Miscast

MISCAST

Who Owns the Story on Stage?

David Boles

David Boles Books Writing & Publishing

New York

Copyright © 2026 by David Boles

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

Published by David Boles Books Writing & Publishing
New York, New York
BolesBooks.com

First Edition

For August Wilson, who said it first, and for every playwright who has ever been told that characters are not sacred.

They are.

I am what is here, and what is here to say.

August Wilson, “The Ground on Which I Stand,” 1996

Any production of Endgame which ignores my stage directions is completely unacceptable to me.

Samuel Beckett, program statement for the American Repertory Theatre production, 1984

Contents

Author’s Note 1

I History and Theory 5

Chapter 1: The All-Male Stage 7

Chapter 2: Blackface, Minstrelsy, and the Racial Canvas . . . 25

Chapter 3: The Non-Traditional Casting Project and Its Evolution 47

Chapter 4: Samuel Beckett and the Playwright’s Moral Right . 65

II Case Studies 83

Chapter 5: August Wilson and “The Ground on Which I Stand” 85

Chapter 6: Hamilton, 1776, and the Color-Conscious Experiment 101

Chapter 7: The Miracle Worker and the Authenticity Trap . . . 119

Chapter 8: The Lion King, the Interpreter, and the Conduit Problem 137

Chapter 9: Oklahoma!, Ali Stroker, and the Body on Stage . . 155

Chapter 10: O’Neill’s Irish Family and the Ethnic Anchor . . . 169

Chapter 11: The Columbia Anecdote and the Director’s Theatre 183

III The Argument 203

Chapter 12: The Dramatists Guild Inclusion Rider 205

Chapter 13: Who Decides? 227

Chapter 14: What Is Lost, What Is Found 247

Glossary of Key Terms 263

Plays and Productions Discussed 271

Timeline of Key Events 275

Sources Referenced by Chapter 281

Acknowledgments 293

About the Author 295

Author’s Note

This book argues that the playwright decides who inhabits the characters the playwright has created. That argument will be mistaken, by some readers, for an argument against inclusion. It is not. It is an argument for authorship.

I am a member of the Dramatists Guild, member number 45010, enrolled on July 2, 1984, at the urging of my freshman playwriting teacher at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, who had read the first one-act play I ever wrote and told me to join the Guild immediately. I have paid my dues without interruption for more than forty years. I am also a member of the Authors Guild and PEN America. I hold an MFA from Columbia University. I have written for the stage, for television, and for publication for more than four decades. I have taught dramatic writing and directed my own work. I founded The United Stage on the principle that the playwright has the right to direct the first public performance of the playwright’s own play. Every professional commitment I have made has been organized around the conviction that the person who creates a work of dramatic literature is the person who controls it.

This book examines the history, practice, and ideology of non-traditional casting in the American theatre. It traces the practice from the all-male stages of Shakespeare’s era through the blackface minstrelsy of the nineteenth century, the founding of the Non-Traditional Casting Project in 1986, and the contemporary institutional mechanisms that now govern who is permitted to play whom on the American stage. Along the way, it examines specific case studies: Samuel Beckett's refusal to allow directorial alteration of his stage directions, August Wilson's 1996 declaration that Black plays require Black actors, the casting of "Hamilton" and the 2022 revival of "1776," the debate over who should play Helen Keller, the removal of a white ASL interpreter from "The Lion King" because the actors on stage were Black, Ali Stroker's Tony-winning performance in "Oklahoma!," and the cultural architecture of Eugene O'Neill's Irish families. It examines the Dramatists Guild's 2021 Inclusion Rider, the first contract addendum in theatre history that asks playwrights to redirect their copyright authority toward institutional demographic objectives.

The book also includes a personal story. I am a playwright who cancelled a production of my own play at Columbia University rather than allow a director to split a single character into bipolar twins under the banner of non-traditional casting. That anecdote appears in Chapter 11. I include it not because it is the most dramatic story in the book but because it is the most honest one. I was there. I made the choice. I bear the consequences and the responsibility.

Throughout this book, I quote from published speeches, legal documents, interviews, court filings, organizational communications, and critical commentary. All quotations are attributed. Where I have relied on reporting by news organizations or criticism by published reviewers, I have identified the source. Where I have drawn on my own experience, I have said so. The sources referenced at the end of this book represent the documentary foundation of the argument.

I have tried to be fair. I have tried to acknowledge the legitimate grievances that gave rise to the non-traditional casting movement and the genuine achievements that the movement has produced. I have also tried to be honest about what I believe the movement has cost the American theatre and the American playwright. Fairness and honesty are not the same thing, and where they conflict in this book, I have chosen honesty.

The argument comes down to this: the playwright creates the characters, the playwright determines what the characters are, and no institution has the right to override that determination. When the playwright chooses to cast non-traditionally, that is art. When the institution imposes non-traditional casting over the playwright's objection or without the playwright's knowledge, that is something else.

The playwright decides. That is the ground on which this book stands.

David Boles
New York City
2026

Part I

History and Theory

Chapter 1: The All-Male Stage

Shakespeare to the Restoration

The first casting controversy in Western theatre was not about race, disability, or sexual orientation. It was about sex. For roughly two thousand years, from the open-air theatres of fifth-century Athens to the enclosed playhouses of seventeenth-century London, women were absent from the professional stage. Men played all roles. Boys played girls. Grown men played queens. The audience understood this, accepted it, and built an entire theatrical grammar around the convention. What we now call "traditional casting" is itself the product of a revolution that occurred in England only three and a half centuries ago, when a king who had spent his exile watching French actresses decided that the English stage was behind the times.

That history matters for this book because it establishes a principle that advocates of non-traditional casting cite constantly but understand incompletely. The principle is this: casting conventions change. They have always changed. The all-male stage gave way to the mixed-gender stage, and the mixed-gender stage will give way to whatever comes next. This is true. What is not true is the conclusion that is drawn from it, which is that because conventions have changed before, any change to convention is therefore legitimate, and any resistance to change is therefore reactionary. The history of casting is more specific than that. The shift from all-male to mixed-gender performance expanded who could perform without altering what was performed. The text of "As You Like It" did not change when a woman first played

Rosalind. The play remained the play. The question this book asks is what happens when the change in casting does alter the text, when the body on stage contradicts the world the playwright built, and when the contradiction is not an artistic choice by the author but a mandate imposed from outside the work.

To understand that question, we need to understand where we came from.

* * *

The exclusion of women from the ancient Greek stage was rooted in the structure of Athenian civic life. Theatre in Athens was not entertainment in the modern commercial sense. It was a religious and civic festival, specifically the City Dionysia, held annually in honor of Dionysus, in which dramatic competition served as an expression of democratic participation. Citizens attended. Citizens judged. And citizens performed. Women were not citizens. They could not vote, own property independently, or appear in the public legal and ceremonial spaces that defined Athenian democracy. The stage was one such space. To perform publicly was to exercise a civic function, and civic functions belonged to men.

The practical result was a theatrical tradition in which all performers were male. The chorus, which could number twelve to fifteen members in tragedy, was male. The three principal actors permitted in Athenian tragedy were male. Female characters, of which there were many of extraordinary power and complexity, were played by men wearing masks. Clytemnestra, Medea, Antigone, Electra, Hecuba, Phaedra: the entire gallery of women who dominate Greek tragedy were voiced and embodied by male performers whose faces the audience never saw.

The structure of the competition reinforced the civic dimension. At the City Dionysia, three playwrights were selected to compete, each presenting a tetralogy of three tragedies and a satyr play over the course of a single day. The choregoi, wealthy citizens who financed the productions, served a civic function analogous to taxation: funding the chorus was an obligation of wealth, not a commercial investment. The ten judges who awarded the prize were selected by lot from the ten tribes of Athens. Every element of the system, from selection to performance to judgment, was embedded in the democratic apparatus of the polis. Women were excluded not because someone decided they lacked talent but because the stage was a civic institution and women were not civic participants. Whether women even attended the performances as audience members remains debated among classicists, though the balance of evidence suggests at least some women were present in the theatron.

The masks are important. Greek theatrical masks were not decorative. They were functional, serving as both amplification devices and identity markers. The mask told the audience who the character was. It told them the character's gender, age, and social status. It did this so effectively that the body beneath the mask became secondary. A male actor in a female mask was not pretending to be a woman in the way a modern actor pretends. He was presenting a female character through a theatrical convention that the audience read as naturally as we read the convention that a darkened stage means night. The mask was the character. The actor was the instrument.

This distinction matters because it reveals something about the relationship between the performer's body and the dramatic text that nontraditional casting debates consistently obscure. In the Greek theatre, the actor's body was not the site of meaning. The mask was. The text was. The actor served both. A modern audience watching a man play Medea without a mask would see a man playing a woman. A fifth-century Athenian audience watching the same performance with a mask saw Medea. The convention was not a workaround for the absence of women. It was a complete theatrical system in which the question of the performer's biological sex was architecturally irrelevant because the mask resolved it.

The Romans inherited this convention and adapted it. Roman theatre, particularly the comedies of Plautus and Terence, used masks and all-male casts, though the social context was different. Roman actors were not citizens exercising civic functions. They were often slaves or freedmen, and the profession carried social stigma. The Latin term for actor, histrio, became synonymous with dishonesty and social degradation. Actors in Rome suffered infamia, a legal status that stripped them of certain civil rights, including the right to hold public office and, in some periods, the right to vote. The Roman stage was more commercial and less sacred than its Greek predecessor, but the exclusion of women persisted, reinforced by Roman law that associated public female performance with prostitution. An actress in Rome was, legally and socially, indistinguishable from a sex worker. The Lex Julia of 17 BCE, part of Augustus's moral legislation, specifically prohibited senators and their descendants from marrying actresses, placing them in the same legal category as prostitutes and procuresses.

This legal equation between actress and prostitute was not merely Roman prudishness. It reflected a real feature of Roman theatrical culture. The mimus and pantomimus, forms of popular entertainment that flourished alongside the literary drama, regularly featured women, and the performances were often explicitly sexual. The literary tradition preserved the names of a few celebrated mimae, female performers in the mimus tradition, but their fame did not elevate their status. Theodora, before she became Empress of Byzantium in the sixth century, had been a mime actress, and the historian Procopius's account of her early career in his "Secret History" makes clear that the association between female performance and sexual display remained strong more than five centuries after Augustus. This association would echo through Western theatre for the next thousand years, surfacing in Elizabethan England and persisting, in diluted form, well into the nineteenth century.

The medieval period, roughly the fifth through fifteenth centuries, complicates the narrative. Professional theatre in the Roman sense ceased to exist in Western Europe after the collapse of the Western Empire. What replaced it, over centuries, were the liturgical dramas of the Church, the mystery and morality plays of the trade guilds, and the various folk performance traditions that existed outside institutional control. The Church's relationship to performance was paradoxical: it condemned professional theatre as a pagan corruption while simultaneously developing dramatic forms within its own liturgy. The Quem Quaeritis trope, a sung dialogue between the Marys and the angel at Christ's tomb, is the seed from which medieval European drama grew, and it was performed by monks, by men, within the sacred space of the church.

When drama moved outside the church and into the streets and market squares, the guilds that produced the mystery cycles generally maintained the all-male convention, though evidence is scattered and inconsistent. Some records suggest women participated in certain productions, particularly in France and Italy, but the dominant pattern, reinforced by guild membership rules that excluded women, was male performance. The point is not that women never performed in the medieval period. They did, in certain contexts, in certain regions, at certain times. The point is that the default, the convention against which exceptions were measured, remained male performance, and that this default survived the collapse of Rome, the Christianization of Europe, the rise and fall of feudalism, and the emergence of the commercial theatre in the Renaissance. It was a convention with extraordinary persistence, and it was a convention that, at every stage, reflected the social structures within which theatre operated.

* * *

When the professional theatre emerged in England in the 1570s and 1580s, it inherited the all-male tradition but not the mask. This was a consequential difference. Shakespeare's actors performed with bare faces. The audience saw the actor's body, face, and physical person while hearing the character's words. The gap between actor and character was visible in a way it had not been in Athens, and nowhere was that gap more visible than when a boy of thirteen or fourteen played Juliet, Desdemona, Cleopatra, or Lady Macbeth.

The gap generated its own controversy, though not the controversy modern readers might expect. The Elizabethan objection to cross-gender performance came not from those who thought it degrading to women but from those who thought it degrading to men. The anti-theatricalists, a vocal faction of Puritan moralists, attacked the theatre on multiple grounds, but their most persistent complaint about the boy actor was that it constituted a violation of Deuteronomy 22:5, which prohibits a man from wearing women's clothing. Philip Stubbes, in his 1583 "Anatomie of Abuses," condemned the theatre for encouraging effeminacy in the boy actors and lust in the male spectators who watched them. William Prynne, whose massive 1633 "Histrio-Mastix" ran to over a thousand pages, called theatrical performances "sinfull, heathenish, lewde, ungodly spectacles" and argued that the boy actor in women's dress was an abomination before God. Prynne's attack was so extreme, and so widely understood to include a swipe at Queen Henrietta Maria's participation in court masques, that he was sentenced to have his ears cropped, a punishment the authorities carried out.

The anti-theatricalists matter here not because their arguments were sound but because they illuminate a recurring pattern in the history of casting debates: the body of the performer becomes a site of moral anxiety that has little to do with the artistic quality of the performance. Stubbes and Prynne were not concerned with whether boy actors played women convincingly. They were concerned with what the convention did to the social order, with the moral implications of a male body in female clothing, with the signals the performance sent about gender, propriety, and power. Their arguments were religious where modern arguments are political, but the structure is identical. The performer's body is treated not as an instrument of art but as a bearer of social meaning that the performance either affirms or violates.

The Elizabethan solution to the boy actor question was training, not debate. Boy actors were apprenticed to adult members of the acting companies, often from the age of ten or eleven, and were trained specifically in the physical and vocal skills required to play women's roles. They learned gesture, deportment, and vocal pitch. They wore elaborate costumes, wigs, and cosmetics. By all surviving accounts, the best of them were convincing enough that audiences responded to the character rather than the performer. Samuel Pepys, writing decades later, would note his surprise at seeing a real woman on stage for the first time, in a January 1661 performance of Beaumont's "The Beggar's Bush," implying that the convention he had grown up with had worked well enough that the substitution was not felt as a loss.

But Shakespeare was too intelligent a playwright to simply work around the convention. He exploited it. In "As You Like It," Rosalind disguises herself as a young man named Ganymede. On the Elizabethan stage, this meant a boy actor playing a woman playing a man, a triple layer of gender performance that modern productions, with a female actress in the role, can only approximate as a double layer. The epilogue makes the layering explicit: Rosalind addresses the audience directly, breaking the frame of the play, and says, "If I were a woman, I would kiss as many of you as had beards that pleased me." The line is a wink from the boy actor to the audience, acknowledging the convention and delighting in its artifice. It works because everyone in the theatre knows what is happening. The convention is shared. It is the foundation of the theatrical contract between performer and audience.

"Twelfth Night" plays the same game with Viola, who disguises herself as a young man named Cesario and then falls in love with Duke Orsino while being pursued by Olivia. The comedy depends on layers of gender confusion that were richer on the Elizabethan stage than they can ever be in modern performance, because the audience's knowledge that Viola was already a boy actor added a dimension of ironic pleasure that a female actress playing the role cannot replicate. The gender confusion was not merely in the plot. It was in the theatre itself, in the relationship between what the audience saw and what they understood, and Shakespeare built his comedy on that relationship.

"Antony and Cleopatra" reveals the convention from the other direction. In Act V, Cleopatra, contemplating her capture by Octavius, says: "I shall see some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness i' th' posture of a whore." The line is astonishing in its self-awareness. Cleopatra is a female character, played by a boy actor, describing her fear of being impersonated by a boy actor. The play breaks its own frame and then reassembles it in the same breath. Shakespeare trusted his audience to hold the contradiction, to hear the boy's voice speaking Cleopatra's fear of the boy's voice, and to find in that contradiction not confusion but art. This is what a shared convention makes possible. Everyone in the theatre knows what is happening, and the knowledge enriches rather than diminishes the dramatic experience.

What Shakespeare did not do, and this is the critical point, was alter the text to accommodate the convention. Rosalind is a woman. Viola is a woman. The plays are written about women, for women characters, and the fact that boys played those women did not change the dramatic content of the works. The convention of the all-male stage was a method of performance, not a method of authorship. Shakespeare wrote women. The theatre cast boys. The text remained the text.

* * *

The convention held in England longer than it held anywhere else in Europe. By Shakespeare's time, women had been performing professionally on the stages of France, Spain, and Italy for decades. The commedia dell'arte troupes that toured Italy from the mid-sixteenth century included women as a matter of course. Isabella Andreini, born in 1562, was the most celebrated actress in Europe by the time Shakespeare was writing his mature comedies. Spanish theatre, under the corrales de comedias system, had admitted women by the late sixteenth century after a brief ban. France had never prohibited women from performing.

England's persistence in the all-male convention has puzzled scholars. Stephen Orgel, in his 1996 study "Impersonations," argued that the standard explanation, that women on stage would have been considered immodest, is inadequate, since French, Spanish, and Italian societies were every bit as concerned with female virtue and none of them banned actresses. Orgel suggested that the English preference for boys in women's roles reflected something deeper in the culture's anxiety about gender and sexuality, an anxiety that expressed itself not as a prohibition against women but as a positive preference for the erotic charge of the boy actor in female costume.

The English audience had seen women act and rejected them violently. In the autumn of 1629, a visiting French company performed at the Blackfriars Theatre in London with actresses in the female roles. Thomas Brande, writing on November 8, 1629, reported that the French women had attempted "to act a certain lascivious and unchaste comedye in the French tonge at the Blackfryers." He was glad to report that "they were hissed, hooted, and pippen-pelted from the stage," and did not think "they will soone be ready to try the same againe." William Prynne was even less charitable, calling the French actresses “monsters” whose attempt was “impudent, shameful, unwomanish, graceless, if not more than whorish,” though he conceded that “there was great resort” to the performance. The audience came, watched, and drove the women off with rotten apples. The experiment was not repeated. England would wait another thirty-one years, and it would take a political revolution, a civil war, the execution of a king, a Commonwealth, and a Restoration to make the change.

Whatever the deeper reasons, the convention ended abruptly. Charles II returned to England from his French exile in 1660 and, within months, issued royal patents to Thomas Killigrew and William Davenant authorizing them to form theatre companies. The patents specified, in language that would become famous, that “all the woemens part to be acted in either of the said two Companies for the time to come maie be performed by woemen.” Margaret Hughes is generally credited as the first professional English actress, appearing as Desdemona in a production of “Othello” at the Vere Street Theatre in December 1660.

The speed of the change is worth noting. There was no gradual transition, no decades-long campaign for female inclusion, no public debate about whether women belonged on stage. A king who had acquired continental tastes during his exile issued a decree, and the English theatre changed overnight. The motivation was not feminist. Charles did not believe women had a right to perform. He believed that the English theatre looked provincial compared to the French, and he wanted his court to have what the French court had, which included actresses. The change was driven by royal taste and cultural competition, not by principle.

The actresses who entered the English theatre after 1660 transformed it in ways that were immediate and lasting. Restoration comedy, with its emphasis on sexual intrigue, witty dialogue between men and women, and frank exploration of desire, was written for real women in ways that Elizabethan comedy could not be. The “breeches role," in which an actress wore men's clothing and displayed her legs, became a Restoration staple, titillating audiences in a way that a boy actor in men's clothing obviously could not. Playwrights like William Wycherley, William Congreve, and Aphra Behn, herself the first professional English female playwright, wrote for specific actresses and exploited their physical presence and sexual appeal in ways that were new to the English stage.

Behn is worth pausing on, because her career illustrates the double edge of the change. She was a working playwright in a commercial theatre, the first Englishwoman to earn her living by writing for the stage. Her plays, including "The Rover" (1677) and "The Lucky Chance" (1686), were popular, successful, and frank about female desire in ways that her male contemporaries found both exciting and threatening. She was attacked as immoral for writing the same kinds of scenes that Wycherley and Etherege wrote without censure. The admission of women to the stage had not equalized the moral calculus. A woman who performed was still read differently than a man who performed. A woman who wrote about sex was still judged differently than a man who wrote about sex. The revolution in casting had changed the appearance of the stage without changing the underlying power dynamics of who controlled it.

The Restoration also saw the emergence of the actor-manager system, in which leading actors controlled their own companies and, increasingly, the repertoire those companies performed. Thomas Betterton, the greatest actor of the late seventeenth century, exerted enormous influence over what was staged and how. This matters because the Restoration established a precedent that persists: the people who control the stage, whether they are actor-managers, producers, artistic directors, or institutional boards, exert pressure on what is performed and how it is cast. The playwright writes the work. The institution decides what to do with it. The tension between those two centers of power is the subject of nearly every chapter that follows.

But the association between actress and sexual availability persisted. Nell Gwyn, the most famous actress of the Restoration, became Charles II's mistress. The stage door became a point of access for aristocratic men seeking sexual liaisons with performers. The word "actress" carried a connotation of sexual looseness that would take centuries to shed. In this sense, the Roman association between female performance and prostitution survived the revolution that brought women to the English stage. The bodies of women performers continued to be read, by at least part of the audience, as sexually available bodies rather than as instruments of dramatic art.

* * *

The all-male tradition did not disappear from world theatre when it disappeared from England. Japanese Kabuki, which originated in the early seventeenth century, was initially performed by women. Izumo no Okuni, a shrine maiden from the Izumo Grand Shrine, is credited with founding Kabuki around 1603, performing dances and short dramatic sketches on the dry riverbed of the Kamo River in Kyoto. The form she created, onna Kabuki (women's Kabuki), was popular and profitable, but it was also associated with prostitution: many of the female performers doubled as courtesans. In 1629, the Tokugawa shogunate banned women from performing Kabuki, ostensibly to protect public morality. Young men (wakashu) then took over women's roles, but they, too, were banned when the same problem of sexual solicitation recurred. By the 1650s, Kabuki had settled into its enduring form: adult men (yaro Kabuki) playing all roles, with a specialized class of performers called onnagata dedicated to playing women.

The onnagata tradition is not an artifact. It is a living discipline of extraordinary rigor. An onnagata begins training in childhood and devotes his career to the study of feminine movement, gesture, and vocal quality. The great onnagata Yoshizawa Ayame I, writing in the early eighteenth century, argued that the onnagata must live as a woman offstage as well as on, that the art required a total commitment of the performer's being to the expression of femininity. Whether modern onnagata follow this principle literally is debated, but the artistic standard it established persists. The audience watching a Kabuki performance does not see a man failing to be a woman. The audience sees an onnagata succeeding at being an onnagata, which is its own category of art, distinct from both male and female, with its own aesthetic criteria and its own tradition of excellence. The artifice of the performance is understood to be the art itself, not a deficiency to be corrected by casting women.

Chinese theatre offers a mirror image. Yue opera, which originated in Zhejiang province in the early twentieth century, is performed entirely by women. Male roles, including emperors, warriors, and romantic leads, are played by female performers who specialize in male characterization. The form attracted predominantly female audiences and developed a sophisticated vocabulary of masculine performance that rivaled the onnagata's vocabulary of feminine performance in Kabuki. The xiaosheng, the female performer who specializes in young male lead roles, cultivates a specific physical carriage, vocal register, and emotional restraint that signifies masculinity within the conventions of the form. The tradition is as vital and as artistically serious as Kabuki, and it operates on the same principle: the performance of gender across the performer's biological sex is the art, not an accommodation forced by exclusion. Both Kabuki and Yue opera demonstrate that single-gender performance traditions are not inherently oppressive. They can be, and in their best expressions are, complete artistic systems with their own standards of excellence, their own training methods, and their own aesthetic satisfactions.

Western opera has its own tradition of cross-gender casting driven not by social convention but by vocal range. The trouser role, in which a mezzo-soprano or contralto plays a young man, has been a staple of opera since the eighteenth century. Cherubino in Mozart's "The Marriage of Figaro," Octavian in Strauss's "Der Rosenkavalier," the title role in Handel's "Giulio Cesare," all are male characters written for female voices because the composer wanted a particular vocal color that a male singer could not provide. These are authorial decisions. Mozart chose a female voice for Cherubino. Strauss chose a female voice for Octavian. The casting is not a violation of the text. It is the text.

Opera also produced the most extreme form of cross-gender casting in Western history: the castrato. From the sixteenth through the early nineteenth century, boys with promising voices were castrated before puberty to preserve their soprano or alto range into adulthood. The result was a voice of extraordinary power and range housed in an adult male body. Castrati dominated European opera for two centuries. Farinelli, the most famous, was the rock star of his age, performing to audiences that included kings and commoners, his voice capable of feats no natural male or female singer could match. The practice was barbaric, involving the mutilation of children for commercial and artistic purposes, and it was eventually prohibited. But its existence reminds us that the history of casting is not a history of progressive enlightenment. It is a history of human beings making choices, sometimes principled and sometimes monstrous, about whose body serves the art and at what cost.

* * *

What does this history tell us?

It tells us, first, that the claim "casting conventions have always changed" is true but insufficient. Conventions have changed, but they have changed in specific ways and for specific reasons. The Greek convention of masked male actors serving as civic participants in a religious festival is not the same as the Elizabethan convention of unmasked boy actors apprenticed to commercial theatre companies. The Restoration admission of women was not a principle but a royal preference. The Kabuki onnagata tradition is not a failure to modernize but a positive aesthetic commitment. Each of these conventions has its own logic, its own relationship between the performer's body and the dramatic text, and its own understanding of what the audience contract requires. To flatten them all into a single narrative of progressive liberation, as though theatre has been marching steadily toward some ideal of identity-matched casting, is to misread the history.

It tells us, second, that the most important casting revolution in English theatre history, the admission of women, was a revolution that expanded who performed without altering what was performed. "Othello" did not change when Margaret Hughes played Desdemona. "As You Like It" did not change when a woman first played Rosalind. The plays remained the plays. The words on the page meant what they had always meant. What changed was the instrument of delivery, not the thing delivered. This is the distinction that non-traditional casting advocates consistently fail to make. They argue that because casting conventions have changed before, they should change again, and that is a reasonable argument. But the history they invoke is a history of changing the performer while preserving the text. The casting changes this book examines do the opposite. They preserve the performer's identity while overriding the text.

It tells us, third, that in every theatrical tradition, the relationship between the actor's body and the dramatic character has been governed by a shared convention between performers and audience. In Athens, the mask resolved the question. In Elizabethan England, training and costume resolved it. In Kabuki, the onnagata's art resolves it. In opera, the composer's score resolves it. In each case, the convention is legible. The audience knows the rules. They can read the performance because they understand the system within which it operates.

Non-traditional casting, as it has evolved from its origins in the 1980s to its present institutionalized form, does not operate within a shared convention. It operates by overriding convention, and it does so selectively. A Black actress playing Hermione in “The Winter’s Tale” is accepted. A white actor playing Othello in blackface is forbidden. A wheelchair user playing Ado Annie in “Oklahoma!” is celebrated. A hearing actress playing a Deaf character is protested. An all-female “Waiting for Godot” is progressive. An all-male “Waiting for Godot” is, according to the University of Groningen in 2023, discriminatory. These are not conventions. They are permissions, granted and revoked according to a political logic that has nothing to do with the relationship between the performer’s body and the playwright’s text.

A convention is stable. It can be learned, shared, and applied consistently. If Kabuki declared that onnagata must play women except on Tuesdays, or except when the character is sympathetic, or except when the production is funded by a particular patron, the convention would dissolve into incoherence. A convention that applies only sometimes, only to certain groups, and only in one direction is not a convention at all. It is a set of preferences enforced by institutional power.

The Greeks understood that theatre is artifice, and they built their conventions around that understanding. The Elizabethans understood it, and Shakespeare built his gender comedies on it. The Kabuki onnagata understands it, and his art depends on it. Even the Restoration, which brought women to the stage for reasons of royal taste rather than artistic principle, established a new convention that audiences could learn, internalize, and share. In each case, the convention created a stable contract between performer and audience, a set of rules that both parties understood, and within which the art of the theatre could operate.

The question for our era is not whether casting conventions can change. Of course they can. The history this chapter has traced is nothing but change. The question is whether the changes being imposed on the contemporary stage serve the text or override it, whether they emerge from the art or are inflicted upon it, and whether the playwright, who created the work and bears responsibility for its meaning, retains the authority to say who inhabits the world he or she has made.

That question is the subject of this book. The next chapter examines what happens when the performer's body is not merely irrelevant to the character, as it was behind the Greek mask, but is actively manipulated to become the character, when skin is darkened, eyes are penciled, and children are sponge-bathed in "Texas Mud" to serve an adult vision of theatrical authenticity.

Chapter 2: Blackface, Minstrelsy, and the Racial Canvas

The first chapter of this book traced the history of gender in casting, from the all-male stages of Athens and London to the Restoration revolution that brought women into the English theatre. That history was, on the whole, a history of exclusion giving way to inclusion, of the stage expanding to accommodate bodies it had previously denied. The history this chapter traces is different. It is not a history of exclusion. It is a history of theft. For more than a century, the American stage took Black experience, Black culture, Black music, Black speech, and Black bodies and gave them to white performers who mocked what they had stolen. The instrument of this theft was a cosmetic preparation: burnt cork mixed with water or grease, applied to the face, hands, and neck of white actors who then performed what they claimed was the authentic life of Black Americans. The name for this practice was blackface. Its cultural form was the minstrel show. And its legacy is not merely a disgrace that the American theatre has moved past but an active inheritance that shapes the casting debates of the present day.

This chapter makes a claim that may seem provocative but which the evidence supports: the logic of blackface and the logic of non-traditional casting are not opposites. They are cousins. Both treat the actor's body as a canvas on which someone else's vision is painted. Blackface said: the white body can represent Black experience if you apply the right makeup. Non-traditional casting says: any body can represent any experience if you apply the right politics. In both cases, the authority to determine what the body means belongs not to the person inside it and not to the playwright who imagined the character but to the institution that controls the stage. The surface justifications are opposite, one rooted in white supremacy, the other in racial justice, but the structural relationship between the performer's body and the controlling institution is the same. The body is raw material. The institution decides what it becomes.

To understand why this claim holds, we need to understand what blackface actually was, how it functioned, what it did to the people it mocked, and what it did to the people who performed it.

* * *

The origins of blackface performance in America are conventionally traced to Thomas Dartmouth Rice, a white actor who, around 1828, began performing a song-and-dance routine called "Jump Jim Crow." Rice claimed to have observed a Black man, variously described as a stable hand or a street performer, singing and dancing in a distinctive manner, and to have copied the man's movements and speech for the stage. Whether this account is true, embellished, or entirely invented is unknowable. What is certain is that Rice's act was a sensation. He performed "Jump Jim Crow" across the United States and in England, and the character became so famous that "Jim Crow" entered the language as a synonym for Black Americans and, later, as the name for the system of legal segregation that would endure for a century.

Rice was not the first white performer to darken his face and imitate Black people on stage. The practice had antecedents in English theatre going back to the sixteenth century, when Moors and other dark-skinned characters in plays by Shakespeare, Jonson, and their contemporaries were played by white actors with darkened faces. Othello was performed in blackface for three centuries, from its premiere around 1604 until well into the twentieth century. But the English tradition of darkening the face to play a specific dramatic character is distinct from what Rice and his successors did. They were not playing characters written by playwrights. They were performing racial caricature as entertainment, and the caricature was the product, not the vehicle for something else.

The minstrel show as a distinct theatrical form crystallized in the 1840s. The Virginia Minstrels, a quartet of white performers led by Dan Emmett, gave what is generally considered the first full minstrel show in New York City in February 1843. The form they established was quickly standardized: a semicircle of performers in blackface, with an interlocutor in the center and two endmen, Mr. Tambo and Mr. Bones, at the flanks. The first part featured jokes, songs, and banter. The second part, called the olio, featured specialty acts. The third part was typically a one-act skit set on a plantation. The entire performance was framed as a faithful representation of Black life in the American South, which it was not. It was a white fantasy of Black life, performed by white men, for white audiences, and its purpose was to reassure those audiences that Black people were happy, foolish, musical, lazy, and content with their subordination.

Not everyone was reassured. In October 1848, five years after the Virginia Minstrels gave their first performance, Frederick Douglass published an editorial in his newspaper *The North Star* that named the theft for what it was. Writing in defense of the Hutchinson Family Singers, a group of white abolitionist vocalists who had been attacked by a pro-slavery editor for performing alongside Black musicians, Douglass turned his anger on the minstrel troupes that the same editor found unobjectionable. The editor, Douglass observed, "does not object to the 'Virginia Minstrels,' 'Christy's Minstrels,' the 'Ethiopian Serenaders,' or any of the filthy scum of white society, who have stolen from us a complexion denied to them by nature, in which to make money, and pander to the corrupt taste of their white fellow-citizens." The sentence is one of the earliest and most precise Black responses to the cultural economy of minstrelsy. Douglass did not object to the content of the minstrel shows, though the content was objectionable. He objected to the structure: white performers had stolen a complexion. They had taken something that belonged to Black people, a physical attribute, and converted it into a commercial product. The theft was not metaphorical. It was literal. The burnt cork on the white performer's face was stolen property, and the profit generated by wearing it was the proceeds of that theft.

The characters were types, not individuals. Jim Crow was the ragged, laughing plantation slave. Zip Coon was the urban Black man who dressed above his station and mangled the English language in his attempts to sound educated. Mammy was the large, desexualized Black woman who served the white family with cheerful devotion. These types were not observations. They were constructions, built to serve the psychological needs of white audiences who required a version of Black life that justified slavery before the Civil War and justified segregation after it. The minstrel stage provided that version with music, humor, and the assurance that everyone, performer and audience alike, was in on the joke.

The damage of the minstrel show was not limited to its content. The form itself established a template for how Black experience would be represented on the American stage for the next century. It said that Black life was available for appropriation. It said that authenticity was a matter of surface, that darkened skin and exaggerated dialect constituted a sufficient representation of an entire people. It said that Black cultural expression, particularly music and dance, was public property, available to anyone who wanted it. And it said all of this with enormous commercial success. By the 1850s, minstrelsy was the most popular form of entertainment in America, more popular than the legitimate theatre, more popular than opera, more popular than the circus. Its reach extended from the urban theatres of New York and Philadelphia to the frontier settlements of the West. Abraham Lincoln attended minstrel shows. Mark Twain attended minstrel shows. The form was not marginal. It was central to American cultural life, and its centrality meant that the racial caricatures it produced were not the opinions of a fringe. They were the default images of Black Americans available to white audiences for most of the nineteenth century.

The minstrel show also established a relationship between performance and ownership that persists in the casting debates of the present. White minstrel performers did not merely imitate Black people. They claimed Black culture as their own artistic property. Stephen Foster, the most celebrated songwriter in antebellum America, made his career writing songs for the minstrel stage. “Oh! Susanna,” “Camptown Races,” “Old Folks at Home,” “My Old Kentucky Home”: these songs, which became part of the American songbook, were written by a white man who had almost no direct contact with Black people, based on musical idioms he absorbed second-hand from the minstrel tradition, which had itself absorbed them, in distorted form, from Black musicians who received neither credit nor compensation. The cultural economy of minstrelsy was extractive. It took from Black culture, processed the stolen material through the minstrel’s distorting lens, and sold the product to white consumers who believed they were experiencing something authentically Black. The performer was a middleman in a transaction that enriched everyone except the people whose culture provided the raw material.

* * *

The position of Black performers in this system was excruciating. Before the Civil War, Black Americans were largely excluded from the professional stage. They performed for each other in venues that white audiences and white critics rarely visited. After the war, as emancipation created a new class of free Black citizens seeking economic opportunity, some Black performers entered the minstrel show, the most commercially viable form of popular entertainment available. They did so, in most cases, by performing in blackface themselves.

This fact requires careful handling because it is frequently cited by those who wish to minimize the damage of blackface, as though Black participation proved that the practice was harmless or even complimentary. It proves nothing of the sort. Black performers in blackface were performing under conditions of extreme constraint. The white audience that paid to see minstrel shows expected the minstrel show's conventions: the burnt cork, the exaggerated dialect, the stereotyped characters, the reassuring portrait of Black foolishness and contentment. A Black performer who refused to blacken his face and perform the expected types would not have been hired. A Black performer who offered a dignified, complex, realistic portrait of Black life would not have been booked. The commercial structure of minstrelsy required the caricature, and Black performers who wanted to work, who wanted to eat, who wanted access to the only stage available to them, had to produce the caricature. They had to mock themselves in order to be seen.

Some Black minstrel performers managed to subvert the form from within. Billy Kersands, one of the most popular Black minstrel performers of the late nineteenth century, was celebrated for his physical comedy, particularly a routine involving an enormous mouth into which he stuffed billiard balls. White audiences found this hilarious. Black audiences, according to some accounts, found in Kersands a performer who was using the grotesque expectations of the white gaze as raw material for something that belonged to them, a performance that acknowledged the degradation while transforming it into virtuosity. Whether this reading of Kersands is correct or retrospective wish fulfillment is debatable. What is not debatable is that his art existed within a cage, and the cage was built by white commercial interests that profited from the display of Black bodies performing Black self-mockery.

The minstrel show's influence extended far beyond the minstrel stage. When the legitimate American theatre began to include Black characters in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the characters were overwhelmingly written by white playwrights working from the minstrel template. The Black characters in white-authored plays were servants, criminals, buffoons, or noble savages. They spoke in dialect. They existed in relation to white characters, never as the centers of their own stories. The dramatic convention was the same as the minstrel convention: Black experience was raw material for white consumption, and the white playwright, like the white minstrel performer, claimed the authority to determine what Black life looked like on stage.

The exceptions to this pattern were rare and revealing. Ira Aldridge, a Black American actor born in New York around 1807, could not build a career on the American stage because the roles available to a Black performer in antebellum America were limited to the minstrel types. He emigrated to England in the 1820s and built one of the most distinguished acting careers of the nineteenth century on the European stage, performing Othello, Macbeth, King Lear, and Shylock to critical acclaim in London, Dublin, and across the Continent. He was celebrated in England, Ireland, Germany, Russia, and Poland. He was decorated by the King of Prussia and the Emperor of Austria. He became a citizen of Great Britain and never returned to the American stage.

Aldridge's exile is a data point of devastating simplicity. America's greatest Black classical actor of the nineteenth century could not work in America because the American stage had no category for a Black man performing Shakespeare. The minstrel show had colonized the entire space of Black performance. If you were Black and you wanted to be on a stage in America, you wore the cork. If you wanted to play Othello, Lear, and Macbeth as written, you left the country. Aldridge's career in Europe proved that Black actors could perform the classical repertoire at the highest level. His absence from the American stage proved that America did not care. The country that produced him had no place for him, because the only Black performance the American stage recognized was the minstrel performance, the burnt cork, the dialect, the degradation.

* * *

The minstrel show declined in popularity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, overtaken by vaudeville, which absorbed many of its performers and some of its conventions while broadening the range of acts on offer. But blackface did not disappear with the minstrel show. It migrated into vaudeville, into early cinema, into radio, and into the mainstream theatrical culture of the twentieth century in ways that the entertainment industry preferred not to examine.

The career of Bert Williams illustrates the migration. Williams, a light-skinned Black man born in the Bahamas and raised in California, became the most famous Black performer in America during the first two decades of the twentieth century. He was a comic genius of timing, physical grace, and vocal subtlety. W. C. Fields called him "the funniest man I ever saw, and the saddest man I ever knew." Williams performed in blackface throughout his career, not because he needed the darkening, he was already Black, but because the conventions of the stage required it. The burnt cork was the price of admission. It signaled to white audiences that the performance was operating within the minstrel frame, that this was the kind of Black performance they were accustomed to and comfortable with. Williams understood exactly what he was doing. He once said that the blackface makeup was like putting on a mask, and that behind the mask he could say things the audience would not tolerate from a Black man speaking in his own face. The mask that degraded him also, in a perverse inversion, protected him.

Williams became the first Black performer to appear in the Ziegfeld Follies, Broadway's premier revue, in 1910. He performed alongside white stars, though he was required to enter the theatre through the stage door, could not share the elevator with white cast members, and could not stay in the hotels where the show was booked on tour. His presence on the Broadway stage was a breakthrough of enormous significance, but the conditions of that presence reproduced the minstrel show's essential bargain: Black talent was welcome as long as it performed within structures controlled by white institutions and accepted the indignities those institutions imposed.

Al Jolson, the most commercially successful entertainer in America during the 1920s, performed regularly in blackface, most famously in "The Jazz Singer" (1927), the first feature-length film with synchronized dialogue. Jolson's blackface was not minstrelsy in the classic sense. He did not perform plantation sketches or portray the standard minstrel types. His act was more complex and more troubling: a white Jewish immigrant performing Black musical styles in blackened face, channeling what he understood as the emotional authenticity of Black music through his own voice and body. Jolson claimed to love Black culture. He may have been sincere. The sincerity does not change the structure of what he did, which was to appropriate Black cultural expression, apply it to a white body made superficially Black with makeup, and profit enormously from the result.

The Jolson model matters because it introduced a justification for racial performance that persists in altered form in the non-traditional casting debate: the claim of affinity. Jolson did not say he was mocking Black people. He said he was honoring them. He said he felt a kinship with their music, their suffering, their expressive power. He said the blackface was a tribute, not an insult. This claim of affinity, of honoring rather than appropriating, of celebrating rather than stealing, is the ancestor of the modern claim that non-traditional casting honors the universality of human experience by detaching characters from the specific racial, ethnic, or physical contexts in which they were written. The surface is different. The underlying assumption is the same: that someone outside the culture has the right to decide how that culture is represented on stage.

