that information is decidedly not in the meme. The meme suggests that the boyfriend might leave the girlfriend for the other but does not suggest that there's a possibility of his having both at the same time. This doesn't confuse readers either. The meme works because it swiftly communicates an emotional story on top of a business arrangement. It insists that the problem with the proposed merger is the likely emotional reaction Nissan might have to Renault's new merger. The meme also casts Renault's interest in physical and emotional terms: Renault as the "distracted boyfriend" turns, unable to stop itself, to look at an alternate possible future. To make sense of all this requires a complicated network of conceptual associations as well as emotions. Seeing our cognitive work in processing this meme allows us to understand how casting can be a tool to think with: tell me who plays the boyfriend, the girlfriend, and the ogled woman, and I will make new sense of a novel situation. Once I've learned

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the game, I can adapt it and use it for other things. Casting can be a powerful cognitive tool.

A performance speaks to us not just through our physical and emotional experience as an audience but also how we are "staged" or "cast" as spectators. As Evelyn Tribble brilliantly argues in *Cognition in the Globe* (2011) and Bruce Smith argues in *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England* (1999), the environment is critical to our thinking. This is usually called *distributed cognition*, and it is the theory that what we call "thinking" is a process that is spread out over the environment we are in. As Edwin Hutchins famously articulated in his *Cognition in the Wild* (1995), navigating a ship is a cognitive event that happens at the intersection of the captain, the crew, the layout of the control panel, and the ocean. Tribble points out that the cognitive feat of early modern actors being able to perform a rotating series of plays without much (or any) rehearsal is not due to the brilliance of the individuals, but of the system they are in, a system that includes the plots, the iambic pentameter, the props, the practice of acting apprenticeship, and the conventions of staging. When Richard Wagner designed Bayreuth with its hidden orchestra and fanned-out seats, he was affording his audience an experience of performance that was different from the one had in theaters created to facilitate spectators' views of each other. The small, intimate black-box theaters of the mid-twentieth century, on the other hand, were built to ensure focus on the faces of the actors in order to perceive the characters' "internal psychology." When actors in today's Shakespeare's Globe Theatre use the groundlings as confidants, rubes, foils, and props, the spectators understand the play in relation to this experience of being brought in on the joke. This isn't how all Shakespeare productions cast the audience, however, despite the ways that the scripts presume such a setting, but many contemporary productions of Shakespeare explicitly and critically cast the audience in a way central to the thematic content.

Recent theatrical experiences have required spectators to engage with the environment – not to make meaning but in order for us to enact an experience. Campbell Edinborough's book *Theatrical Reality* seriously considers the embodied spectator, embedded in space, and the role she plays in constructing the theatrical experience. Many of the performances he discusses rely on a staging, a placing, of the spectator into the experience.

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This kind of performance puts the spectator into the scenic reality and strains and stretches the conventions of performer, author, and spectator. Edinborough analyzes an experience he had at a performance wherein a character reached out to hold his hand, and he suddenly felt himself both in and out of the drama: "As the actress held my hand, I wondered who I was supposed to be, which made me wonder who her character thought I was" (2016: 127). This "corporeal alienation" made it difficult for him to distinguish between theatrical reality and his own reality. What Edinborough does not discuss (but is my interest here) is what the cognitive/conceptual work of theatrical productions might be that stages the audience differently. If I am brought to my seat by an usher and told to turn my phone off and unwrap my candy and sit quietly in the dark when the play begins, I have been staged as part of the performance. My role has been cast: "Sit here; watch there." I may, like Claudius in *Hamlet*, imagine a relationship between what's on stage and my own life ("I also killed my brother"), but the two are separated by distance, darkness, and the "fourth wall." When theater companies disrupt this reception relationship, spectators need to challenge their interpretive protocols.

To be "cast" as a spectator may mean actually being given a role, as spectators were for Phyllida Lloyd's trilogy of all-female Shakespeare set in prison. Originally for the Donmar Warehouse in London, Lloyds' productions came to St. Ann's Warehouse in New York City.[3] In *Julius Caesar* (2012), *Henry IV, Part 1* (2014), and *The Tempest* (2016), the audience was marched into the "prison" under guard. Lloyd used the impact of the gates, the yelling, the dehumanizing cattle prodding of the entry to *Julius Caesar* to start the play by evoking the experience of threat, of restriction, of oppression. During the assassination, we are made to feel the threat of the conspirators from Caesar's perspective because the actor playing Caesar (Frances Barber) took the seat of an audience member in the front row. He is one of us, and we may be as vulnerable as he is. As Laura Seymour points out, this invites us to see and question our perspective:

[3] More information and clips from the productions are available here: https://shakespeare-trilogy.donmarwarehouse.com/ The entire trilogy is available for free for teachers and students at UK schools.

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> Occasionally turning round to address her lines to audience-members in a manner that suggested she expected sympathy and support from them, Barber consolidated this relationship and identification between Caesar and the audience. Simultaneously, via a camera trained on Barber's face, an image of Caesar's threatening countenance was shown on television screens positioned high up on either side of the stage. Thus, as well as experiencing Caesar's viewpoint of the conspirators as they knelt and looked up at him, the spectators could see Caesar's face looking down on them, as if they were in the conspirators' position. (Seymour, 2016: 51)

Playing the part of fellow prisoners, the spectators are invited to think about their perspective in their interpretations of the killing. With our attention drawn to our perspective – by shifting it, documenting it, challenging it – we wonder whose side are we on. Should Caesar have been killed? What is the environment, the situation, in which such a killing is necessary or inevitable?