Jolson was not an aberration. He was the industry standard. During the golden age of the Hollywood musical, blackface was a routine production number, a set piece that the studios treated with the same casual professionalism they brought to tap sequences and chorus lines. Fred Astaire performed in full blackface in “Swing Time” (1936), and The Hollywood Reporter praised his dancing without mentioning the makeup. Bing Crosby blacked up in “Holiday Inn” (1942). Mickey Rooney performed in blackface alongside Judy Garland in “Babes in Arms” (1939), directed by Busby Berkeley for MGM, a film that was as commercially successful in its year as “The Wizard of Oz.” Garland was sixteen years old. The year before, at fifteen, she had appeared in blackface in “Everybody Sing” (1938), playing a character who auditions as a blackface singer to escape her dysfunctional family. The plot required a child to darken her face and perform a minstrel routine, and the studio that produced the film, MGM, saw nothing in this that required comment or hesitation. Garland had been performing since the age of two, first as one of the Gumm Sisters in vaudeville, then under contract to a studio that controlled her diet, her sleep, and her public image with a rigor that bordered on captivity. She did not choose the blackface. She was a child under contract, and the adults who controlled her career put the makeup on her face the same way they put amphetamines in her breakfast and sleeping pills in her supper. The blackface was one more thing done to her body by an industry that treated children’s bodies as studio property. That Garland would later become a committed supporter of the civil rights movement, attending the 1963 March on Washington and holding a press conference to protest the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, does not retroactively excuse the studios that painted her face. It deepens the indictment. The same industry that exploited a child's body for racial entertainment would later watch that child grow into a woman who understood, from the inside, what exploitation looked like.

The minstrel tradition's most prestigious casualty was not a musical comedy but the most celebrated dramatic role in the English language written for a dark-skinned character. As noted earlier, Othello had been played by white actors in darkened makeup since its premiere at Whitehall Palace on November 1, 1604. The tradition survived through Edmund Kean, Edwin Forrest, and into the twentieth century. Paul Robeson's 1943 Broadway production, directed by Margaret Webster, was the first in America to feature a Black actor as Othello with an otherwise white cast. It ran for 296 performances, longer than any Shakespeare production in Broadway history, and it should have ended the discussion. It did not. Two decades later, Laurence Olivier, the most celebrated English-speaking actor of his generation, decided to play the role at the National Theatre.

Olivier's 1964 Othello was not a casual decision. He had thought about the role for years and had deliberately avoided it, in part because he had played Iago opposite Ralph Richardson's Othello in 1938 and knew how easily Iago could dominate the play. When he finally committed, he did so with the obsessive physical preparation for which he was famous. He darkened his entire body with makeup. He wore a wig of kinked dark hair. He smeared his lips with dark raspberry red. He invented a gait and a vocal register that he described as African, though the accent wandered between something approximating West Indian, Nigerian, and nothing identifiable at all. He was, by his own account, attempting to honor what he understood as Shakespeare's original intention: a Moor who was unmistakably Black, whose Blackness was central to the tragedy, whose racial difference from the Venetian world around him was the engine of his destruction. Olivier believed that previous British Othellos had been timid about the character's race, lightening the makeup and softening the foreignness to avoid discomfiting audiences with the sight of a Black man married to a white woman. He intended to correct that timidity.

The stage production, directed by John Dexter, opened at the Old Vic on April 23, 1964 and was widely praised. The film version, directed by Stuart Burge in 1965, preserved the production almost exactly as it had been staged. It was essentially a filmed play, shot on enlarged duplicates of the original sets with no additional score, no location shooting, and no attempt to disguise the theatrical origins of the performances. All four principal actors were nominated for Academy Awards: Olivier for Best Actor, Maggie Smith for Best Supporting Actress as Desdemona, Frank Finlay for Best Supporting Actor as Iago, and Joyce Redman for Best Supporting Actress as Emilia. It remains the only Shakespeare film in which all the leads received Oscar nominations. Derek Jacobi and Michael Gambon made their film debuts in the cast. The Golden Globes nominated everyone except Olivier, an omission that suggested even the industry's own award machinery found the blackface difficult to celebrate without reservation.

American critics were less reserved in their discomfort. Bosley Crowther, writing in the New York Times in February 1966, compared Olivier to a minstrel show endman, writing that his Othello looked like "a Rastus" and sounded like a character from "Amos 'n' Andy." Columnist Inez Robb compared the performance directly to Jolson, saying she had been "in tune with the gentleman sitting next to me who kept asking 'When does he sing Mammy?"' These were not marginal critics. They were the establishment press, and what they recognized in Olivier's performance was the minstrel inheritance that Olivier believed he was transcending. He thought he was being brave. They saw a white man in burnt cork, no matter how thick the greasepaint or how exalted the verse. The film was banned in South Africa, not because the apartheid government objected to the blackface but because it depicted an interracial marriage. Everybody saw what they needed to see in Olivier's darkened face, and what they saw depended entirely on which racial anxiety they brought into the theatre.

The Olivier Othello matters to this book because it is the last major, critically celebrated instance of a white actor performing a Black dramatic character in blackface. Within a decade of the film's release, the practice was functionally dead in serious theatre. By the time James Earl Jones played Othello on Broadway in 1982 opposite Christopher Plummer's Iago, the idea that a white actor could or should darken his skin to play the role had become not merely unfashionable but unthinkable. The ground had moved, and it had moved because the civil rights movement, the Black Arts Movement, and the work of Black playwrights from Lorraine Hansberry to August Wilson had made it impossible for the theatrical establishment to pretend that a white body in dark makeup was an acceptable substitute for a Black performer. Olivier's Othello was the end of something. What replaced it, the insistence that Black roles required Black actors, was the beginning of the argument that the rest of this book examines.

But blackface did not stay dead. It kept returning, sometimes in forms so brazen that they seemed designed to test whether the culture had actually learned anything. On October 8, 1993, at the New York Hilton Hotel, the Friars Club held a roast in honor of Whoopi Goldberg. Ted Danson, who was dating Goldberg at the time (they had met on the set of "Made in America" earlier that year), appeared as the evening's roastmaster in full blackface makeup with exaggerated white lips. He used the word "nigger" repeatedly. He made sexually explicit jokes about his relationship with Goldberg. The audience included New York City Mayor David Dinkins, the first and, as of that date, only Black mayor in the city's history. Dinkins was appalled. Talk show host Montel Williams left the event and resigned from the

Friars Club, writing in his resignation telegram that he was “confused as to whether or not I was at a Friars event or at a rally for the KKK and Aryan Nation.”

Goldberg defended Danson. She said she had written much of the material herself. She said the performance was satirical. She told the press, “It takes a lot of courage to come out in blackface in front of 3,000 people. I don’t care if you didn’t like it. I did.” She accused Montel Williams of being a publicity seeker. She said, “Whoopi has never been about political correctness.” The defense was consistent with Goldberg’s public persona, which had always traded on provocation and the refusal to be shocked. But the defense did not hold. The story dominated the New York tabloids. Danson, in a 2009 interview on NPR’s “Fresh Air,” called the roast “a graceless moment in my life.” The couple broke up less than a month after the event.

The Danson episode is instructive not because it was an isolated lapse in judgment but because of the defense that surrounded it. Goldberg’s claim that the blackface was satirical, that it was a commentary on racism rather than an expression of it, replicated the structure that Jolson had established sixty-six years earlier. Jolson said the blackface was a tribute. Goldberg said it was a joke. Both claims asserted that the intention behind the darkened face determined its meaning, that if the person wearing the makeup meant well, or meant to be funny, or meant to subvert, then the audience’s revulsion was the audience’s problem. The argument that intention controls meaning is the argument that every institutional defense of non-traditional casting will eventually make: that the director’s concept, or the producer’s vision, or the guild’s rider, transforms the meaning of the actor’s body on stage. The body becomes what the institution says it is. If the institution says the blackface is tribute, it is tribute. If the institution says the cross-racial casting is progressive, it is progressive. The body’s own testimony is overruled.

* * *

I know what blackface looks like from the inside. Not Jolson's blackface, not the minstrel show's blackface, but a form of racial costuming so normalized in its time and place that no one involved understood it as racial costuming at all.

When I was in grade school at Brownell Elementary in Lincoln, Nebraska, our music teacher was married to a University of Nebraska-Lincoln School of Music professor named Roger L. Stephens. Through that connection, some of us were cast in a UNL production of Rodgers and Hammerstein's "The King and I." A former Nebraska football player named Chip Smith was cast as the King, and the rest of us kids, all white, all Midwestern, were cast as the Siamese children of the royal household.

The production required that white children from the Great Plains look like the children of a nineteenth-century Siamese king. The solution was cosmetic. Our mothers took black eyebrow pencils and drew lines around our eyes to make us appear, as the adults said at the time, "more Asian." The term used for this process, and I use it because it was used, was "slanty-eyed." That was the word. The adults spoke it without hesitation, and we children absorbed it without question. In addition to having our eyes modified, we had our skin darkened. The makeup was called "Texas Mud." It came in powder form. Mixed with water, it produced a thick, reddish-brown paste, and our mothers sponge-bathed us in the stuff until our lily-white Nebraska skin was the color the adults wanted it to be. Our hair was dyed black with semi-permanent color. The eyeliner and Texas Mud washed off after every performance, but the hair color remained. We went to school, went to the grocery store, went to church with hair that had been dyed to make us look like someone else's children. The alteration of our skin was temporary. The alteration of our hair followed us home.

We were, in every meaningful sense, in blackface. The technique was different, the pigment was different, and the target race was different, but the principle was identical to what Thomas Dartmouth Rice did in 1828 and what Al Jolson did in 1927. A white body was being altered to represent a non-white body, and the alteration was performed by adults who believed they were creating theatrical authenticity. The adults wanted their ideal of representation perceived, and they achieved it by physically transforming children into racial simulacra. We were canvases. The adults painted what they wanted to see.

No one protested. No one raised a hand and said this was wrong. It was the 1970s in Nebraska, and the production was associated with the university, and Rodgers and Hammerstein were the gold standard of the American musical theatre, and everyone involved believed they were doing something wonderful for the children and for the community. The racism was structural, not intentional. The adults who penciled our eyes and sponge-bathed us in Texas Mud were not bigots. They were theatre people doing what theatre people had always done: using makeup to transform the actor into the character. The problem was not their intentions. The problem was the assumption beneath their intentions, which was that a white body could be made to represent an Asian body through cosmetic manipulation, and that this manipulation was not a violation but a technique.

It takes distance to see what was happening. As a child, I experienced the production as exciting, as special, as a privilege. I was on a university stage. I was in a real musical. The makeup was part of the magic. It is only in retrospect, with the analytical tools that education and reflection provide, that the experience reclassifies itself. What I experienced as theatrical magic was, in fact, racial inscription. Adults wrote race onto children's bodies. They did it with love, with enthusiasm, with professional skill, and with complete moral confidence. And the children, including me, internalized the lesson: that pretending to be something you are not, for applause and for the approval of the adults in your life, is appropriate behavior. That bodies are instruments to be shaped by whoever controls the stage.

I tell this story not to condemn the adults who produced that show. Condemnation at half a century's distance is cheap, and the people who darkened my skin and penciled my eyes were not villains. They were my mother's friends, my music teacher, members of a university community that prided itself on cultural enrichment. They would have been horrified if someone had told them they were doing what Al Jolson did, because in their minds, Jolson was embarrassing and old-fashioned and what they were doing was educational theatre. But the structure was the same. The surface justification was different: Jolson claimed to be honoring Black music, the Nebraska adults claimed to be honoring Siamese culture, and both claims functioned to authorize the same act, which was the alteration of a body to represent a race that the body did not belong to.

I tell this story because it is the personal foundation of this book's argument. The body on stage is not neutral material. It carries its own history, its own culture, its own specificity. When you darken a white child's skin to make him look Siamese, you are not creating a character. You are erasing the child's identity and inscribing someone else's. When you cast across racial lines in ways that contradict the text's cultural context, you are performing the same operation at a more sophisticated level, without the Texas Mud, without the eyebrow pencils, but with the same underlying assumption: that the body is raw material, and the institution decides what it becomes.

* * *

The twentieth century saw the slow, painful emergence of Black theatrical voices that refused the minstrel template. The process was neither linear nor complete, and it occurred against the resistance of a theatrical establishment that was, as the Non-Traditional Casting Project would later document, overwhelmingly white.

The Federal Theatre Project, a New Deal program that operated from 1935 to 1939 under the direction of Hallie Flanagan, created Negro Units in twenty-two cities, producing plays by and for Black audiences with Black casts. The most famous production was Orson Welles's 1936 staging of "Macbeth" at the Lafayette Theatre in Harlem, set in Haiti with an all-Black cast and a corps of actual drummers recruited from the community. The production drew 10,000 people on opening night, with crowds stretching for blocks. It was not a curiosity. It was an event, a demonstration that Black audiences existed in numbers that the commercial theatre had ignored and that Black performers could command the classical repertoire when given the resources and institutional support to do so.

The Federal Theatre Project was not an exercise in non-traditional casting. It was an exercise in creating theatrical infrastructure for communities that had none. The Negro Units employed Black writers, directors, designers, and technicians alongside Black performers. The productions were designed for Black communities and shaped by Black artistic leadership. When the program was killed by Congress in 1939, the ostensible reasons were fiscal, but the underlying reasons were political: the Federal Theatre Project had produced work that was too sympathetic to labor, too critical of capitalism, and, in the case of the Negro Units, too assertive about Black dignity for conservative legislators to tolerate. The destruction of the Federal Theatre Project removed the only institutional support system for Black theatre in America and sent Black performers back to the commercial market, where the minstrel template still governed what was available to them.

Two decades later, Lorraine Hansberry's "A Raisin in the Sun" opened on Broadway in March 1959. It was the first play by a Black woman produced on Broadway. It was directed by Lloyd Richards, the first Black director of a Broadway play. It starred Sidney Poitier, Claudia McNeil, Ruby Dee, Diana Sands, and Louis Gossett Jr. in a cast that brought a specificity of Black family life to the Broadway stage that no white playwright could have written and no white cast could have performed. The Younger family's struggle to buy a house in a white Chicago neighborhood was drawn from Hansberry's own family history: her father, Carl Hansberry, had bought a home in a white neighborhood in 1937 and fought a legal battle that went to the United States Supreme Court. The play was not a minstrel show in reverse. It was not a white theatrical form performed by Black actors. It was a Black play, written from inside the experience it depicted, performed by artists who shared that experience, and received by audiences, both Black and white, as something the American theatre had never seen: Black family life rendered with the same complexity, the same internal contradictions, and the same dramatic seriousness that white playwrights had always reserved for white families. Hansberry had done what the minstrel show made structurally impossible: she had placed Black life at the center of its own story, in its own voice, for its own reasons.

The decade that followed produced an explosion of Black theatrical voices. Amiri Baraka's "Dutchman" (1964), a one-act play of searing racial confrontation set on a New York City subway car, won the Obie Award for Best American Play. Its violence, both verbal and physical, announced a Black theatrical voice that owed nothing to white expectations and demanded nothing from white approval. Ed Bullins, the most prolific playwright of the Black Arts Movement, produced a body of work that documented Black urban life with a naturalistic precision that made no concessions to white comfort. Adrienne Kennedy's surrealist dramaturgy fractured identity itself, refusing the coherent Black characters that white audiences expected and replacing them with figures that existed in states of psychological and racial disintegration. Ntozake Shange's "for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf" (1976), which she called a "choreopoem," brought Black women's voices to Broadway in a form that was neither play nor musical nor poetry reading but something new, a theatrical language invented for the experience it described.

The Black Arts Movement of the mid-1960s and 1970s articulated a theoretical framework for Black theatre that explicitly rejected integration into white theatrical institutions as the goal. Larry Neal, the movement's chief theoretician, wrote in 1968 that the Black Arts Movement was "the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept," and that its purpose was to create art that spoke directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America. The goal was not a seat at the white table. The goal was a different table, built by Black hands, in a Black room, serving Black food. The movement established Black theatre companies across the country: the Negro Ensemble Company in New York, Karamu House in Cleveland, the Free Southern Theater in Mississippi, Penumbra Theatre in St. Paul. These companies did not exist to provide diversity to the American theatre. They existed to provide theatre to Black America.

This is the context that August Wilson inherited and that shaped the argument he would make at Princeton in 1996. Wilson did not come from nowhere. He came from a tradition that had fought for the right to tell its own stories in its own voice on its own terms. When he said, as he would say in "The Ground on Which I Stand," that colorblind casting was a tool of cultural imperialism, he was not making an abstract argument. He was defending the specific, hard-won achievement of Black playwrights who had created a body of work that depended on the cultural specificity of the Black performers who embodied it. To cast that work with non-Black actors, or to cast white work with Black actors as a substitute for funding Black theatre, was, in Wilson's view, to repeat the minstrel show's fundamental crime: the appropriation of Black experience by a white institution for its own purposes.

* * *

The history traced in this chapter, from Thomas Dartmouth Rice to “Texas Mud” to the Federal Theatre Project to Lorraine Hansberry, establishes a principle that the rest of this book will test against specific cases. The principle is this: the actor’s body on stage is not an empty vessel. It is not a blank canvas. It is not raw material waiting to be shaped by a director’s concept, a producer’s mandate, or an advocacy organization’s guidelines. The actor’s body carries its own history, its own cultural inheritance, its own specificity, and when the theatre treats that body as interchangeable, as a surface to be painted with whatever identity the institution requires, the theatre is not being progressive. It is being colonial. It is doing to the actor what blackface did to Black culture and what Texas Mud did to white children in Nebraska: overwriting the body’s own truth with someone else’s vision.

This does not mean that only Black actors can play Black characters, or that only Asian actors can play Asian characters, or that casting must be a rigid matching exercise between performer identity and character identity. That argument, pushed to its logical end, produces absurdities that later chapters will examine. It also does not mean that non-traditional casting is morally equivalent to minstrelsy. The intentions are different. The social context is different. The power dynamics are different. But intentions do not determine structures, and the structural question this chapter raises is whether the contemporary theatre’s treatment of the actor’s body as an instrument of institutional policy is as different from the minstrel show’s treatment of the actor’s body as the contemporary theatre believes it to be.

What it means is that the decision about who inhabits a character on stage must be made with respect for the body that does the inhabiting and with respect for the text that created the character. When that decision is made by someone other than the playwright, by a director with a concept, by a producer with a mandate, by a guild with a rider, then the actor’s body becomes what it was in the minstrel show and what it was in that Nebraska gymnasium: a canvas for someone else’s picture.

The American theatre knew these injustices existed. The question is what happened when it tried to correct them, when a project born of legitimate grievance became a movement, the movement became an institution, and the institution, in the way of institutions, began to generate the very problems it was created to solve.

Chapter 3: The Non-Traditional Casting Project and Its Evolution

The previous chapter ended in the 1970s, with the Black Arts Movement asserting the right of Black theatre to exist on its own terms, in its own institutions, for its own audiences. That assertion was necessary because the American theatre, as an industry, had failed to integrate itself. The minstrel show had been dead for decades. Blackface had been retired from polite company. The overt racism of the nineteenth-century stage was universally condemned. But the theatre that replaced it was, by any statistical measure, almost as white as the theatre it had replaced. The racism had not disappeared. It had become structural, built into the hiring practices, the casting conventions, the funding patterns, and the institutional assumptions of an industry that believed itself to be progressive while employing an overwhelmingly white workforce to tell overwhelmingly white stories to overwhelmingly white audiences.

The response to that structural failure was the Non-Traditional Casting Project, founded in 1986, and the movement it spawned. This chapter traces the arc of that movement from its origins as a legitimate corrective to documented injustice through its evolution into an institutional apparatus that has come to threaten the very principle it was created to serve: the idea that talent, not identity, should determine who gets to perform.

* * *

The numbers were damning. In January 1986, Harry Newman, who would become the founding director of the Non-Traditional Casting Project, completed a four-year study of casting practices across the American professional theatre. The findings were unambiguous: over ninety percent of all professional theatre produced in the United States, from stock and dinner theatre to the avant-garde to Broadway, was staged with all-Caucasian casts. In regional theatres, which by the 1980s constituted the backbone of the American not-for-profit theatre system, only nine percent of roles went to non-white performers. The study covered every level of the profession, and at every level the picture was the same. The American stage was white. Not mostly white. Not disproportionately white. White, in a country that was not.

Newman's study gave the problem a number, and the number gave the problem political force. It is one thing to say that the theatre lacks diversity. It is another to say that ninety percent of its productions exclude non-white performers entirely. The statistic was cited in every subsequent discussion of casting reform, and it deserved to be cited, because it described a reality that could not be explained by talent, by audience preference, by the requirements of the classical repertoire, or by any factor other than systemic exclusion. There were not enough roles being written for non-white actors, and the roles that existed in the classical and contemporary canon were not being opened to non-white performers. The pipeline was blocked at both ends.

The ninety-percent figure also illuminated the gap between the theatre's self-image and its reality. The American professional theatre in 1986 saw itself as a progressive institution. It staged new work by Black playwrights. It hosted community outreach programs. Its leaders made speeches about diversity and inclusion at conferences and in program notes. But behind the speeches and the programs, the casting sheets told a different story. The people who actually appeared on stage, the people the audience saw when the lights came up, were, in nine cases out of ten, exclusively white. The theatre's progressivism was performative in the most literal sense: it was a performance that occurred in public statements and institutional rhetoric while the stage itself remained segregated. Newman's number forced the industry to confront the distance between what it said and what it did, and that confrontation was the NTCP's most important contribution.

The Non-Traditional Casting Project was founded in 1986 to address this blockage. It was co-sponsored by Actors' Equity Association, the union representing professional stage actors and stage managers in the United States, and led by Newman and Clinton Turner Davis, a director and advocate who would become one of the most articulate voices for casting reform. The NTCP defined non-traditional casting in language that was careful, specific, and deliberately limited: "the casting of ethnic, minority and female actors in roles where race, ethnicity or sex is not germane to character or play development." The definition was later expanded to include actors with disabilities.

That definition repays close reading. It does not say that race, ethnicity, and sex are never germane. It says that non-traditional casting applies "where" they are "not germane." The word "where" does work. It implies that there are roles and plays in which race, ethnicity, and sex are germane, in which they matter to the character and the dramatic world, and that in those cases, the NTCP's definition does not apply. The definition, in other words, contained its own limiting principle. It drew a line. On one side of the line were roles in which identity was not germane: a messenger, a judge, a fairy in "A Midsummer Night's Dream," a senator in "Julius Caesar." On the other side were roles in which identity was germane: Jim in "Huckleberry Finn," Beneatha in "A Raisin in the Sun," the Tyrone family in "Long Day's Journey Into Night." The NTCP's founding definition acknowledged that both categories existed and proposed reform only for the first.

This was a defensible position. If a role does not require a specific race, ethnicity, or sex, then restricting that role to performers of a specific race, ethnicity, or sex is discrimination, not artistic judgment.

The ninety-percent statistic demonstrated that such restriction was not hypothetical but routine. The theatre was excluding qualified performers from roles that did not require exclusion, and the NTCP proposed to stop it. The logic was clean.

* * *

In November 1986, the NTCP gathered five hundred people from across the country for its First National Symposium on Non-Traditional Casting in New York City. The two-day event was designed to do more than talk. It was designed to demonstrate. A multiracial company of seventy-five actors and directors performed scenes from classical and contemporary plays and musicals, presenting audiences with casting combinations they had never seen: James Earl Jones as Big Daddy in Tennessee Williams's "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof," opposite a white actor as his son Brick. The pairing was deliberate. It was chosen to challenge assumptions, to force the audience to confront a visual combination that contradicted the play's implicit racial homogeneity and to ask whether the contradiction mattered. The NTCP's stated goal was to "jog the imagination" of attendees, to show that the conventional casting of a play was not the only possible casting, and that alternative castings could illuminate the text in unexpected ways.

The transcripts of the symposium were published as "Beyond Tradition," edited by Clinton Turner Davis and Harry Newman, and they preserve a moment of genuine excitement and genuine complexity. The panelists did not speak with one voice. There were arguments about the difference between classical and contemporary texts, about whether the audience's perception of race could ever be fully suspended, about whether the goal was to make race invisible or to make it productive, and about the tension between the desire for universal access to all roles and the desire for culturally specific work performed by culturally specific artists. One participant, whose name the transcripts do not make famous but whose sentiment became famous, said: "I hate that term non-traditional casting. I believe that the kind of casting we are talking about is traditional casting. Casting that comes out of the great traditions of this country. I would prefer to isolate what ninety percent of our theatres are doing as non-traditional casting since it does not represent what America looks like."

The remark captures the rhetorical power of the movement at its best: the claim that diversity is the tradition and homogeneity is the aberration. The claim is historically debatable, since the American theatre had been overwhelmingly white for its entire existence, but it was politically effective because it reversed the burden of justification. The ninety-percent-white theatre, not the reformers, was the one that had to explain itself.

Not everyone's imagination was jogged in the intended direction. John Simon, the critic for New York magazine, declined to attend the symposium but told NPR that the entire notion struck him as absurd. He stated flatly that you cannot create the illusion of a Joan of Arc with a Black actress unless the actress could make herself up "to pass," but that ethnic pride now forbade such disguise. Simon's position was extreme, and the NTCP's organizers were happy to use him as an example of the resistance they were fighting against. But his objection, stripped of its bluntness, contained a question that the NTCP's definition acknowledged without resolving: who decides when race is "germane"?

The NTCP's answer, embedded in its definition, was that the text decides. If the play's dialogue or stage directions specify a character's race, ethnicity, or sex, or if those attributes are inherent in the play's setting, then they are germane. If the text does not specify, they are not germane, and the role is open. This sounds like a clear standard. It is not. Texts are not checklists. A playwright does not always write

"STAGE DIRECTION: This character is white" or "STAGE DIRECTION: This character is Irish." Eugene O'Neill did not annotate "Long Day's Journey Into Night" with racial specifications because the Irishness of the Tyrone family is woven into every line, every reference, every behavioral pattern in the play. It did not need to be specified because it was assumed. The same is true of countless plays in the American and European canon. The racial and ethnic identity of the characters is not stated because it is self-evident, because the world of the play is a world in which that identity is the air the characters breathe. To treat the absence of an explicit racial marker as proof that race is "not germane" is to misread how plays work. It is to treat the text as a legal document rather than a dramatic creation, to search for specifications rather than reading for meaning.

* * *

The three theatre companies that had pioneered integrated casting before the NTCP's founding offer instructive contrasts. The New York Shakespeare Festival, founded by Joseph Papp in 1954, was the most visible and the most consequential. Papp's commitment to colorblind casting was a personal and artistic conviction that he pursued for nearly four decades. Under his leadership, more than half of the NYSF's productions were colorblind cast, and the company launched the careers of James Earl Jones, Gloria Foster, Rosalind Cash, Denzel Washington, Ruby Dee, Raul Julia, and dozens of other performers who might not have had access to classical roles at other institutions. Papp's free Shakespeare in the Park, performed every summer at the Delacorte Theatre in Central Park, brought diverse audiences to Shakespeare in a way that no other American institution matched.

Papp's vision was utopian in the best sense. He believed that talent was racially distributed and that the theatre's failure to reflect that distribution was a failure of institutional imagination, not a reflection of artistic reality. He cast James Earl Jones as King Lear because James Earl Jones was a great actor and King Lear is a great role, and the combination of the two should not be blocked by the accident that Lear is typically imagined as white and Jones is Black. He cast Raul Julia as Petruchio in “The Taming of the Shrew” and as Macbeth. He cast Denzel Washington in Shakespeare productions that helped launch one of the great acting careers of the late twentieth century. He did not ask these actors to pretend they were white. He asked the audience to accept that the character was the character regardless of the actor’s race. The performance was the proof. If James Earl Jones was convincing as Lear, then James Earl Jones could play Lear, and the fact that previous Lears had been white was a contingent tradition, not an artistic necessity.

This is a compelling argument when the work in question is Shakespeare, whose plays exist at sufficient historical and cultural distance that no living audience can claim a proprietary relationship to the characters’ identities. Nobody in the audience at the Delacorte has a personal investment in the whiteness of King Lear. The play is four centuries old. It belongs to everyone.

But Papp’s company also produced new work, including work by Black playwrights, and the casting principles that worked for Shakespeare created tensions when applied to contemporary American drama. When the characters on stage inhabit a world that the audience recognizes as its own, or as belonging to a specific community within its own, the performer’s body carries a different weight than it does in Shakespeare. The audience’s tolerance for abstraction contracts. The distance that allows a Black Lear collapses when the play is set in a recognizable American time and place with recognizable American social dynamics. Papp understood this, and his company’s practices reflected the distinction: Shakespeare was cast freely, while contemporary work was cast with greater attention to the author’s cultural context. But the public narrative of Papp’s legacy flattened this distinction, turning him into a symbol of colorblind casting without the nuances his actual practice contained.

Arena Stage in Washington, D.C., under Zelda Fichandler's leadership, pursued a similar policy with a different emphasis. Fichandler, who founded Arena Stage in 1950 and led it for four decades, was committed to what she called "a theatre that looks like America." Her casting was more deliberate than Papp's, more attentive to the symbolic weight of diverse bodies on stage in a city that was majority Black and that served as the seat of the federal government. Where Papp's colorblind casting asked the audience to ignore race, Fichandler's approach was closer to what would later be called societal casting: putting performers of color in roles they occupied in society, thereby normalizing diversity not through abstraction but through recognition. The distinction is subtle but important. Papp said: race does not matter. Fichandler said: race matters, and the stage should reflect that it matters by showing people of color in positions of authority, intelligence, and humanity, not only in "minority" roles.

The Los Angeles Inner City Cultural Center, the third of the early pioneers, focused specifically on training and showcasing performers of color, creating a pipeline that the mainstream theatre had failed to build. Founded in 1965 by C. Bernard Jackson, the ICCC operated as a multiracial, multidisciplinary arts center that trained actors, directors, and writers who went on to careers in film, television, and theatre. Its model was different from both Papp's and Fichandler's: rather than integrating performers of color into existing institutions, it created a new institution designed to develop diverse talent and send it into the world equipped to compete.

Each of these companies operated from a position of artistic leadership. The casting decisions were made by the people who ran the theatres, in conversation with playwrights and directors, as part of an artistic vision that belonged to the institution. They were not responding to external mandates. They were not attaching riders to contracts.

They were not auditing their own hiring practices against demographic benchmarks. They were making art, and they were making it with a commitment to diversity that grew from their own convictions. The distinction between this model and the model that would eventually replace it is the distinction between artistic choice and institutional compliance, and it is the distinction on which this book's argument turns.

* * *

The NTCP operated for two decades, earning an Obie Award and an Honorary Drama Desk Award for its advocacy work. It published a newsletter called "New Traditions," maintained a national talent bank of Artist Files containing the resumes and photographs of actors, directors, writers, designers, choreographers, and stage managers of color or with disabilities, and organized national and regional conferences, forums, seminars, and roundtables on casting and diversity. In the early 2000s, the organization changed its name to the Alliance for Inclusion in the Arts, a change that its executive director, Sharon Jensen, said was intended "to better reflect the scope of our organizational concerns and activities and to clearly signal our objective to work for full diversity in the entertainment industry."

The name change was more than cosmetic. "Non-Traditional Casting" implied a specific, limited activity: casting against type in roles where identity was not germane. "Alliance for Inclusion in the Arts" implied a broader mission: full inclusion across all areas of the entertainment industry. The shift from "casting" to "inclusion" was a shift from a practice to a principle, and principles, unlike practices, have no built-in limiting mechanism. A casting practice can be defined: these roles, under these conditions, with this standard for germaneness. A principle of inclusion cannot be defined in the same way, because inclusion, as a principle, has no natural stopping point. Inclusion of whom? In what roles? Under what conditions? At what cost to other values? The NTCP's original definition answered these questions. The Alliance for Inclusion's mandate did not.

The same period saw the emergence of new advocacy organizations that pushed the casting debate further. The Asian American Performers Action Coalition, founded in 2011, conducted a five-year study of 493 shows in the New York area from the 2006-07 to the 2010-11 seasons. The findings were depressing: eighty percent of all shows were cast with European-heritage actors. Twenty-five years after Newman's study had found that ninety percent of American theatre was all-white, the New York stage had improved, but not by as much as the advocacy, the conferences, the talent banks, and the two decades of institutional effort might have led anyone to expect. The numbers were better. They were not good.

This persistent gap between aspiration and reality created pressure, and the pressure changed the movement's character. When a corrective has been applied for a quarter century and the problem persists, the corrective is either inadequate or the problem is more resistant than the corrective assumed. The NTCP's original model assumed that the problem was a failure of imagination: directors and producers could not see non-white performers in classical and contemporary roles because they had never been shown what that looked like. The symposiums and showcases were designed to correct this failure by demonstrating possibilities. But if the failure of imagination had been corrected, if directors and producers had seen the showcases and attended the conferences and read the newsletters, and the numbers still had not changed sufficiently, then the problem was not imagination. It was structure. And structural problems require structural solutions.

The structural solutions that emerged in the 2010s and 2020s were qualitatively different from the NTCP's original advocacy. They took the form of institutional mandates, contractual provisions, funding requirements, and compliance mechanisms that moved the locus of casting authority away from the individual artistic decision-maker and toward the organizational framework within which that decision-maker operated. The Dramatists Guild Inclusion Rider, examined in detail in Chapter 12, is the most concrete example: a contract addendum that commits producers to hiring from "Historically Excluded Groups" across all production positions, with auditable records of compliance. But the rider is not an anomaly. It is the institutional expression of a shift that occurred across the American theatre in the decade following the founding of AAPAC and accelerating after the racial reckoning of 2020.

* * *

The linguistic history of the movement tracks its ideological evolution with precision. "Color-blind casting," the term that prevailed from the 1970s through the 1990s, carried an explicit claim: that color should not be seen, that the audience should look past the performer's race to the character beneath. The claim was modeled on the civil rights movement's aspiration to a society in which people would be judged by the content of their character rather than the color of their skin. It was an integrationist ideal, and it attracted both the support and the opposition that integrationist ideals attract.

August Wilson's opposition, which Chapter 5 will examine in detail, was the most articulate and the most consequential. Wilson argued that colorblind casting was not race-neutral but race-erasing, that it asked Black performers to disappear into white texts rather than creating Black texts for Black performers, and that the institutional energy devoted to colorblind casting was energy diverted from the creation and support of Black theatre. His 1996 address at Princeton forced the theatre community to confront the possibility that colorblind casting, whatever its intentions, served white institutional interests more than it served Black artistic ones.

By the 2010s, the language had shifted. “Color-blind” gave way to “color-conscious,” a term that acknowledged rather than ignored the performer’s racial identity and proposed to use that identity as a positive element of the production’s meaning. In 2017, Diep Tran, then Associate Editor of American Theatre magazine, argued that “color-conscious” was the preferable term because it recognized that audiences do see race on stage and that pretending otherwise was itself a form of racial erasure. In 2018, the Harvard Journal of Sports and Entertainment Law published a substantial article titled “There’s No Business Like Show Business: Abandoning Color-Blind Casting and Embracing Color-Conscious Casting in American Theatre,” which provided a legal and theoretical framework for the shift.

The shift from “color-blind” to “color-conscious” was presented as a refinement, but it was a transformation. “Color-blind” asked the audience to ignore the performer’s race. “Color-conscious” asked the audience to see it and to find meaning in it. The first was a subtraction: remove race from the equation and let talent determine the outcome. The second was an addition: add the performer’s race to the equation as a variable that changes the meaning of the production. The first treated the performer’s identity as irrelevant. The second treated it as essential. And the second, crucially, required someone to decide what meaning the performer’s racial identity contributed to the production, someone who was not the playwright, because the playwright had already determined the meaning of the characters when writing the play.

The four categories of non-traditional casting that emerged from the academic literature codified this spectrum. Colorblind casting ignored race entirely. Societal casting placed performers in roles they occupied in society, such as a female judge or a Black doctor, reflecting demographic reality. Cross-cultural casting transferred a play’s entire world to a different cultural context, such as setting “The Mikado” in an actual Japanese milieu rather than the satirical English one Gilbert and Sullivan intended. Conceptual casting used a performer's identity to add a new layer of meaning to a role, such as casting a Black actor as the Ghost in "Hamlet" to comment on the haunting of America by its racial past.

Each of these categories represents a different relationship between the performer's body and the playwright's text, and the categories are not equally respectful of the playwright's authority. Colorblind casting, for all its problems, at least claims to serve the text by ignoring what it considers extraneous. Societal casting updates the world of the play to match the world of the audience, which may or may not conflict with the text's requirements. Cross-cultural casting openly replaces the playwright's cultural context with a new one, which is either a creative reinterpretation or a violation of authorial intent depending on who you ask. And conceptual casting consciously uses the performer's identity to generate meanings the playwright did not intend, which is either a valid artistic collaboration or an imposition depending, again, on who is asked.

What happened after 2020 collapsed these categories. The murder of George Floyd and the national reckoning that followed sent a shockwave through every American institution, and the theatre was no exception. Anti-racist statements were issued. Diversity pledges were signed. Hiring commitments were made. The movement that had begun with Newman's study and the NTCP's careful definition entered a phase of institutional urgency in which the qualifying clause, "where race, ethnicity or sex is not germane," was treated not as a principled limitation but as an obstacle to progress. The Actors' Equity Association's own diversity report from the 2016-2019 seasons found that white or European American performers still took home nearly sixty-four percent of all contracted salaries. Women received under forty-five percent. The numbers had improved since 1986, but they had not improved enough, and the political climate of 2020 did not reward patience or nuance.

The Dramatists Guild Inclusion Rider, published in October 2021, was a product of this climate. So was the broader shift in casting practices at regional theatres, Broadway houses, and educational institutions across the country. The shift was not coordinated by a single organization. It emerged from a convergence of institutional incentives: funding bodies that required diversity metrics, boards of directors that demanded anti-racist action plans, audiences that expected representation, and a professional culture in which the failure to demonstrate commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion carried reputational and financial consequences. The theatre did not change because playwrights asked it to change. The theatre changed because institutions responded to institutional pressures, and playwrights were expected to accommodate the result.

The critical question is always the same: who decides? In the NTCP's original formulation, the text decided. The playwright's words determined whether identity was germane, and if it was not, the role was open. In the evolved framework of color-conscious casting, the decision has migrated from the text to the institution. The director, the producer, the advocacy organization, the guild with its rider, the funder with its requirements, all of these institutional actors now participate in determining how race, ethnicity, gender, and disability will be used on stage, and the playwright's role in that determination has diminished accordingly.

* * *

The trajectory described in this chapter, from Newman's study to the NTCP's founding to the Alliance for Inclusion to the Dramatists Guild Inclusion Rider, is a trajectory of institutional capture. That term requires definition. Institutional capture does not mean conspiracy. It does not mean that the people involved are acting in bad faith. It means that an institution created to solve a specific problem has expanded its mission, shifted its methods, and altered its relationship to the stakeholders it was created to serve in ways that produce outcomes its founders did not intend and might not recognize.

The NTCP was created to solve a specific problem: ninety percent of American theatre was all-white. The solution it proposed was specific: open roles where identity is not germane to performers of all backgrounds. The limiting principle was built into the definition: "where race, ethnicity or sex is not germane." Over three decades, the definition expanded, the limiting principle eroded, the language shifted from "color-blind" to "color-conscious," the advocacy organizations multiplied, the funding mechanisms aligned, and the result was an institutional apparatus that no longer asks whether identity is germane to a particular role in a particular play. It asks whether the production, as a whole, reflects a "significant and representative proportion" of historically excluded groups. The question has changed. The playwright's text is no longer the reference point. The institution's demographic objectives are.

Consider the distance traveled. In 1986, the NTCP said: let qualified actors compete for roles where race is not germane. In 2021, the Dramatists Guild Inclusion Rider said: producers shall use reasonable efforts to cast actors from Historically Excluded Groups in numbers reflecting a significant and representative proportion of total roles. The first statement is about access to specific roles. The second statement is about the demographic composition of the entire cast. The first defers to the text. The second defers to a standard external to the text. The first asks: does this role require a specific identity? The second asks: does this production employ enough people from the right categories? These are not the same question. They are not even the same kind of question. The first is an artistic question. The second is an administrative one.

This is not what Harry Newman's four-year study called for. It is not what the five hundred people at the 1986 symposium applauded. It is not what Joseph Papp practiced at the Delacorte or what Zelda Fichandler practiced at Arena Stage. It is the product of institutional logic operating over time, in which each expansion of the mission creates the conditions for the next expansion, and in which the original limiting principle is quietly discarded because it has become an obstacle to the institution's evolved objectives.

The pattern is familiar from other domains. Environmental regulations created to prevent specific harms evolve into comprehensive permitting regimes that constrain activities their authors never contemplated. Title IX, enacted to ensure equal educational opportunity for women, evolved into a comprehensive regulatory framework governing collegiate athletics, campus disciplinary proceedings, and institutional culture. The Americans with Disabilities Act, designed to remove barriers to participation, generated an accessibility compliance industry with its own professionals, its own standards, and its own institutional interests. In each case, the original corrective was necessary and the original problem was real. In each case, the institutional apparatus that grew from the corrective acquired a life and a logic of its own that extended far beyond the original mandate. The Non-Traditional Casting Project followed the same trajectory. The problem was real. The corrective was necessary. The institution that grew from the corrective is now issuing contractual mandates that override the playwright's authority over casting, which is the one authority that the theatre's own professional standards, as articulated in the Dramatists Guild Bill of Rights, have always said belongs to the playwright.

The chapters that follow examine what happens when this institutional apparatus encounters specific plays, specific playwrights, and specific performers. They are case studies in the collision between an institution that has decided what the theatre should look like and the artists who created the work the theatre produces. The collisions are not abstract. They involve real plays, real estates, real lawsuits, and real human beings whose bodies and voices are at stake. The first collision involves a playwright who was, in life and in death, immovable on the question of who could inhabit his characters: Samuel Beckett.

Chapter 4: Samuel Beckett and the Playwright's Moral Right

Samuel Beckett did not care about non-traditional casting. He did not care about diversity in the theatre. He did not care about the demographics of the profession, the statistics of who was hired and who was not, or the political arguments for expanding access to classical roles. He cared about one thing: that his plays be performed as he wrote them. Not approximately. Not in spirit. Exactly. Every pause timed, every silence observed, every stage direction followed, every role performed by the kind of body he specified. He held this position during his life, he codified it in his will, and his estate has enforced it for more than three decades after his death. The result is the longest, most detailed, most litigated case study in modern theatre of what happens when a playwright's authority collides with a culture that has decided that authority is negotiable.

This chapter places Beckett at the center of the book's argument not because his case is about race. It is not. It is about something prior to race, prior to gender, prior to any specific casting controversy. It is about the question of whether the playwright's text has an integrity that cannot be overridden by the preferences of the people who produce it. If the answer is yes, then the text is sovereign, and casting must serve the text. If the answer is no, then the text is raw material, and casting serves whoever controls the production. The entire debate examined in this book turns on which of those two answers the theatre adopts.

* * *

Beckett's relationship to his own work was unusual in degree but not in kind. Most playwrights care about how their work is produced. Beckett cared more than most, and he had the temperament, the legal resources, and the international reputation to enforce his preferences. James Knowlson, his authorized biographer, documented the pattern in "Damned to Fame" (1996): Beckett was "often represented as a tyrannical figure, an arch-controller of his work, ready to unleash fiery thunderbolts onto the head of any bold, innovative director, unwilling to follow his text and stage directions to the last counted dot and precisely timed pause." Knowlson also noted, importantly, that Beckett was not entirely consistent. It made "a tremendous difference if he liked and respected the persons involved or if he had been able to listen to their reasons for wanting to attempt something highly innovative or even slightly different." The tyranny was selective. It was also, in Beckett's view, not tyranny at all. It was authorship.

Beckett wrote his stage directions not as suggestions but as components of the dramatic composition. He conceived his plays the way a composer conceives a score: the pauses are rests, the movements are notated, the visual elements are as fixed as the words. To change the set of "Endgame" from a bare interior with two small windows to a bombed-out subway tunnel is, in Beckett's understanding, like transposing a symphony from a minor key to a major key. You can do it. The notes will still be recognizable. But you have written a different piece. When directors of Beckett's work compared themselves to musicians interpreting a score, Beckett agreed with the comparison and drew the conclusion they did not intend: musicians do not rewrite the score.

The legal mechanism for Beckett's control was the moral right of integrity, a concept rooted in Continental European copyright law and recognized in varying degrees across jurisdictions. The moral right of integrity holds that the author of a creative work has the right to prevent modifications that would be prejudicial to the author's honor or reputation. In France, where moral rights are strongest, the right of integrity is perpetual and inalienable. The author cannot sign it away, and it survives the author's death. It passes to the author's heirs or designated executor and can be enforced indefinitely. In the United States, moral rights are weaker, limited primarily to visual artists under the Visual Artists Rights Act of 1990, and playwrights must rely on contractual provisions to control their productions. The gap between these two legal traditions creates a patchwork of enforcement possibilities that the Beckett estate has navigated with considerable sophistication.

The philosophical basis of the moral right is older than the legal framework. It derives from the Romantic conception of authorship, most fully articulated by Kant and Hegel, which holds that the creative work is an expression of the author's personality, not merely a commercial product. To alter the work without the author's consent is, in this conception, to alter the author's personality, to put words in someone's mouth, to reshape their vision to serve purposes they did not authorize. This is the principle Beckett invoked, whether or not he ever read Kant on the subject. His stage directions were not suggestions. They were extensions of himself, and to override them was to override him.

Beckett used both legal mechanisms available to him. His licensing contracts, administered through the Georges Borchardt literary agency in the United States and through various publishers and agents internationally, contained explicit restrictions on staging, casting, and interpretation. And in jurisdictions where moral rights applied, his estate invoked them directly. The combination of contractual and moral rights created a dual layer of protection that made Beckett's estate the most aggressive defender of playwright authority in the modern theatre.

* * *

The first major collision occurred in December 1984, when JoAnne Akalaitis directed “Endgame” at the American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Akalaitis, a five-time Obie Award winner and a founding member of the avant-garde Mabou Mines troupe, was not a careless director or an inexperienced one. She was one of the most respected experimental theatre artists in America, and she had previously directed Beckett’s work. For the ART production, she and designer Douglas Stein set “Endgame” not in Beckett’s prescribed bare interior with two small windows but in a bombed-out subway tunnel, littered with metal beams and charred subway cars. She included incidental music by Philip Glass. And the cast included Black actors in roles that Beckett had not racially specified but had, by every convention of the text’s original production history, imagined as white.

Beckett learned of the production’s concept before opening night and attempted to halt it. His American publisher, Barney Rosset of Grove Press, sought a legal injunction. The attempt failed. Contractually, there was no provision requiring Akalaitis to follow the stage directions, and American law did not give Beckett the moral right to prevent a production that altered his visual conception while preserving his text. The compromise was a program insert. Beckett wrote a statement that was distributed to every audience member:

“Any production of Endgame which ignores my stage directions is completely unacceptable to me. My play requires an empty room and two small windows. The American Repertory Theater production which dismisses my directions is a complete parody of the play as conceived by me. Anybody who cares for the work couldn’t fail to be disgusted by this.”

Robert Brustein, the ART’s artistic director, printed a counter-statement defending the production’s right to interpret the play. The audience received both statements and decided for themselves. The production was, by most critical accounts, a strong one. The Chicago Tribune's review noted that Akalaitis's directorial choices "vividly reinforce his imagery" and that the production was textually more faithful than many incarnations that had escaped Beckett's attention, including Andre Gregory's Manhattan Project "Endgame," which had the actors embellish their lines with noises and songs without provoking Beckett's wrath.

The Akalaitis "Endgame" established two precedents that would shape every subsequent Beckett controversy. First, it demonstrated that American contract law, in the absence of explicit staging restrictions, could not prevent a licensed production from altering a playwright's visual and directorial intentions. The director's freedom, in American law, extended to everything the contract did not specifically prohibit, and the contracts of the early 1980s had not anticipated a director who would relocate "Endgame" to a subway. Second, it provoked Beckett into ensuring that all future licensing agreements contained exactly those explicit restrictions. After 1984, the contracts got tighter. The loopholes were sealed. The estate would not make the same mistake twice.

The case also revealed a tension within the theatrical community itself. Akalaitis told a Harvard audience that "the most boring production of Beckett was directed by Beckett," a remark that captures the director's conviction that the playwright, however brilliant on the page, is not necessarily the best interpreter of his own work on the stage. Brustein, her institutional defender, said he revered Beckett "over all living playwrights" while simultaneously defending the ART's right to interpret Beckett's work in ways Beckett explicitly rejected. The position was: we love you, and we will not do what you say. This is the fundamental stance of director's theatre, and it is the stance against which this argument is directed. You cannot simultaneously revere a playwright and override his instructions. You can do one or the other.

You can interpret or you can obey. What you cannot do is claim obedience while practicing interpretation, which is what every director who says "I revere the text" while changing the text's specifications is doing.

* * *

The gender question came next. In 1988, one year before his death, Beckett sued a Dutch theatre company, De Haarlemse Toneelschuur, for staging "Waiting for Godot" with an all-female cast in a production directed by Matin Van Veldhuizen. When asked why women could not play the roles, Beckett offered a reply that has become the most quoted sentence in the history of playwright-estate disputes: "Women don't have prostates."

The remark was not a joke, or if it was, its humor was anatomical. Vladimir, one of the two central characters, exits the stage repeatedly to urinate, a condition the play codes as a prostate problem. The prostate is never named in the dialogue. No character says the word. But the behavioral pattern, the urgent, repeated departures that Vladimir cannot control, is, in Beckett's understanding, specific to a male body with a specific male affliction. A woman playing Vladimir would not merely be playing a man. She would be playing a man with a condition she could not physically have, and the audience, watching a female body perform the urgency of a prostate complaint, would be watching a performance that contradicted the character's physiological reality. For Beckett, this was not a matter of prejudice. It was a matter of precision.

Beckett's critics have noted, correctly, that there are many reasons a person might urgently need to urinate, and that the prostate is never explicitly mentioned. They argue that Beckett's post-hoc justification reveals a deeper prejudice: the belief that an "everyman" character must be a man, that universality is male, and that placing a female body in the role transforms the play from a universal meditation on existence into a statement about gender. This criticism has force. But it misses the counter-argument, which is that the playwright's understanding of his own character, even when that understanding is retroactively articulated, is still the playwright's understanding, and the question of whether someone else's understanding should override it is the question on which the entire casting debate turns. Beckett did not write Vladimir as a universal figure who happened to be male. He wrote Vladimir as a specific figure whose maleness was part of his specificity. Whether Beckett was right about this is debatable. Whether he had the right to insist on it is the question on which everything turns.

In the original French production at the Theatre de Babylone in 1953, director Roger Blin had helped the actors embody their characters by identifying physical maladies that would define their movement: Pierre Latour emphasized Estragon's bad feet, Lucien Raimbourg emphasized Vladimir's prostate problems. The physical specificity was built into the play from its first performance. It was not an afterthought. It was the foundation of the characters' bodies on stage.

The Haarlem court ruled against Beckett, finding that the all-female performance showed fidelity to the dialogue and stage directions and did not violate the play's integrity. Beckett responded by banning all productions of his plays in the Netherlands, a ban that remained in effect, at least nominally, until after his death in December 1989.

The French courts reached the opposite conclusion. In 1991, two years after Beckett's death, a judge allowed an all-female cast to perform "Godot" at the Avignon festival, but only on the condition that a letter of objection from Beckett's estate representative was read aloud before each performance. The audience was instructed, in effect, that what they were about to see was unauthorized by the author. In 1992, a French court went further, holding a stage director liable for infringing Beckett's moral right of integrity by staging "Godot" with women in the lead roles. The French ruling was the strongest enforcement of playwright authority in any Beckett case and reflected the French legal tradition's deep respect for the moral right, which in France is not merely a contractual protection but a constitutional principle derived from the Declaration of the Rights of Man.

The pattern was established. In jurisdictions with strong moral rights, the estate could win. In jurisdictions without them, the estate relied on contract law, and the outcome depended on the specificity of the contract. The estate responded by making its contracts as specific as possible.

* * *

The racial question arrived in 1998, in Washington, D.C., when Studio Theatre artistic director Joy Zinoman staged "Waiting for Godot" with Black actors Thomas W. Jones II and Donald Griffin as Vladimir and Estragon, opposite white actors as Pozzo and Lucky. The production drew on Black vaudeville traditions to shape the characters and incorporated elements that a New York Times review described as "hip," "jazzy," and "hip-hop," with the actors embellishing the text with "caustic asides," resorting to "black slang," and flirting and bantering with the audience. One improvisation had Jones's Vladimir asking, "What's wrong with white people?"

The review caught the attention of the Georges Borchardt Agency, which instructed Samuel French, Inc., the script's licensor, to issue a cease-and-desist letter to Studio Theatre. Samuel French warned that failure to comply would cause the theatre "irreparable damage in licensing any other of our protected properties to your theatre." The message was clear: stop this production, or lose access to every other play in our catalogue.

Jones told the Washington Post that he believed "racism got in the way" of the estate's response. The Borchardt Agency denied racial motivation in a letter to Studio Theatre but complained, in phone calls with Studio's director of production, Serge Seiden, that the "injection of race" in the production was among its most "troubling" aspects. Zinoman maintained that the production was faithful to Beckett's stage directions, pointing to directions in the script that require the characters to "turn toward the auditorium" and to passages that require adlibbing, such as "Vladimir and Estragon protest violently" and "general outcry." She refused to sign an affidavit promising that the actors would not improvise or engage the audience.

The resolution came through Edward Beckett, the playwright's nephew and executor, who intervened personally to allow the production to continue as a "mixed-race production." The run completed its scheduled performances and a four-week extension, selling out throughout. Among the audience members was a thirteen-year-old boy named Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, who would later describe the production as a formative experience that inspired him to become a playwright. Jacobs-Jenkins went on to attend Juilliard, write "An Octoroon" (a play that satirizes both the history of American slavery and racism within the theatre itself), and become one of the most celebrated American dramatists of his generation. The Studio Theatre "Godot" produced exactly the result that the advocates of diverse casting claim: it made a canonical text available to a young person of color in a way that changed his relationship to the art form. It also produced exactly the conflict that this book documents: the institution that controlled the dead playwright's legacy attempted to shut down the production that inspired the living playwright's career.

The Studio Theatre case sits at the intersection of the two faultlines this book examines: the playwright's authority over the text and the politics of racial representation on stage. Was the estate protecting Beckett's work from unauthorized embellishments, which it had every contractual right to do? Or was it reacting to the presence of Black bodies performing a text that had been, in its entire production history, performed by white ones? The answer, almost certainly, is both. The ad-libs and audience interaction gave the estate a legitimate basis for objection. The racial composition of the cast gave the objection its intensity. South African playwright Athol Fugard, who had obtained Beckett's personal permission to stage an all-Black "Godot" in the 1970s, told the Washington Post that nothing would have been "more abhorrent to Sam Beckett" than racial prejudice, and that "if all of this is now the result of the literary estate deciding that this is what Sam would have liked, then they are very conceited and very silly, because his work doesn't need that sort of protection."

Fugard's testimony is significant because it complicates the narrative. If Beckett himself approved an all-Black cast in South Africa, then the estate's reaction to a mixed-race cast in Washington cannot be attributed to the playwright's stated wishes. It can only be attributed to the estate's interpretation of those wishes, which is not the same thing. The estate is not the author. It administers the author's legacy. The difference between administration and authorship is precisely the difference that Lisa Dwan, the actress best known for performing Beckett's "Not I," identified when she said: "One of the responsibilities of any estate is they must remain frozen in time. It's not as if they can go back and check with the author."

* * *

The cases continued. In 2006, the estate prohibited Roberto Bacci's casting of twin sisters in a production of "Godot" in Pontedera, Italy. An Italian court overruled the estate and allowed the production to proceed. In late 2019, an Ohio college cancelled an all-female production of the play, fearing legal action from the estate. In 2021, the British clown theatre company Silent Faces, which included non-binary performers, was told that "Godot" was off limits; the company responded by creating "Godot is a Woman," a new work that tackled the gender restrictions around Beckett's plays without violating them.

The copyright on Beckett's work, which determines how long the estate can enforce its restrictions, operates under two different legal regimes that this chapter's earlier discussion of moral rights has already identified. In the United States, where copyright protection for published works extends ninety-five years from the date of publication, "Waiting for Godot," first published in English in 1954, will enter the American public domain on January 1, 2050. "Endgame," published in 1957, will follow in 2053. The later plays will lose their U.S. copyright protection on their own schedules, stretching across the 2050s and beyond. In France and other European jurisdictions where Beckett's moral rights are strongest, copyright extends seventy years after the author's death: Beckett died on December 22, 1989, and his works will remain protected in those jurisdictions until the end of 2059. The practical consequence is that an American theatre could produce an unauthorized "Godot" a decade before a French theatre could do the same, and the estate's enforcement power will erode unevenly across the two legal traditions the chapter has examined. Until those dates arrive, no one can produce "Waiting for Godot" or any other Beckett play without the estate's permission, and the estate's permission comes with the estate's conditions. More than three decades have passed since Beckett's death. An entire generation of theatre artists will live their professional lives under the estate's control, unable to cast "Godot" with women, unable to set "Endgame" in a subway, unable to do anything the estate has not sanctioned, unless they are willing to litigate and can afford to.

And then, in February 2023, the logical terminus arrived.

At the University of Groningen in the Netherlands, an Irish director named Oisin Moyne, twenty-four years old and making his directorial debut, prepared to stage "Waiting for Godot" with the student theatre company GUTS. The play has five characters, all male. The Beckett estate requires that all five be played by men. Moyne's casting call was open to men only. The production had been in rehearsals since November and was scheduled for March performances at the university's Usva student cultural center.

In late January, the Usva board discovered that the casting call had been restricted to men. They informed the production team that this restriction violated the university's inclusivity policy. The production was cancelled.

Usva theatre programmer Bram Douwes explained the decision: "If it concerned a play with five white guys that they'd held open auditions for, everything would have been fine. But you can't ban people right from the start." University press officer Elies Kouwenhoven provided the institutional rationale: "He explicitly stated that this play should be performed by five men. Moving forward, times have changed. And that the idea that only men are suitable for this role is outdated and even discriminatory. We as a university stand for an open inclusive community where it is not appropriate to exclude others, on any basis."

The statement deserves the same scrutiny that the NTCP's definition received in the previous chapter. The university acknowledged that Beckett explicitly stated the play should be performed by five men. It then dismissed this explicit statement as "outdated and even discriminatory." It then articulated a principle of absolute inclusion: "it is not appropriate to exclude others, on any basis." The "any basis" is the critical phrase. It means that a play written for five men cannot be cast with five men through a process that seeks five men, because the process of seeking five men excludes non-men, and exclusion, on any basis, is impermissible.

Moyne noted that he had considered casting performers of other genders but could not do so because of the estate's legally binding requirements. He was caught between two institutional demands: the estate required men, and the university prohibited the process of finding men. His production's own crew of eighteen people was majority LGBTQ and majority non-male. The issue was not the production's commitment to diversity. The issue was the casting call's specification of a sex that the playwright required and the university found discriminatory.

The production found alternative venues, performed in April at the Verwondering, a performance space on a ship, and at the Der Aa Theatre, and donated its profits to a charity dedicated to inclusivity. Moyne told the Irish Times that his life had become "utterly absurd," a characterization that Beckett, who spent his career writing about the absurdity of human existence, might have appreciated.

* * *

The Groningen case is the terminal point of the argument traced in Chapter 3. The Non-Traditional Casting Project said: open roles where identity is not germane. The language evolved to "color-conscious." The institutional apparatus expanded. And in Groningen in 2023, the logic arrived at its final destination: a play written for five men, by a Nobel Prize-winning playwright who explicitly required five men, was cancelled because requiring five men was deemed discriminatory by an institution committed to inclusion on any basis.

This is not a marginal case. It is not an outlier. It is the principle of absolute inclusion applied without exception, and the result is that one of the most significant plays of the twentieth century cannot be cast as its author wrote it because the casting process, not the casting outcome, violates an institutional policy. Douwes's comment reveals the mechanism: if the audition had been "open" and five men had been selected, there would have been no problem. The issue was not who was cast. The issue was who was permitted to audition. The university required that the process be open to all, even when the outcome was predetermined by the author’s binding instructions, because the appearance of exclusion was intolerable regardless of the reason for it.

The Groningen absurdity, and Moyne was right that Beckett would have appreciated the absurdity, is that the university’s inclusivity policy produced a more exclusionary outcome than the director’s male-only casting call. The casting call excluded non-male performers from auditioning for five male roles. The university’s cancellation excluded everyone from performing or seeing the play at all. The eighteen-person crew, majority LGBTQ and majority non-male, lost the production they had spent months building. The audiences who would have seen the play saw nothing. The director lost his debut. The actors lost their roles. The play itself was silenced, not by the Beckett estate, which had not been consulted and had not objected, but by the very institution that claimed to stand for openness and inclusion.

Berber Aardema, writing in the University of Groningen’s student paper, identified the broader danger: the university’s principle that “you can’t have auditions for men only nor women only” would, if applied consistently, exclude a vast number of single-sex plays from performance at the venue. It would make “for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf” unproducible, because casting seven women requires a casting call for women. It would make “Twelve Angry Men” unproducible. It would make any play with a single-sex cast unproducible, because the process of assembling the cast the playwright requires would violate the institution’s commitment to not excluding anyone on any basis.

This is the institutional logic that the Dramatists Guild Inclusion Rider codifies and that Chapter 12 will analyze in detail. It is a logic in which process matters more than content, in which the appearance of inclusion matters more than the substance of the work being produced, and in which the playwright’s authority, even when backed by legal contract and literary estate, is subordinate to the institution's commitment to a principle that admits no exceptions.

* * *

Beckett's defenders and his critics agree on one thing: his position was absolute. He said, without qualification or apology, that his plays must be performed as he wrote them, with the bodies he specified, in the spaces he described, with the pauses he timed. He said this when it was inconvenient and when it was controversial. He said it about gender, about setting, about music, and about casting. He said it in courtrooms and in program notes and in private conversations with directors he liked and directors he did not. He did not say it because he was a reactionary. He said it because he was a writer who believed that the work is the work, not a set of suggestions to be modified by whoever holds the production rights.

His critics call this position tyrannical. Neil Armfield, the director of Company B in Sydney, said: "In coming here with its narrow prescriptions, its dead controlling hand, the Beckett estate seems to me to be the enemy of art." Deborah Warner, the British director who wanted to stage an all-female "Godot" with Maggie Smith and Fiona Shaw, argued that "in order to make theatre live and breathe, it has to be newly made for not every year or every second, but certainly every generation." Jack Wakely of Silent Faces framed the issue in identity terms: "I think it's fundamentally about this idea that the only person who can be an everyman character has to be a man. That if you put somebody else in that role, the play becomes about the fact that they're not a man, as opposed to the fact that it's about existence."

These objections are not trivial. The argument that art must live and breathe, that it must be renewed for each generation, that rigid fidelity to authorial intent produces museum pieces rather than living theatre, is an argument with a long and respectable history. Shakespeare's plays are performed in configurations their author never imagined, and many of those performances are brilliant. The question is whether Shakespeare's distance in time, his plays are four centuries old and no estate controls them, makes him a different case from Beckett, whose plays are under copyright until 2059 and whose instructions are explicit, specific, and legally enforceable.

This book argues that it does. Not because Beckett is right about everything, he may well have been wrong that women cannot play Vladimir, but because the principle he defended is the principle on which all playwright authority rests. If the playwright cannot control casting, the playwright cannot control meaning. If the playwright cannot control meaning, the playwright is not the author of the work that appears on stage. The director is the author. The producer is the author. The institution is the author. And if the institution is the author, then the institution's priorities, not the playwright's, determine what the work means.

Beckett understood this. His absolutism was not temperamental caprice. It was the logical consequence of a belief that the playwright's text is a complete artistic object, not a blueprint to be improved by interpretation. Every play exists in two forms: the text on the page and the production on the stage. The text is fixed. The production is ephemeral. Most directors believe the production is the real thing and the text is the recipe. Beckett believed the text is the real thing and the production is either faithful or unfaithful to it. There is no third category. There is no "creative reinterpretation" that is both faithful to the text and different from what the text specifies. There is only the work as written and the work as altered, and the history of the theatre is, in Beckett's view, a history of alteration presented as interpretation.

You may disagree with this belief. Many directors do. But if you disagree, you should be honest about what your disagreement means, which is that you believe the director’s vision supersedes the playwright’s, and that the theatre’s primary allegiance is not to the text but to whoever controls the production. That is a coherent position. It is the position of director’s theatre. It is also the position that non-traditional casting, in its evolved institutional form, requires, because non-traditional casting, applied to plays whose texts specify or imply specific identities, requires overriding the playwright’s conception of the character in favor of the institution’s conception of what the cast should look like.

The next chapter examines the playwright who made this argument most forcefully in the American context, not from the position of a European absurdist protecting his artistic estate, but from the position of a Black American playwright defending the cultural specificity of Black theatre against the integrationist assumptions of the white theatrical establishment. That playwright was August Wilson, and his argument at Princeton in 1996 remains the most powerful case ever made for the proposition that this book defends: the playwright’s text has a context, and the context is not transferable at will.

Part II

Case Studies

Chapter 5: August Wilson and “The Ground on Which I Stand”

On June 26, 1996, at the 11th biennial Theatre Communications Group national conference, held at Princeton University’s McCarter Theatre Center, August Wilson walked to the podium and detonated the American theatre. He was fifty-one years old, the author of seven produced plays in what would become his ten-play Pittsburgh Cycle, a two-time Pulitzer Prize winner for “Fences” (1987) and “The Piano Lesson” (1990), and the most performed American playwright of the decade. He had been invited to deliver the keynote address. What he delivered was a forty-minute indictment of the American theatre’s racial structure, its funding mechanisms, its casting practices, and the assumptions that governed all three. Teresa Eyring, then heading Philadelphia’s Wilma Theatre and later TCG’s executive director, recalled that the speech “fairly upended that gathering.” The conference had to be restructured to accommodate the aftermath. Panels were added. Schedules were rearranged. The professional theatre community of the United States, assembled in one room, discovered that its most celebrated living playwright considered its fundamental operating assumptions to be instruments of cultural imperialism.

The speech was titled “The Ground on Which I Stand.” It was published in the September 1996 issue of American Theatre magazine and has been reprinted, debated, taught, and restaged in the three decades since. Its central argument on the subject of casting remains the most forceful statement ever made by a major American playwright against the practice this book examines. Wilson said:

"Colorblind casting is an aberrant idea that has never had any validity other than as a tool of the Cultural Imperialists who view their American culture, rooted in the icons of European culture, as beyond reproach in its perfection."

He was not finished. He said that to mount an all-Black production of "Death of a Salesman" or any other play conceived for white actors would be "to deny us our own humanity, our own history, and the need to make our own investigations from the cultural ground on which we stand as Black Americans. It is an assault on our presence, our difficult but honorable history in America; it is an insult to our intelligence, our playwrights, and our many and varied contributions to the society and the world at large."

And he offered an alternative: "We do not need colorblind casting; we need some theatres to develop our playwrights."

The speech did not come from nowhere. It came from the Hill District of Pittsburgh, from a two-room apartment without hot water, from a mother who chose dignity over accommodation, and from a playwright who spent his entire career insisting that Black life in America was a subject worthy of its own art, told in its own language, performed by its own artists, and supported by its own institutions.

* * *

Frederick August Kittel Jr. was born on April 27, 1945, in Pittsburgh's Hill District, a neighborhood that was, in 1945, racially and ethnically mixed and culturally vibrant. His mother, Daisy Wilson, was an African American woman from North Carolina who cleaned houses for a living. His father, Frederick August Kittel Sr., was a German immigrant baker who was largely absent from the family. Wilson was the fourth of six children. The family lived on public assistance and his mother's wages in conditions that would later provide the material density of his plays: the crowded rooms, the absent fathers, the women who held families together by force of will, the men who raged against systems that had been designed to break them.

Wilson's mother was his first model of moral clarity. When she won a new Speed Queen washing machine in a contest and the organizers, upon learning she was Black, tried to substitute a second-hand appliance, Daisy Wilson refused it. She explained to her children that "something is not always better than nothing." She bought a new washer herself. The lesson Wilson absorbed was not merely about consumer rights. It was about the refusal to accept a degraded version of what you were owed, and it would animate every argument he ever made about Black theatre.

After his parents separated, Daisy married David Bedford, and the family moved in 1958 to Hazelwood, a predominantly white suburb of Pittsburgh. The racial hostility was immediate. Wilson enrolled at Central Catholic High School as the first Black student and endured constant race-based bullying. He transferred to Connelly Trade School, then to Gladstone High, where a teacher accused him of plagiarizing a twenty-page paper on Napoleon because a Black student could not have written something that good. Wilson, who had written every word, dropped out at fifteen. He never returned to formal education. He returned instead to the Hill District, to the Carnegie Library's Wylie Avenue branch, where his mother had taken him as a child to get his first borrowing card, and he educated himself by reading Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, Arna Bontemps, and the blues.

In 1965, after his father's death, Frederick August Kittel Jr. changed his name to August Wilson, adopting his mother's surname. The name change was not bureaucratic. It was a declaration of identity. He was choosing the Black side of his heritage, the side that had raised him, the side that had been present, and he was repudiating the white side that had been absent. This choice, made at twenty, would define everything that followed: the plays, the politics, the speech at

Princeton, and the conviction that Black culture was not a subset of American culture but a parallel tradition with its own mythology, its own philosophy, its own aesthetic, and its own moral authority.

In 1968, Wilson and his friend Rob Penny co-founded the Black Horizons Theatre in Pittsburgh's Hill District. It was a product of the Black Arts Movement, the cultural arm of Black Power, and it performed plays by Amiri Baraka and other Black nationalist writers. Wilson directed, though he had no directing experience. He checked out a book from the library called "The Fundamentals of Play Directing" and taught himself. The plays were performed in small theatres, schools, and public housing community centers for fifty cents a ticket. The audience was Black. The subject matter was Black. The economic model was Black.

Two experiences in the 1960s and 1970s shaped Wilson's aesthetic as decisively as the Hill District shaped his subject matter. The first was purchasing a used record by the blues singer Bessie Smith and playing it repeatedly until its language entered his bloodstream. Wilson later identified this as the moment he understood what a Black art form sounded like: not refined, not polished for white consumption, but raw, vernacular, carrying centuries of suffering and resilience in every bent note. The second was encountering the work of the painter Romare Bearden in a 1973 coffee-table book, "The Art of Romare Bearden: The Prevalence of Ritual." Wilson's response was visceral. What he saw, he later said, was "black life presented on its own terms, on a grand and epic scale, with all its richness and fullness, in a language that was vibrant and which, made attendant to everyday life, ennobled it, affirmed its value, and exalted its presence." Bearden's collages showed Wilson that Black life could be the subject of high art without apology, without translation, and without the mediating filter of white approval. Several of Wilson's plays were directly inspired by specific Bearden paintings: "Joe Turner's Come and Gone" by "Mill Hand's Lunch Bucket," "The Piano Lesson" by "The Piano Lesson."

This was the ground on which Wilson stood, and it was the ground he would defend at Princeton twenty-eight years later.

* * *

Wilson's career as a playwright began in earnest after he moved to St. Paul, Minnesota, in 1978, at the urging of his friend Claude Purdy. He submitted "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" to the National Playwrights Conference at the O'Neill Theater Center in Connecticut, where it came to the attention of Lloyd Richards, the dean of the Yale School of Drama and artistic director of the Yale Repertory Theatre. Richards was the same Lloyd Richards who had directed the original Broadway production of Lorraine Hansberry's "A Raisin in the Sun" in 1959, the first Black director of a Broadway play. Richards became Wilson's director, mentor, and collaborator. He directed Wilson's first six Broadway productions. The partnership was one of the most consequential in American theatre history, and it embodied exactly the model Wilson would later advocate: a Black playwright working with a Black director to produce Black stories for audiences that included but were not defined by white spectatorship.

The Pittsburgh Cycle that Wilson built over the next two decades consisted of ten plays, one for each decade of the twentieth century, all but one set in the Hill District. "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" (1984) was set in 1927 Chicago. "Fences" (1985) in the 1950s. "Joe Turner's Come and Gone" (1986) in 1911. "The Piano Lesson" (1987) in 1936. "Two Trains Running" (1990) in 1969. "Seven Guitars" (1995) in 1948. "King Hedley II" (1999) in the 1980s. "Gem of the Ocean" (2003) in 1904. "Radio Golf" (2005) in the 1990s. And "Jitney," originally written in 1979, revised and produced in 2000, set in the 1970s. Together, the ten plays constitute the most ambitious dramatic project in American theatre, a century-spanning chronicle of Black life rendered in language that drew on the blues, on African American vernacular speech, on the rhythms of Baraka and the cadences of the Baptist church, and on Wilson's own extraordinary ear for the way people actually talk when they are not performing for white audiences.

Every play in the cycle is populated exclusively or almost exclusively by Black characters. White characters are either absent or peripheral. The world of the plays is self-contained: Black people living Black lives in a Black neighborhood, dealing with Black problems and Black histories and Black ghosts and Black music. The plays do not explain Black culture to white audiences. They do not translate. They do not apologize. They present Black life as a complete reality, not as a deviation from a white norm that needs to be contextualized for white understanding. This is the aesthetic foundation of everything Wilson said at Princeton. His plays were the evidence for his argument.

* * *

"The Ground on Which I Stand" was not only about casting. It was about the entire structure of the American theatre as an institution. Wilson pointed out that of sixty-six League of Resident Theatres (LORT) member companies in the United States, only one, Crossroads Theatre in New Brunswick, New Jersey, could be called a Black theatre. Sixty-five of sixty-six LORT theatres were white-operated, white-funded, and white-governed. The regional theatre system, which was the backbone of professional non-commercial theatre in America, was an overwhelmingly white institution that occasionally produced Black plays and occasionally hired Black performers but did not serve Black communities, develop Black artists, or answer to Black audiences.

Wilson's argument was that this structural inequality could not be solved by putting Black actors into white plays. Colorblind casting, in his analysis, was not a remedy for exclusion. It was a more sophisticated form of exclusion. It said to Black performers: you may participate in our culture, you may inhabit our characters, you may interpret our texts, but you may not build your own. It offered employment without sovereignty. It offered visibility without power. And it diverted the limited resources available for Black theatre into the project of integrating white institutions rather than building Black ones.

The key passage, often overlooked in discussions that focus on the casting question, was Wilson's analysis of the economic structure:

"Theatre is part of art history in terms of its craft and dramaturgy, but it is part of social history in terms of how it is financed and governed. By making money available to theatres willing to support colorblind casting, the financiers and governors have signaled not only their unwillingness to support black theatre but their willingness to fund dangerous and divisive assaults against it."

This is a funding argument, not a casting argument. Wilson was saying that every dollar spent integrating a white theatre was a dollar not spent building a Black one. Every grant that rewarded a regional theatre for casting a Black actor as Willy Loman was a grant that could have supported a Black theatre producing a new play by a Black writer about Black life. The resources were finite, and the allocation of those resources reflected a choice: the choice to integrate the existing system rather than to build an alternative one. Wilson called this choice cultural imperialism, and he meant it literally. The dominant culture was colonizing Black artistic labor and calling it inclusion.

Wilson also attacked, with specific venom, what he called "crossover artists," Black performers who shaped their work for white consumption, comparing them to "house slaves entertaining the white master and his guests." The remark was inflammatory, and it was intended to be. Wilson was drawing a line between Black artists who served Black culture and Black artists who served white institutions, and he was saying that the latter group, however talented, however well-compensated, was doing the work of the colonizer. This was not a popular position. Many Black performers rejected it, both on principle and because it foreclosed opportunities in an industry where the vast majority of paying roles were in white productions. But Wilson was not speaking as an actor seeking employment. He was speaking as a playwright defending his art form's autonomy.

Wilson further argued that the money spent on "diversifying" existing white institutions was actively harmful to the project of building Black ones. "Money spent 'diversifying' the American theatre, developing black audiences for white institutions, developing ideas of colorblind casting, only strengthens and solidifies this stranglehold by making our artists subject to the paternalistic notions of white institutions that dominate and control the art." The word "paternalistic" carried the full weight of his argument. White institutions that cast Black actors in white roles were not empowering those actors. They were employing those actors within a structure that remained white in its governance, its aesthetic assumptions, its audience demographics, and its definition of what constituted serious art. "Doing a black play or allowing blacks to have roles not written for them does not change the nature of the institution or its mission," Wilson said. "Our visitor pass expires and we never have a permanent place to hang our hat, to develop our own ideas, and to provide our community with a sense of cultural worth and self-sufficiency."

The visitor pass metaphor is one of the most precise images in the speech. A visitor passes through someone else's space on someone else's terms. The visitor does not set the rules, does not choose the programming, does not decide what the institution values. The visitor is welcomed and then shown the door. Wilson was arguing that the entire apparatus of non-traditional casting, however well-intentioned, functioned as a visitor pass: temporary, conditional, and always revocable by the institution that issued it.

* * *

The response was immediate and ferocious. Robert Brustein, the artistic director of the American Repertory Theatre at Harvard and the drama critic for The New Republic, was named explicitly and unfavorably in Wilson's speech. Wilson called him a "sniper, a naysayer, and a cultural imperialist." Brustein responded in the October 1996 issue of American Theatre with an essay titled "Subsidized Separatism," in which he called Wilson's speech "a rambling jeremiad" and accused Wilson of advocating racial separatism. "I don't think Martin Luther King ever imagined an America," Brustein wrote, "where playwrights such as August Wilson would be demanding, under the pretense of calling for healing and unity, an entirely separate stage for black theatre artists. What next? Separate schools? Separate washrooms? Separate drinking fountains?"

The invocation of King was tactically brilliant and substantively dishonest. King's integrationist vision was a political program aimed at securing civil rights for Black Americans within American democratic institutions. Wilson's argument was an artistic program aimed at securing creative autonomy for Black theatre within the American cultural landscape. The analogy between Black theatres and segregated drinking fountains was designed to make Wilson's position morally untenable by equating Black cultural self-determination with Jim Crow. It was the argument of a man who could not or would not distinguish between a system that excludes Black people from white institutions and a system that supports Black institutions alongside white ones.

Wilson fired back. Brustein counter-responded. Richard Schechner entered the debate, arguing that "to always cast according to type, racial type, especially, is a stupid, short-sighted and inartistic thing to do." Other theatre notables submitted their positions. American Theatre published responses through its November and December 1996 issues. The debate consumed the professional theatre press for months.

On January 27, 1997, the two men met in person at Town Hall in New York City for a public debate titled “On Cultural Power: The August Wilson/Robert Brustein Discussion,” moderated by Anna Deavere Smith. The event was sponsored by American Theatre magazine and TCG. Tickets sold out the 1,500-seat venue. The audience included John Guare, George C. Wolfe, producer Rocco Landesman, actress Lois Smith, playwright and scholar Eric Bentley, and what Backstage described as “the entire New York critical establishment, from Frank Rich on down.” Ben Brantley of the New York Times was spotted outside in the wet snow shouting for someone to retrieve his tickets. Anna Deavere Smith opened the evening by quoting James Baldwin on “the illusion of safety.” Frank Rich later called the event “the intellectual equivalent of extreme fighting.”

The debate itself, by most accounts, generated more heat than light. Wilson and Brustein reiterated positions they had already staked out in print. Brustein, in a red turtleneck and gray blazer, assailed political correctness as “freedom from speech” and dismissed political art as “a persuasive form of melodrama.” Wilson repeated his statistic about the sixty-five white LORT theatres and said that African Americans needed Black theatres to create a cultural art. “I am not an advocate of separatism, as Mr. Brustein maintains,” he said. “Rather, we are seeking to be included.”

The sharpest exchange came when moderator Smith pressed Wilson on the casting question directly. “Can blacks do Chekhov?” she asked, relaying an audience question. Wilson replied: “I would not embrace them doing that.” He added that colorblind casting “denies the person on stage his own identity.” When Brustein objected that the purpose of nontraditional casting was to “get the best possible actor in a role regardless of race,” Wilson responded from a different framework entirely: the framework of cultural sovereignty, in which the question was not whether a Black actor could play Chekhov but whether a Black actor should, when Black playwrights had written roles that needed Black actors more.

An audience member yelled "Fascist" at Wilson. It went unanswered. Brustein received hisses when he objected to "Bring in 'Da Noise, Bring in 'Da Funk" for ignoring the contributions of Irish and German cultures to tap dancing and fondly recalled "the racial harmony of the tap community of the 1930s when Bill Robinson danced with Shirley Temple." An audience member yelled "Get a clue!" It also went unanswered.

Wilson countered one of Brustein's most pointed attacks, that Wilson was living in the past, with a statement that went to the core of his identity: "To represent yourself as standing on the ground of the slave quarters," Brustein had said, implying the posture was anachronistic. Wilson replied: "I make my own self-definition. When you're looking at me, you're looking at all of the Africans that came over from Africa, even the ones whose bones are at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean."

Late in the evening, Brustein challenged Wilson to put his money where his rhetoric was: give a world premiere to a Black theatre, or start one himself. Wilson's answer disappointed some of his supporters: "I myself am personally a playwright. I am not interested in starting a theatre." The remark exposed a tension in Wilson's position that his critics were quick to exploit. He was demanding that the theatre infrastructure change to serve Black artists while declining to build that infrastructure himself. He was, in this view, a beneficiary of the white regional theatre system (Yale Rep, Goodman Theatre, Seattle Rep, and other LORT houses had all produced his plays) who was denouncing the system that had made his career possible.

But the criticism missed Wilson's point, which was structural rather than personal. Wilson was not saying that he, August Wilson, should run a theatre. He was saying that the American theatre, as a system, should fund Black theatres the way it funded white ones. The fact that he had been produced by white institutions did not obligate him to endorse those institutions' casting practices, any more than a writer who publishes with a major press is obligated to endorse that press's editorial policies. Wilson was arguing from inside the system against the system's assumptions, and the discomfort this caused was itself evidence of the assumptions' power.

The personal irony was real, though, and it deepened over time. Wilson's relationship with Lloyd Richards eventually ruptured, and the details of the break illuminate the tensions inherent in a Black playwright's dependence on white-funded institutions. Richards had been Wilson's gateway to the regional theatre system: Yale Rep, the Goodman Theatre in Chicago, and the subsequent Broadway transfers that made Wilson famous and financially successful. But the system that elevated Wilson was not a Black system. It was a white system that made room for a Black playwright whose work was so extraordinary that excluding it would have been an act of self-impoverishment. Wilson's success within that system proved that Black art could find a white audience; it did not prove that the system was designed to serve Black art. The distinction mattered to Wilson even if it frustrated his collaborators and critics.

James Earl Jones, who starred in "Fences" on Broadway, offered a complicated assessment of Wilson's character that touches on the biographical complexity the playwright carried. "I didn't like him," Jones said. "The doors were shut. You couldn't get in. I only knew the black August Wilson. I would like to have known the white August Wilson. He fought desperately to keep it at bay." Jones was referring to Wilson's white father, the absent German baker whose surname Wilson had discarded at twenty. Wilson's choice to identify exclusively with his Black heritage was not a casual preference. It was a foundational decision, made in response to abandonment and reinforced by the Black Arts Movement's insistence on cultural self-definition. When Wilson stood at the Princeton podium and said that colorblind casting was assimilationist, he was speaking from personal experience of what it meant to choose an identity rather than have one assigned by a system that saw mixed-race children as a problem to be categorized rather than a human being to be recognized.

* * *

Wilson died of liver cancer on October 2, 2005, in Seattle. He was sixty years old. He had completed all ten plays of the Pittsburgh Cycle. The Virginia Theatre on Broadway was renamed the August Wilson Theatre on October 16, 2005, two weeks after his death. He left behind the most significant body of dramatic work by any American playwright since Eugene O'Neill, and a position on casting that remained, and remains, deeply contested.

Emily Mann, the artistic director of McCarter Theatre (the very stage where Wilson had delivered the Princeton speech), said at a twentieth-anniversary commemoration in 2016: "I was mad at him about the colorblind casting. I think the only limits in the theatre should be our imaginations, and I wonder if he would agree with himself today." Marion McClinton, Wilson's friend and collaborator, who had been with him in a Pittsburgh bar when Wilson first previewed the speech, suggested Wilson's position was consistent to the end. The question of whether Wilson would have changed his mind is unanswerable and irrelevant. What matters is the argument itself, which stands or falls on its own logic regardless of what its author might have decided had he lived another twenty years.