Contemporary productions of Shakespeare sometimes cast spectators not by giving them a role within the play but rather a set of physical conditions through which to watch it. If, as philosopher Evan Thompson explains, the mind is "an embodied dynamic system in the world," not a "neural network in the head," our world is one we are trained to interact with in order to understand. Our environment is not background information; it is central to cognition. That is to say, according to Thompson, that "cognition unfolds as the continuous coevolution of acting, perceiving, imagining, feeling, and thinking" (Thompson, 2007: 10–11). This is the experience I had watching dreamthinkspeak's *The Rest Is Silence* in London in 2012. Staged in an empty warehouse space with the audience free to move about, watching scenes unfold in large window-spaces on the four walls around us, *The Rest Is Silence* connected my physical experience of navigating the story-consuming process with the nature of the story they were trying to tell. Flowing through the audience space, composing the story of *Hamlet* from the compressed and extended and overlapping scenes, I experienced the dispersion of cause, effect, agents, and intention; I was

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plugged into the network of beings that make up this cognitive event. *Hamlet* happens in the spectators' movement, in the rehearsal and performance of found text, in the shifting of perspectives, and in the redesignation of space.[4] In this case, performing the role of the audience meant moving and making choices with and through my body. I was cast to experience the play via my role as roving spectator – that was necessary to make sense of the production. Understanding cognition as embodied shifts what we can see and the questions we ask.

1.2 The Bodies in Shakespeare: Bodies Matter

The "casting director" is a very recent invention; Shakespeare did not cast his plays so much as write them for the bodies he had. As others have pointed out, his "clown" characters changed in 1599, when Will Kempe left the company and Robert Armin joined the company.[5] Writing *Hamlet* for Lord Chamberlain's Men meant writing Hamlet for Richard Burbage. Shakespeare's casting reality changed his text; as Paul Menzer reminds us, "Rosalind is not tall because the texts says so, the text says so because Rosalind is tall – at least the boy playing her was" (Menzer, 2013: 143). Shakespeare knew the actors, knew what they were capable of, what they had played before, and what the audience would anticipate about the story through reference to the actor. When Kemp entered as Dogberry in Act three of *Much Ado*, the audience would not need to wait until something funny happened to know it would be funny. Editor Harold Jenkins (1982) notes in the Arden *Hamlet* that the original actors of Hamlet and Polonius probably played Brutus and Caesar in the 1599 production of *Julius Caesar*, so when Burbage's Hamlet interacted with the Polonius that was his Caesar, audiences might have seen two plays at the same time, in a kind of character palimpsest. Shakespeare did not need to call attention to this, but he did, having Hamlet ask Polonius about his acting past before the Mousetrap. Polonius reports, "I did enact Julius Caesar. I was killed i'th' Capitol. Brutus killed me," and Hamlet responds, "It was a brute part of him to kill so capital a calf there" (3.2.101–4). In a kind of intertextual apology and/or

[4] For more on this performance, see Cook (2015).
[5] See, for example, Tiffany Stern (2004: 26).

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ribbing, Hamlet/Brutus and Polonius/Caesar are all onstage together because the bodies cast to play the characters are made visible (to some) in the intertextuality.

The plays also often display the actors' bodies underneath the characters. In the badinage before the Mousetrap, Shakespeare provides a couple of metatheatrical moments to point out the actors playing Shakespeare's characters. After trading swipes with Claudius, Hamlet turns on Ophelia to suggest that he might lie in her lap. When she says no, Hamlet attempts to spin his request as nonsexual, but then says, "Do you think I meant country matters?" Primed by the discussion of her lap, an Elizabethan audience would hear the slang term for female genitalia in the first syllable of "country." Perhaps trying to change the conversation, which is occurring in front of the king, from the topic of her genitals, Ophelia says, "I think nothing, my lord," to which Hamlet replies, "That's a fair thought to lie between maids' legs"; when Ophelia falls for it and asks, "What is, my lord?," Hamlet replies, "Nothing" (3.2.116–21). This nothing, the lack of a penis thing, that lies between maids' legs, completes Shakespeare's peekaboo, undressing poor Ophelia. Played by a boy player, of course, Ophelia does have something between her legs and the audience gets to imaginatively "see" the missing thing of the character together with the thing of the actor.[6]

Though critics disagree about the degree to which audiences "forgot" they were watching boys play women, I find it far more interesting to imagine it fluidly, that sometimes the character had nothing between his or her legs and then at other times he had something. Anthony Dawson notes that a spectator writing about a male Desdemona wrote about the brilliance of the acting in which "she" seemed to "implore" in death. This critic is watching both: a dead female character and a male actor seeming to implore while pretending to be dead (Dawson, 1996; 35). Carol Chillington Rutter believes it was an "unremarkable" stage convention:

> The English stage didn't 'take' boys for women any more than it "took" commoners for aristocrats or Richard

[6] For more on this, see Cook, 2006.

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