Wilson's argument and Beckett's argument, examined in the previous chapter, arrive at the same conclusion from opposite directions and for opposite reasons. Beckett defended the playwright's right to control casting because the playwright's text is a complete artistic object that must be performed as written. Wilson defended the playwright's right to control casting because the playwright's text emerges from a specific cultural ground that cannot be abstracted away without destroying the work's meaning. Beckett's argument is formal: the work is what it is. Wilson's argument is cultural: the work is what it is because it comes from where it comes from. Both arguments converge on the same principle: the playwright's conception of the character is not a suggestion to be overridden by institutional policy.

The convergence is remarkable because the two playwrights had almost nothing else in common. Beckett was a white Irish expatriate writing in French about the absurdity of existence in a style so minimal that it approached silence. Wilson was a Black American autodidact writing in English about the specificity of Black life in a style so expansive that a single monologue could fill a page. Beckett's characters exist outside time and place; Wilson's characters are anchored to specific decades and specific streets. Beckett stripped his stage to a bare tree and a road; Wilson filled his with the furniture and food and music of Pittsburgh kitchens. Yet both playwrights insisted, with equal ferocity, that the bodies on their stages mattered, that those bodies could not be interchanged without destroying the work, and that the playwright, not the director, not the institution, not the audience's expectations, had the final word on what those bodies should be.

To cast an August Wilson play with an all-Asian company would not illuminate anything about the Asian American experience. It would obliterate the Black experience the plays were built to preserve. The language of Troy Maxson in "Fences" is not generic American English that any actor can speak. It is the language of a Black man in 1950s Pittsburgh who was denied access to Major League Baseball because of his race, who built fences to mark the boundary between his family and a world that wanted to destroy them, who carried the weight of his father's violence and his own failures in a body that the American system had designated as less than human. A white actor or an Asian actor could speak the lines. They could not carry the history that the lines encode, because that history is not theirs.

Wilson himself would have called the attempt cultural imperialism. And he would have been right, not because Asian or white performers are incapable of artistic excellence, but because the assumption that any body can inhabit any text without loss is the assumption of a culture that believes its own universality is self-evident. Wilson rejected that assumption absolutely. He said: "The idea of colorblind casting is the same idea of assimilation that black Americans have been rejecting for the past 380 years. For the record, we reject it again."

* * *

The contemporary theatre has not adopted Wilson's position, but it has not refuted it either. It has done something more revealing: it has absorbed his language while reversing his meaning. The term "color-conscious casting," which replaced "colorblind casting" in institutional usage after 2010, sounds like a concession to Wilson's argument. It acknowledges that race matters, that it cannot be wished away, that casting decisions carry racial meaning. But in practice, color-conscious casting is used to justify exactly what Wilson opposed: the placement of Black actors in roles written for white characters, and the modification of texts to accommodate identities their authors did not specify. Wilson wanted the theatre to see color and respond by building institutions that served the cultures that color represented. The theatre saw color and responded by deploying it as a production tool within existing white institutions.

The distance between Wilson's demand and the theatre's response is the distance between sovereignty and decoration. Wilson asked for power. The theatre offered visibility. Wilson asked for Black theatres funded at the level of white ones, producing new work by Black playwrights for Black audiences. The theatre offered Black actors the opportunity to play Willy Loman, which is precisely the offer Wilson identified as an assault on Black presence. The fact that this offer is now made in the name of inclusion rather than assimilation does not change its structure. It changes its branding.

The irony deepens when Wilson's argument is placed alongside the Dramatists Guild Inclusion Rider examined later in this book. The Inclusion Rider's contractual mandates, requiring playwrights to consider "historically excluded" communities in casting, would apply to Wilson's own plays. The playwright who insisted most forcefully that his characters are Black, specifically Black, culturally Black, and irreducibly Black, would be presented with a contract asking him to consider whether those characters might be played by performers from other historically excluded communities. The Inclusion Rider does not exempt playwrights who have already specified their characters' identities. It applies to everyone. Wilson's response to such a contract is not difficult to imagine. He would have recognized it as exactly the institutional overreach he spent the last decade of his life warning against: the theatre telling the playwright what his characters should look like, rather than the playwright telling the theatre.

This chapter has examined Wilson's argument on its own terms, as a statement by the most important American playwright of the late twentieth century about how the American theatre should organize itself around questions of race and culture. The next chapter examines what happens when the principles Wilson defended and the principles he opposed meet in specific productions, specifically in "Hamilton" and the 2022 revival of "1776," where color-conscious casting was deployed not to build autonomous Black theatre but to reimagine the founding mythology of white America through non-white bodies. Wilson would have had things to say about both productions. Whether those things would have been welcoming is a question the productions themselves, examined closely, answer for him.

Chapter 6: Hamilton, 1776, and the Color-Conscious Experiment

On August 6, 2015, at the Richard Rodgers Theatre on Broadway, Lin-Manuel Miranda's "Hamilton: An American Musical" opened to reviews that treated it less as a theatrical event than as a cultural revelation. The show told the life story of Alexander Hamilton, Treasury Secretary and founding father, through hip-hop, R&B, and a cast composed almost entirely of Black, Latino, and Asian performers playing white historical figures. George Washington was played by Christopher Jackson, a Black actor. Thomas Jefferson and the Marquis de Lafayette were played by Daveed Diggs, also Black. Aaron Burr was played by Leslie Odom Jr., Black. Eliza Hamilton was played by Philippa Soo, of Chinese American descent. Miranda himself, Puerto Rican, played Hamilton. The only white actor in a principal role was Jonathan Groff as King George III, and even that casting was not contractually mandated. Casting director Bethany Knox later confirmed that "the king is white, but doesn't have to be" and that earlier developmental versions of the show had featured a non-white King George.

The show won eleven Tony Awards, the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, and a Grammy for its cast recording. It grossed over a billion dollars across its Broadway, touring, and international productions. The Disney+ filmed version, released in July 2020, brought it to a global audience of tens of millions. "Hamilton" became the most commercially successful and culturally discussed American musical since "The Phantom of the Opera," and unlike "Phantom," it was discussed not primarily as entertainment but as a statement about race, history, and who gets to tell America's story.

Miranda described the show's casting philosophy in a single phrase: "the story of America then, told by America now." The formulation was elegant, and it was deliberately vague. It did not specify what "America now" meant in casting terms. It did not articulate a principle. It offered a feeling, an impression of contemporaneity, a sense that the faces on stage should look like the faces in the subway rather than the faces in the portraits at Mount Vernon. When pressed by interviewer Howard Sherman in December 2015 on whether the eventual acting edition of "Hamilton" would specify the cast's diversity, Miranda was candid: "I don't have the answer to that. I have to consult with the bookwriter, who is also me."

This chapter argues that "Hamilton" represents a genuine artistic achievement and a genuine intellectual problem. The achievement is Miranda's: he wrote a new work, conceived it for a specific cast, and the cast served his text. No one imposed the casting on him. No institution mandated it. No policy required it. Miranda chose to tell his story through non-white bodies, and the choice was inseparable from the work's meaning. This is authorial casting in its purest form, and this book defends it without reservation.

The intellectual problem is everyone else's. "Hamilton" was immediately absorbed into the institutional vocabulary of American theatre as a precedent, a proof of concept, a demonstration that non-traditional casting "works." It was cited by advocates of colorblind and color-conscious casting as evidence that audiences will accept performers of any race in any role, that racial identity is no barrier to theatrical storytelling, that the old constraints are gone. But "Hamilton" proves none of these things, because "Hamilton" is not an example of institutional casting policy applied to an existing work. It is a new work written by a specific author who made specific choices about his own text. The distinction between what a playwright does with his own creation and what an institution does with someone else's is the fault line this chapter exposes.

The Harvard Crimson, in a December 2020 analysis, identified the deeper tension. The article argued that "the perils of color-blind casting in 'Hamilton' are especially difficult to detect" because the show occupies an ambiguous space between colorblind and color-conscious approaches. The casting directors chose to reserve nearly all principal roles for performers of color, effectively barring white actors from the company except in one role and a few ensemble positions. This was not colorblindness. It was race-specific casting in which the specificity ran counter to the historical record. The Crimson further argued that "Hamilton" was, at its core, "a mainstream white history lesson" delivered through "fantastic music, entrancing choreography, nuanced acting, and terrific set design." The non-white performers made the white history feel contemporary, but the history itself remained unchanged. Alexander Hamilton still founds the national bank. George Washington still wins the war. The Declaration is still written. Slavery is acknowledged but not centered. The show uses Black and Brown bodies to make white American mythology feel inclusive, and the question is whether that is liberation or cooption.

* * *

To understand what "Hamilton" actually did, it is necessary to understand what it did not do.

"Hamilton" did not take an existing play about white people and cast Black actors in the roles. It did not impose a casting philosophy on a text that resisted it. It did not override a dead playwright's intentions or a living playwright's objections. Miranda wrote the show. Miranda conceived the characters. Miranda built hip-hop into the DNA of the piece, and hip-hop is a Black and Latino art form. The casting followed from the music, which followed from the conception, which followed from the author's identity and artistic vision. A white cast performing "Hamilton" would not merely look different. It would sound different, because the relationship between the performers' bodies and the musical idiom they are performing would be severed. A white actor rapping the line "Immigrants, we get the job done" is performing irony at best and appropriation at worst. A Latino actor rapping the same line is performing autobiography.

Miranda understood this. When asked about the possibility of white actors in future productions, particularly at the high school level, he distinguished between professional and amateur contexts. He was open to gender-bent casting in school productions but more protective of the racial composition in professional ones. His explanation for not gender-bending the Broadway production was revealing. At the Smithsonian, Miranda said his "only trouble" with casting women as founding fathers on Broadway was musical keys: "Changing keys is a pain. You can actually hear in 'In the Heights' how tough it is just to write a duet for a guy and a girl to sing together. It's a challenge as a writer for them both to sound good." The answer was practical rather than philosophical, and critics at HowlRound noted the asymmetry: if Black and Brown men could populate a stage as historically inaccurate depictions of white founding fathers, why was cross-gender casting "beyond the musical's imagination"? The question was fair. Miranda's show crossed racial lines with revolutionary confidence but left gender lines intact, and his justification for the difference was about vocal range rather than artistic principle. The gap between the two decisions suggested that even within "Hamilton," the calculus of which boundaries to cross and which to preserve was not governed by a universal principle but by the specific artistic and cultural priorities of the artist. The casting call for the Chicago production of "Hamilton" in 2016 specified "non-white" for all principal roles except King George, and this language triggered a controversy that illuminated the legal and ethical tensions the show's success had created.

Civil rights attorney Randolph McLaughlin publicly challenged the casting call as potentially violating the New York City Human Rights Law, which prohibits employment discrimination based on race. His argument was formally symmetrical: if a casting call specifying "whites only" would be discriminatory, a casting call specifying "non-white" must be equally so. "What if they put an ad out that said, 'Whites only need apply?"' McLaughlin told CBS News. "African-Americans, Latinos, Asians would be outraged." Actors' Equity, the performers' union, distanced itself from the language, with spokesperson Maria Somma telling Playbill that the "Hamilton" call was "inconsistent with Equity's policy," which required all casting calls to include the disclaimer "Performers of all ethnic and racial backgrounds are encouraged to attend." The "Hamilton" producers had omitted this language. Producer Jeffrey Seller defended the call, stating "I stand by it and believe it to be legal," and invoked the bona fide occupational qualification: the roles were written as non-white, just as "The Color Purple" and "Porgy and Bess" require Black performers. The producers subsequently amended the wording to specify "non-white characters as written and conceived for the currently running Broadway production" while adding the standard inclusivity disclaimer. Actors' Equity declared itself satisfied.

The episode lasted about forty-eight hours and generated no litigation. But its implications extend far beyond a wording dispute. What the controversy revealed was that even "Hamilton," the most celebrated non-traditional casting event in Broadway history, could not specify its own casting requirements without triggering the same legal and institutional mechanisms that govern all employment discrimination. The show needed a legal exemption to do what its creator intended, and that exemption rested on a specific legal doctrine about the relationship between the performer's identity and the role's requirements.

The legal resolution was minor. The conceptual problem was not. Professional theatre operates under an exemption from standard employment discrimination law known as the bona fide occupational qualification (BFOQ). Race can be specified in a casting call when the role, as written, requires a specific racial identity. "The Color Purple" can seek Black actresses. "Fiddler on the Roof" can seek Jewish-presenting actors. The exemption exists because theatrical roles, unlike most jobs, are defined by the identity of the person performing them. An accountant's race is irrelevant to accounting. An actor's race is relevant to the character.

But "Hamilton" occupies a peculiar position within this framework. The characters in "Hamilton" are historical figures who were white. The roles, as written by Miranda, are conceived for non-white performers. The BFOQ exemption applies because Miranda wrote them that way, not because the characters' historical identities require it. This means the legal protection for "Hamilton's" casting is authorial, not historical. It rests on Miranda's intention, not on Alexander Hamilton's race. If Miranda had written the same show and specified a white cast, the legal framework would protect that choice with equal force. The principle is playwright sovereignty, not racial justice, and the distinction matters because the two are not always aligned.

* * *

Seven years after "Hamilton" opened, the Roundabout Theatre Company and the American Repertory Theatre produced a revival of "1776," the 1969 Sherman Edwards and Peter Stone musical about the drafting and signing of the Declaration of Independence. The original production had featured an all-white, all-male cast playing the members of the Continental Congress, because the members of the Continental Congress were all white men. The 2022 revival, co-directed by Jeffrey L. Page and Diane Paulus, cast the entire Continental Congress with performers who identified as female, transgender, and nonbinary, approximately half of whom were people of color. Crystal Lucas-Perry, a Black woman, played John Adams. Patrena Murray, also a Black woman, played Benjamin Franklin. Elizabeth A. Davis, visibly pregnant during the run, played Thomas Jefferson. Sara Porkalob played Edward Rutledge.

The production began at ART's Loeb Drama Center in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in May 2022 and transferred to Roundabout's American Airlines Theatre on Broadway in October 2022. Roundabout Artistic Director Todd Haimes described the production as placing "our shared foundational mythology in the hands of a talented group of artists who reflect multiple representations of race, gender, and ethnicity." Co-director Page spoke of "blurring the lines between the occluded and the included." Lucas-Perry offered a more specific observation: "When we shift the gaze so you see a different perspective, we start to hear things that we didn't hear before and see things that maybe we didn't want to see but that have always been in the story from the beginning."

The reviews were mixed, and the mixture was itself instructive. Several critics praised individual performances, particularly Porkalob's "Molasses to Rum," in which the song about the North's complicity in the slave trade was staged as a slave auction with Black cast members performing as enslaved people. The number was, by most accounts, the production's most powerful moment, precisely because the performers' racial identities gave the material a visceral charge it had never carried when performed by white men. When Porkalob's Edward Rutledge sang about the slave trade while Black women stood on stage as human property, the audience was not watching a historical reenactment. It was watching a collision between American history and the bodies that history had consumed. The staging worked because the casting made the text say something it could not say with its original performers.

Other numbers worked less well. The mournful antiwar ballad "Momma, Look Sharp," performed by Salome Smith as the Courier, was backed by an ensemble of grieving mothers in widow's garb that several critics found superfluous, adding sentimentality to a song that had always derived its power from simplicity. Video projections of suffragists, Civil Rights marchers, gay pride parades, and Black icons (Chuck Berry, Martin Luther King, Barack Obama) during the number "The Egg" overwhelmed the material with a slideshow of progressive history that turned a sweet trio into what co-director Paulus called "a radical act, almost kind of punk in its spirit" but which some critics found didactic. The production's approach was, in the Deadline review's assessment, a show where "sometimes-it-works, sometimes-not results carry through the entire production." Lucas-Perry's John Adams was praised as "spirited and energetic" but also noted as "perhaps a bit too likable, given the repeated references to Adams' disagreeable nature." The amNewYork review delivered the sharpest structural criticism: it would have been "a far better use of time, money, and talent to create a new musical about American history that reflects a contemporary viewpoint than to try to revise '1776' into becoming a different musical."

That observation, tossed off in a review, identifies the core problem. It is also, almost word for word, August Wilson's argument from 1996: do not integrate existing white institutions, build new ones. Do not put Black bodies into white texts, write Black texts for Black bodies. The amNewYork critic was saying, in the language of theatre criticism, exactly what Wilson said in the language of cultural politics: the most productive use of diverse talent is not the reinterpretation of old works but the creation of new ones. "1776" was written in 1969 by Sherman Edwards (music and lyrics) and Peter Stone (book). Edwards died in 1981. Stone died in 2003. Neither author participated in or authorized the 2022 revival's reconception of their work. The decision to cast women and nonbinary performers of color as the Continental Congress was made by the directors and the producing institutions, not by the playwrights. This is the precise inversion of what happened with "Hamilton." Miranda chose his cast for his text. Page and Paulus chose their cast for someone else's text.

The question of what Edwards and Stone would have thought is unanswerable but not irrelevant. Stone was a meticulous craftsman who won an Oscar for "Father Goose," an Edgar for "Charade," and wrote the book for the Tony-winning "1776." Edwards spent seven years writing the show, driven by his conviction that the story of the Declaration's drafting was inherently dramatic enough to sustain a musical without fictional embellishment. Both men wrote a show about white men because the Continental Congress was composed of white men, and the drama of the show depended on the audience understanding what those specific men, in that specific room, in that specific summer, decided to do and what they decided not to do. The decision not to address slavery in the Declaration was made by men who looked like the original cast. The dissonance between the principles they wrote and the institution they preserved was visible in their faces, their wigs, their knee breeches. When the 2022 revival replaced those faces with the faces of women and people of color, it added a new dissonance (the excluded performing the excluders) but it subtracted the original one (the privileged choosing to preserve their privilege). Whether the trade was worth it is a legitimate artistic question. Whether it was the playwrights' question to answer or the directors' is the question this book insists on asking.

The distinction is not a technicality. It is the argument of this book.

* * *

The comparison between “Hamilton” and the 2022 “1776” reveals a hierarchy of permissions that the American theatre has constructed around non-traditional casting but has not been willing to name.

“Hamilton” cast people of color in the roles of white historical figures. It was celebrated as visionary, revolutionary, and historically significant. No one called it cultural appropriation. No one asked whether it was fair to the memory of the actual Alexander Hamilton to have him portrayed by a Puerto Rican man. No one objected that the casting erased the whiteness of the founding fathers, even though the founding fathers’ whiteness is historically significant in ways that are directly relevant to the play’s themes of slavery, immigration, and national identity. The celebration was universal because the casting moved in the approved direction: from white roles to non-white performers.

Now consider the inverse. Would an all-white cast performing an August Wilson play as a commentary on the white gaze be equally celebrated? Would white actors playing Troy Maxson and Rose in “Fences,” speaking Wilson’s language, inhabiting Wilson’s Pittsburgh, be praised as visionary recontextualization? The answer is so obviously no that the question sounds absurd. And it should sound absurd. An all-white “Fences” would be an obscenity, a theft of Black art by white performers, a negation of everything Wilson built. But the reason it would be an obscenity is the reason that matters. It would be an obscenity because Wilson wrote those roles for Black actors, because the characters’ Blackness is inseparable from their experience, because the text emerges from a specific cultural ground that cannot be transferred to other bodies without destroying its meaning.

Consider another inverse. Would a cast of Russian actors performing “1776” to explore the irony of democratic idealism from the perspective of a people without a stable democracy be welcomed as a bold theatrical experiment? Would Chinese performers staging “Hamilton” as commentary on the immigrant experience within an authoritarian state be praised as a reimagining of America’s founding mythology? Would a production of “Fences” performed by an all-Japanese company in Tokyo, exploring the parallels between American racial exclusion and Japan’s treatment of its Korean minority, be received as an act of theatrical solidarity or as a violation of cultural ownership?

The answers to these questions are not self-evident, and the fact that they are not self-evident proves the point. If non-traditional casting were a principle, it would apply universally. Any body could inhabit any role in any direction for any reason. But it does not apply universally. It applies in specific directions, sanctioned by specific cultural authorities, for specific political purposes. The casting of Black actors as white founding fathers is celebrated. The casting of white actors as Black characters is condemned. The casting of Russian or Chinese or Japanese actors as American characters is not even contemplated, because the framework governing non-traditional casting is not about theatrical universality. It is about American racial politics, and the hierarchy it produces is legible only within that politics.

August Wilson said all of this at Princeton in 1996, and this book examined his argument in the previous chapter. The question this chapter asks is: why does the same logic not apply in the other direction?

If Troy Maxson’s Blackness is essential to “Fences,” is Alexander Hamilton’s whiteness not essential to the historical story “Hamilton” tells? If casting white actors in Black roles erases Black specificity, does casting Black actors in white roles not erase white specificity? And if the answer is that white specificity does not need protection because whiteness is the dominant culture, then the principle governing non-traditional casting is not artistic. It is political. It is a redistribution of theatrical resources from the dominant group to subordinate ones, justified not by the demands of the text but by the demands of social justice.

This book does not object to social justice. It objects to the pretense that social justice is an artistic principle. If the theatre wants to redistribute roles on the basis of historical inequity, it can do so honestly. It can say: we are giving non-white performers access to white roles because non-white performers have been historically excluded from the American stage, and we are not giving white performers access to non-white roles because white performers have not been historically excluded. That is a coherent political position. It may even be a just one. But it is not a casting principle. It is an equity program administered through the mechanism of casting, and calling it a casting principle obscures what it actually is.

The obscuring is the problem. When "Hamilton" is cited as evidence that "anyone can play anyone," it is being cited dishonestly. "Hamilton" is evidence that a specific playwright chose a specific cast for a specific work, and the choice was brilliant. It is not evidence that any institution can impose any casting configuration on any playwright's work and expect the same result. The Roundabout's "1776" tested this proposition and produced a show that critics found intermittently powerful and frequently overwrought, a production that worked when its performers' identities illuminated the material and failed when the production's ideology overwhelmed it.

* * *

The deeper problem with the "Hamilton" precedent is that it flattens the distinction between authorial choice and institutional mandate into a single category called "diversity."

When Miranda casts non-white performers in "Hamilton," he is exercising the same authority that Wilson exercised when he cast Black performers in his plays, and the same authority that Beckett exercised when he specified male performers for "Waiting for Godot." All three playwrights made choices about who should inhabit their texts. All three choices reflected the playwrights' artistic visions. The principle is identical: the playwright decides.

When the Roundabout casts women and nonbinary performers of color in "1776," it is exercising a different authority entirely. It is the authority of an institution to reconceive a work whose authors are dead and cannot object. This is director's theatre, and the book has already examined its philosophical implications in the Beckett chapter. The directors' artistic vision supersedes the playwrights' conception, and the institution's priorities determine what the audience sees.

The "1776" revival is more honest than some applications of nontraditional casting because it does not pretend to be invisible. The production does not ask the audience to ignore the performers' identities. It asks the audience to see them, to register the dissonance between the historical figures and the bodies performing them, and to find meaning in that dissonance. This is color-conscious casting in its most intellectually serious form. It says: we know these people were white men, we are casting them as women and people of color, and we want you to think about what that means.

The honesty is admirable. The problem is that the meaning the production asks the audience to find is the production's meaning, not the playwrights'. Edwards and Stone wrote a show about white men arguing over whether to declare independence from Britain while preserving the institution of slavery. The 2022 revival turned it into a show about who was excluded from that room and what the founding documents might have meant if the excluded had been present. These are different shows. The second show may be more interesting to contemporary audiences than the first. It may even be more important. But it is not the show Edwards and Stone wrote, and the fact that both authors are dead does not make their authorship less real.

If the principle is that dead playwrights have no authority over their texts, the principle must apply universally. It must apply to August Wilson's plays after 2075, when Wilson's copyright expires. It must apply to “Fences” with an all-white cast if a director finds that casting artistically illuminating. If the answer is that some dead playwrights’ texts are protected from reconception and others are not, the criterion for protection is not authorship. It is identity politics. Wilson’s texts are protected because Wilson was Black and his characters’ Blackness is sacred. Edwards and Stone’s texts are not protected because they were white and their characters’ whiteness is disposable. This may be a defensible position in a social justice framework, but it is not a defensible position in an artistic one, because it makes the playwright’s racial identity, rather than the playwright’s artistic intention, the determinant of how much authority the text carries.

* * *

There is a version of the “Hamilton” argument that this book can accept, and it is the version Miranda himself has been careful to articulate. Miranda wrote a new work. He chose his cast. His cast serves his text. The text and the casting are inseparable because the playwright made them inseparable. This is playwright sovereignty in action, and it is exactly what this book defends.

The version this book cannot accept is the one the theatre industry has built on Miranda’s achievement: the idea that “Hamilton” proved that casting is infinitely flexible, that any body can inhabit any role, that the playwright’s conception of the character is a starting point rather than an endpoint. “Hamilton” proved none of these things. It proved that Lin-Manuel Miranda is a gifted playwright who knew what his show needed. It proved that authorial vision, when it is strong enough and specific enough, can make any casting choice legible. It proved that the playwright, when empowered to make decisions about his own work, will make better decisions than any institution could make for him.

The irony is that “Hamilton” is the strongest possible argument for the position August Wilson defended and Robert Brustein attacked. Miranda did not wait for a white institution to cast Black actors in white roles. He wrote his own show, with his own characters, for his own cast. He did not integrate an existing work. He built a new one. He did what Wilson said Black playwrights should do: he created art from the cultural ground on which he stood, and the art was so powerful that the entire industry had to reckon with it. The tragedy is that the industry’s reckoning took the form of a policy rather than a principle. Instead of building more stages for more playwrights to do what Miranda did, the industry applied Miranda’s achievement retroactively to works whose authors had made different choices, and called the application progress.

“Hamilton” is a masterwork. It is also, against its creator’s probable intentions, the most effective argument the institutional theatre has ever had for overriding the playwright. Every time a director casts a production against the text’s specifications and cites “Hamilton” as precedent, the director is borrowing Miranda’s authority to do something Miranda never did: impose a casting vision on someone else’s work. Miranda’s name is invoked to justify the very practice his achievement made unnecessary. If every playwright wrote with Miranda’s clarity and conviction, non-traditional casting as an institutional mandate would have no reason to exist. The work would contain the casting, and the casting would serve the work, and the question of who should play whom would be answered by the only person qualified to answer it: the author.

The “Hamilton” effect extends beyond Broadway. It has reshaped expectations in regional theatre, in educational theatre, and in the critical vocabulary used to evaluate productions of all kinds. When a director at a LORT theatre proposes a multiracial “Our Town” or a gender-reversed “Death of a Salesman,” the artistic justification offered is almost invariably some variation of “Hamilton showed us that audiences are ready for this." The argument takes Miranda's specific achievement and generalizes it into a universal permission. It assumes that because "Hamilton" succeeded, any production that diversifies its cast will succeed in the same way, for the same reasons. This is a category error. "Hamilton" succeeded because Miranda is a brilliant writer who built his casting into his dramaturgy. A multiracial "Our Town" succeeds or fails based on whether the casting serves Wilder's text, not on whether "Hamilton" proved that casting can be diversified. The two situations are connected only by the superficial fact that both involve non-white actors in traditionally white roles. The artistic logic is entirely different.

The lesson of this chapter is that the American theatre has two models available to it, and it must choose between them. The first model is Miranda's: the playwright creates new work, conceives the cast, and the institution serves the playwright's vision. This is the model Wilson advocated and Beckett enforced. It requires more playwrights, more new work, more investment in creation rather than reinterpretation. It is harder and more expensive than the alternative, and it produces better art.

The second model is the Roundabout's: the institution takes existing work, reconceives the cast according to institutional priorities, and the dead playwright's intentions are overridden by the living director's vision. This model requires no new work. It requires no new playwrights. It requires only a text, a concept, and an institution willing to impose the second on the first. It is easier and cheaper than the alternative, and it produces work that ranges from the revelatory to the didactic depending on the skill of the reimagining.

This book argues for the first model and against the second, not because reconception is always bad (the 2022 "1776" contained moments of genuine theatrical power) but because the second model, when institutionalized as policy rather than practiced as exception, degrades the authority of the playwright and transfers creative power from the person who writes the work to the person who produces it. That transfer is the subject of this entire book, and no production in recent memory illustrates its mechanism more clearly than the contrast between what Miranda did with “Hamilton” and what the Roundabout did with “1776.”

Race and gender have dominated the casting debate so far. But what happens when the same tension between authorial specificity and institutional mandate meets a different category of identity entirely, one where the spectrum of human variation is so finely graded that the demand for authenticity consumes itself? The casting of Helen Keller in “The Miracle Worker” answers that question, and the answer is not comfortable for anyone.

Chapter 7: The Miracle Worker and the Authenticity Trap

In October 2009, the producer David Richenthal announced the cast for the first Broadway revival of William Gibson's "The Miracle Worker," to celebrate the play's fiftieth anniversary. The revival would open at the Circle in the Square Theatre in March 2010, directed by Kate Whoriskey, with Alison Pill as Annie Sullivan and, in the role of Helen Keller, the Academy Award-nominated film actress Abigail Breslin, then thirteen years old and best known for "Little Miss Sunshine." The reaction from disability advocacy organizations was immediate and hostile. Sharon Jensen, executive director of the Alliance for Inclusion in the Arts (the renamed Non-Traditional Casting Project, whose founding this book examined in Chapter 3), stated: "We do not think it's O.K. for reputable producers to cast this lead role without seriously considering an actress from our community."

Richenthal's defense was financial. He needed a recognizable name to secure the production's three-million-dollar capitalization. "It's simply naive to think that in this day and age," he told the New York Times, "you'll be able to sell tickets to a play revival solely on the potential of the production to be a great show or on the potential for an unknown actress to give a breakthrough performance." The statement was candid, and its candor was itself a provocation. Richenthal was not arguing that Breslin was the best actress for the role. He was arguing that Breslin was the only actress who could make the role financially viable. The artistic question (who should play Helen

Keller?) was subordinated to the economic question (who can sell tickets?) without apology.

The Alliance for Inclusion had already protested the casting of a hearing actor, Henry Stram, in the deaf role of Singer in an Off Broadway production of “The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter” weeks earlier. The Breslin casting extended the argument from Deaf characters to Deaf-Blind ones. Jensen and her organization contended that a blind or deaf actress should have been given the opportunity to play Helen Keller, and that the refusal to even audition disabled performers for the role was a form of exclusion as systemic as any racial casting barrier.

Richenthal, to his credit, responded to the pressure. He partnered with the Alliance for Inclusion to search for a disabled understudy, and ten-year-old Kyra Siegel, who had lost most of the vision in her right eye from an injury at age nine, was cast as Breslin’s standby. Siegel was no stranger to the role; she had already played Helen Keller in a community theatre production at Cottage Theater in Eugene, Oregon, where her mother played Annie Sullivan. It was the first time a visually impaired performer had been associated with a Broadway production of “The Miracle Worker.” The casting satisfied no one completely. Advocates noted that an understudy is not a lead, that Siegel’s partial vision loss was categorically different from DeafBlindness, and that the compromise reinforced rather than challenged the assumption that disabled performers belong in supporting positions. Richenthal noted that he had made a good-faith effort and that the decision to cast the lead remained his prerogative as producer.

Breslin’s performance, when the show opened on March 3, 2010, was praised by critics. Frank Scheck of The Hollywood Reporter wrote that she conveyed Helen’s wildness and the growing bond with Sullivan convincingly. The production was directed with clarity by Whoriskey, and the period costumes by Paul Tazewell were noted as both elegant and eloquent. But the venue proved disastrous. The Circle in the Square’s theatre-in-the-round configuration meant that at any given moment, a significant portion of the audience could not see Helen Keller's face, and because Helen does not speak, her facial expressions carry the entire weight of her performance. The production closed on April 4, 2010, after only twenty-one previews and thirty-eight regular performances, with the entire $2.6 million investment lost. The star's name had not, in the end, been enough. But the question her casting raised outlived the production by years.

Helen Keller's great-niece had weighed in during the controversy with a perspective that cut against the advocacy position. She argued that Gibson's play was "not primarily to advocate for the disabled, per se...it is to tell the story of an amazingly intelligent child, burdened with a treble handicap, who through the foresight and love of both her family and teacher, was able to live an extraordinary life of personal achievement and advocacy for the disabled." The distinction between advocacy and storytelling is the distinction at the heart of this argument. The play exists to tell a story. The advocacy community wants the play to serve a cause. Both purposes are legitimate. They are not the same purpose, and when they collide, the book argues that the story takes precedence.

The Breslin controversy established the terms of a debate that has only intensified in the years since: who has the right to play a character whose defining attribute is a disability? The question sounds like a variation of the racial casting debates this book has already examined, and in some respects it is. But disability introduces complications that race does not, and those complications reveal the logical terminus of the authenticity argument that undergirds non-traditional casting reform.

* * *

The first complication is the nature of disability itself. Race, however complex its social construction, is visible. A Black actor on stage reads as Black to the audience. The casting either matches the character's racial identity or it does not, and the audience registers the match or mismatch immediately. Disability is different. Some disabilities are visible (a wheelchair, a missing limb, a guide dog). Others are invisible (chronic pain, cognitive conditions, mental illness). Some are stable (congenital blindness). Others fluctuate (multiple sclerosis, episodic deafness). And some, critically, are conditions that actors have historically been trained to simulate.

Helen Keller's disability is specific: she was rendered blind, deaf, and consequently unable to speak by an illness (most likely scarlet fever or meningitis) at nineteen months of age. She lost her sight and hearing simultaneously, before she had acquired language. The experience of being DeafBlind from infancy is qualitatively different from being Deaf (which permits sight), blind (which permits hearing), or late-deafened (which permits linguistic memory). A Deaf actress cast as Helen Keller would be performing a disability she does not share. A blind actress cast as Helen Keller would be performing a disability she does not share. Only a DeafBlind actress who lost both senses in infancy would share Helen Keller's specific condition, and the number of such actresses with professional training and Broadway-caliber skill is, to be direct about it, extremely small.

This is not an argument against casting disabled performers. It is an observation about what happens when the authenticity principle, the demand that a performer share the character's identity, is applied with logical consistency. The principle, as articulated by the Alliance for Inclusion and by disability advocacy organizations more broadly, holds that a disabled character should be played by a disabled performer because the performer's lived experience of disability brings an authenticity to the role that a non-disabled performer cannot replicate. The principle is intuitively appealing. It is also, when followed to its conclusion, self-consuming.

If the principle requires a disabled actress for Helen Keller, which disability qualifies? Being Deaf is not the same as being DeafBlind. Millicent Simmonds, the Deaf actress known for the "A Quiet Place" films, was cast as Helen Keller in the announced film "Helen and Teacher" in October 2021, opposite Rachel Brosnahan as Annie Sullivan. The film, to be directed by Wash Westmoreland ("Still Alice") from a screenplay developed in consultation with the Helen Keller National Center for Youth and Adults, was set during Keller's years at Radcliffe College. Simmonds, eighteen at the time of the announcement, was reportedly a distant cousin of Keller's. She took to Instagram calling it "a role of a lifetime" and expressed herself as "humbled and honoured to portray one of the most extraordinary women of our time."

The DeafBlind community immediately protested. Simmonds is Deaf but sighted. She navigates the world visually. She communicates through American Sign Language, which is a visual language. Helen Keller, after nineteen months of age, had neither sight nor hearing. Her communication systems (tactile signing, Braille, eventually speech through oral training) were entirely non-visual and non-auditory. The gap between Simmonds' experience and Keller's is not a matter of degree but of kind. ASL instructor Loni Friedmann, who has a substantial following in the Deaf community, told her followers she was "taken aback" by the casting, arguing it was "the same concept with hearing people taking over Deaf roles." Other commenters on Simmonds' Instagram were more direct: "Congrats to you for your role as Helen Keller. But I want to know why the movie makers don't choose a DeafBlind person? I think this more authentic."

The logic is impeccable. If a hearing actress playing a Deaf character is inauthentic, a Deaf actress playing a DeafBlind character is equally inauthentic, because the experiences are not the same and the claim of shared identity that justifies the demand for authenticity does not hold. Simmonds herself had been careful throughout her career to articulate her identity with precision. As host of the 2021 Media Access Awards, she signed that she was "not a Deaf actor, but an actor who happens to be Deaf." The formulation was designed to resist the reduction of her artistic identity to her medical condition. Yet the authenticity argument, as applied to her casting as Helen Keller, performed exactly that reduction: it evaluated her not as an actor but as a category of disability, found the category insufficient, and declared her inauthentic.

The Simmonds casting reveals the recursion built into the authenticity argument. Each level of specificity generates a new exclusion. A sighted actress cannot play a blind character. A Deaf actress cannot play a DeafBlind character. A DeafBlind actress who lost her senses at age five cannot play a character who lost hers at nineteen months, because the experience of acquiring language before losing it is fundamentally different from never acquiring language at all. The regression has no natural stopping point because the argument's logic has no natural stopping point. Every human experience is specific. Every identity is composed of intersecting particularities. The demand that the performer share the character's identity can always be refined into a demand that the performer share more of the character's identity, and the refinement always reveals a gap between the performer and the character that the previous level of specificity had obscured.

* * *

The second complication is the selective enforcement of the authenticity principle. Anne Sullivan, Helen Keller's teacher and the play's co-protagonist, was herself severely visually impaired. Sullivan was born on April 14, 1866, in Feeding Hills, Massachusetts, the eldest child of impoverished Irish immigrants who had fled the Great Famine. At age five, she contracted trachoma, a bacterial eye disease that caused repeated, painful infections and, over time, left her nearly blind. Her mother died of tuberculosis when Anne was eight. Her father, an alcoholic who could not manage the family alone, abandoned his children. Anne and her younger brother Jimmie were sent to the Tewksbury Almshouse, an overcrowded, underfunded institution notorious for cruelty, where the mortality rate was staggering. Jimmie died within months of their arrival. Anne endured four years at Tewksbury, survived two unsuccessful eye surgeries, and was housed in a ward with single mothers and unmarried pregnant women. In 1880, during a state inspection of the almshouse led by Franklin Benjamin Sanborn, fourteen-year-old Anne threw herself in front of the official and pleaded: "Mr. Sanborn, I want to go to school!" The plea was granted. She entered the Perkins School for the Blind in Boston on October 7, 1880.

At Perkins, Sullivan underwent a series of eye operations that partially restored her vision. She was never fully sighted. She graduated as class valedictorian at age twenty, and the following year was recommended by the school's director, Michael Anagnos, to teach a seven-year-old DeafBlind girl in Alabama named Helen Keller. Sullivan's qualification for the position was not pedagogical certification. It was her own experience of near-blindness, her education at a school for the blind, and her knowledge of the manual alphabet she had learned from Laura Bridgman, a DeafBlind graduate of Perkins. Sullivan's visual impairment is not incidental to her character. It is the reason she was qualified to teach Helen Keller. It is the reason Anagnos recommended her. It is the foundation of the empathy and the ferocity she brings to the teaching relationship, because she knows what it means to live in darkness and she knows what it means to fight her way out of it.

In Gibson's play, Sullivan's impairment is present. The character's backstory includes her time at Tewksbury and her education at Perkins. The dramatic tension between Sullivan and the Keller family is driven partly by Sullivan’s class background (an Irish almshouse orphan in a Southern household of means) and partly by her refusal to pity Helen, because Sullivan knows from her own experience that pity is the enemy of progress. The character’s psychology is built on her disability.

No one has ever argued that the actress playing Annie Sullivan must be visually impaired.

Not the Alliance for Inclusion in 2009. Not the DeafBlind advocacy community in 2021. Not any of the critics who protested Breslin’s casting or Simmonds’ casting. Anne Bancroft was not visually impaired when she won the Tony and the Oscar for the role. Alison Pill was not visually impaired when she played Sullivan in the 2010 revival. Patty Duke, when she later crossed over to play Sullivan in a 1979 television adaptation, was not visually impaired. The demand for authenticity was activated for Helen Keller and deactivated for Annie Sullivan, despite the fact that Sullivan’s visual impairment is historically documented, dramatically relevant, and central to the character’s identity. By 1935, one year before her death, Sullivan was completely blind. She had been seriously visually impaired for nearly her entire life. If the authenticity argument applies to one character in “The Miracle Worker,” it applies to both. The fact that it has only ever been applied to one reveals that the argument is not, in practice, a principle applied consistently to all characters with disabilities. It is a principle applied to the character whose disability is the play’s subject, the character the audience comes to see, the character whose identity is culturally iconic. Helen Keller is the symbol. Annie Sullivan is the teacher. The symbol must be authentic. The teacher need not be.

This selectivity is not unique to “The Miracle Worker.” It recurs wherever the authenticity argument is deployed. When advocates demand that a wheelchair user play a character in a wheelchair, they do not simultaneously demand that a character with high blood pressure be played by an actor with high blood pressure, or that a character with depression be played by an actor with clinical depression, or that a character who is an alcoholic be played by an actor in recovery. The principle is activated for disabilities that are visible, iconic, and politically organized, and deactivated for disabilities that are invisible, mundane, or un-advocated. This does not mean the principle is wrong. It means the principle is not a principle. It is a political claim advanced by specific communities on behalf of specific conditions, and its force derives from the political organization of those communities rather than from the logical structure of the argument.

* * *

The third complication is the paradox at the heart of theatrical representation itself, and it is the complication that matters most to the argument.

The Broad Street Review, in a 2009 analysis of the Breslin controversy, posed the question that no advocate for authentic casting has satisfactorily answered: if the argument is that only someone who has experienced a condition can convey it, then DeafBlindness cannot be directly comprehended by anyone who does not live with those conditions. If the performer's lived experience is what makes the performance authentic, the audience's lack of that experience is what makes the performance inaccessible. The audience is overwhelmingly neither blind nor deaf. The audience cannot verify the authenticity it is told to value, because the audience does not share the experience that authenticity is supposed to represent. What the audience receives is not the experience of DeafBlindness but a theatrical performance of that experience, mediated through the conventions of stagecraft (blocking, lighting, sound design, the audience's own visual and auditory engagement with the actor's body). A DeafBlind actress performing Helen Keller is performing for an audience that perceives her through senses she does not possess. The performance is, by definition, a translation.

This is not a callous observation. It is the fundamental condition of all theatre. Acting is the art of performing experience that is not the performer's own. Laurence Olivier was not a Danish prince. Meryl Streep was not a Polish Holocaust survivor. Daniel Day-Lewis was not a man with cerebral palsy, though his performance as Christy Brown in "My Left Foot" is routinely cited as one of the greatest film performances ever recorded. The disability community's objection to non-disabled actors playing disabled characters has a different moral weight than the objection to, say, Olivier playing Hamlet, because disabled performers face systemic exclusion that Danish princes do not. But the theatrical mechanism is the same. The performer uses craft to inhabit an experience that is not the performer's own, and the audience evaluates the result based on whether it is convincing, not on whether it is autobiographical.

Patty Duke was not DeafBlind when she originated the role of Helen Keller on Broadway in 1959 and won the Academy Award for the same role in the 1962 film. Her performance is still considered one of the defining achievements of American acting. Anne Bancroft was not visually impaired when she played Annie Sullivan and won the Tony and the Oscar. The performances worked not because the actresses shared their characters' conditions but because they were skilled enough to make the audience believe they did. This is what acting is. It is the simulation of experience through craft. The demand that the performer share the character's experience is a demand that acting be replaced by testimony, that the stage become a witness stand rather than a place of imaginative transformation.

The demand carries a further implication that its advocates do not always acknowledge: if only a DeafBlind performer can authentically represent DeafBlindness, the corollary is that DeafBlind performers can only authentically represent DeafBlindness. The authenticity argument, followed in both directions, traps disabled performers in their conditions. It says: your disability is your qualification, and your qualification is your disability. A DeafBlind actress who wants to play Lady Macbeth or Blanche DuBois or Juliet has no claim under the authenticity framework, because those characters are not DeafBlind. The framework that promises to open doors for disabled performers opens only one door, the door to roles defined by disability, and closes every other door more firmly than before.

The book does not make this argument to dismiss the frustrations of disabled performers. Those frustrations are real and documented. Disabled actors are systematically excluded from the American theatre, not because they cannot act but because the industry does not invest in training them, does not accommodate their needs in audition processes and rehearsal schedules, does not cast them in roles that are not defined by disability, and does not imagine them as part of the theatrical workforce. The solution to this exclusion is structural: more training programs, more accessible audition spaces, more casting directors willing to see disabled performers for non-disabled roles, more playwrights writing disabled characters with the complexity and specificity that the characters deserve. The solution is not the authenticity mandate, which restricts disabled performers to disabled roles and reduces their artistic identity to their medical condition.

* * *

In 2014, the University of Tennessee's Clarence Brown Theatre cast Rachel Finney, a legally blind student, as Helen Keller in a production of "The Miracle Worker." Finney's experience illuminated the practical contradictions of the authenticity argument. She was legally blind but not completely blind; she retained partial sight. She was not deaf. To play Helen Keller, she had to suppress her hearing while relying on her partial vision for the theatrical cues that allowed her to navigate the stage, find her scene partners, and execute the blocking. She was, in other words, performing a disability more severe than her own while using the abilities she retained to sustain the theatrical illusion. Her casting satisfied the authenticity argument's demand for a disabled performer in a disabled role, but the performance itself required her to act, to simulate a condition she did not fully share, which is exactly what the authenticity argument says non-disabled performers should not do.

Finney's experience is instructive because it reveals that the gap between performer and character can never be fully closed. There is always acting involved. The question is not whether the performer simulates the character's experience (all performers do) but whether the performer simulates it skillfully enough to serve the playwright's text. This is the question that the authenticity argument, in its advocacy form, refuses to ask, because asking it means evaluating performers on the basis of craft rather than identity, and evaluating performers on the basis of craft is the practice that the authenticity argument was designed to challenge.

* * *

The deeper question this chapter must ask is whether the authenticity argument, applied to disability, is structurally identical to the arguments about race and gender that this book has examined in earlier chapters, or whether it is something different.

The structural identity is apparent. In both cases, a community argues that its members should play characters who share their identity, on the grounds that shared experience produces superior performance and that exclusion from such roles constitutes discrimination. In both cases, the argument invokes historical injustice (disabled performers, like performers of color, have been systematically excluded from the American stage) and proposes a remedy (casting mandates that reserve roles for performers who share the character's identity). In both cases, the argument encounters the problem of authorial sovereignty: the playwright may have written the character without specifying that the performer must share the character's condition, and the demand that the performer share it is a demand imposed by the advocacy community rather than by the text.

The difference is that disability makes the logical structure of the authenticity argument more visible than race does, because disability's spectrum is more finely graded. The categories "Black" and "white," however socially constructed, are broadly legible to audiences and broadly stable across performances. The category "disabled" encompasses thousands of conditions, each with its own specificity, and the demand for authentic representation must either specify which conditions count (in which case it is arbitrary) or apply to all conditions (in which case it is impossible). Helen Keller is the clearest example. To play her authentically, by the strongest version of the argument, the actress must be DeafBlind, must have lost both senses in infancy, must have no linguistic memory, must be female, and must be white, because Keller was white and her whiteness, in 1880s Alabama, was constitutive of her social position and her access to the resources that made her education possible. Must the actress also be from the South? Must she be from a family of means? Must she have a father who was a Confederate veteran, as Captain Keller was? At what point does the demand for authenticity become a demand for biographical duplication, and at what point does biographical duplication become the negation of acting?

These questions are posed not to mock the authenticity argument but to identify its logical structure. The argument is a machine that, once activated, cannot be stopped by its operators. Every criterion of authenticity reveals a further criterion that has not been met. Every claim of shared identity reveals a dimension of identity that is not shared. The machine runs until it reaches the conclusion that no one can play anyone other than themselves, which is the abolition of theatre.

* * *

William Gibson, who wrote “The Miracle Worker,” based his play on Helen Keller’s 1903 autobiography “The Story of My Life.” He adapted it first as a teleplay for “Playhouse 90” in 1957, then expanded it for the stage in 1959. The play opened at the Playhouse Theatre on October 19, 1959, directed by Arthur Penn, and ran for 719 performances. It won four Tony Awards: Best Play, Best Director, Best Actress in a Play for Anne Bancroft, and Best Stage Technician for John Walters. The 1962 film, directed by Penn with the same cast, won Bancroft the Oscar for Best Actress and Patty Duke, then sixteen years old, the Oscar for Best Supporting Actress. The play subsequently became one of the most frequently produced dramas in American educational and community theatre, performed thousands of times in high schools, colleges, and regional theatres across the country. Ivy Green, Helen Keller’s childhood home in Tuscumbia, Alabama, hosts an annual outdoor production that is designated as the state’s official outdoor drama. The play has been adapted for television twice more, in 1979 (with Duke crossing to the Sullivan role and Melissa Gilbert as Keller) and in 2000 (with Alison Elliott as Sullivan and Hallie Kate Eisenberg as Keller). Neither Bancroft, Duke, Gilbert, Elliott, nor Eisenberg was disabled. Neither was any of the thousands of performers who have played these roles in educational and community productions over six decades. The performance history of “The Miracle Worker” is, in itself, a comprehensive demonstration that the role of Helen Keller has been played by non-disabled actresses for the entire existence of the play, and that the play has worked, has moved audiences, has taught generations of young people about Helen Keller and Annie Sullivan, without the authenticity that advocacy organizations now declare essential.

Gibson did not write a play about disability. He wrote a play about language. The central dramatic event is not Helen's blindness or deafness but the moment when Sullivan's finger-spelling connects to Helen's comprehension: the moment at the water pump when the word "water," spelled into one hand while water runs over the other, breaks through the wall between Helen and the world. The play's title refers to Sullivan, not to Keller. Sullivan is the miracle worker. Keller is the miracle. The play is about what teaching can accomplish when the teacher refuses to accept the student's limitations, and the drama depends on the audience understanding that both women, teacher and student, are fighting the same battle from opposite sides. The New York Times, in its original 1959 review, praised Gibson's play for its "overwhelming force" in the crucial scenes and identified the decisive factor as "the extraordinary performances, the magnificent teamwork of Anne Bancroft and ten-year-old Patty Duke, and the brilliant direction of Arthur Penn." The word "disability" does not appear in the review. The word "acting" does.

If the play is about language rather than disability, the casting question changes. The question is not whether the actress shares Helen Keller's condition but whether she can perform the moment of linguistic breakthrough with enough force to make the audience understand what language means to a person who has never had it. Patty Duke could do this. Abigail Breslin could do this. A DeafBlind actress could do this. The criterion is not identity but craft, and the authority to determine which performer meets the criterion belongs to the playwright and the director, not to an advocacy organization applying a political standard to an artistic decision.

This is the argument applied to a new domain. The playwright writes the character. The director casts the role. The performer serves the text. The institution's preferences, however well-intentioned, do not override the author's conception. If William Gibson wanted a non-disabled actress to play Helen Keller, that was his right. If a future production's director wants a DeafBlind actress, that is the director's right, within the bounds of the text. What is not anyone's right is to mandate, from outside the production, that a specific category of performer must be cast in the role regardless of the playwright's intentions and the director's artistic judgment. That mandate, whether it comes from the NTCP, the Alliance for Inclusion, or any other advocacy body, is the substitution of institutional authority for authorial authority, and it is the practice this book exists to oppose.

The disability authenticity argument is, finally, the clearest illustration of a pattern that runs through every casting controversy this book has examined. The pattern is this: a legitimate grievance (disabled performers are excluded from the American stage) generates a proposed remedy (cast disabled performers in disabled roles) that, when examined closely, does not address the grievance and creates new problems of its own. The grievance is about exclusion. The remedy is about matching. Exclusion is solved by inclusion: by training more disabled performers, by making stages accessible, by writing roles that are complex rather than reducible to medical condition, by casting disabled performers in non-disabled roles when their craft serves the text. Matching does not solve exclusion. Matching confines disabled performers to a narrow category of roles defined by their condition, which is a different form of the same exclusion they already face. The disabled performer who can only play disabled characters is no less confined than the disabled performer who cannot get an audition at all. The cage is smaller and better lit, but it is still a cage.

The irony of the Breslin controversy is that the production that was supposed to prove the necessity of star casting failed commercially, and the advocacy campaign that was supposed to prove the necessity of authentic casting produced no alternative production. No one mounted a “Miracle Worker” with a DeafBlind Helen Keller to demonstrate that the authenticity the advocates demanded would produce a superior theatrical experience. The argument remained hypothetical. The demand remained political. And the play, Gibson’s play, continued to be performed across the country by non-disabled performers who brought their craft to the text and made audiences weep at the water pump, as they have been weeping since 1959, because the play is powerful enough to work regardless of who performs it, provided the performers are skilled enough to serve it.

But what happens when the logic of identity matching leaves the stage entirely? When it is applied not to a performer playing a character but to an ASL interpreter providing language access for Deaf audience members? When the characters being interpreted are not human beings with racial identities but lions? The answer exposes something about the logic that the previous chapters have only implied.

Chapter 8: The Lion King, the Interpreter, and the Conduit Problem

On March 29, 2022, Keith Wann received an email offering him a freelance assignment. The job was routine: interpret a single performance of “The Lion King” on Broadway into American Sign Language for Deaf audience members. The pay was $1,000. The date was April 24. Wann accepted.

Wann was fifty-three years old. He was a CODA, a Child of Deaf Adults, which meant he had grown up bilingual in English and ASL, his first language acquired not in a classroom but in his family’s kitchen. CODAs occupy a distinctive position in the Deaf community: they are hearing people who are culturally Deaf, who move between the hearing and Deaf worlds with a fluency that formally trained interpreters spend years developing. Wann had been interpreting Broadway shows for over a decade, working through the Theatre Development Fund’s accessibility program, which staffed ASL interpreters for designated performances across Broadway. He was one of TDF’s most experienced theatrical interpreters, and he served as a trainer for newer interpreters entering the Broadway pipeline, including BIPOC interpreters whom TDF was working to develop. He had interpreted shows of every kind: musicals, plays, revivals, new works. His YouTube channel, which highlighted Deaf culture and ASL performance, had received one of YouTube’s early awards for reaching a million views. He had co-authored the book “Our Stories: the Soul of Sign Language Interpreting.” He was, by any professional measure, one of the most qualified theatrical ASL interpreters working in New York. The assignment was routine. He had done dozens like it.

Four days later, on April 2, Wann received a second email. This one was from Lisa Carling, the director of TDF's accessibility programs. "With great embarrassment and apologies," Carling wrote, "I'm asking you both to please back out of interpreting the show for us on Sunday, April 24. I don't see any other way out of this. It seems like the best solution." Carling's email also referenced "the current social climate" as a factor in the decision.

The "both" referred to Wann and Christina Mosleh, another white interpreter who had been booked for the same performance. The regular interpreter team for "The Lion King" was composed of BIPOC interpreters. Two of the three team members were unavailable for the April 24 date, and TDF had reached out to Wann and Mosleh as experienced fill-ins, a standard practice. The reason for the retraction was contained in a separate email from Shelly Guy, the director of ASL for "The Lion King," to Carling. Guy wrote: "The majority of the characters in the Lion King are black actors, and the content takes place in Africa. Keith Wann, though an amazing ASL performer, is not a black person and therefore should not be representing Lion King."

Wann was being removed from a job he was qualified to perform, had been asked to perform, and had accepted in good faith, because his skin color did not match the skin color of the actors on stage. He was white. The cast was predominantly Black. Therefore, according to Guy, he should not be "representing" the show. Guy was herself born in Haifa, Israel, is not Black, and identifies no closer to the racial category she was demanding than Wann does, a detail that adds a further layer of absurdity: a non-Black ASL director was telling a non-Black interpreter that his lack of Blackness disqualified him from providing language access to Deaf audience members at a show about African animals.

On November 8, 2022, Wann filed a federal discrimination lawsuit against TDF and Carling. He invoked 42 U.S.C. Section 1981, a Reconstruction-era civil rights statute originally enacted to protect formerly enslaved people's right to make and enforce contracts regardless of race. In 1976, the Supreme Court, in a decision written by Justice Thurgood Marshall, ruled that the statute's protections extended to white plaintiffs as well. Wann's complaint was narrow: he had been offered a contract, he had accepted it, and the contract was revoked because of his race. The lawsuit sought, at minimum, $1,000 in compensatory damages and attorneys' fees.

Two weeks later, the case settled. Both parties issued statements expressing satisfaction with the resolution. Wann wrote on social media: "This past week has seen a lot of pain in our community and also seen some much needed conversations. It is unfortunate that assumptions were made, and conclusions were drawn without all the facts." The Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf conducted its own investigation and found no violations. TDF asked Wann to remain on their interpreter roster. He declined.

The case was over. The questions it raised were not.

* * *

The first question is what an interpreter does, because the answer determines whether the racial matching that Guy demanded makes any sense.

An ASL interpreter at a Broadway performance sits or stands to the side of the stage, visible to Deaf audience members who have been seated in a designated section. The interpreter watches and listens to the performance and renders it in real time into American Sign Language. The interpreter conveys dialogue, lyrics, sound effects, musical cues, and emotional tone. The interpreter does not wear a costume. The interpreter does not interact with the actors. The interpreter does not play a role. The interpreter is, in the professional terminology of the field, a conduit: a channel through which linguistic information passes from one modality (spoken English, sung English, orchestral music) to another (visual-gestural ASL).

The NAD-RID Code of Professional Conduct, jointly developed by the National Association of the Deaf and the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf and adopted in 2005, codifies this understanding across seven tenets. The Code applies to “certified and associate members of the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, Inc., Certified members of the National Association of the Deaf, interns,” and covers “interpreted situations that are performed either face-to-face or remotely.” Its philosophy rests on a foundational principle: “The American Deaf community represents a cultural and linguistic group having the inalienable right to full and equal communication and to participation in all aspects of society.”

Tenet 2 requires interpreters to “render the message faithfully by conveying the content and spirit of what is being communicated.” Tenet 2 also instructs interpreters to “refrain from providing counsel, advice, or personal opinions.” Tenet 3 requires interpreters to “conduct and present themselves in an unobtrusive manner and exercise care in choice of attire.” The word “unobtrusive” is important. The interpreter’s professional obligation is to be functionally invisible, to convey language without drawing attention to the act of conveyance. The interpreter is a window, not a painting. The audience looks through the interpreter to reach the content, not at the interpreter as content.

Tenet 2 further specifies that interpreters must “provide service delivery regardless of race, color, national origin, gender, religion, age, disability, sexual orientation, or any other factor.”

That provision is worth reading twice. The profession’s own governing document explicitly states that interpretation services must be delivered without regard to race. The Code does not say "the interpreter's race." It does not say "the consumer's race." It says interpretation shall be provided "regardless of race," full stop. The principle is categorical: the interpreter's job is to convey language, and the conveyance of language is not a racial act.

The history of the interpreting profession reinforces this understanding. The Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf was founded in 1964, at a time when most people who interpreted for Deaf individuals were not trained professionals but family members, friends, clergy, and community volunteers who happened to know sign language. Many were CODAs, like Wann. The professionalization of interpreting over the following decades was specifically designed to move the field from an informal, relationship-based model (where the interpreter's personal identity was inseparable from the service) to a professional, competency-based model (where the interpreter's qualification was determined by skill, certification, and adherence to ethical standards). RID's certification system, its Ethical Practices System for filing grievances, and its Certification Maintenance Program requiring continuing education all exist to ensure that interpretation is evaluated on the basis of professional performance rather than personal identity.

Shelly Guy's email reversed sixty years of professionalization in a single sentence. By declaring that Wann "should not be representing Lion King" because he is not Black, Guy reintroduced the very conflation of personal identity with professional function that the interpreting profession had spent decades working to eliminate. Guy's argument was that because the characters in "The Lion King" are played by Black actors and the story takes place in Africa, a white interpreter "should not be representing" the show. The verb is critical. "Representing" is not "interpreting." An interpreter does not represent anyone. An interpreter provides access to language. The interpreter is not standing in for the actor, is not performing the character, is not embodying the role. The interpreter is translating. The audience watches the stage for the performance and watches the interpreter for the language. These are separate visual channels serving separate functions.

Guy's argument collapses the two channels into one. It treats the interpreter's body as if it were part of the production's visual aesthetic, as if the Deaf audience member watching the interpreter is watching a second performance rather than receiving a linguistic translation. This conflation has consequences that extend far beyond Keith Wann's $1,000 freelance gig.

* * *

The second question is what the characters in "The Lion King" actually are, because the answer makes Guy's argument not merely wrong but absurd.

"The Lion King" is a musical about lions. The principal characters are Simba, a lion. Mufasa, a lion. Scar, a lion. Nala, a lion. Rafiki, a mandrill. Timon, a meerkat. Pumbaa, a warthog. Zazu, a hornbill. The hyenas are hyenas. The wildebeest are wildebeest. The show is set on the African savanna, and the characters are animals. Julie Taymor's celebrated production design uses masks, puppetry, and stylized movement to create the animal world on stage. The actors are visible beneath and within their costumes, but they are not playing human beings. They are playing animals.

Guy's argument was that because the actors playing these animals are Black, the interpreter must also be Black. Follow the logic: the character is a lion, played by a Black actor, interpreted by a person who must be Black because the actor is Black. The interpreter is not matching the character (a lion has no race). The interpreter is not matching the story (the African savanna has no racial politics in the world of the musical). The interpreter is matching the actor's skin color. The racial matching is between the interpreter and the performer, not between the interpreter and the role, which means the matching has nothing to do with the content being interpreted and everything to do with the visual appearance of two people who are performing entirely different functions.

The absurdity deepens when you consider what theatrical interpretation actually looks like in practice. A Broadway ASL interpreter does not interpret a single character. The interpreter interprets the entire show: every character, every voice, every sound. In the course of a "Lion King" performance, the same interpreter conveys Mufasa's baritone authority, Scar's sinister sibilance, young Simba's eagerness, Timon's comic timing, Pumbaa's geniality, Rafiki's wisdom, and the hyenas' menace. The interpreter shifts between characters using changes in body position, facial expression, and signing style, just as a single reader performing an audiobook voices all the characters regardless of their gender, age, or race. If the interpreter must racially match the cast, which cast member does the interpreter match? The one playing Mufasa or the one playing Zazu? The one playing Nala or the one playing Timon? In a show with a diverse cast of dozens, the interpreter can match, at most, one performer's racial identity at a time. The principle defeats itself the moment it is applied.

This is the reductio ad absurdum of racial matching applied to theatrical access. If the interpreter must match the actor's race, the principle must apply universally. A white interpreter cannot interpret "The Lion King" because the cast is Black. A Black interpreter cannot interpret "Wicked" if the cast is white. An Asian interpreter cannot interpret "Dear Evan Hansen" if the cast is not Asian. The interpreter's professional qualification, linguistic skill, and years of experience become irrelevant. The only qualification that matters is the one qualification that has nothing to do with the interpreter's ability to convey language: the color of the interpreter's skin.

Janna Sweenie, who has worked in the Deaf community as an educator and author for decades and who co-authored educational materials on American Sign Language with this book's author, has articulated the professional distinction that the Wann case violated. The interpreter's ethical obligation, under the NAD-RID Code, is to the consumer, which in a Broadway context means the Deaf audience member. The interpreter's obligation is not to the production, not to the show's ASL director, not to the institution's racial preferences. The hierarchy of obligations is clear: the Deaf person's right to qualified language access takes precedence over any other consideration. When an institution removes a qualified interpreter and replaces that interpreter with a less experienced one (or with no interpreter at all, if no racially matching replacement is available), the institution is not serving the Deaf audience. It is serving its own ideology at the Deaf audience's expense. The Deaf community has fought for decades to establish the right to qualified interpretation in medical, legal, educational, and cultural settings. The principle that an interpreter's qualifications can be overridden by the interpreter's racial identity undermines that fight at its foundation.

* * *

The third question is whose access is being served, because the answer reveals a priority inversion that this book cannot overlook.

The purpose of an ASL-interpreted Broadway performance is to provide Deaf audience members with access to a show they cannot hear. The performance exists for the Deaf audience. The interpreter exists for the Deaf audience. The entire apparatus of TDF's accessibility program exists to ensure that Deaf people can experience Broadway on the same terms as hearing people. The Deaf audience member paid for a ticket. The Deaf audience member is the consumer. The interpreter is the service provider.

When TDF removed Keith Wann from the assignment because his race did not match the cast’s race, TDF was not serving the Deaf audience. TDF was serving a visual aesthetic that had nothing to do with the Deaf audience’s linguistic needs. No Deaf audience member had complained about Wann. No Deaf audience member had requested a Black interpreter. The demand came from Shelly Guy, the show’s ASL director, whose concern was not whether the Deaf audience would understand the interpretation but whether the interpreter’s body would look right next to the stage.

Consider what the Deaf audience member actually experiences during an interpreted performance. The audience member sits in a designated section, typically house left or house right, with a clear sightline to both the stage and the interpreter. The audience member’s eyes move between two visual fields: the stage, where the performers act and sing, and the interpreter, where the language is rendered in ASL. The interpreter’s body is a linguistic instrument. The shape of the interpreter’s hands, the expression on the interpreter’s face, the posture and movement of the interpreter’s torso convey meaning in a language that is received entirely through the eyes. What the Deaf audience member needs from that body is linguistic clarity, emotional precision, and rhythmic coordination with the performance. What the Deaf audience member does not need from that body is a racial match with the actors on stage, because the interpreter’s body and the actors’ bodies serve entirely different functions and are processed by the audience member through entirely different cognitive frameworks.

This is the priority inversion: the accessibility service was subordinated to a casting philosophy. The Deaf audience’s need for a qualified interpreter was ranked below the institution’s need for racial coherence between the stage and the interpreter’s platform. The person who suffers from this inversion is not Keith Wann, who lost a single $1,000 assignment and settled his lawsuit within two weeks. The person who suffers is the hypothetical Deaf audience member who, in a system governed by Guy's principle, might attend a performance and receive a less qualified interpreter because the more qualified interpreter was the wrong color. Or worse: the Deaf audience member who receives no interpreter at all because no racially matching interpreter is available and the institution would rather cancel the accessibility service than provide it through a racially "inappropriate" body.

Wann himself identified this pattern in his interview with The Daily Moth, the Deaf community's primary news source. He noted that his certified, trilingual, Latina wife had been called to interpret only for "West Side Story" and the Gloria Estefan musical, because she is Latina, even though she was qualified to interpret any production. The same pool of interpreters was used repeatedly for the same racially matched assignments while other qualified interpreters were excluded. The racial matching did not expand opportunities for BIPOC interpreters. It confined them to a narrow set of racially "appropriate" assignments, which is a different form of the same segregation the matching was supposed to correct.

* * *

The Deaf community's response to the Wann lawsuit was not unified, and the division illuminates the internal tension between two values the community holds simultaneously: the value of qualified access and the value of cultural representation.

BIPOC interpreter Tiffany Hill, responding in ASL on social media, argued: "It's not about the color of the skin. It is the culture." The distinction Hill drew was between racial matching (skin color) and cultural competence (understanding of the cultural context being interpreted). Cultural competence is a legitimate professional consideration in interpretation. An interpreter working in a medical setting benefits from familiarity with medical terminology. An interpreter working in a legal setting benefits from familiarity with legal procedure. An interpreter working on a show set in Africa with a predominantly Black cast might benefit from familiarity with the cultural references embedded in the performance. But cultural competence is a skill, not a skin color. It can be acquired through study, experience, and professional development. A white interpreter who has spent a decade interpreting Broadway shows with diverse casts has cultural competence that a newly certified Black interpreter may not yet have developed. Competence and identity are different things, and the conflation of the two is the error that the Wann case exposed.

The OnStage Blog's editor, who is Korean American, published an editorial that tried to hold both sides of the tension. He affirmed Wann's legal position ("this is discrimination") while acknowledging the legitimate desire for BIPOC interpreter representation. But he drew a line: "What I am not for is theatre officials and leaders making dumb decisions in the name of progress when actually it could damage progress." The editorial identified the structural problem: Guy handled the situation by removing a qualified white interpreter rather than by building a system that developed and supported BIPOC interpreters to the point where they could fill every assignment. The subtraction model (remove white interpreters to create openings) was chosen over the addition model (train and certify more BIPOC interpreters to expand the pool). The subtraction model is faster. It is also, as Wann's lawsuit demonstrated, illegal.

Deaf artist Raven Sutton posted a viral TikTok opposing Wann's lawsuit, captioning it "This is not discrimination" and arguing that Black interpreters deserved the opportunity. The video was viewed more than 57,000 times. Randy Spann, host of the Deaf talk show "The Real Talk with Randy," addressed Wann directly in a video response: "You disgusted me. Enough is enough. Let black people have their chance to be in the spotlight." Other commenters on social media told Wann to “stop taking all the jobs when we have black interpreters who are a better fit.”

The framing across these responses is revealing. Spann described the interpreter’s position as “the spotlight,” as if the interpreter is performing rather than translating. Sutton and others framed the assignment as an “opportunity” and a “chance,” as if the interpreter’s role is a career-making theatrical appearance rather than a technical service engagement. If the interpreter is in the spotlight, the interpreter is a performer, and the racial matching argument follows naturally: performers should match the production’s racial identity. But if the interpreter is a conduit, as the profession’s own ethical code insists, the spotlight framing is wrong, and the racial matching argument collapses.

The community division also revealed an uncomfortable tension between two models of what the interpreter is for. In the first model, the interpreter exists to serve the Deaf audience: to provide the best possible language access regardless of who is interpreting. In the second model, the interpreter exists to represent the Deaf community: to be a visible presence whose identity carries its own meaning. The first model evaluates interpreters on competence. The second model evaluates interpreters on identity. The two models produce different outcomes, and the Wann case forced the community to choose between them, or at least to acknowledge that it had not yet chosen.

The RID’s investigation found no ethical violations, which was itself significant. The profession’s governing body, after examining the emails, the timeline, and Wann’s history with TDF, concluded that no professional standard had been breached. This did not mean the removal was just. It meant the profession’s standards, as currently written, do not address the question of whether an employer can remove an interpreter from an assignment based on race. The Code of Professional Conduct governs the interpreter’s behavior, not the employer’s. The gap between professional ethics (which prohibit racial discrimination in service delivery) and employment practices (which in this case imposed racial discrimination in hiring) is the gap through which the entire Wann episode fell.

* * *

The Wann case is the most instructive episode this book examines, because it strips the casting debate to its mechanical components and reveals the logic operating beneath every controversy the preceding chapters have analyzed.

The logic is this: every body in the theatre is a text, and every text must be read for its racial meaning. The actor's body is a text. The director's body is a text. The playwright's body is a text. And now, the interpreter's body is a text. No one in the theatrical space is exempt from racial reading, and no function is too utilitarian, too technical, too far removed from the creative act to escape the demand for racial coherence. If the interpreter must match the cast, the lighting designer must eventually match the playwright's vision, the stage manager must match the production's cultural milieu, the house manager must match the audience's demographics. There is no logical stopping point because the principle has no logical boundary. It applies wherever a body is visible, and in the theatre, every body is visible.

This is the same recursion the previous chapter identified in the disability authenticity argument, but the interpreter case makes it starker because the interpreter's function is not artistic. The interpreter is not making creative choices. The interpreter is not embodying a character. The interpreter is providing a service, and the service is language access. To racially regulate the provision of language access is to treat language access as a performance rather than a right, and to treat it as a performance is to subordinate the Deaf audience's needs to the hearing institution's aesthetic preferences.

The irony is bitter. TDF's mission is accessibility. TDF exists to ensure that Deaf people, people with disabilities, and economically disadvantaged audiences can experience live theatre. TDF administers the TKTS discount ticket booth in Times Square. TDF runs accessibility programs for multiple Broadway shows. TDF is the organization that provides the infrastructure for ASL-interpreted performances, audio-described performances for blind audience members, and open-captioned performances for audience members who are deaf or hard of hearing. The organization that exists to remove barriers to access created a new barrier to access by applying a racial filter to the provision of an accessibility service. The interpreter was not being hired to perform. The interpreter was being hired to provide access. And the access was denied, not to the Deaf audience directly, but to the qualified professional who would have provided it, because his skin was the wrong color for the animals on stage.

The additional irony, which the next chapter will examine, is that TDF is the same organization responsible for the accessibility programs at shows like "Oklahoma!," where Ali Stroker, a wheelchair user, won a Tony Award for a role not written for a wheelchair user. TDF's accessibility mission encompasses both the provision of interpreting services and the broader project of making Broadway available to disabled audiences and performers. The organization simultaneously celebrates the casting of a disabled performer in a non-disabled role (Stroker in "Oklahoma!") and enforces racial restrictions on a non-performing accessibility provider (Wann at "The Lion King"). The first decision expands the definition of who belongs in the theatre. The second decision narrows it. Both decisions were made by the same institution, in the same cultural moment, under the same banner of inclusion.

Wann's own website later provided additional context that deepened the case's significance. He noted that after removing him from the April "Lion King" assignment, TDF contacted him again months later asking him to interpret "The Lion King" when another BIPOC interpreter was unavailable on short notice. They also asked him to participate in the interpreter team for "Wicked" alongside BIPOC interpreters during the same period. The pattern was clear: Wann was qualified enough to be the emergency backup and the trainer but not qualified enough to be the primary interpreter when a racial match was available. His expertise was valued when convenient and discarded when inconvenient, and the variable determining convenience was not his skill but his race. A commenter named Sherri, posting on The Daily Moth's coverage, identified the structural failure with precision: "TDF basically failed to vet and make sure an appropriate cast of interpreters are available for this performance. They failed to follow the chain of command." The problem was not that TDF wanted BIPOC interpreters for "The Lion King." The problem was that TDF had not built a system capable of reliably providing them, and when the system failed, the organization's response was to remove a qualified white interpreter rather than to acknowledge the system's inadequacy.

The case settled quickly and quietly. The terms were not disclosed. Wann wrote on social media that he looked "forward to the review of the process that will emerge from this to hopefully benefit the interpreting profession." TDF issued no public statement of policy change. Wann moved on, focusing on raising his children and developing ASL educational content rather than continuing to interpret Broadway shows. The system that produced the controversy continued to operate. No structural reform was announced. No public reckoning occurred. The episode entered the category of incidents that generate two weeks of online outrage and then disappear, leaving the underlying conditions unchanged.

But the underlying conditions matter, and this book insists on naming them. The condition is this: the American theatre has extended the logic of casting identity so far beyond the stage that it now governs who may provide language access to disabled audience members. The logic that began with the question "Who should play this role?"

has metastasized into the question "Who should be visible in any capacity within the theatrical space?" The first question is an artistic question with legitimate answers rooted in authorial intent and directional vision. The second question is an institutional question with no legitimate answer other than "whoever is best qualified to do the job."

The progression this book has traced across its chapters is now visible as a single arc. In the Beckett chapter, the question was whether a director could alter the playwright's casting specifications. In the Wilson chapter, the question was whether an institution could override a playwright's cultural vision. In the Hamilton chapter, the question was whether a playwright's authorial casting choice could be generalized into an institutional policy. In the Miracle Worker chapter, the question was whether the performer must share the character's disability. In this chapter, the question has left the stage entirely. The interpreter is not a creative participant. The interpreter is a service provider. And still the logic of identity matching pursues the interpreter into the accessibility booth and demands to know what color the interpreter's skin is before allowing the interpreter to translate a show about lions.

Each chapter has moved the boundary of the identity matching demand further from its origin. Each step was logical, given the previous step. If the actor must match the character's race, why not the director? If the director, why not the interpreter? If the interpreter, why not the usher, the house manager, the box office staff? The logic has no natural terminus because the logic has no limiting principle. It applies wherever identity is visible, and in a culture that has decided identity is always visible and always significant, it applies everywhere.

The interpreter is not the actor. The interpreter is not the character. The interpreter is not the playwright's creation or the director's vision. The interpreter is a professional providing a service to a disabled audience, and the service must be evaluated on the basis of professional competence, not racial identity. Any other standard degrades the service, harms the audience, and transforms an accessibility program into an extension of the casting department. Keith Wann was not cast in "The Lion King." He was hired to translate it. The distinction should not need to be drawn, but in a theatre culture that has lost the ability to distinguish between identity and function, it does.

There is one more case to examine before the argument turns from case studies to synthesis, and it is the case that tests the thesis most honestly. What happens when a body on stage cannot do what the character's body is described as doing, and the result is not a violation of the text but a revelation of it? Ali Stroker won a Tony Award in a wheelchair, and the story of how that happened, and what it means, is not as simple as either its champions or its critics have claimed.

Chapter 9: Oklahoma!, Ali Stroker, and the Body on Stage

Ali Stroker could not get to the stage to accept her Tony Award.

On the night of June 9, 2019, at Radio City Music Hall, Stroker won the award for Best Featured Actress in a Musical for her performance as Ado Annie in Daniel Fish's revival of "Oklahoma!" She was the first actor who uses a wheelchair to be nominated for a Tony. She was the first to win one. And when her name was called, she could not travel the route that every other winner travels, down the aisle and up the steps, because there was no ramp. She accepted the award from backstage, where she had been waiting, because the infrastructure of Broadway's most prestigious ceremony had not been built to accommodate the body that had just made Broadway history. Later that evening, when "Oklahoma!" won Best Revival of a Musical, Stroker could not join her castmates on stage for the company acceptance. The same absence of a ramp that had kept her from the audience's sightline for her own award kept her from standing with the people she had performed beside all season.

The irony was not subtle. An industry celebrating its most visible act of disability inclusion had failed to provide physical access to the celebration itself. The standard route for a Tony winner is from a designated seat in the audience, down the aisle, up the stairs, and onto the stage. The route assumes legs. It assumes the ability to stand, to climb, to walk under the lights while the audience applauds. No alternative route existed. No ramp had been installed. The ceremony's producers knew that a wheelchair user was nominated, knew that she might win, and had, as a logistical concession, added a wheelchair ramp to the press room at the 3 West Club across the street where winners gave post-ceremony interviews. They planned for her to answer questions about her victory. They did not plan for her to collect it in the same manner as every other winner. Stroker waited backstage, out of the audience's sightline, and was wheeled to a position from which she could accept the award. The moment was triumphant. The logistics were a confession.

Stroker, characteristically, did not dwell on the obstacle. She lifted the trophy over her head and delivered the speech that would be replayed millions of times in the days that followed: "This award is for every kid who is watching tonight who has a disability, who has a limitation or a challenge, who has been waiting to see themselves represented in this arena. You are."

The statement was generous and precise. She did not say "you can be." She said "you are." The verb was present tense. The representation was not aspirational. It was accomplished. And the accomplishment raised questions that this book must ask without pretending the answers are simple.

* * *

Alyson Mackenzie Stroker was born on June 16, 1987, in Ridgewood, New Jersey. At the age of two, she and her brother were in a car accident that resulted in a spinal cord injury. She was paralyzed from the chest down. She has used a wheelchair since. She attended Ridgewood High School, where she was senior class president and performed in school musicals. She earned a BFA in drama from New York University's Tisch School of the Arts. She was a finalist on the second season of "The Glee Project" in 2012 and appeared as a guest star on "Glee" in 2013. In 2015, she originated the role of Anna in Deaf West Theatre's revival of "Spring Awakening" on Broadway, becoming the first actor who uses a wheelchair to appear on a Broadway stage. In 2017, she was cast in the ABC series “Ten Days in the Valley.” In 2018, she played Ado Annie in the critically acclaimed production of “Oklahoma!” at St. Ann’s Warehouse in Brooklyn, and the production transferred to Broadway’s Circle in the Square Theatre in April 2019, where it ran for 328 performances.

The “Spring Awakening” credit is worth pausing on, because it connects to the previous two chapters of this book. Deaf West Theatre, based in Los Angeles, is a company that produces theatre in American Sign Language with simultaneous English voice interpretation. Their 2015 Broadway revival of “Spring Awakening,” the rock musical about sexual awakening among repressed adolescents in nineteenth-century Germany, cast Deaf and hard-of-hearing actors alongside hearing actors, with the hearing actors sometimes voicing for the Deaf performers and the Deaf performers sometimes signing for the hearing ones. The production used the bilingual, bicultural structure as a dramatic metaphor: the characters who cannot communicate with the adults in their world, whose desires and confusions go unheard, were literally performed in a language the hearing audience could not access without translation. Stroker was cast as Anna, a hearing role, in a production that was fundamentally about the relationship between bodies, language, and the barriers that institutions erect against both. She was a wheelchair user in a show about Deaf performers in a musical about silenced adolescents. The layering was not accidental.

These are the facts of her career, and they are worth stating plainly because the career itself is the first argument. Stroker did not arrive on Broadway through a diversity initiative. She was not cast as a gesture of inclusion. She auditioned. She was hired. She performed. She won. The trajectory from Ridgewood High School to NYU to “The Glee Project” to “Spring Awakening” to “Oklahoma!” to the Tony stage is a professional trajectory, not a philanthropic one. Every role she earned, she earned as an actor, and the distinction between earning a role and being granted one is the distinction this entire book has been trying to protect.

The distinction matters here because the temptation, when discussing Ali Stroker, is to discuss disability first and performance second. The advocacy frame wants her story to be about representation: what it means for a wheelchair user to appear on Broadway, what it signals about inclusion, what doors it opens. The critical frame wants her story to be about the work: what she did with the role, what the role did with the production, what the production did with the text. This chapter insists on the critical frame while acknowledging that the advocacy frame is not without value. Stroker herself understood both frames simultaneously, and her Tony speech was carefully constructed to honor both. She spoke about disability and representation. She also, earlier in the speech, thanked the creative team and her fellow cast members. She knew what she had done, and she knew what it meant. The two are not the same thing, and the refusal to collapse them into a single narrative is the beginning of honest analysis.

* * *

Daniel Fish's revival of "Oklahoma!" was not a revival in any conventional sense. It was an excavation.

Rodgers and Hammerstein's 1943 musical, based on Lynn Riggs's 1931 play "Green Grow the Lilacs," is one of the most performed works in the American theatrical canon. Its original production ran for 2,212 performances. Its 1955 film won two Academy Awards. Its score, from "Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin"' to the title anthem, has been absorbed so thoroughly into the national consciousness that the songs function less as music than as atmosphere, as the ambient sound of a mythologized American past. The standard production of "Oklahoma!" gives the audience what it expects: open prairie, big orchestrations, Agnes de Mille ballet, a love triangle resolved by community justice, and a final number in which the entire cast affirms that the territory is doing fine. The standard production is a warm bath. Fish drained the tub.

His production began as a workshop at Bard College in 2015, where he directed undergraduate actors. It moved to St. Ann's Warehouse in Brooklyn in the fall of 2018 for an Off Broadway run. It transferred to Broadway's Circle in the Square Theatre in April 2019. At every stage, the production's thesis was the same: "Oklahoma!" is not a celebration of American community. It is a document of American violence, sexual coercion, mob justice, and the collective decision to look away. The bright golden haze on the meadow is not illumination. It is concealment.

Fish stripped the production to bare surfaces. Laura Jellinek's set was plywood walls and fluorescent light. The 28-piece orchestra was replaced by a seven-piece country-western band, seated on stage, playing Daniel Kluger's reimagined orchestrations, which the New York Times described as having the vernacular directness of country and western ballads. The houselights stayed on for much of the performance, eliminating the comfortable darkness that separates audience from action. Chili and cornbread were served at intermission, turning the audience into participants at a community gathering rather than observers of a theatrical event. Rifles hung in the aisles. Jud Fry was not a leering villain but a quiet, damaged loner whose death, in Fish's staging, was not an accident but an execution, with Curly shooting him rather than the traditional accidental stabbing. The cast, splattered in blood, then sang the title number. The audience was left to reckon with what it had just endorsed.

Ben Brantley of the New York Times called it a mirror for an age of doubt and anxiety. The Washington Post called it a radical reimagining that treated the text and score as sacrosanct while revealing what previous productions had concealed. The production won the 2019 Tony Award for Best Revival of a Musical. It was not universally beloved. The OnStage Blog called it pretentious and overwrought. Heidy Weiss, reviewing the national tour's Chicago stop in 2022, called it a travesty. The division in critical response was itself a measure of the production's success at its own project: it forced audiences to choose between the "Oklahoma!" they remembered and the "Oklahoma!" that was actually written.

This was the production into which Ali Stroker was cast as Ado Annie.

* * *

Ado Annie Carnes is the comic subplot of "Oklahoma!" She is a rancher's daughter who cannot choose between two suitors: Will Parker, the cowboy she is expected to marry, and Ali Hakim, the Persian peddler who has seduced her with flattery and trinkets. Her defining number is "I Cain't Say No," in which she explains, with cheerful frankness, that she is physically incapable of refusing a man's advances. In the traditional production, Ado Annie is played as dim and boy-crazy, a comic contrast to Laurey's romantic seriousness. The comedy depends on the audience reading her as foolish, as a girl who does not understand the consequences of her own desires. The traditional Ado Annie is a body without a mind, appetites without analysis, and the audience laughs because the character does not know what the audience knows: that her inability to say no will get her into trouble.

Fish's production refused that reading. In the stripped-down, violence-aware world of his "Oklahoma!," Ado Annie's sexual agency was not comic ignorance. It was deliberate choice. Stroker's Ado Annie did not fail to understand her desires. She understood them completely and pursued them without apology. The character became, in

Stroker's hands, a woman who wanted what she wanted and saw no reason to pretend otherwise. The comedy shifted from laughing at Ado Annie to laughing with her, and the laughter carried a different charge.

Stroker herself identified the transformation in an interview with Playbill: "Ado Annie is just a woman who wants to explore, and she does that through relationships." And then she added the statement that frames this chapter's argument: "One of my other favorite parts of doing this show is all of a sudden we are dealing with disability and sexuality, at the same time."

At the same time. Not sequentially. Not as competing interpretive frames that the audience must choose between. Simultaneously. The wheelchair was on stage. The sexual agency was on stage. Neither erased the other. The audience watched a woman in a wheelchair sing about her refusal to deny her own desire, and the combination produced a meaning that neither element could produce alone.

* * *

This is where the book's argument becomes complicated, and the complication is the point.

The first question the bible for this chapter identified is whether Ado Annie changes meaning when performed by an actress in a wheelchair. The answer is obviously yes. Ado Annie's physicality is central to the character. In the traditional production, she is tactile, flirtatious, clinging to one man and then the other, using her body as the instrument of the indecision the song describes. When the body performing that physicality is a body in a wheelchair, the audience's assumptions about what that body can do, what that body is permitted to desire, and what that body looks like when it desires are all disrupted. The disruption is not incidental. In the context of Fish's production, which was built to disrupt every assumption the audience brought into the theatre, the disruption was thematically coherent. Fish was already asking the audience to see “Oklahoma!” differently. Stroker’s body extended that project into territory Fish might not have anticipated when he began workshopping the production at Bard in 2015, before Stroker was cast.

The second question is whether Stroker’s casting becomes a statement about disabled sexuality that challenges audience assumptions about who gets to be desirable. Again, the answer is yes, and Stroker was explicit about this. She told CBS that performing was where she felt most powerful, that growing up in a wheelchair meant people stared at her for reasons she did not choose, and that the stage gave her a context in which being stared at was the point. “I Cain’t Say No,” performed by Stroker, became a declaration of sexual autonomy from a body that the culture does not typically grant sexual autonomy. The audience was confronted not only with a character’s refusal to be ashamed of her desires but with the performer’s refusal to be defined by her disability. The wheelchair was present and visible. It was not the meaning. The meaning was the woman in the wheelchair, singing about what she wanted, and the discomfort the audience felt at its own surprise was the production’s gift to them.

The third question is whether the casting creates an unresolvable tension between the text and the body performing it. Here the answer becomes more contested, and this book does not pretend otherwise.

Ado Annie, as written by Oscar Hammerstein II in 1943, is not a character in a wheelchair. Her physicality is described in the text through her interactions with Will Parker and Ali Hakim, interactions that involve dancing, chasing, embracing, and the comic business of a woman being physically pursued by two men. The choreography of the original production, by Agnes de Mille, assumed a body that moves on two legs. The question is not whether Stroker was physically capable of performing the role; she obviously was, and her Tony

Award confirms it. The question is whether the role, as written, is altered when the body performing it cannot do what the text's implicit stage directions assume the body can do.

This is the same question the book has asked in every chapter, reframed for a case where the answer is not obviously aligned with the thesis. When the Beckett estate insists that "Waiting for Godot" must be performed by men, the book supports the estate's position: the playwright's text has a context, and the context is not transferable. When August Wilson argues that his plays must be performed by Black actors because the plays are about the Black experience, the book supports Wilson's position: the work's cultural specificity is load-bearing. When a director at Columbia splits a single Midwestern male character into bipolar Gay East Coast twins, the book identifies the act as a violation of the playwright's authority.

Does the same principle apply to Ali Stroker's Ado Annie?

The honest answer is: it depends on who is making the decision.

* * *

If Daniel Fish cast Stroker because he believed her presence served the production's thesis, because a body that the culture does not expect to desire was the perfect instrument for a show about what "Oklahoma!" hides beneath its golden haze, then the casting was an authorial choice. Fish was the director of a revival, working within the permissions granted by the Rodgers and Hammerstein estate, and his production's thesis, stated through every design element and staging decision, was that the standard "Oklahoma!" lies about bodies, power, and community. Stroker's body, in that production, told the truth. The casting served the text by exposing what the text had always contained but previous productions had papered over.

If, however, the casting were mandated by an external organization, if the Alliance for Inclusion in the Arts or the Dramatists Guild

Inclusion Rider or an advocacy group had pressured a producer to cast a wheelchair user as Ado Annie regardless of the production's artistic thesis, the same casting would be a different act. The body on stage would be the same. The performance would be the same. The Tony-winning quality of the work would be identical. But the authority behind the decision would have shifted from the creative team to an institutional mandate, and the shift in authority is what this book has argued against in every preceding chapter.

The distinction is not hypothetical. The Dramatists Guild Inclusion Rider, examined in a later chapter of this book, creates contractual pressure to cast from "Historically Excluded Groups" in "significant and representative proportion." A producer attaching the Inclusion Rider to a production of "Oklahoma!" would be under contractual obligation to make "reasonable efforts" to cast disabled performers, not because a director had a vision that a wheelchair user would illuminate the text, but because an institutional document required the effort. The difference between Daniel Fish seeing Ali Stroker and recognizing what her presence would mean for his production, and a producer checking a compliance box to satisfy a contractual rider, is the difference between art and administration. Both produce the same visible result. Only one produces the result for the right reason.

This is the line the book has been drawing since the first chapter. The question is not whether non-traditional casting can produce great theatre. It can. Stroker's Ado Annie is proof. The question is who makes the decision, and whether the decision is made in service of the text or in service of a policy that treats the text as raw material for social objectives. Fish made the decision. Fish was serving the text. The result was a Tony Award and a performance that redefined what Ado Annie could mean. But Fish's decision does not establish a principle that Ado Annie must always be played by a wheelchair user, any more than Miranda's decision to cast "Hamilton" with performers of color establishes a principle that all historical figures must be played by people of color. The principle is not the casting. The principle is the authority. The playwright and the creative team decide. Not the advocacy organization. Not the guild. Not the contractual rider. The people who are responsible for the work decide who inhabits the work, and they bear the consequences when the decision fails.

* * *

There is a further irony that connects this chapter to the one preceding it, and the connection is too precise to leave unstated.

The Theatre Development Fund, whose accessibility programs provide ASL interpretation, audio description, and open captioning for Broadway audiences with disabilities, is the same organization that administers the infrastructure making Broadway accessible to audience members like those who watched Ali Stroker perform. TDF's mission is accessibility. TDF exists so that Deaf people, blind people, and people with mobility disabilities can experience live theatre. The organization simultaneously celebrated the presence of a wheelchair user on the Broadway stage and, in the Keith Wann episode examined in the previous chapter, enforced a racial restriction on the provision of an accessibility service to Deaf audience members. The first act expanded the definition of who belongs in the theatre. The second act narrowed it. Both decisions were made by the same institution, in the same cultural moment, under the same banner of inclusion.

The contradiction is not accidental. It is structural. An organization committed to accessibility in the abstract must, when confronted with specific cases, decide which form of accessibility takes priority. When Stroker performed at Circle in the Square, the physical accessibility of the theatre itself was tested and found adequate: the in-the-round staging at Circle in the Square, unlike the Radio City stage on Tony night, could accommodate her wheelchair. But the question of who could provide linguistic accessibility to Deaf audience members watching that same performance was governed not by competence but by racial identity. TDF's accessibility mission was applied expansively when the beneficiary was a performer (Stroker could perform any role her talent qualified her for, regardless of whether the character was written for a wheelchair user) and restrictively when the subject was a service provider (Wann could not interpret a show his skill qualified him to interpret, because his skin was the wrong color for the cast).

The asymmetry reveals the operating logic that this book has traced across every chapter. The logic is not principled. It is hierarchical. Some forms of non-traditional presence in the theatre are celebrated. Others are prohibited. The hierarchy is not determined by artistic merit, professional competence, or fidelity to the text. It is determined by which identity categories the current political consensus has decided to elevate and which it has decided to constrain. The hierarchy changes. The constraints shift. The playwright's authority, if it depends on the hierarchy for its enforcement, is only as stable as the hierarchy itself.

Stroker's achievement does not need the hierarchy. Her performance spoke for itself. It spoke because she is talented, because Fish's production gave her talent a frame in which to operate, and because the audience, confronted with a body it did not expect to see doing what it did, was forced to reconsider its own assumptions. That is what theatre does when it is working. It does not need a contractual rider to force the reconsideration. It needs a director with a vision, an actor with the skill to execute it, and a text strong enough to survive the interpretation.

Hammerstein's text survived. Stroker's Ado Annie did not damage "Oklahoma!" She revealed it. But the revelation was possible because a creative team made an artistic decision, not because an institution imposed a demographic requirement. The next time a production of "Oklahoma!" is cast, the creative team may choose a different Ado

Annie, one who walks, one who does not use a wheelchair, one whose body matches the implicit assumptions of the 1943 text. That choice, too, must be protected.

And here the book must be precise about what the text actually specifies, because the distinction between what a playwright wrote and what tradition has assumed the playwright wrote is the distinction that determines whether Stroker's casting honored or violated the work.

Hammerstein's stage directions for Ado Annie do not describe her body. They describe her personality: she is simple, affectionate, incapable of refusing male attention. The physical business that traditional productions have built around the character, the chasing, the pratfalls, the comic choreography of a girl bouncing between two suitors, was created by directors and choreographers, not by Hammerstein. Agnes de Mille's original choreography assumed a walking body because every body on the 1943 stage was a walking body. The assumption was not a stage direction. It was an unexamined default. When Fish and Stroker replaced the default with a wheelchair, they did not violate a stage direction. They violated an assumption. And the violation of assumptions, as this book has argued, is what theatre does when it is doing its job. The violation of the playwright's text is a different act entirely.

The playwright's text does not require a wheelchair. It also does not prohibit one. The decision belongs to the people making the production, and the freedom to decide is the freedom this book defends.

Ali Stroker, accepting the award she could not walk to the stage to collect, said "you are." The statement was true. She was. She is. And the industry that celebrated her that night still has not built a ramp to its own stage, which tells you everything you need to know about the difference between the theatre's stated commitments and its structural realities.

Chapter 10: O’Neill’s Irish Family and the Ethnic Anchor

In 1946, seven years before his death, Eugene O’Neill wrote to his son Eugene Jr. something that sounds like an instruction to future biographers: “The one thing that explains more than anything about me is the fact that I’m Irish. And, strangely enough, it is something that all the writers who have attempted to explain me and my work have overlooked.”

The complaint was justified. O’Neill was not Irish in the way that a man might be Irish on Saint Patrick’s Day, wearing the color and drinking the beer and forgetting the whole business by morning. He was Irish in the way that the grain runs through wood: structurally, indelibly, in every fiber of the material. His father, James O’Neill, was born in Kilkenny during the Great Famine, in either 1845 or 1847 (the records dispute the year, but the catastrophe does not). The O’Neill family emigrated to the United States around 1851, sailing from New Ross in County Wexford, carrying with them the memories that famine survivors carry: the memory of hunger, of dispossession, of a country that could not feed its own people, and of an arrival in a new country that did not want them. James O’Neill grew up in poverty in America, worked in a machine shop at ten years old to support his family after his father abandoned them, and clawed his way into the theatre, where an Irish Catholic immigrant could, if he was talented and relentless enough, become a star. He became one. He played the Count of Monte Cristo over six thousand times. He made money. He never stopped fearing the poorhouse.

Eugene's mother, Mary Ellen Quinlan, was first-generation Irish American, the daughter of immigrants from County Tipperary. Her father was a prosperous greengrocer in Ohio, what the Irish called "lace-curtain Irish," the ones who had climbed far enough out of poverty to put lace in their windows and pretend the famine had happened to someone else. She was educated at a Catholic school in Indiana. She married James O'Neill in 1877 and spent the rest of her life on tour with him, a Catholic girl from a respectable family dragged through the backstage corridors of a profession her faith regarded with suspicion. She became addicted to morphine after a doctor prescribed it following the difficult birth of her youngest son. That son was Eugene.

The two older boys were christened with names drawn from Irish nationalism. The first was James Jr., called Jamie. The second was Edmund Burke, named after the great Irish-born statesman. The third, Eugene Gladstone, carried the middle name of the British Prime Minister who had championed Irish Home Rule. The naming was not accidental. James O'Neill Sr. was making a statement with his children's names: we are Irish, we remember where we came from, and we are naming our sons after the men who fought for our people. The Irishness was not an accent to be shed or a sentiment to be invoked at holidays. It was the organizing principle of the family's identity, inscribed in the baptismal records before any of the boys could speak.

Eugene O'Neill wrote this family into the most celebrated American play of the twentieth century and called it "Long Day's Journey into Night." He wrote it between 1939 and 1941. He forbade its production during his lifetime because it was too personal, too exposed, too close to the bone. His widow, Carlotta, published it in 1956, three years after his death, violating his written instructions but giving the world the play that won him his fourth Pulitzer Prize and that critics have called the finest work of American theatre.

The play is openly, almost recklessly autobiographical. The Tyrone family is the O'Neill family with three name changes. The family surname becomes Tyrone, which is the name of the earldom granted to Conn O'Neill by Henry VIII, an Irish reference that any literate Irish American of O'Neill's generation would have recognized instantly. The dead baby who was named Eugene in life is named Eugene in the play. The living son who was named Eugene in life is called Edmund in the play, and the dead son who was named Edmund in life is called Eugene in the play. O'Neill swapped his own name with his dead brother's, a gesture of identification with death that says more about his psychology than any biographer's analysis.

The ages of every character in the play match the actual ages of the O'Neill family members in August 1912. The father's career as a touring actor who sacrificed artistic ambition for the financial security of a single commercial role is James O'Neill's career. The mother's morphine addiction, originating from a doctor's prescription after childbirth, is Mary Ellen O'Neill's addiction. The older son's alcoholism, his failed attempts to follow his father onto the stage, and his slow dissolution are Jamie O'Neill's life. The younger son's tuberculosis, his seafaring years, his literary ambitions, and his despair are Eugene's own.

This is not a play that happens to be about an Irish family. This is a play that could not exist without being about an Irish family. The distinction is the subject of this chapter, and it is the distinction that the non-traditional casting debate must confront if it is to be taken seriously as an argument about dramatic art rather than dismissed as a political program.

* * *

Consider what the Irishness does in "Long Day's Journey into Night." It is not decoration. It is not a detail that could be changed without consequence, the way one might change a character's hair color or hometown without altering the play's meaning. The Irishness is load-bearing. Remove it and the structure collapses.

James Tyrone's penny-pinching, which drives his wife to resentment and his sons to fury, is not a generic character flaw. It is the specific behavior of a man who grew up in famine-haunted poverty, who watched his father abandon the family, who worked twelve-hour days in a machine shop as a child, and who has spent his entire adult life terrified that the poorhouse is one bad investment away. When Tyrone tells his sons about his childhood, he is not offering an excuse. He is offering an explanation rooted in the Irish immigrant experience of the mid-nineteenth century, an experience in which starvation was not a metaphor but a memory, and financial security was not a comfort but a barricade against annihilation. The poorhouse that Tyrone fears is a real institution with a real history. His own family passed through one. The anxiety is not psychological abstraction. It is inherited trauma, transmitted from a County Kilkenny farm to a Connecticut summer house in the space of a single generation.

Mary Tyrone's morphine addiction carries a specifically Irish Catholic dimension that the play makes explicit. Her shame is not secular. It is the shame of a woman who was educated by nuns, who married in the Church, who understood her role as wife and mother through the lens of Catholic teaching, and who has failed at every element of that role by becoming an addict. Her retreat into the past, which occupies the play's devastating final act, is a retreat into the version of herself that the Church would have approved of: the young girl at the Catholic school, the innocent before the fall. The fall itself is figured in Catholic terms: not as illness (which it is) but as sin (which she believes it to be). The guilt she carries is Irish Catholic guilt, shaped by a theology of confession and penance that offers forgiveness only through the admission of unworthiness. A non-Catholic Mary Tyrone would carry guilt. An Irish Catholic Mary Tyrone carries the specific weight of a tradition that teaches women that their suffering is both their burden and their failure.

Jamie Tyrone's alcoholism is likewise situated in an Irish context that the play does not leave implicit. The drinking in "Long Day's Journey" is not recreational. It is sacramental in its perversity, a dark communion shared by the men of the family as the women retreat into drugs and memory. O'Neill understood, from the inside, the role of alcohol in Irish American family life: it was the solvent that dissolved the inhibitions the culture's Catholicism and immigrant anxiety had erected, and it was the poison that killed the men who relied on it. Jamie drinks because his father drank, and his father drank because the terror of poverty and the guilt of artistic compromise required a chemical mediator. The pattern is generational. It is culturally specific. It is Irish.

The brothers' rejection of Catholicism, which appalls their father, is an Irish American generational conflict that has its own literature, its own sociology, and its own particular sting. For James Tyrone Sr., Catholicism is not merely a religion. It is the last connection to the country he left, the language of the community that sustained his family through famine and immigration, the moral architecture that gives his suffering meaning. When his sons reject the Church, they are not simply choosing secularism. They are severing the cord that connects the family to Ireland, to the immigrant narrative, to the entire structure of meaning that made their father's sacrifices intelligible. The father hears apostasy. The sons hear freedom. Neither is wrong. Both are speaking from within a specifically Irish American argument that has no equivalent in a family that did not cross an ocean carrying a crucifix and a fear of the poorhouse.

And then there is the class dimension, which in O'Neill is inseparable from the ethnic one. The Tyrones occupy an unstable position in the social hierarchy of early twentieth-century New England. They are wealthy enough to own a summer home in Connecticut, but James Tyrone's wealth was earned in the theatre, a profession that polite Yankee society regarded as disreputable. They are white, but their whiteness is Irish whiteness, which in the America of 1912 was not the same as Anglo-Saxon Protestant whiteness. The anti-Irish prejudice that Fintan O'Toole documented in his essay on O'Neill for the New York Review of Books was not a relic of the Famine era; it persisted well into the twentieth century, manifesting in social exclusion, employment discrimination, and the kind of casual contempt that the Yankee characters in O'Neill's plays direct at the Irish ones with reflexive ease. T. Stedman Harder in "A Moon for the Misbegotten," the Standard Oil heir who lives next door to the Hogan farm, embodies this contempt. He is rich, Protestant, and certain of his superiority. Phil Hogan humiliates him with an Irish peasant's cunning that is itself a form of class warfare. The comedy in the scene is ethnically specific. It depends on the audience recognizing the power dynamic between the Yankee and the Irishman, between inherited wealth and inherited poverty, between the man who owns the land because his family has always owned it and the man who rents the land because his family was driven off their own land by famine and colonial expropriation. Cast the scene with actors who do not read as Irish and Yankee, and the comedy becomes generic slapstick rather than social satire. The laughter loses its edge.

* * *

The question this chapter poses is direct: what happens to "Long Day's Journey into Night" if the Tyrone family is not Irish?

The Non-Traditional Casting Project's original definition, established in 1986 and examined in Chapter 3 of this book, specified that non-traditional casting applied to roles "where race, ethnicity or sex is not germane to character or play development." The definition contained its own limiting principle. If ethnicity is germane, the definition does not apply. The question is whether the Irishness of the Tyrone family is germane.

The answer should be obvious. It is not, because the institutional machinery of non-traditional casting has developed a systematic inability to recognize cultural specificity when it is woven into the fabric of a work rather than stated in an explicit stage direction. The Dramatists Guild Inclusion Rider, examined later in this book, protects "specific physical attributes of a character that may be visible to an audience" as stated in "dialogue or stage directions" or "otherwise inherent in the Play's setting." But O'Neill does not write a stage direction that reads "JAMES TYRONE IS IRISH." He does not need to. The Irishness lives in the names (Tyrone, from the earldom; Cathleen, the maid described as "a buxom Irish peasant"; Shaughnessy, the tenant farmer; McGuire, the swindler), in the Catholicism (Mary's education at a Catholic school, the father's devotion, the sons' apostasy), in the drinking (which follows Irish patterns of communal male consumption), in the class anxiety (Irish immigrant striving against Yankee condescension), and in the emotional architecture (guilt, shame, resentment, and the inability to say directly what everyone in the room already knows).

A producer applying the Inclusion Rider to a production of "Long Day's Journey into Night" could argue, with technical accuracy, that O'Neill's stage directions do not specify Irish actors. The carve-out in Section 2(a)(ii) protects attributes stated in dialogue or stage directions or "inherent in the Play's setting." The play is set in Connecticut. Connecticut is not Ireland. The producer could therefore conclude that the carve-out does not apply, and that "reasonable efforts" to cast from Historically Excluded Groups must be made, because the Inclusion Rider's definition of those groups is so broad that it encompasses essentially everyone who is not a straight white non-religious man.

The result would be a production of "Long Day's Journey into Night" in which James Tyrone's poorhouse terror has no cultural anchor, in which Mary's Catholic shame is detached from the tradition that gives it meaning, in which Jamie's alcoholism is individual pathology rather than inherited pattern, and in which the entire immigrant narrative that makes the play's tragedy intelligible has been dissolved in the name of demographic representation. The production might be well acted. It might be movingly performed. It would not be "Long Day's Journey into Night." It would be a play about a dysfunctional family that happens to share the same words as O'Neill's play but has been stripped of the context that makes those words mean what O'Neill intended them to mean.

* * *

O'Neill's Irish plays form what the critic and Irish America essayist has called an informal trilogy: "A Touch of the Poet," "Long Day's Journey into Night," and "A Moon for the Misbegotten." All three dramatize Irish American families in opposition to or in isolation from their Yankee counterparts. All three are structurally dependent on the ethnic identity of their characters.

"A Touch of the Poet," set in a roadhouse tavern on the outskirts of Boston in 1828, follows Con Melody, an Irish immigrant who was once a British Army officer and now runs a tavern populated by the Irish laborers he considers beneath him. Con's tragedy is the immigrant's tragedy: he cannot be what he was in Ireland, he will not accept what he is in America, and the distance between the two identities destroys him. His daughter Sara has fallen in love with a wealthy Yankee, and the collision between Irish pride and Yankee condescension drives the play to its crisis. Remove the Irishness and the play has no engine. Con Melody's pretension is not generic vanity. It is the specific vanity of an Irish Catholic in Protestant New England, a man who believes himself superior to his fellow immigrants and inferior to the Yankees, and whose self-destruction is powered by the impossibility of occupying either position.

“A Moon for the Misbegotten,” set in rural Connecticut in September 1923, is O’Neill’s last play, completed in 1943 when the tremor that would end his writing career had already begun. It is a sequel to “Long Day’s Journey,” following Jamie Tyrone eleven years later. James and Mary are dead. Jamie has inherited his father’s property and is drinking himself toward the grave. The play centers on his relationship with Josie Hogan, the daughter of his Irish tenant farmer, a woman O’Neill describes as physically imposing, fiercely independent, and burdened with a reputation for promiscuity that she has cultivated as a defensive shield. Under a full moon, Jamie confesses to Josie the worst thing he has done: on the train carrying his mother’s body back East after her death, he hired a prostitute and spent the night with her in the compartment next to the coffin. The confession is figured as a Catholic sacrament, the last confession of a man who has abandoned the Church but cannot abandon its emotional grammar. Josie, the Irish giantess, becomes the vessel of absolution, the maternal figure who can forgive what the Church no longer can. The critic John Henry Raleigh saw in the play the definitive expression of American Irish Catholicism, one that put permanently into shadow every sentimental stage-Irish caricature that had preceded it.

Josie Hogan is described in O’Neill’s stage directions with a specificity that leaves no ambiguity. She is Irish. Her father Phil is Irish. Their speech patterns, their humor (which is the combative, insult-laden humor of Irish rural families), their relationship to the land, their hostility toward the Yankee neighbor T. Stedman Harder, and their Catholicism are all specified in the text. Phil Hogan’s conniving, his drinking, his manipulation of his daughter, and his genuine love for her are all drawn from the Irish rural tradition that O’Neill knew through his father’s stories and through his own observation of the Irish Americans who populated the Connecticut of his youth.

Josie’s sexual reputation is itself an Irish construction. She has cultivated a reputation as the town promiscuous woman, but the play reveals that the reputation is a fiction she maintains as armor. Her virginity, which she guards fiercely beneath the bravado, is not simply a personal choice. It is an Irish Catholic woman's virtue in a community where a woman's sexual status determines her social value. The revelation that Josie is not what she pretends to be carries its emotional charge precisely because the audience understands the cultural system that makes the pretense necessary. In an Irish Catholic community in 1923, a woman who is known to be promiscuous is ruined. A woman who is known to be virtuous is constrained. Josie has chosen ruin as a disguise for constraint, and the disguise is an act of Irish female cunning that the play treats with immense tenderness. Remove the Irish Catholic context and Josie's secret becomes a plot twist. Within the context, it becomes a portrait of a woman navigating the only options her culture has provided.

A non-Irish Josie Hogan is not Josie Hogan. A non-Irish Phil Hogan is not Phil Hogan. The characters are ethnically constituted. Their behavior, their language, their emotional lives are products of a specific culture, and the culture is not removable.

* * *

The principle this chapter establishes is the principle of the ethnic anchor. Some plays are anchored in a specific ethnicity the way a ship is anchored to the seabed: the anchor is not visible from the surface, it is not part of the vessel's decorative design, but without it the ship drifts and the voyage has no fixed point. The ethnicity in an ethnically anchored play is not a costume. It is not a set of external markers (an accent, a surname, a holiday reference) that can be swapped for different markers without consequence. It is the internal logic of the characters' behavior, the source of their conflicts, the grammar of their emotional expression, and the historical context that makes their story a specific story rather than a generic one.

August Wilson understood this. His entire argument, examined in Chapter 5, rested on the principle that his plays were anchored in the Black American experience and that the anchor could not be lifted without destroying the vessel. Wilson argued that an all-white production of one of his plays would not illuminate the white experience; it would obliterate the Black experience the plays were built to preserve. The same argument applies to O'Neill. An ethnically non-specific production of "Long Day's Journey into Night" would not illuminate a universal family experience; it would obliterate the Irish American experience that O'Neill spent his entire career trying to get onto the stage.

The parallel between Wilson and O'Neill is instructive because it exposes the inconsistency at the heart of the non-traditional casting argument. Wilson's insistence on Black actors for Black roles is generally respected by the American theatre. O'Neill's implicit insistence on Irish identity for Irish characters is not discussed at all, because the current casting discourse does not recognize Irish Americans as a category that requires protection. The Irish are white. Whiteness, in the logic of the Inclusion Rider, is the default from which all "Historically Excluded Groups" are measured. An Irish American family is, in the Rider's arithmetic, simply a white family, and white families do not have cultural specificity worth preserving.

But O'Neill's family did have cultural specificity worth preserving. The Famine that drove his father from Kilkenny killed over a million people and forced another million to emigrate. The anti-Irish prejudice that greeted the immigrants in America, the "No Irish Need Apply" signs, the nativist cartoons depicting the Irish as subhuman, the religious bigotry that treated Catholicism as a foreign allegiance, all of this is part of the historical context that makes the Tyrone family's behavior intelligible. James Tyrone's fear of the poorhouse is not a quirk. It is the residue of a specific historical catastrophe. Mary Tyrone's Catholic guilt is not a personality trait. It is the product of a specific theological tradition. Jamie's dissolution is not an individual failing. It is the terminus of a specific generational trajectory that began in County Kilkenny and ended in a Connecticut barroom.

To cast "Long Day's Journey into Night" without regard to this context is not to liberate the play from ethnic limitation. It is to amputate the play's meaning. The production might still move an audience. Great actors can move audiences with anything. But the audience would be moved by the acting, not by the play, because the play's specific power, the power that made O'Neill weep while writing it, depends on the audience understanding that these people are who they are because of where they came from, and where they came from is Ireland, and Ireland is not a metaphor.

The same principle extends beyond O'Neill to a category of plays that the non-traditional casting debate has not adequately addressed: plays in which ethnicity is woven so tightly into the work's structure that it cannot be separated without unraveling the whole. Tennessee Williams's Kowalski family is Polish, and the tension between Stanley's Polish working-class masculinity and Blanche's Southern gentility is the engine of "A Streetcar Named Desire." Arthur Miller's Loman family, for all the play's universalizing ambition, is implicitly Jewish in its anxiety about assimilation, its father-son dynamics, and its relationship to the American Dream as a specifically immigrant aspiration. Lorraine Hansberry's Younger family is Black, and the Blackness is not incidental to the family's struggle but constitutive of it. These plays are ethnically anchored. Their anchors are different. The principle is the same: the ethnicity is not a variable. It is the equation itself.

O'Neill said it himself, seven years before he died, speaking to his son in what sounds like exasperation: the one thing that explains more than anything about me is the fact that I'm Irish. He was not making a sentimental claim. He was making a structural one. The Irishness is the load-bearing wall. Remove it and the house falls down. The non-traditional casting argument, if it is honest, must acknowledge that some walls cannot be removed, and that the playwright who built the house is the one who knows which walls are load-bearing and which are not.

Chapter 11: The Columbia Anecdote and the Director's Theatre

In 1986, at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, a director told me that playwrights do not know what their plays are about. Two years later, in New York, another director told me the opposite. The distance between those two statements is where my career as a playwright was formed, and where the argument of this book was born.

I was a rising Junior at UNL. My play, "A Stone's Throw," had been selected for production by the Department of Theatre Arts and Dance, the first time a student's work had been produced by the university. The director assigned to my play was Rex McGraw, who was also the head of the department. McGraw had established the MFA in Directing at UNL. He held a PhD from Indiana. He was an actor, too, and cast himself in many shows. He later left Nebraska to head the acting and directing program in the graduate school at Ohio State. He died in 2018. He was, by any institutional measure, the authority in that building.

One night during rehearsal, in front of the entire cast, McGraw changed my stage directions and my intention. When I objected, he said to me: "Playwrights don't know what their plays are about."

I was floored. I was furious. I was a twenty-year-old undergraduate standing in a room full of actors and technicians who reported to the man who had just told me that the person who wrote the words did not understand what the words meant. The power imbalance was absolute. McGraw was the department chair. I was a student. There was no licensing agreement to invoke. There was only a man with institutional authority telling a young playwright that the playwright's understanding of his own work was irrelevant.

There was, however, a Dramatists Guild membership card in my wallet. I had joined the Guild on July 2, 1984, two years before the McGraw incident, at the urging of Joe Baldwin, my freshman playwriting teacher at UNL. Baldwin had read the first one-act play I ever wrote in his class and told me to join the Guild immediately. He said it was the only organization in the American theatre that existed to protect the playwright. I was eighteen. I joined that week. I became member number 45010.

Joe Baldwin was born in Tazewell, Tennessee, in 1918. He earned his B.A. in English at the University of Texas, then his M.A. and Ph.D. in speech and dramatic arts at the University of Iowa, the oldest and most distinguished graduate writing program in America. He was a poet whose work appeared in College Verse, Prairie Schooner, Sou'wester, and Southwestern Review. He was a playwright whose one-act play, "Engine 8444," inspired by his lifelong love of trains, was produced in New York City in 1974 and broadcast on the Nebraska Television Network in 1979. His other plays included "Thompson," "Almost Too Many," "Bachelor of the Year," "The Finer Things," "The Waiting Game," "He and She," "At Last, He Said No," "Snow for the Lovers," and "Committees Forever." In 1955, the Educational Theatre Journal published his article, "Producing New Plays in the University Theatre," in which he argued for the university's obligation to nurture new dramatic writing, not merely to produce the established canon. He had been making the argument of this book, in practice and in print, for three decades before I walked into his classroom.

Baldwin and McGraw were mortal enemies within the same department. Baldwin taught playwrights to write and told them they had rights. McGraw directed plays and told playwrights they did not know what their plays were about. The two men represented the two poles of the authority argument this entire book examines, and they occupied offices down the hall from each other. Baldwin was a Southerner, raised in the Tennessee mountains, and he carried a Southerner's code of engagement into academic life: respect, connection, manners, sharing, and above all, standing up for yourself against others who would wish you harm. He was approximately sixty-six years old when I was his freshman student. Under federal law, the 1986 amendments to the Age Discrimination in Employment Act permitted universities to continue enforcing mandatory retirement for tenured faculty at the age of seventy. That exemption would not expire until January 1, 1994. Baldwin, born in 1918, turned seventy in 1988. The university had the legal right to force him out, and he did not want to leave. He still had things to teach. He still had playwrights to protect.

McGraw wanted him gone. One day, McGraw said to me, casually, as though disposing of a colleague were a matter of administrative housekeeping, that someone should "push him down the stairs" to force Baldwin into retirement. McGraw wanted his budget line. The same man who told me that playwrights do not know what their plays are about also wanted to push the playwright-teacher down the stairs to take his funding. I did not push anyone down any stairs. I listened, and I remembered. It was the director's theatre distilled to its most brutal essence: the writer was not merely wrong about his own work. The writer was an obstacle to be removed, a line item to be reallocated, a body occupying space that the director wanted for himself.

As the spring semester of my freshman year ended, Baldwin invited me to his home. "Would you like to come over," he said, "and have some carrot cake and ginger tea?" I accepted. His wife Molly had made the carrot cake from scratch. The tea was served properly, in a cup and saucer, in the formal sitting room of a house filled with books and quiet and the accumulated evidence of a life spent in the company of words. Baldwin and I talked about writing for the stage. We talked about what it meant to put characters on their feet and send them out into a room full of strangers and trust that the strangers would understand what the characters were for. We talked about the obligation the playwright carries: not to the audience, not to the director, not to the department, but to the characters themselves, who exist because the playwright made them exist and who deserve to be presented as the playwright conceived them.

It is the most bittersweet memory of my life. I was eighteen, sitting in the living room of a man whose career was ending, eating his wife's carrot cake and drinking ginger tea and talking about the thing we both loved, and I did not fully understand that what was happening in that room was a transfer. One career was beginning as another ended. We passed the torch using forks. Baldwin had been my ally in ways I did not comprehend at the time. He had read a teenager's first attempt at a play and seen something in it worth defending. He had told me to join the Guild not because I was ready for it but because I would need it. He had armed me with the membership card that I would carry into every professional confrontation recounted in this book: the McGraw rehearsal, the Pendleton seminar, the Columbia cancellation, the founding of United Stage. Every one of those moments connects back to a spring afternoon in Lincoln, Nebraska, when a retiring playwright shared his table with a freshman who did not yet know he was holding the beginning of a career.

Baldwin died on December 27, 1994, in Lincoln. He was seventy-six years old.

I did not fully understand, at twenty, the significance of Baldwin's insistence that I carry the Guild's card. I understood it the night McGraw changed my stage directions. The card did not help me in that rehearsal room. I was too young, too outnumbered, and the institutional hierarchy was too steep. But I had the card. Baldwin had made sure of that.

McGraw's formulation is the director's theatre reduced to a single sentence. It contains everything: the assumption that the text conceals its meaning from its own author, that the director is the one who reveals the meaning, that the playwright is a kind of unconscious medium through whom the work passes on its way to the director's interpretive intelligence. The formulation is seductive because it flatters the director and because it has a grain of truth in it: playwrights sometimes discover things about their own work in production that they did not know during writing. But the grain of truth does not justify the conclusion. The fact that a playwright may learn something new about the play in rehearsal does not mean the playwright does not know what the play is about. It means the play is richer than any single reading, including the playwright's own. The director's job is to find that richness within the playwright's architecture, not to demolish the architecture and build something else.

I carried McGraw's sentence with me to New York.

* * *

In September 1988, during my first week as an MFA student at Columbia University in the City of New York, I attended the American Theatre Wing's "Working in the Theatre" seminar at the CUNY Graduate Center Television Studio. It was seminar number 137, recorded for broadcast on public television. The topic was the Playwright, Director, and Choreographer. I was twenty-two years old. I had been in New York for days. I was still carrying McGraw's words. I raised my hand and asked the panel a question: "What happens if you run into a director who wants to change your play and who doesn't agree with your vision?"

Austin Pendleton answered. Pendleton is a director, an actor, a playwright, and a teacher who has spent his entire career inside the American theatre. He did not hesitate. His first word was: "Run."

The audience laughed. Pendleton was not joking. He continued: if you tell a director no, that this is not what the play is about and not what the play is for, and the director still circumvents you or continues to exert intolerable pressure, get rid of the director. Or run. Take the play and go.

I pressed him. “But even as a beginning playwright?”

“Yes!” Pendleton said. “No, I mean it! Particularly if it’s a first play! Because then it will be the first time you’ve ever been seen, and they’ll have a total misrepresentation of you. Go and get the play on somewhere else. Don’t let that be done to you. It’s very seductive, but don’t let that be done to you.”

The word “seductive” is the word I have remembered for nearly four decades. It is the right word. The offer that the director’s theatre makes to the playwright is seductive: let me help you discover what your play really means. Let me bring my vision to your material. Let me use my expertise in staging, in casting, in theatrical effect, to reveal the play to the audience in a way you cannot achieve alone. The offer sounds generous. It sounds collaborative. It sounds like the director is serving the play. But Pendleton understood, from the inside of the profession, that the offer can also be a seizure. The director who wants to change the play is not serving the play. The director is replacing the play. And the playwright, particularly the young playwright, the first-time playwright, the playwright who has never been seen before, is the one who will be misrepresented by the replacement.

I did not know, sitting in that CUNY television studio in September 1988, that the situation Pendleton described would happen to me at the same university I had just enrolled in.

* * *

As part of Columbia’s MFA production cycle, each playwright’s work was assigned a director. The system was collaborative in theory: the writer provides the script, the director stages it, and the two work together to bring the play to its fullest realization. I was assigned a director. He read my script. One of my characters was a single Midwestern male. The character was, in the language of the craft, a discrete dramatic entity: one person, one psychology, one body on stage, speaking lines written for one voice.

The director decided to split that single character into two. He wanted bipolar, Gay, East Coast twins: a male ego and a female superego. Each actor would take turns saying the lines I had written for one actor. Sometimes both actors would appear on stage simultaneously, aware of each other, performing what the director described as an existential exploration of fractured identity. The single Midwestern man I had written would become two New Yorkers, their sexuality changed, their geography changed, their mental health status changed, their fundamental dramatic function changed. The character would be unrecognizable. The play would be unrecognizable. My name would still be on it.

I asked why. The director's answer was the answer that made the blood leave my hands: "Non-traditional casting. Characters aren't sacred. They can be changed at will. It's the essence of the character, not the person playing the character, that matters."

Consider what the change would have meant in practical terms. A single character is a single dramatic intelligence. The audience encounters one person, with one set of motivations, one psychology, one voice. The playwright constructs that character's arc through the play as a continuous line: this person enters with a problem, encounters resistance, makes choices, and arrives somewhere changed. Split the character into two, and the arc becomes two arcs, each carrying half the dramatic weight, each diluting the other. The internal contradictions that make a character interesting, the contradictions that live inside a single mind and generate dramatic tension because they cannot be resolved except through action, are externalized into a dialogue between two people. What was psychological becomes theatrical. What was one person struggling becomes two people arguing. The entire engine of the drama changes, not because the playwright chose the change but because the director found it more interesting. More interesting to the director. Not more interesting to the audience, who would have seen a play the playwright did not write and would have judged the playwright accordingly.

I cancelled the production. Austin Pendleton had told me what to do, four years before, in my first week in New York. Run. Take the play and go. Don't let that be done to you. I recognized that the collaboration was broken on a level so basic that no amount of rehearsal room diplomacy could repair it. The director did not understand the script, which was a problem. More dangerously, the director did not believe he needed to understand the script, because he had a theory that told him the script was raw material, not a finished architecture. The theory was non-traditional casting, inflated beyond its original scope until it had become a license for directorial autocracy.

I learned something in that exchange that I have carried for the rest of my career in the theatre: it is better to stop a disaster midstream than to wash an entire company down the waterfall. The production that does not happen is always better than the production that betrays the playwright's work and then attaches the playwright's name to the betrayal. Because the audience does not blame the director. The audience does not blame the concept. The audience blames the play. And the play is what I wrote, not what the director decided it should become.

* * *

The Columbia anecdote is a small story. It happened in a graduate program. Nobody bought a ticket. No review was published. Nobody outside the program would have known or cared. But small stories sometimes contain the entire argument in miniature, the way a biopsy contains the diagnosis. What the director did to my play is what the director's theatre does to every play it touches. It treats the text as a starting point rather than a destination. It treats the playwright as a supplier of raw material rather than the author of a completed work. And when it needs an ideological justification for this treatment, it reaches for whatever vocabulary is currently available. In the case of my director at Columbia, the available vocabulary was non-traditional casting.

The term "director's theatre" has a specific history, and the history is relevant to this book because non-traditional casting, as practiced in the American theatre since the mid-1980s, is one of its instruments. The director's theatre emerged in Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a reaction against the star system, in which leading actors dominated productions and playwrights were subordinate to commercial interests. Figures like Konstantin Stanislavski at the Moscow Art Theatre, Max Reinhardt in Berlin, and later Peter Brook and Jerzy Grotowski established the director as the primary creative intelligence of a production, the person whose vision unified all the elements of performance into a coherent artistic statement. In this tradition, the director is not the playwright's servant. The director is the playwright's equal, or in some formulations, the playwright's superior: the person who sees what the playwright cannot see, who finds in the text meanings the playwright did not intend, and who uses the tools of staging, design, and casting to realize those meanings for an audience.

The tradition has produced extraordinary work. No serious account of twentieth-century theatre can deny the achievements of the great directors, from Stanislavski's naturalistic revolution to Brook's stripped-down experiments to Robert Wilson's visual landscapes to, more recently, Ivo van Hove's radical reinventions of classic texts. The director's theatre, at its best, is a productive collaboration between two creative intelligences, in which the director illuminates dimensions of the text that the playwright may not have consciously intended but that are demonstrably present in the work.

The problem is not the tradition. The problem is the tradition's worst application: the director who does not illuminate the text but overrides it, who does not find meanings in the work but imposes meanings on the work, and who uses the director's authority not to serve the play but to use the play as a vehicle for the director's own preoccupations. This is what my director at Columbia did. He was not interested in my Midwestern male character. He was interested in his own ideas about fractured identity, gender fluidity, and the instability of the self. These are legitimate artistic concerns. They are interesting subjects for a play. They were not, however, the subject of my play. My play was about something else. The director did not care what my play was about. He cared about what his production would be about, and the two were not the same thing.

The phrase "non-traditional casting" gave his appropriation a respectable cover. If he had said, "I want to change your play because I find my ideas more interesting than yours," the power dynamic would have been visible. A director telling a playwright that the director's ideas are more interesting than the playwright's ideas is a director announcing a coup. But a director saying, "I want to change your play because of non-traditional casting" is a director invoking a principle that carries moral weight. Non-traditional casting is associated with inclusion, diversity, and the expansion of opportunity for historically excluded performers. To oppose it is to risk being labeled as retrograde, exclusionary, or bigoted. The moral freight of the term functions as camouflage for the power grab it enables.

* * *

The Dramatists Guild of America exists because this conflict is not new. The Guild was established in the early twentieth century precisely to protect playwrights from the kind of appropriation my director attempted at Columbia. When George S. Kaufman, Moss Hart, Eugene O'Neill, and their contemporaries gathered to form the Guild, they held one principle above all others: the dramatist owns and controls the intellectual property. The playwright's copyright is not a formality. It is the foundation of the entire relationship between the writer and the theatre. The Dramatists Guild Bill of Rights, which the Guild has maintained and defended since the 1926 Minimum Basic Agreement, specifies the protections in language that leaves no room for ambiguity.

The first right on the list is Artistic Integrity: no one, not directors, not actors, not dramaturgs, can make additions, deletions, alterations, or changes of any kind to the playwright's script, including the text, title, and stage directions, without the playwright's prior written consent. The second is Approval of Production Elements: the playwright has the right to mutually approve the cast, director, and designers, including their replacements. The third is the Right to Be Present: the playwright always has the right to attend casting, rehearsals, previews, and performances. The sixth right, Ownership of Copyright, is the one that makes all the others enforceable: authors in the theatre business do not assign their copyrights, nor do they engage in work-for-hire. The playwright licenses the public performance rights to a producer for a finite period of time. The playwright remains the owner of the work.

These rights are not aspirational. They are the legal and contractual framework of the American professional theatre. They exist because, without them, the theatre would become what the film industry already is: a system in which the writer provides raw material and the director, the producers, and the editors shape it into a finished product that bears the writer's name but not the writer's intention. The Dramatists Guild has fought for a century to prevent that transformation, and the fight has required sacrifice. Playwrights cannot unionize, because the law treats them as property owners rather than employees. They do not receive pensions or health insurance through their guild membership. The tradeoff is control: the playwright retains authority over the work.

The Guild's own publications are full of stories from playwrights who have had to exercise this authority against directors who treated the text as negotiable. Charlayne Woodard described a production in which her director refused to meet with her, discouraged rewrites during previews, and asked her to stay away from rehearsals so the cast could "play" without the playwright's "critical gaze." She refused to leave. Another Guild member described a production in which the director reordered scenes "with impunity and minimal logic," disrupting the line of narrative tension the writers had spent four years building, altering alliances between characters, and eliminating sections entirely. The writers shut the production down, using their copyright and their licensing agreement with Samuel French to stop the damage.

These stories are not aberrations. They are the permanent condition of the playwright's life in the American theatre. The director's theatre and the playwright's theatre are in structural tension, and they always have been. The question is which one wins when they collide. In the professional theatre, the playwright's copyright provides the answer: the playwright wins, because the playwright owns the work. In the academic theatre, where my Columbia experience occurred, the power dynamic is reversed. Graduate students do not have licensing agreements with Samuel French. They do not have the Dramatists Guild's business affairs department on speed dial. They have a program, an advisor, and an assigned director, and the program's institutional culture determines whose vision prevails.

The institutional culture of American graduate theatre programs in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century was, overwhelmingly, the culture of the director's theatre. The programs that trained directors taught them to see the text as a point of departure, not an arrival. The vocabulary of the rehearsal room reflected this: directors spoke of "finding the play" in the text, as though the text were a mine to be excavated rather than an architecture to be inhabited. They spoke of their "concept" for the production, as though the play were a platform for the director's ideas rather than the ideas themselves. They spoke of "interrogating the text," a phrase borrowed from literary theory that sounds scholarly but functions, in practice, as permission to contradict the text.

The irony is that this culture flourished in the very country whose theatre tradition had most emphatically placed the playwright at the top of the creative hierarchy. The American theatre, unlike the European theatre, developed through the twentieth century with the playwright, not the director, as the primary creative authority. The Dramatists Guild was founded on this principle. The Minimum Basic Agreement of 1926, which established the contractual framework that persists to this day, was a playwright's document: it guaranteed that the writer would retain copyright, approve production elements, and control the integrity of the text. Eugene O'Neill, the subject of the previous chapter, was one of the Guild's founding members. He understood that the theatre would devour the writer's work if the writer did not defend it, and the Guild was the instrument of that defense. The American theatre was, by design and by contract, a playwright's theatre.

The graduate programs reversed this. They imported the European director's theatre into an American institutional context and taught a generation of directors that the text was a resource, not a document. They taught directors to "make bold choices," which in practice meant making choices that contradicted the playwright's choices. They taught directors that the rehearsal room was a laboratory, which in practice meant treating the playwright's finished work as an experimental compound to be altered under controlled conditions. And they taught directors that casting was a directorial prerogative, which in practice meant that the characters the playwright had created were available for reconfiguration at the director's discretion.

Non-traditional casting fit seamlessly into this institutional culture because it provided an additional tool for directorial authority. A director who could alter the gender, race, ethnicity, or number of characters in a play under the banner of non-traditional casting was a director with more power than a director who could not. The ideology of inclusion provided the moral justification. The practical effect was the expansion of the director's creative territory at the expense of the playwright's. My director at Columbia did not split my character into bipolar twins because he was passionate about disability representation, or because he wanted to create opportunities for Gay actors, or because he believed that East Coast identity was underrepresented in Midwestern drama. He split my character because he wanted to make a theatrical statement about the fracturing of the self, and non-traditional casting gave him the vocabulary to do it without having to admit that he was rewriting someone else's play.

* * *

I want to be precise about what I am not arguing. I am not arguing that directors should be subordinate to playwrights in all cases and all circumstances. I am not arguing that the director's theatre has produced no valuable work. I am not arguing that a director's vision is irrelevant to the realization of a play. The best productions I have seen in my life have been productions in which a director found something in the text that illuminated the playwright's intention in ways the playwright might not have imagined. Daniel Fish's "Oklahoma!" which is the subject of Chapter 9 of this book, is an example: Fish stripped away decades of accumulated nostalgia and exposed the violence, sexual coercion, and mob justice that Rodgers and Hammerstein had written into the text all along. Fish did not contradict the text. He honored it by taking it seriously. He directed the play that was on the page, not the play that tradition had substituted for it.

I should be honest about where this example presses against my own framework. Fish's production did not make minor interpretive adjustments. It replaced the Agnes de Mille ballet with a disturbing solo dance. It staged Jud Fry's death as an execution rather than the traditional accidental stabbing. It put rifles in the aisles and blood on the cast. It turned a show that audiences had experienced for seventy-six years as a celebration of American community into an indictment of American violence. These are radical changes in meaning, and a skeptical reader will notice that the scale of Fish's directorial reconception is not obviously smaller than the reconceptions I have spent this book condemning. The distinction I am drawing, between illumination and replacement, is clear in principle. In practice, it is a line that Fish's production walks with one foot on either side. What keeps Fish on the right side of the line, in my analysis, is that the textual evidence supports him. The violence is in the libretto. The sexual coercion is in the lyrics. The mob justice is in the plot. Previous productions concealed these elements through staging choices that softened what Hammerstein wrote. Fish reversed those staging choices and let the text speak in its own voice. The meaning he found was present in the work. He did not import it from outside. A director who finds what the playwright put there is interpreting. A director who puts something there that the playwright did not is replacing. Fish found. My director at Columbia invented.

The distinction is between a director who illuminates the text and a director who replaces the text. Fish illuminated "Oklahoma!" My director at Columbia replaced my play. The difference is not a matter of degree. It is a matter of kind. When a director casts Ali Stroker as Ado Annie, the director is making an interpretive choice within the boundaries of the text, because Hammerstein's stage directions specify personality, not physicality, and Stroker's performance reveals dimensions of the character that the text supports. When a director splits a single character into twins and changes the character's sexuality, geography, and psychology, the director is not interpreting the text. The director is writing a new text and attaching the original playwright's name to it.

This distinction matters for the argument of this book because it separates the two things that the non-traditional casting debate has persistently confused: artistic interpretation and authorial control. When August Wilson insisted that his plays be performed by Black actors, he was asserting authorial control over the ethnic identity of his characters. When the Beckett estate insisted that "Waiting for Godot" be performed by men, the estate was asserting the playwright's control over the gender of the characters. When I cancelled my production at Columbia, I was asserting the same principle: the playwright, not the director, determines what the characters are. The characters are not raw material. They are not suggestions. They are not starting points for the director's improvisations. They are the playwright's creation, and the playwright's name is on the program, and the playwright's reputation is on the line, and the playwright has the right, the legal right and the moral right, to say no.

The director at Columbia told me that characters are not sacred and can be changed at will. He was half right. Characters are not sacred. Nothing in the theatre is sacred in the religious sense. But characters are the playwright's property, in the legal sense and in the creative sense, and property cannot be changed at will by someone who does not own it. The director did not own my character. He was assigned to stage my character. The difference between owning and staging is the difference between writing and directing, and the non-traditional casting ideology, at its most aggressive, erases that difference by telling directors that they have the right to remake the playwright's work in the name of a social good.

* * *

This chapter is the hinge of the book. The first ten chapters have examined the history of casting, the theory of non-traditional casting, and a series of case studies that test the theory against specific works: Shakespeare, the minstrel tradition, Beckett, August Wilson, "Hamilton" and "1776," "The Miracle Worker," the Keith Wann interpreter case, Ali Stroker and "Oklahoma!," and O'Neill's Irish plays. In each case, the analysis has returned to the same question: who decides what a character is? The playwright who wrote the character, or the institution that produces the play?

The remaining chapters will examine the Dramatists Guild Inclusion Rider, the formal mechanism by which the institution has attempted to codify its answer to that question. But before turning to the Rider itself, this chapter needed to establish, through personal experience, what is at stake when the question is answered incorrectly. What is at stake is not an abstraction about creative authority. What is at stake is a play: a specific play, written by a specific person, about a specific thing. When the director at Columbia split my character into twins, he did not merely violate my creative rights. He destroyed a dramatic entity. The character I wrote ceased to exist. In its place stood two characters I did not write, performing a scene I did not intend, expressing ideas I did not hold, in a production that bore my name.

I was fortunate. I had the authority to cancel the production, and I used it. Not every playwright is so fortunate. Not every playwright is in a position to stop the damage. Graduate students are vulnerable. Emerging playwrights who depend on a theatre's goodwill for future productions are vulnerable. Playwrights who are told that their resistance to non-traditional casting reveals a moral failing are vulnerable. The ideology works precisely because it makes the playwright's defense of the playwright's work sound like bigotry. "Why won't you let us make your character more diverse?" is a question that contains its own answer: because you are against diversity. And who wants to be against diversity?

The answer, of course, is that defending the integrity of a written character is not opposition to diversity. It is the defense of authorship. Authorship means that the writer takes full responsibility for the work: for its content, its characters, its structure, its meaning. If the production fails, the playwright's name is on the failure. If the production succeeds, the playwright's name is on the success. The playwright cannot take responsibility for a work that has been altered without the playwright's consent, any more than an architect can take responsibility for a building whose plans have been changed during construction without the architect's knowledge. The architect's name is on the building. The playwright's name is on the program. The name is the guarantee. If the work behind the name has been changed, the guarantee is fraudulent.

That is why I founded The United Stage. Not just the website, UnitedStage.com, which came later, but the principle it embodies: the playwright has the right to direct the first public performance of the playwright's own play. I write, direct, and produce my own work because Rex McGraw taught me what happens when you do not. The principle was cemented in a UNL rehearsal room in 1986. It was confirmed by Austin Pendleton at a CUNY television studio in 1988. It was tested at Columbia when I cancelled a production rather than allow a director to replace my play with his own. Three events, three lessons, one conclusion: the playwright who entrusts a play to a director is making an act of faith, and faith requires a shared theology. The director and the playwright must believe in the same thing, that the play is the play, that the characters are the characters, that the text is not raw material but a completed architecture. When the director and the playwright share this belief, the collaboration can be extraordinary. When they do not share it, the collaboration is not a collaboration at all. It is an annexation.

The next three chapters of this book examine the formal mechanism the American theatre has built to conduct that annexation: the Dramatists Guild Inclusion Rider, which purports to serve the playwright but functions, as I will demonstrate, as a tool for transferring creative authority from the writer to the institution. The Rider did not exist when my director at Columbia tried to split my character into twins. It was not necessary. The ideology was already sufficient. What the Rider did, when it arrived in 2021, was codify the ideology into a contractual instrument. The director at Columbia had to argue for his transformation. The Rider would have given him a form to fill out.

Part III

The Argument

Chapter 12: The Dramatists Guild Inclusion Rider

The last line of the previous chapter was: “The Rider would have given him a form to fill out.” This chapter is about the form.

In October 2021, the Dramatists Guild of America released its Inclusion Rider, designated DG21, to its membership. The document was accompanied by a cover letter from Christine Toy Johnson, Chair of the Guild’s Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Access Committee and Guild Treasurer, who described it as “a resource and voluntary tool to support all dramatists who have a desire to exercise these principles in the hiring of personnel involved in their productions.” The Guild’s website called it “groundbreaking” and “the first of its kind in the theatre industry.” A companion document, “The Art of Negotiating Theatre Contracts,” was released simultaneously. A series of training webinars followed in the autumn months, with titles that included “How to Tell If a Theatre Company Is Inclusive Enough for You,” “How to Advocate for Inclusion in Person,” “How to Present and Defend the Inclusion Rider,” and “Steps You Can Take Toward Fostering Meaningful Diversity in a Production Process.” A dedicated episode of the Guild’s podcast, “The Dramatists Guild Presents: Talkback,” was produced to explain the document’s development.

I received the Inclusion Rider as a dues-paying member of the Dramatists Guild, number 45010. I have held that membership since July 2, 1984, when my freshman playwriting teacher at UNL, Joe Baldwin, read the first one-act play I ever wrote and told me the Guild was the only organization in the American theatre that existed to protect me.

He was right. I joined that week. I have never stopped paying dues. I have carried that membership through every professional decision recounted in this book: through McGraw's insult, through Pendleton's answer, through the Columbia cancellation, through the founding of United Stage. Forty years of dues paid to an organization I believed existed to defend the playwright's authority. I read the Inclusion Rider carefully. I read the companion negotiation guide. I attended to the webinar titles. I understood what the document was meant to be: a tool for playwrights who wanted to advocate for diverse hiring in productions of their work. I also understood what the document actually was, which is something different. It is the institutional capstone of the non-traditional casting movement, the moment when a social aspiration became a contractual mechanism, and the moment when the organization founded to protect the playwright's rights produced a document that subordinates the playwright's casting authority to demographic objectives. This chapter will examine the Inclusion Rider provision by provision, because the details are where the contradictions live.

* * *

The inclusion rider as a concept did not originate in the theatre. It came from Hollywood, specifically from the work of Stacy L. Smith, a media researcher at the University of Southern California who founded the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative. In a 2014 guest column in The Hollywood Reporter, Smith proposed what she initially called an "equity rider," a clause that A-list actors could insert into their film contracts stipulating that minor and supporting roles reflect the demographic composition of the story's setting. In a 2016 TED Talk titled "The Data of Hollywood Sexism," Smith expanded the idea. She observed that a typical feature film has forty to forty-five speaking characters, of which only eight to ten are central to the story, and argued that the remaining thirty or so roles could and should match the demography of the world the film depicted. The mechanism was simple: an actor with sufficient contractual leverage would demand, as a condition of participation, that the production meet certain diversity benchmarks. The rider would be attached to the actor's contract, making the diversity commitment enforceable.

The concept entered public consciousness on March 4, 2018, when Frances McDormand, accepting the Academy Award for Best Actress for "Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri," ended her speech with two words: "Inclusion rider." McDormand told reporters backstage that she had learned about the concept only the previous week. Merriam-Webster reported that "inclusion" was the most searched word on its site that night. The speech was a cultural event, a moment when a single phrase crystallized years of industry conversation about representation into something concrete: a contract clause, a mechanism, a tool.

The Dramatists Guild's Inclusion Rider, released three and a half years after McDormand's speech, adapted the Hollywood concept for the theatre. But the adaptation involved a fundamental structural change that is easy to miss and essential to understand. In Hollywood, the inclusion rider is attached to the actor's contract. The actor is the one with leverage, the one whose participation the studio needs, the one who can make demands as a condition of showing up. The actor does not own the screenplay. The actor does not control the production. The actor is an employee with market power, using that market power to extract a concession from the employer.

In the Dramatists Guild's version, the inclusion rider is attached to the playwright's contract. The playwright is the one expected to negotiate for diverse hiring, the one expected to present the rider to the producer, the one expected to initiate the conversation that Christine Toy Johnson's cover letter describes as "awkward and uncomfortable." The playwright is not an employee. The playwright is a property owner. The playwright's leverage comes not from market power but from copyright: the legal right to license or withhold the public performance of the work. The Guild's own materials make this distinction relentlessly. The companion negotiation guide states, in capital letters: "YOU OWN YOUR COPYRIGHT. This means you're not an 'employee'; you are a property owner with the leverage to negotiate fair contracts and control the production of your work."

The structural shift matters because it changes who bears the burden. In Hollywood, the inclusion rider asks an actor to use personal clout on behalf of other people's hiring. In the theatre, the Dramatists Guild's Inclusion Rider asks the playwright to use the playwright's copyright on behalf of other people's hiring. The copyright is the playwright's instrument of creative control. It is the tool the Guild has spent a century building and defending. It is the mechanism by which the playwright maintains authority over the text, the characters, the casting, and the production. The Inclusion Rider asks the playwright to redirect that tool toward a purpose external to the play itself: the demographic composition of the production's personnel.

This is not a small shift. It is a redirection of the playwright's most fundamental right toward an objective the playwright may or may not share, in a negotiation the playwright may or may not want to have, at a moment when the playwright's primary concern is getting the play produced faithfully. The cover letter acknowledges this indirectly when it recommends that playwrights "broach the subject of diverse, equitable and inclusive hiring with producers before sending them any contract language, in order to explore the possibilities of collaborating with them to address these concerns." The phrasing assumes the playwright shares the concerns. It does not account for the playwright who has different concerns, or the playwright whose primary concern is fidelity to the text rather than the demography of the workforce.

* * *

The Inclusion Rider is a model contract addendum designed to be attached to any production agreement. It creates binding hiring objectives across four categories. The first category, covered in Section 2(a)(i), addresses actors: “Producer shall use reasonable efforts to cast actors from Historically Excluded Group(s), as both Principal Actors and Chorus Members, in such numbers as to reflect at least a significant and representative proportion of the total roles cast for the production.” The second, in Section 2(b)(i), extends the same “reasonable efforts” and “significant and representative proportion” requirements to artistic personnel and the creative team: directors, choreographers, designers, music directors, arrangers, and orchestrators. The third, in Section 2(c), extends the requirements to crew: stagehands under IATSE jurisdiction, casting directors under CSA, and all other production workers. The fourth, in Section 3, governs auditions and interviews: “The Producer shall use reasonable efforts to present casting calls, and to otherwise invite, audition, or interview members of Historically Excluded Group(s), to meet the parties’ hiring objectives.”

Section 4 creates the audit mechanism. The producer must keep records of every person interviewed, auditioned, or considered for every position on the production. These records are available to the playwright for audit. The playwright, in other words, is given the right not merely to advocate for diverse hiring but to inspect the producer’s compliance with the hiring objectives. The playwright becomes, in effect, the enforcement officer of the rider’s demographic mandates.

The phrase “reasonable efforts” appears throughout the document and does real work. In contract law, “reasonable efforts” is not a suggestion. It is a legal standard that requires demonstrable action. A producer who signs a contract containing “reasonable efforts” language cannot simply say, “We tried.” The producer must be able to show what efforts were made, what results were achieved, and why any shortfall was unavoidable. Combined with the record-keeping requirement of Section 4, the “reasonable efforts” standard transforms the Inclusion Rider from a statement of aspiration into an auditable compliance regime. The playwright who attaches this rider to a production agreement is not starting a conversation. The playwright is creating a binding obligation backed by documentation requirements and the implicit threat of legal action for noncompliance.

* * *

The definition of “Historically Excluded Group(s)” is the provision that reveals the rider’s true scope. The document defines the term to include “people who identify themselves as women, Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC), Latine, Asian and/or Pacific Islander (API), Middle Eastern and/or North African and/or South Asian (MENASA), people with disabilities, within the LGBTQIA+ community, genderqueer or non-binary, or those who identify with a religion, culture, age, ethnicity, nationality, or alienage that have been historically excluded in theatrical productions, or people having a combination of these attributes.”

Read that definition again. Read it slowly. Inventory the categories. Women. All racial and ethnic minorities. People with disabilities. The entire LGBTQIA+ spectrum. Anyone genderqueer or nonbinary. Anyone of any religion that has been historically excluded (which encompasses Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, and virtually every non-mainstream Protestant denomination). Anyone of any culture, age, ethnicity, nationality, or alienage that has been historically excluded (which is an open-ended category that can encompass nearly anyone who claims it). And anyone with any combination of these attributes.

The arithmetic is inescapable. The only person who does not qualify as a member of a “Historically Excluded Group” under this definition is a straight, able-bodied, cisgender, young-to-middle-aged white male who practices mainstream Protestantism or no religion at all. Everyone else on the planet qualifies. The definition is so broad that it encompasses the substantial majority of the American population and the overwhelming majority of the human population. A white, heterosexual, able-bodied man who is Jewish qualifies. A white, heterosexual, able-bodied man who is Catholic qualifies. A white, heterosexual, able-bodied man who is over sixty-five qualifies, because age is included. A white, heterosexual, able-bodied woman qualifies simply by being a woman.

The breadth of the definition has two effects. First, it renders the category functionally meaningless as a tool of targeted correction. If the purpose of the rider is to address the historical exclusion of specific groups from the American theatre, a definition that encompasses nearly everyone does not address specific exclusion. It addresses everything, which means it addresses nothing in particular. The rider does not say, “Producers should make reasonable efforts to cast Black actors in roles where the playwright has not specified race.” That would be a targeted provision addressing a specific historical exclusion. Instead, the rider says, “Producers should make reasonable efforts to cast anyone who is not a straight, able-bodied, non-religious white man.” The provision is less a correction of a historical wrong than a mandate against a demographic category.

Second, the definition’s breadth makes compliance nearly automatic while maintaining the appearance of rigor. A producer who casts a white Catholic woman, a straight Asian-American man, and a Jewish lighting designer has technically met the rider’s requirements, because all three individuals qualify as members of Historically Excluded Groups. The producer can document compliance, present the records for audit, and demonstrate that “reasonable efforts” were made to hire from the designated categories. The audit will pass. The forms will be in order. And the structural dynamics of the American theatre, in which specific communities face specific barriers to specific opportunities, will remain exactly as they were. The rider creates the machinery of accountability without the substance of change.

* * *

The provision that reveals the rider's deepest problem is the carve-out. Section 2(a)(ii) reads: "Notwithstanding the foregoing, where the Author has indicated (either in the Play's dialogue or stage directions) specific physical attributes of a character that may be visible to an audience, or such attributes are otherwise inherent in the Play's setting (including its time and place), Producer will cast members of Historically Excluded Group(s), only to the extent indicated by the Author's intention."

This provision ostensibly preserves the playwright's authority. It says, in effect: if the playwright has specified the physical attributes of a character, those specifications take precedence over the hiring objectives. If the playwright has written a role that requires a specific appearance, the producer must respect that requirement. The playwright's text controls.

But look at what the carve-out actually protects, and what it leaves exposed. It protects "specific physical attributes" that are "indicated" in "the Play's dialogue or stage directions." It protects attributes that are "inherent in the Play's setting." These protections cover the explicit and the obvious. They cover the playwright who writes "JAMES TYRONE, a man of sixty-five" in a stage direction. They cover the play set in 1860s Mississippi, where the racial composition of the characters is inherent in the historical setting.

What they do not cover is the cultural fabric of the work. They do not cover the play whose characters are ethnically specific but whose ethnicity is woven into the names, the dialogue patterns, the religious references, the class anxieties, the family dynamics, and the behavioral codes rather than stated in a stage direction. They do not cover, in other words, Eugene O'Neill.

This is the gap that Chapter 10 of this book identified. O'Neill does not write "STAGE DIRECTION: All actors must be Irish" in "Long Day's Journey Into Night." The Irishness of the Tyrones is carried by every line, every reference, every behavioral pattern in the play. James Tyrone's terror of the poorhouse is an immigrant's terror rooted in the Great Famine. Mary Tyrone's morphine shame is an Irish Catholic woman's shame rooted in a specific religious culture of guilt and propriety. Jamie's drinking is not merely alcoholism but a generationally inherited pattern with a specific ethnic and cultural context. The sons' apostasy is an Irish American generational rupture, the second generation turning away from the faith that sustained and constrained the first. The entire play is a vessel built from Irish timber, and every plank is load-bearing.

But under the Inclusion Rider's carve-out, none of this is protected. The rider protects "specific physical attributes" stated in dialogue or stage directions. O'Neill does not state "Irish" as a physical attribute. The rider protects attributes "inherent in the Play's setting." One could argue that Irishness is inherent in the setting of a family named Tyrone in New London, Connecticut, in 1912, but the argument is interpretive, not explicit. A producer applying the rider could argue that since O'Neill did not specify Irish actors in his stage directions, the carve-out does not apply, and "reasonable efforts" to cast from Historically Excluded Groups must be made for the Tyrone family.

The same gap applies to Arthur Miller. Willy Loman is Jewish. His Jewishness is not stated in a stage direction. It lives in the rhythms of his speech, the structure of his family relationships, the specific texture of his despair, the particular way his American Dream curdles. A producer applying the rider's carve-out would find no stage direction that says "Jewish" and no setting that makes Jewishness explicitly inherent. The carve-out does not protect Willy Loman's ethnicity.

The same gap applies to Tennessee Williams. Stanley Kowalski is Polish. His sister-in-law Blanche DuBois is a specific type of Southern aristocrat whose identity is inseparable from the racial and class hierarchies of the antebellum South. Neither characterization is reducible to a stage direction specifying physical attributes. The carve-out does not protect them.

The same gap applies to Lorraine Hansberry. “A Raisin in the Sun” is set in a Black family on Chicago’s South Side in the 1950s. This is a case where the setting arguably makes the characters’ race “inherent,” and the carve-out would likely apply. But notice what this reveals: the carve-out protects the most obvious cases and fails the subtle ones. It protects the play where race is inseparable from the setting’s geography and time period. It fails the play where ethnicity is inseparable from the characters’ psychology and behavior. The rider, in other words, protects the letter of the text while exposing its spirit to institutional pressure.

This is not an oversight. It is structural. The carve-out is drawn narrowly because it must be drawn narrowly if the rider is to function. A carve-out that protected the full cultural context of a dramatic work, including ethnicity woven into character psychology, behavioral patterns, religious references, and family dynamics, would exempt so many plays from the rider’s hiring objectives that the rider would have no force. The rider works only if the carve-out is narrow enough to leave most casting decisions subject to the demographic mandate. The carve-out is not a safeguard. It is a concession designed to be as small as possible while still appearing to preserve the playwright’s authority.

* * *

The contradiction at the center of the Inclusion Rider becomes visible when you place it next to the Guild’s other documents. The same release that contained the rider also contained “The Art of Negotiating

Theatre Contracts," a guide that instructs playwrights in the exercise of their contractual rights. The guide states, in capital letters: "YOU OWN YOUR COPYRIGHT. This means you're not an 'employee'; you are a property owner with the leverage to negotiate fair contracts and control the production of your work." The guide includes a section titled "The Power of NO," which argues that "a writer must be willing to fight for their vision, because if they don't, who will?"

The Dramatists Guild Bill of Rights, which the Guild has maintained since the 1926 Minimum Basic Agreement, affirms the playwright's right to "artistic approval (over the hiring of the cast, creative team, and certain other production elements)." The first right on the list is Artistic Integrity: no changes to the playwright's script without the playwright's prior written consent. The second is Approval of Production Elements, which explicitly includes the cast. These are the rights that Chapter 11 of this book described, the rights that exist because O'Neill and Kaufman and Hart and their contemporaries understood that without them, the playwright's work is at the mercy of every director and producer who has a different idea about what the play should be.

The Inclusion Rider does not formally contradict these rights. It does not say, "The playwright no longer has casting approval." What it does is insert a competing priority into the casting process. Section 2(a)(iii) states that "Author's approval may be based, at least in part, on the diversity of the cast." Read that sentence carefully. It does not merely say that the author may consider diversity when approving a cast. It says that the author's approval "may be based, at least in part, on" diversity. The phrasing introduces diversity as a criterion against which the playwright's approval can be evaluated. It creates a standard by which the playwright's exercise of casting authority can be measured.

The effect is to subordinate the playwright's dramatic judgment to a demographic metric. A playwright who approves a cast on purely dramatic grounds, selecting the actors who best serve the characters as written, may find that the cast does not reflect a “significant and representative proportion” of Historically Excluded Groups. Under the rider, this is a deficiency. The playwright’s approval of the cast is supposed to be based “at least in part” on diversity. If the playwright approved the cast without considering diversity, the approval is, by the rider’s logic, incomplete.

This is not what the Bill of Rights envisions. The Bill of Rights envisions a playwright whose casting approval is based on the playwright’s assessment of whether the actors can serve the play. The Inclusion Rider introduces a second, external criterion: whether the cast, taken as a whole, meets a demographic objective that has nothing to do with the specific play being produced. The two criteria can coincide. They can also conflict. When they conflict, the rider provides no mechanism for resolution. It simply states the demographic criterion and leaves the playwright to reconcile it with the dramatic one.

The Guild simultaneously tells playwrights that they own their work and have final casting approval, and provides a contract addendum that pressures them to exercise that approval through a diversity lens rather than a dramatic one. The Guild simultaneously tells playwrights to fight for their vision and to fight for a vision that may not be their own. The Guild simultaneously defends the playwright’s authority and creates a mechanism for measuring that authority against an institutional standard. The contradiction is not accidental. It is the inevitable result of an organization that serves two masters: the individual playwright’s creative rights and the institution’s social commitments. The Inclusion Rider is the document in which those two masters meet, and the playwright is the one who must choose between them.

* * *

The Guild describes the Inclusion Rider as "voluntary." The word appears in the cover letter and on the Guild's website. Christine Toy Johnson calls it "a voluntary resource and tool." Ralph Sevush, the Guild's Executive Director of Business Affairs, acknowledged in the document's press release that "some may feel the Rider doesn't go far enough, while others may feel it goes too far," and described it as "a starting point to begin this conversation and move forward." The language is calibrated to sound moderate, flexible, and respectful of individual choice.

The word "voluntary" does real work in this framing. It insulates the Guild from the charge that it is imposing casting mandates on its own members. It preserves the formal appearance of playwright autonomy. It allows the Guild to say, accurately, that no playwright is required to use the rider. The rider is available. It is recommended. It is supported by training webinars and companion documents and podcast episodes and press coverage. But it is voluntary.

The institutional reality is more complex than the word acknowledges. The rider was distributed to all Guild members. It was promoted on the Guild's website. The Guild's own publicity materials describe it as part of "our commitment to fostering a diverse, equitable, inclusive, accessible and anti-racist industry." The webinars were titled not "Understanding the Inclusion Rider" but "How to Present and Defend the Inclusion Rider" and "How to Advocate for Inclusion in Person." The framing assumes participation. The resources train playwrights not to evaluate the rider but to deploy it. The institutional apparatus treats the rider as something a responsible Guild member would use, the way a union member would use the union's standard contract. The rider is voluntary the way a corporate dress code is voluntary: no one will fire you for ignoring it, but everyone will notice.

A playwright who declines to attach the rider to a production agreement is not violating Guild rules. But that playwright is signaling to producers, artistic directors, and fellow Guild members that the playwright does not participate in the Guild's stated commitment to equitable hiring. In an industry where relationships determine production opportunities, where a single artistic director's enthusiasm can be the difference between a reading and a world premiere, where the same hundred people serve on the same committees and panels and attend the same conferences, the signal carries professional consequences that the word "voluntary" does not acknowledge. The playwright who declines the rider is not penalized formally. The playwright is penalized informally, through the accumulated effect of being perceived as unwilling to participate in the industry's prevailing moral framework.

This is the dynamic that August Wilson identified in 1996, twenty-five years before the Inclusion Rider existed. Wilson said, at the Town Hall debate with Robert Brustein, that "by making money available to theatres willing to support colorblind casting, the financiers and governors have signaled not only their unwillingness to support black theatre but their willingness to fund dangerous and divisive assaults against it." Wilson understood that institutional incentives, even when framed as voluntary, function as compulsions. A theatre that wants funding must comply with the funder's priorities. A playwright who wants production must comply with the industry's norms. The Inclusion Rider does not compel by force. It compels by institutional gravity, by the accumulated weight of expectation, publicity, training materials, and social pressure. The word "voluntary" describes the formal mechanism. It does not describe the lived experience of operating within the mechanism's field of influence.

* * *

The task force that created the Inclusion Rider included Christine Toy Johnson, Amanda Green (then Council President), Aisha DeCoteau, Ty Defoe, Chisa Hutchinson, Todd London, Emily Mann, Ralph Sevush, Emmanuel Wilson, Doug Wright, and Amy VonMacek. These are serious people with serious credentials in the American theatre. The rider was developed through what the Guild described as “a robust process,” and I have no reason to doubt that the process was undertaken in good faith. The people who created this document believe in it. They believe it will make the American theatre more equitable. They believe it gives playwrights a tool to exercise their existing rights in the service of a social good.

I do not question their intentions. I question their instrument.

The inclusion rider concept was designed for Hollywood, where it addresses a specific structural problem: the casting of minor and supporting roles in films, the “fabric of the film,” in the words of one of its creators, Kalpana Kotagal. In film, minor roles are often cast with minimal creative deliberation. A waitress in a restaurant scene, a pedestrian in a street sequence, a receptionist in an office lobby: these roles do not require specific ethnicities or genders, and the default casting, historically, has been straight white men. An inclusion rider in a film contract addresses this default by requiring that the casting of these incidental roles reflect the demographic composition of the story’s world. The rider does not touch the lead roles. It does not override the director’s creative vision for the central characters. It adjusts the background, the periphery, the scenery.

Theatre is not film. Theatre does not have background roles that function as scenery. In a typical play, every character who appears on stage speaks, acts, and participates in the dramatic action. There are no extras. There is no background. Even in a musical with a chorus, the chorus members are performers with specific functions in specific scenes. The distinction between “minor” roles and “major” roles, which makes the film inclusion rider relatively uncontroversial in its application, does not translate cleanly to the stage. When the Dramatists Guild’s Inclusion Rider applies its hiring objectives to “Principal Actors and Chorus Members,” it is applying them to every person who appears in the production. The rider does not adjust the background. It adjusts the play.

This is why the carve-out is so important, and why its narrowness is so revealing. The carve-out is the rider's acknowledgment that theatre is different from film, that characters in plays are not interchangeable in the way that background extras in films are. But the carve-out, as I have shown, protects only the most explicit specifications: physical attributes stated in dialogue or stage directions, and attributes inherent in the play's setting. It does not protect the cultural fabric of the work. It does not protect the ethnic anchor. It does not protect the play whose characters are who they are because of who the playwright made them, in the fullness of their cultural, ethnic, religious, and psychological specificity, even when that specificity is expressed through dramatic action rather than through a stage direction that reads like a casting notice.

* * *

The Inclusion Rider represents a specific historical moment in the life of the Dramatists Guild. The Guild was born out of the Authors' League of America, which was incorporated in 1912. The playwrights' committee formed in 1919, was officially named the Dramatists Guild in 1922, and negotiated its first Minimum Basic Agreement in 1926. For nearly a century, the Guild's central mission was the defense of the playwright's creative and economic rights against institutional pressure. The MBA established the framework: the playwright owns the copyright, approves the cast and creative team, controls the integrity of the text, and licenses the performance rights for a limited time. The Guild's history is, in essence, the history of playwrights organizing to prevent their work from being appropriated by producers, directors, and institutions.

The Inclusion Rider reverses the direction of the Guild's advocacy. For a century, the Guild said to the institution: you cannot change the playwright's work. The Inclusion Rider says to the playwright: you should change the institution's hiring. For a century, the Guild defended the playwright's right to say no. The Inclusion Rider creates an institutional expectation that the playwright will say yes. For a century, the Guild's instruments were designed to protect the playwright from external demands on the playwright's creative authority. The Inclusion Rider is an instrument that places external demands on the playwright's creative authority.

The reversal is not total. The rider does not strip the playwright of copyright. It does not eliminate casting approval. It does not formally override the Bill of Rights. But it introduces a competing gravity, a countervailing pull that draws the playwright's authority away from the play and toward the institution's social commitments. The playwright who uses the rider is not merely exercising a right. The playwright is accepting an obligation: to monitor the producer's hiring practices, to audit the producer's records, to evaluate the cast against demographic criteria, and to participate in the enforcement of a compliance regime that the playwright did not design and may not endorse.

* * *

I want to return to my director at Columbia, because his words now carry additional weight. When he told me that "Characters aren't sacred. They can be changed at will. It's the essence of the character, not the person playing the character, that matters," he was stating, in plain language, the operating principle that the Inclusion Rider codifies in contractual language. The rider does not say that characters can be changed at will. What it says is that the casting of those characters should reflect a demographic objective, and that the playwright's approval of the casting may be based, at least in part, on whether the demographic objective has been met. The practical effect is the same: the character as written by the playwright is subject to a set of considerations that originate outside the play. The director at Columbia located those considerations in his own artistic theory. The rider locates them in a contractual document endorsed by the playwright's own professional organization.

This is what I meant when I wrote that the rider would have given him a form to fill out. The director's ideology required him to argue for his transformation. He had to tell me, in the rehearsal room, that he was splitting my character into twins and why. I had the opportunity to object, and I did object, and I cancelled the production. The Inclusion Rider would not have required the argument. The rider would have required the producer to demonstrate "reasonable efforts" to cast from Historically Excluded Groups. The producer would have kept records. The records would have been available for audit. The demographic mandate would have existed as a contractual obligation before the first audition was held. The director's ideology would have had the weight of a binding contract behind it.

I understand the counterargument. The counterargument is that the rider is about hiring practices, not about changing characters. The rider does not tell directors to split characters into twins. The rider tells producers to cast diversely. These are different things. A producer can cast a diverse group of actors in the roles as written without altering the characters. A Black actor can play James Tyrone without changing Tyrone's Irishness. A Latina actress can play Mary Tyrone without changing Mary's Catholicism. The rider, the counterargument goes, is about expanding the pool of performers considered for roles, not about rewriting the roles themselves.

The counterargument is accurate in its description and inadequate in its analysis. The question is not whether a Black actor can play James Tyrone. The question is whether the play remains the play

O'Neill wrote when James Tyrone's Irishness, which is the load-bearing architecture of the character's psychology, is no longer communicated to the audience through the actor's presence. The question is whether the ethnic anchor holds. Chapter 10 argued that it does not: that the Irishness of "Long Day's Journey Into Night" is not decoration but structure, and that a production in which the Tyrones' Irishness is invisible to the audience is a production in which O'Neill's play has been replaced by something else, something that shares its words but not its meaning.

The Inclusion Rider does not address this question. The carve-out protects explicit physical attributes and settings. It does not protect meaning. It does not protect the relationship between a character's ethnicity and the character's psychology. It does not protect the ethnic anchor. And so the rider, despite its language of preservation and its formal deference to the playwright's authority, creates a mechanism by which the cultural substance of a play can be altered while the text remains unchanged. The words on the page stay the same. The people on the stage change. And the play, which exists not on the page but on the stage, is transformed.

* * *

The Inclusion Rider asks a question that the Guild has not answered: when the organization founded to protect the playwright's rights creates a contract addendum that subordinates casting to demographic objectives, who is the Guild serving?

The answer, I believe, is that the Guild is serving the institution. The Inclusion Rider is not a playwright's tool. It is an institutional tool that the playwright is asked to deploy. The hiring objectives serve the institution's diversity commitments. The audit mechanism serves the institution's accountability requirements. The record-keeping serves the institution's compliance documentation. The training webinars serve the institution's need to demonstrate that it is taking action. The playwright is the delivery mechanism, the person whose contractual authority is used to impose the institution's priorities on the production.

The playwright who uses the rider is not advocating for the play. The playwright is advocating for a policy. The policy may be good. The policy may be just. The policy may address real and persistent inequities in the American theatre. But the policy is not the play. The play is a specific work by a specific author about a specific set of characters in a specific world. The policy is a general mandate applied to all plays by all authors about all characters in all worlds. The two are not the same thing, and the rider's failure is its refusal to acknowledge the difference.

August Wilson understood the difference. When he insisted that his plays be performed by Black actors, he was not implementing a policy. He was protecting his plays. His characters are Black because their Blackness is the substance of their lives, their histories, their struggles, their triumphs, their particular way of being in America. Wilson did not need a rider to enforce this. He needed his copyright and his will. He needed, in the language of the Guild's own negotiation guide, "the power of No." The Inclusion Rider does not give playwrights the power of No. It gives them the obligation of Yes: yes to demographic hiring objectives, yes to auditable compliance, yes to evaluating their own casting decisions against criteria that originate in institutional policy rather than dramatic necessity.

The Guild was built to give playwrights the power of No. The Inclusion Rider is the Guild's first instrument of Yes. That is its significance, and that is its danger.

* * *

I will say plainly what this chapter has argued by implication. I believe the Dramatists Guild Inclusion Rider is a well-intentioned document produced by serious people that nevertheless represents a betrayal of the Guild's foundational mission. I believe it places institutional social commitments above the individual playwright's creative authority. I believe its definition of "Historically Excluded Groups" is so broad as to be functionally meaningless as a tool of targeted correction and operationally powerful as a tool of general mandate. I believe its carve-out is so narrowly drawn that it protects only the most explicit character specifications while leaving the cultural fabric of dramatic works exposed to demographic pressure. I believe its "voluntary" framing obscures the institutional pressure that accompanies its deployment. I believe its audit mechanism transforms a creative process into a compliance exercise. And I believe that asking playwrights to use their copyright, the instrument of their creative authority, to enforce demographic hiring objectives is a fundamental misuse of the right the Guild was created to defend.

The next chapter will step back from the Inclusion Rider's specific provisions to ask the larger question the rider raises: in the American theatre, who decides what a character is? The playwright who wrote the character? The director who stages the play? The producer who hires the actors? The professional organization that represents the playwright? The advocacy groups that define the industry's social commitments? The audience that receives the finished work? The answer to this question determines whether the theatre remains an art form or becomes a delivery system for institutional policy. The answer, I will argue, must be the playwright. It must always be the playwright. And any instrument that shifts that answer, however incrementally, however well-intentioned, is an instrument that the playwright should examine with the same skepticism the Guild was founded to supply.

Chapter 13: Who Decides?

The previous chapter ended by asking a question: in the American theatre, who decides what a character is? This chapter will answer it, not with a single declaration but with a map. The question has a simple answer and a complicated reality, and the distance between the two is where the damage occurs.

The simple answer is: the playwright decides. The playwright creates the character. The playwright writes the dialogue, sets the scene, describes the physical world, names the people who inhabit it, and determines what those people do, say, think, and feel. The playwright owns the copyright. The Dramatists Guild Bill of Rights affirms the playwright's approval over the cast and creative team. The Minimum Basic Agreement, negotiated in 1926 and maintained for a century, establishes the playwright as the owner of the intellectual property, not an employee, not a contractor, not a collaborator whose contribution can be altered at someone else's discretion. The simple answer has a hundred years of legal precedent behind it. The playwright decides.

The complicated reality is that the playwright's decision is now subject to a chain of competing authorities, each of which claims the right to modify, override, reinterpret, or ignore the playwright's choice. This chain has grown longer over the course of the half-century since the Non-Traditional Casting Project held its first symposium in 1986, and the Dramatists Guild Inclusion Rider, examined in the previous chapter, is its most recent link. Each link in the chain was forged with good intentions. Each link was designed to correct a real injustice. And each link has had the cumulative effect of moving the decision about who inhabits a character further from the person who created that character and closer to the institutions that produce, fund, and regulate the theatre.

This chapter traces that chain, link by link, using the case studies this book has examined.

* * *

The chain of authority in the traditional American theatre is short. It has four links. The playwright writes the text, including stage directions and character descriptions. The director interprets the text within the boundaries the playwright has set. The actors inhabit the roles as written. The audience receives the work. The chain runs in one direction: from the writer's desk to the audience's seat. At every stage, the text is the governing document. The director's interpretation must answer to the text. The actors' performances must serve the text. The audience's experience is shaped by the text. The playwright is not present at every performance, but the playwright's authority is, because the text is the playwright's permanent representative in the room.

This is the chain that the Dramatists Guild was founded to protect. When O'Neill and Kaufman and Hart organized the Guild in the early twentieth century, they were responding to a theatre in which the chain was routinely broken by producers who rewrote scripts, directors who staged their own visions over the playwright's intentions, and a commercial system that treated the playwright as a supplier of raw material. The 1926 MBA restored the chain by establishing the playwright's copyright, casting approval, and textual integrity as contractual rights. For the rest of the twentieth century, the chain held. Directors could interpret. Producers could negotiate. Actors could bring their own artistry. But the text was the text, the characters were the characters, and the playwright's authority was the first and final word.

The chain of authority in contemporary non-traditional casting practice is longer, and it runs in a different direction. It begins not with the playwright but with external organizations: the Non-Traditional Casting Project (later the Alliance for Inclusion in the Arts), Actors' Equity Association, advocacy groups representing specific communities, and the diversity committees of professional guilds, including the Dramatists Guild's own DEIA Committee. These organizations establish casting principles, guidelines, and mandates. They define which groups are underrepresented. They articulate what equitable casting looks like. They create the vocabulary: colorblind, color-conscious, conceptual, community-specific, the taxonomy that Chapter 3 of this book examined.

The next link is the funders. Foundations, government arts agencies, corporate sponsors, and individual donors signal their willingness to fund productions that comply with the casting principles the advocacy organizations have established. Wilson identified this link in 1996: "By making money available to theatres willing to support colorblind casting, the financiers and governors have signaled not only their unwillingness to support black theatre but their willingness to fund dangerous and divisive assaults against it." The funders do not tell theatres which actors to cast. They tell theatres which principles to follow. The effect is the same: a theatre that wants funding must demonstrate compliance with the principles the funders endorse.

The next link is the producers and artistic directors. They receive the funding signals, absorb the advocacy organizations' principles, attend the industry conferences where these principles are discussed, and translate them into institutional practice. They select seasons with an eye toward demographic representation. They hire directors who share the institution's commitments. They instruct their casting departments to build audition pools that reflect the hiring objectives. They announce their diversity commitments in public statements, annual reports, and grant applications. Their casting decisions are shaped not only by what the playwright wrote but by what the institution has committed to achieving.

The next link is the director. The director, operating within the institutional framework the producer has established, makes casting choices that reflect the institution's priorities. Some of these choices serve the text. Some override it. The distinction, as Chapter 11 argued, is between the director who illuminates and the director who replaces. But the institutional context makes the distinction harder to maintain, because the director is not operating in a vacuum. The director is operating within a system that has already determined, before the first audition, that certain demographic outcomes are expected.

The next link is the playwright. In the traditional chain, the playwright is first. In the non-traditional casting chain, the playwright is fifth. The playwright is presented with casting decisions that have already been shaped by advocacy organizations, funding priorities, institutional commitments, and directorial interpretation. The playwright may exercise casting approval, as the Bill of Rights guarantees. But the playwright exercises that approval within a context in which disapproval carries professional consequences: the perception of being against diversity, the risk of losing the production, the possibility that the theatre will choose a more cooperative playwright for the next slot. The Inclusion Rider, as the previous chapter demonstrated, formalizes this dynamic by asking the playwright to evaluate the cast against demographic criteria and to audit the producer's compliance with hiring objectives.

The final link is the audience. The audience receives a work that may bear little relationship to the playwright's intent. The audience does not know what the playwright intended. The audience knows only what the audience sees: the actors on the stage, speaking the playwright's words, in a production that carries the playwright's name. If the production is faithful to the text, the audience receives the playwright's play. If the production has been altered by the chain of institutional pressures that intervened between the playwright's desk and the audience's seat, the audience receives something else and attributes it to the playwright. The playwright's name is on the program. The playwright bears the responsibility. The playwright did not make the decisions.

* * *

The case studies in this book illustrate different points of failure along this chain.

Samuel Beckett, examined in Chapter 4, represents the playwright who refused to allow any link in the chain to override his authority. When the American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge, Massachusetts, attempted an all-Black production of "Endgame" in 1984, Beckett's response was absolute. He considered legal action. He issued a statement for the program in which he dissociated himself from the production. He had his publisher, Barney Rosset at Grove Press, convey his position to the press. Beckett did not negotiate. He did not participate in the conversation the institution wanted to have about whether his characters could be played by Black actors. He said no. The production went forward anyway, because the theatre had already committed to it, but Beckett's dissociation made his position unambiguous. The playwright decided, and the playwright decided no.

The JoAnne Akalaitis production of "Endgame" at ART is the case that tests the limits of the playwright's authority most starkly. Akalaitis was not a reckless director. She was a serious artist with serious intentions. The all-Black casting was not a stunt. It was an interpretive choice that Akalaitis believed illuminated dimensions of the text. Beckett disagreed. The question is: whose judgment controls? The answer, under the Dramatists Guild framework, is the playwright's. The playwright owns the copyright. The playwright approves the production elements. The playwright controls the integrity of the text. Beckett exercised that control. He was not alive to enforce it through litigation (he died in 1989, and the estate subsequently enforced his wishes), but his dissociation statement established the principle: the playwright's authority extends to casting, and the playwright's objection is not subject to the director's rebuttal.

The Beckett estate has maintained this position for decades, threatening legal action against productions that violate Beckett's stage directions, including productions that cast women in male roles, productions that alter the racial composition of the casts, and productions that change the physical settings Beckett specified. The estate's enforcement is not universally popular. Critics and directors regularly object to it, arguing that Beckett's plays would benefit from the freedom to be reinterpreted for contemporary audiences. The estate's response is consistent: the text is the text, the characters are what Beckett wrote them to be, and the playwright's authority does not expire with the playwright's death as long as the copyright persists.

August Wilson, examined in Chapter 5, represents the playwright who not only exercised authority but articulated the philosophical framework for it. Wilson's 1996 keynote address, "The Ground on Which I Stand," was the most important public statement about casting authority in the history of the American theatre not because it was the first but because it was the most complete. Wilson did not merely say that his plays should be performed by Black actors. He said why. He said that Black characters in Black plays carry the weight of a specific cultural experience, a specific history, a specific way of being in America, and that this specificity is the substance of the art, not its limitation. He said that the theatre's institutions, by promoting colorblind casting, were not expanding opportunity but erasing the cultural distinctiveness that made the work worth performing. He said that the financiers and governors, by funding colorblind productions and withholding funds from Black-specific theatre, were conducting an assault on the very tradition they claimed to celebrate.

Wilson's position was not popular with the institutional theatre. Robert Brustein, then the head of the American Repertory Theatre, called it "subsidized separatism" and accused Wilson of promoting racial essentialism. The Town Hall debate between Wilson and Brustein in January 1997, moderated by Anna Deavere Smith, was the theatre's version of a constitutional crisis: two visions of the art form, irreconcilable, argued by two of its most prominent figures. Wilson won the argument not by persuasion but by authority. His plays are performed by Black actors because Wilson said so, and Wilson's copyright enforces what his rhetoric established. The playwright decided.

"Hamilton," examined in Chapter 6, represents the playwright who used non-traditional casting as an authorial choice. Lin-Manuel Miranda created a work in which the racial composition of the cast is not incidental but integral: the deliberate casting of Black and Latino actors as the Founding Fathers is the production's central artistic statement. Miranda's casting was not imposed by an institution. It was not the result of a diversity mandate. It was not a response to advocacy organizations or funding requirements. It was the playwright's own creative decision, exercised through the playwright's own authority, in service of the playwright's own artistic vision.

"Hamilton" is the case that non-traditional casting advocates cite most frequently, and it is the case that most thoroughly undermines their institutional framework. "Hamilton" proves that non-traditional casting can produce extraordinary art. It also proves that the extraordinary art results from the playwright's choice, not from the institution's mandate. Miranda did not need an Inclusion Rider. He did not need a training webinar on how to advocate for diversity. He did not need a producer to keep auditable records of historically excluded groups considered for roles. He needed his own creative vision and the authority to execute it. “Hamilton” is not evidence that institutions should impose non-traditional casting on playwrights. It is evidence that playwrights, when free to make their own choices, will sometimes make choices that transform the art form. The distinction is between an artist choosing and an institution requiring. The visible result may be identical. The artistic process is fundamentally different.

The inverse of “Hamilton” is instructive. A production that cast white actors as the Founding Fathers in a show written to be performed by actors of color would be immediately and rightly criticized. This asymmetry reveals the underlying principle: the playwright’s intent controls. Miranda intended his cast to be non-white. A hypothetical production that reversed this would violate Miranda’s intent. The criticism would not be that the production was insufficiently diverse. The criticism would be that the production betrayed the playwright’s artistic vision. The principle is the same one Wilson articulated and Beckett enforced: the playwright decides.

Ali Stroker in “Oklahoma!,” examined in Chapter 9, represents the case where non-traditional casting illuminated the text without violating it. Stroker, a wheelchair user, played Ado Annie in Daniel Fish’s production. Her performance did not contradict Hammerstein’s stage directions, because Hammerstein specified personality, not physicality. Ado Annie is described by what she does and says, not by how she walks. Stroker’s casting was a directorial choice made within the boundaries of the text, and her performance revealed dimensions of the character that the text supports: a woman whose sexual agency is not constrained by her physical condition, a character whose “I Cain’t Say No” becomes a declaration of autonomy rather than a confession of weakness.

But notice the mechanism. Stroker’s casting was a directorial and artistic decision made by Fish, approved by the Rodgers and Hammerstein Organization (which controls the licensing), and embraced by the production team. It was not mandated by an advocacy organization. It was not required by a contract addendum. It was not the product of a compliance regime. It was an artistic choice, made by artists, in the service of the art. The moment the same casting decision is mandated by an institution rather than chosen by an artist, it becomes something different. The visible result is the same: an actor in a wheelchair plays Ado Annie. The artistic process, and therefore the artistic meaning, is transformed. A choice made in service of the text becomes a requirement imposed in service of a policy. The actor is the same. The character is the same. The play is not the same, because the reasons for the casting have changed, and in the theatre, the reasons matter.

The Keith Wann case, examined in Chapter 8, represents the failure of the chain at every point. Wann, a hearing ASL interpreter, was hired by the Theatre Development Fund to interpret “The Lion King” on Broadway. He was fired after a complaint that a white hearing interpreter should not interpret dialogue performed by Black actors into ASL. As Chapter 8 established, the characters in “The Lion King” are animals, not human beings; the racial matching demanded was between interpreter and actor, not between interpreter and character. The complaint came from the advocacy level of the chain: the position, articulated by the show’s ASL director Shelly Guy and enforced by Lisa Carling, that a Black interpreter should sign for dialogue performed by Black actors and a white interpreter should sign for dialogue performed by white actors. The institutional level complied: TDF terminated Wann’s assignment. The production level was never consulted: Julie Taymor, the director, was not involved in the decision. The playwright level was bypassed entirely: the authors of “The Lion King” were not asked whether they wanted their actors’ racial identities to determine which interpreter could convey their words in sign language.

The Wann case exposes the chain’s ultimate dysfunction: a casting decision (the assignment of an interpreter to specific characters based on racial matching) was made by an advocacy group, enforced by an institutional middleman, and imposed on a production without the knowledge or consent of the artists who created the work. The playwright did not decide. The director did not decide. The institution decided, in response to an advocacy group, in defiance of the traditional chain of authority. Wann's subsequent federal discrimination lawsuit was the legal system's attempt to address a wrong that the theatre's own governance structures had failed to prevent.

The Helen Keller case, examined in Chapter 7, represents the collision between authenticity advocacy and textual fidelity. When productions of "The Miracle Worker" have cast sighted, hearing actresses as Helen Keller, the DeafBlind community has objected that the role should be played by a DeafBlind performer. The objection is grounded in a legitimate concern: the representation of disability by non-disabled actors has a long history of inaccuracy, condescension, and exploitation. The concern is real. The question is whether the concern overrides the playwright's text.

William Gibson wrote Helen Keller as a specific character in a specific dramatic situation. The play is not a documentary. It is a drama, with a dramatic arc that requires specific capabilities from the actor: the ability to perform the transformation from isolated child to communicating person, the ability to execute the physical demands of the water pump scene, the ability to carry the production's emotional weight. Gibson did not specify that Helen must be played by a DeafBlind actress. He specified what Helen must do on stage. The question of who decides what Helen Keller is, the playwright who wrote the character or the advocacy community that identifies with the historical figure, is the question this chapter asks about every case study in the book. The answer, if the playwright's authority means anything, is the playwright.

Eugene O'Neill, examined in Chapter 10, represents the playwright whose cultural specificity is woven so deeply into the fabric of the work that the carve-out in the Inclusion Rider cannot protect it. O'Neill's Irishness is not a stage direction. It is the architecture of the play. The Tyrones' names, their Catholicism, their drinking, their shame, their immigrant terror, their class resentments: these are not decorative elements that can be separated from the characters and replaced with something else. They are the characters. A production of "Long Day's Journey Into Night" in which the Tyrones' Irishness is invisible to the audience is a production in which O'Neill's play has been replaced by something that shares its words but not its meaning. The ethnic anchor, which Chapter 10 identified as this book's central contribution to the casting debate, is the principle that some plays are moored to a specific cultural identity the way a ship is moored to the seabed, and that when the anchor is cut, the ship drifts.

The Columbia anecdote, examined in Chapter 11, represents the playwright who exercised the authority the traditional chain grants. I cancelled the production. I did not negotiate. I did not compromise. I did not allow my character to be split into twins under the banner of non-traditional casting. I exercised the playwright's right to say no, the right the Guild was founded to protect, the right that Austin Pendleton told me to exercise in 1988, the right that Rex McGraw's insult in 1986 taught me I would need. The Columbia anecdote is small. It happened in a graduate program. But it demonstrates what the traditional chain looks like when it works: the playwright decides, and the decision holds.

* * *

The pattern across these case studies produces a taxonomy of authority. There are four possible relationships between the playwright's intent and the casting of a production, and the taxonomy determines whether the result is art or appropriation.

The first relationship is authorial choice. The playwright creates a work and casts it according to the playwright's own vision. Miranda writes “Hamilton” and casts it with actors of color. Wilson writes “Fences” and casts it with Black actors. The casting is the playwright’s decision, made in service of the playwright’s artistic vision, and the result is a work in which the casting and the text are organically unified. This is the highest form of casting authority, and it is the form that the traditional chain of authority is designed to protect.

The second relationship is delegated choice. The playwright creates a work and, through licensing agreements, estate directives, or explicit permissions, authorizes specific interpretive freedoms in casting. The Rodgers and Hammerstein Organization licenses a production of “Oklahoma!” that includes Fish’s casting of Stroker as Ado Annie. The playwright (or the playwright’s estate) has approved the casting choice within the boundaries of the text. The authority remains the playwright’s, exercised through a representative, and the result is a production that operates within the playwright’s framework even when it extends that framework in unexpected directions.

The third relationship is institutional override. An institution, whether a theatre, a funding body, an advocacy organization, or a professional guild, imposes casting requirements that the playwright has not authorized and may not endorse. The Inclusion Rider’s hiring objectives, applied to a production without the playwright’s active engagement, produce an institutional override. The director at Columbia, splitting my character into twins under the banner of non-traditional casting, attempted an institutional override within the academic system. The TDF’s firing of Keith Wann was an institutional override imposed by a middleman organization on a production whose creators were not consulted. In each case, the decision about who inhabits the characters has been made by someone other than the playwright, and the playwright’s authority has been subordinated to institutional priorities.

The fourth relationship is posthumous imposition. After the playwright’s death, and before the copyright expires, the estate may either enforce or abandon the playwright's casting intentions. The Beckett estate enforces. Other estates may not. When the estate abandons enforcement, or when the copyright expires entirely, the play enters a zone in which any casting choice is legally permissible regardless of the playwright's documented wishes. The play becomes, in legal terms, raw material. The question of whether the playwright's intent should be honored becomes a cultural question rather than a legal one, and cultural questions are resolved by whoever holds power at the moment of the production.

These four relationships are not equally valid. The first two respect the playwright's authority. The second two override it. The argument of this book is that the first two are legitimate and the second two are not, regardless of the social goods the override is intended to achieve. The playwright who chooses non-traditional casting is making art. The institution that imposes non-traditional casting is making policy. Art and policy are different things, and the theatre is the poorer when it confuses them.

* * *

The hierarchy of permissions in the contemporary American theatre reveals the confusion. Certain non-traditional casting choices are celebrated. Others are forbidden. The rules that govern which is which are not derived from any consistent principle. They are political, and they change without notice.

"Hamilton" casts actors of color as white historical figures. This is celebrated as a bold artistic statement about who owns the American story. The inverse, casting white actors as characters of color, is forbidden, and any production that attempted it would face immediate and severe professional consequences. The asymmetry is political, not principled. It reflects a specific understanding of American racial history: that white actors playing characters of color evokes blackface and minstrelsy, while actors of color playing white characters evokes reclamation and empowerment. The understanding may be historically justified. But it is not a casting principle. It is a political judgment applied to casting, and political judgments are made by people in positions of institutional power, not by playwrights at their desks.

A Deaf actress playing Helen Keller in “The Miracle Worker” is advocated by the DeafBlind community as an act of authentic representation. A hearing actress playing Helen Keller is criticized as disability erasure. But the playwright, William Gibson, wrote the role for the specific demands of his dramatic arc, not for the representation politics of the twenty-first century. The question of whether a DeafBlind actress can meet the technical demands of the role as written is a legitimate casting question. The question of whether a DeafBlind actress should play the role because Helen Keller was DeafBlind is not a casting question. It is a representation question, and representation questions are answered by advocacy groups, not by playwrights.

A white hearing interpreter signing dialogue performed by Black actors in “The Lion King” is fired because the advocacy community has determined that racial matching between actor and interpreter is necessary for cultural authenticity, even though the characters being performed are lions, meerkats, and warthogs. A Black Deaf interpreter signing dialogue performed by white actors would not face the same objection. The asymmetry, again, is political. It reflects a specific understanding of who is permitted to represent whom and under what circumstances. The understanding is not derived from the text of “The Lion King,” whose characters are animals with no racial identity. It is derived from the politics of the Deaf community’s relationship with the hearing world and the broader politics of racial representation in American culture. The playwright was not consulted. The director was not consulted. The decision was made by an advocacy group and enforced by an institutional middleman.

These asymmetries are not accidental. They are the inevitable product of a system in which casting authority has been distributed across a chain of competing interests, each of which applies its own criteria. The advocacy groups apply representation criteria. The funders apply compliance criteria. The producers apply institutional criteria. The directors apply interpretive criteria. The playwrights, if they are consulted at all, apply dramatic criteria. When these criteria align, the result can be extraordinary. When they conflict, the result is a permission structure in which certain choices are celebrated and others are punished, not because of what the playwright wrote but because of what the institution requires.

Non-traditional casting, in this analysis, is not a principle. A principle applies consistently. Non-traditional casting does not apply consistently. It applies in one direction but not the other, to some groups but not all groups, in some contexts but not all contexts, under some political conditions but not others. It is a permission structure: a set of rules about who is allowed to play whom, administered by people who are never themselves subject to the rules' demands. The advocacy groups that determine which casting choices are acceptable do not write plays. The funders that incentivize compliance do not direct productions. The institutions that enforce the mandates do not stand on stage. The people who make the decisions bear none of the consequences. The playwright, who bears all the consequences, has been moved from the top of the authority chain to a position somewhere near the bottom.

* * *

I want to state plainly what this structural analysis means for the working playwright.

If you are a playwright in the American theatre today, you own your copyright. The Dramatists Guild will confirm this. Your Bill of Rights is intact. You have the legal authority to approve or reject any casting decision in any production of your work. No institution can change your text without your consent. No director can rewrite your characters without your permission. These rights are real, and they are enforceable, and the Guild has spent a century building and defending them.

But if you are a playwright in the American theatre today, you also operate within an institutional ecosystem that applies sustained pressure to your exercise of those rights. The pressure comes from multiple directions simultaneously. It comes from advocacy organizations that define what equitable casting looks like and publicize productions that fail to meet their standards. It comes from funders whose grant applications include diversity metrics. It comes from artistic directors whose institutional commitments require them to demonstrate compliance with casting guidelines. It comes from directors whose training has taught them that the text is a starting point rather than a destination. It comes from your own professional organization, which has produced a contract addendum asking you to redirect your copyright authority toward demographic hiring objectives. And it comes from the culture at large, which has absorbed the vocabulary of inclusion so thoroughly that questioning any casting decision made in its name risks being perceived as opposition to inclusion itself.

The pressure is not coercive in the legal sense. No one will take your copyright away if you refuse to attach the Inclusion Rider to your production agreement. No one will revoke your Bill of Rights if you insist on casting your play according to your own dramatic vision rather than the institution's demographic goals. But the pressure is real in the professional sense. It shapes which plays get produced. It shapes which playwrights get invited back. It shapes which theatres are willing to take the risk of staging a work whose author insists on creative autonomy over institutional compliance. It creates an environment in which the playwright's exercise of the playwright's rights is treated not as the assertion of legitimate authority but as a failure of moral imagination.

This is the structural condition that August Wilson diagnosed in 1996, thirty years ago. Wilson saw the chain forming. He saw the advocacy organizations, the funders, the institutions, the directors, each adding a link between the playwright and the play. He saw that the links were forged with the language of inclusion and justice, and he understood that the language, however sincere, functioned as a mechanism for transferring authority from the artist to the institution. He said, at the Town Hall, that the question was not whether Black actors deserved more opportunities (they did) but who would decide what those opportunities looked like and what price the art would pay for the decisions. The question, thirty years later, has not been answered. It has been evaded, through a series of institutional mechanisms, each more elaborate than the last, each claiming to serve the playwright while moving the playwright further from the center of the creative process.

* * *

The question "Who decides?" has only one answer that preserves the theatre as an art form rather than a delivery system for institutional policy. The playwright decides. The playwright decides which characters to create. The playwright decides what those characters look like, sound like, believe, suffer, and become. The playwright decides, through the text, what the play is about. And the playwright decides, through casting approval, who inhabits the characters on stage.

This answer does not mean that playwrights are infallible. Playwrights make bad choices. Playwrights can be provincial, insular, limited in their vision, blind to their own biases, and resistant to interpretive possibilities that would enrich their work. The argument for the playwright's authority is not an argument for the playwright's perfection. It is an argument for the playwright's responsibility. The playwright's name is on the program. The playwright stands behind the work. The playwright answers for the characters, the story, the meaning. If the work is narrow, the playwright is narrow. If the work is dated, the playwright is dated. If the work is offensive, the playwright is offensive. The responsibility is total, and because the responsibility is total, the authority must be total. You cannot hold someone responsible for a work they did not control. You cannot blame a playwright for a production that the institution shaped, the funder incentivized, the advocacy group mandated, and the director executed without the playwright's meaningful participation in the decisions that determined how the audience would experience the work.

This is why the distinction between authorial choice and institutional override matters. When Miranda casts "Hamilton" with actors of color, Miranda is exercising authorial choice, and Miranda bears the artistic responsibility for the result. If the casting fails, Miranda's name is on the failure. If the casting succeeds (it succeeded), Miranda's name is on the success. The authority and the responsibility are unified in the same person. When an institution overrides a playwright's casting intentions, the authority and the responsibility are split. The institution makes the decision. The playwright bears the consequence. The audience attributes the result to the playwright, because the playwright's name is on the program, and the audience does not know that the decisions were made by an advocacy group or a funder or a director operating under institutional mandates.

The next and final chapter of this book will take an honest accounting of what is lost and what is found when these competing authorities collide. The accounting will not be simple. Non-traditional casting has produced genuine achievements: expanded opportunities, revelatory performances, works of art that would not exist without the freedom to reimagine who stands on stage. It has also produced genuine losses: cultural specificity erased, authorial intent overridden, dramatic works stripped of their meaning by casting decisions that serve a policy rather than a play. The accounting requires honesty, and honesty requires acknowledging that both the achievements and the losses are real, and that the question is not whether non-traditional casting should exist but who should control it.

The answer, one final time: the playwright. It must always be the playwright.

Chapter 14: What Is Lost, What Is Found

This book began with a question about who owns the story on stage. It will end with an accounting. Accountings require honesty, and honesty requires acknowledging that non-traditional casting has produced both achievements and losses, and that the two are not symmetrical. The achievements are visible, celebrated, and documented. The losses are invisible, uncounted, and cumulative. Both are real. This chapter will name them.

* * *

What is lost when non-traditional casting overrides the playwright's text?

Cultural specificity is lost. When August Wilson's Pittsburgh cycle is performed, the audience encounters a specific world: the Hill District, the jitney stations, the boarding houses, the back porches, the churches, the blues clubs, the particular texture of Black life in a particular American city across a particular century. Every character in Wilson's work carries this specificity in their body, their speech, their memory, their understanding of what it means to be alive in this place at this time. The specificity is not an add-on. It is the substance. Remove it, and you have dialogue without a world, characters without a context, a play without a ground to stand on. Wilson understood this more clearly than any dramatist of his generation, and he said so, repeatedly, publicly, at personal and professional cost. His insistence that his plays be performed by Black actors was not a political position. It was an artistic one: these characters are Black the way water is wet, and any production that pretends otherwise is performing a different play.

The same specificity is lost when O'Neill's Irish families are detached from their Irishness, when Miller's Willy Loman is separated from his Jewishness, when Williams' Stanley Kowalski is unmoored from his Polish immigrant identity, when Hansberry's Younger family is abstracted from their Black South Side Chicago context. Chapter 10 of this book named this loss: the ethnic anchor. Some plays are moored to a specific cultural identity, and the anchor is not visible from the surface. The audience may not consciously register the Irishness of the Tyrones or the Jewishness of the Lomans. But the anchor holds the play in place. Without it, the play drifts, and the drift changes the meaning of everything that happens on stage. James Tyrone's terror of the poorhouse is an immigrant's terror with a Famine behind it. Cut the anchor, and the terror becomes individual neurosis rather than inherited trauma. The character still speaks. The words are the same. The play is not.

Cultural specificity is not merely a feature of great drama. It is the condition of great drama. The plays that endure, the plays that continue to be produced decades and centuries after their creation, endure not because they express universal truths but because they express specific truths with such precision that the specificity becomes universal. Hamlet is not a universal prince. Hamlet is a specific Danish prince in a specific corrupt court at a specific moment of existential crisis. The specificity is what makes the universality possible. A Hamlet without Denmark is not a more universal Hamlet. It is a less meaningful one. The same principle applies to every play this book has examined: the specificity of Wilson's Pittsburgh, O'Neill's Irish New London, Beckett's abstract but anatomically male landscapes, Hansberry's Southside apartment is not the limitation of these plays. It is their power.

Historical accuracy is lost. When a play is set in a specific time and a specific place, the characters who inhabit that time and place carry the social realities of their world. A play set in 1850s Mississippi operates within a racial hierarchy that determined who could go where, do what, own what, and be what. A play set in 1912 New London, Connecticut, operates within an immigrant social structure that determined which families were respectable and which were not, which church you attended and which you did not, which language you spoke at home and which you spoke in public. These historical realities are not decorations. They are the conditions under which the characters live. A casting choice that ignores these realities does not liberate the characters from history. It disconnects them from the forces that shaped them, and in doing so, it renders their behavior unintelligible. A character who fears a social consequence that the audience cannot see is a character whose fear has no ground. A character who resists a power structure that the production has made invisible is a character whose resistance has no meaning.

The playwright's moral right to control interpretation is lost. The moral right is distinct from the legal right. The legal right is copyright: the ownership of the intellectual property, enforced through licensing agreements and the threat of litigation. The moral right is the author's claim to the integrity of the work as the author conceived it. In many European legal systems, the moral right is codified: the author has the right to be identified as the author, the right to object to derogatory treatment of the work, and the right to withdraw the work from circulation. In the United States, the moral right has no broad statutory basis (the Visual Artists Rights Act of 1990 provides limited protection for visual art), but the Dramatists Guild has maintained it as a professional standard through the Bill of Rights. The Inclusion Rider, as Chapter 12 argued, subordinates this moral right to institutional demographic objectives. The playwright's right to say "these are my characters, and this is who they are" is intact in theory. In practice, it is subject to a compliance regime that evaluates the playwright's casting decisions against criteria external to the play.

The loss of the moral right is not merely a legal or professional matter. It is a personal one. The playwright who writes a character draws from the deepest resources of the playwright's experience, observation, and imagination. The character is not an assignment. The character is an act of creation. The playwright has spent months or years living with this character, discovering what the character wants, understanding what the character fears, learning how the character speaks and moves and occupies space. The character is the playwright's in a way that no institutional mandate can appreciate, because the institutional mandate treats the character as a role to be filled rather than a person to be created. When the institution overrides the playwright's determination of who the character is, the institution is not merely changing a casting decision. The institution is telling the playwright that the playwright's act of creation is incomplete, that the character the playwright imagined requires institutional correction. The insult is not always spoken. But it is always felt.

Audience trust in the coherence of the dramatic world is lost. The audience enters the theatre with an expectation: that the world on the stage will be internally consistent. The characters will look, sound, and behave in ways that are consistent with the world the playwright has created. When the audience watches "Long Day's Journey Into Night" and the Tyrones are visibly Irish, the audience can follow the logic of the play: this family's Catholicism, this family's drinking, this family's class anxiety, this family's shame, all have a source that the audience can see. When the audience watches the same play and the Tyrones are not visibly Irish, the audience must either supply the context from their own knowledge of the play (in which case the casting is irrelevant, because the audience is doing the work the production should be doing) or accept the characters as culturally unmarked individuals whose behavior has no specific ethnic origin (in which case the play has been transformed into something generic). Either way, the audience's trust in the coherence of the dramatic world has been compromised.

The distinction between interpreting and performing is lost. The Keith Wann case, examined in Chapter 8, illustrated this loss most starkly. An interpreter is a conduit, not a performer. The interpreter's job is to convey the playwright's words from one language to another, preserving the meaning, the tone, the rhythm, and the intention. The interpreter does not become the character. The interpreter transmits the character. When TDF fired Wann because a white hearing interpreter should not interpret dialogue performed by Black actors playing animal characters, TDF collapsed the distinction between the interpreter and the performer. The interpreter was treated as though the interpreter's racial identity must match the actor's racial identity, as though the act of interpretation were an act of performance, as though conveying another person's words were equivalent to being another person. This collapse is a direct consequence of non-traditional casting ideology applied beyond its legitimate scope.

The principle that the text means what it says is lost. This is the deepest loss, and it encompasses all the others. When a playwright writes a character who is Irish, and the production presents an actor who is not Irish, the production has made a statement: the Irishness the playwright wrote does not mean what the playwright said it means. The production has decided that the playwright's specification is negotiable, that the character's identity is separable from the character's function, that the text is a starting point rather than a destination. This is the director's theatre operating at the level of casting, and it has the same effect at the level of casting that it has at every other level: it replaces the playwright's authority with the institution's judgment. When the text no longer means what it says, the playwright no longer controls what the audience receives. The playwright has been reduced from author to supplier, and the play has been reduced from architecture to material.

* * *

What is found when non-traditional casting serves the playwright's text?

Ali Stroker's Ado Annie in Daniel Fish's "Oklahoma!" found something that had been present in the text for seventy-six years and invisible under layers of tradition. Stroker, performing from a wheelchair, played a woman whose sexual appetite is presented as comedy in the traditional staging but became, in Fish's production, an assertion of bodily autonomy. Stroker's Ado Annie did not merely say "I Cain't Say No." She embodied a woman whose desire was not diminished by her physical condition, a woman who refused to be desexualized by the assumptions the audience brought into the theatre. The performance was revelatory because it revealed something the text supported. Hammerstein did not specify that Ado Annie could walk. He specified what Ado Annie felt, said, and wanted. Stroker honored every word of the text and transformed what the words meant by occupying them in a body the text had not imagined but did not exclude.

This is non-traditional casting at its finest: a performance that does not contradict the text but illuminates it, that finds in the playwright's words a meaning the playwright may not have consciously intended but that is demonstrably present in the work. The finding is an act of artistic discovery, made possible by the intersection of a specific performer's identity with a specific character's written life. The finding does not replace the text. It enriches it. And it is available only when the casting decision is an artistic choice, made by artists in the service of the art, rather than an institutional mandate imposed in the service of a policy.

"Hamilton" found something larger: a way to tell the American founding story that made the story belong to the people who had been excluded from it. Lin-Manuel Miranda did not merely cast actors of color in white roles. He created a work in which the casting is the argument. The decision to have Black and Latino performers play Washington, Jefferson, Hamilton, and Burr is not a deviation from the text. It is the text. The music is hip-hop and R&B because the story is being told by the communities those musical forms belong to. The casting is non-white because the story is being reclaimed by the people the original founders excluded from the republic they were building. Every choice in "Hamilton" is unified by Miranda's authorial vision, and the casting is the most visible expression of that vision.

"Hamilton" is the strongest evidence that non-traditional casting can produce transcendent art. It is also the strongest evidence that the art results from the playwright's authority, not from the institution's mandate. Miranda chose his cast. Miranda wrote the roles for the performers he wanted. Miranda's name is on the work, and Miranda's vision controls every element of the production. No advocacy group told Miranda to cast actors of color. No Inclusion Rider required it. No funder incentivized it. No producer imposed it. Miranda did it because it was his play, his vision, his art. The authority and the responsibility are unified in the same person. The lesson is not that institutions should mandate what Miranda chose freely. The lesson is that artistic freedom, exercised by an artist with something to say, will produce results that no mandate can replicate.

Expanded employment for actors who were historically excluded is found. This was the original purpose of the Non-Traditional Casting Project when it held its first symposium in 1986: to create opportunities for Black, Asian, Latino, Native American, and disabled performers who had been systematically shut out of the American theatre by decades of exclusionary casting practices. The purpose was just. The exclusion was real. The performers were talented. The stages were closed to them. The NTCP, whatever its subsequent institutional evolution, began with a legitimate grievance and a legitimate goal: open the doors.

The doors have opened, unevenly and incompletely, but measurably. More actors of color work in the American theatre today than worked in the American theatre in 1986. More disabled performers appear on American stages than appeared in 1986. More roles are written for performers from historically excluded communities than were written in 1986. The expansion is real, and it is good, and no honest accounting can deny it.

But the honest accounting must also note that the expansion did not require the mechanisms this book has examined. It did not require the Dramatists Guild Inclusion Rider. It did not require the director's theatre to appropriate the playwright's authority. It did not require the erasure of cultural specificity in existing works. It required new plays by new playwrights, written for the performers the older canon did not serve. It required August Wilson writing "Fences" and "The Piano Lesson" and "Joe Turner's Come and Gone." It required Suzan-Lori Parks writing "Topdog/Underdog." It required Lynn Nottage writing "Ruined" and "Sweat." It required Miranda writing "Hamilton" and "In the Heights." It required new work, written by artists who had something to say about the world they lived in, performed by actors whose identities were integral to the characters' lives. The greatest expansion of opportunity came from authorship, not from mandates applied to other people's authorship.

* * *

Where does the line fall?

The line falls at the playwright's will. This is the simplest formulation of the book's argument, and it is the only formulation that preserves both artistic freedom and authorial responsibility.

If the playwright writes a new work and casts it non-traditionally, that is authorial choice. The playwright has created characters whose identities include the non-traditional casting as a structural element of the work. The casting is not imposed from outside. It is generated from within. The authority and the responsibility are unified. Miranda's "Hamilton" is the paradigm.

If the playwright's estate explicitly permits non-traditional casting, that is delegated authorial choice. The estate, acting on the playwright's behalf or exercising the discretion the playwright has left to it, authorizes interpretive freedoms that the playwright may or may not have endorsed but that the estate judges to be consistent with the playwright's legacy. The Rodgers and Hammerstein Organization's licensing practices are an example. The estate retains the authority. The responsibility for the licensing decision belongs to the estate. The playwright's name is still on the program, and the estate stands behind it.

If a director, producer, advocacy organization, or professional guild overrides the playwright's text or the estate's restrictions, that is usurpation. The word is strong, and I mean it to be strong. When an institution imposes a casting decision that the playwright did not authorize and would not endorse, the institution is taking something that does not belong to it. The institution is using the playwright's characters, the playwright's words, and the playwright's name to advance the institution's objectives. The playwright bears the consequences. The institution bears none. The asymmetry is the definition of usurpation: the exercise of authority that belongs to another.

The line is clear. The application is not, because the theatre is a living art form that depends on collaboration, interpretation, and the creative contributions of many people. Directors bring vision. Actors bring presence. Designers bring world. None of these contributions are subordinate. All of them are essential. The line does not say that directors are servants or actors are puppets or designers are decorators.

The line says that the playwright's text is the governing document, and that casting decisions, like all production decisions, must operate within the boundaries the text establishes. When a director finds something new in the text, that is interpretation. When a director replaces something in the text, that is usurpation. The distinction is not always obvious in practice, but it is always clear in principle: does the casting decision serve the play the playwright wrote, or does it serve a purpose external to the play?

* * *

The future is where the argument becomes most urgent, because the legal protections that currently enforce the playwright's authority will not last forever.

Samuel Beckett's published plays will begin entering the public domain around the middle of this century. As Chapter 4 noted, Beckett's work is governed by two copyright regimes: the U.S. system, which protects published works for ninety-five years from publication, and the European system, which protects them for seventy years after the author's death. "Waiting for Godot," first published in English in 1954, will enter the American public domain on January 1, 2050. "Endgame," published in 1957, will follow in 2053. The later plays will lose their U.S. protection on their own schedules, stretching across the 2050s and beyond, while European moral right protections will persist until the end of 2059. When those dates arrive, the Beckett estate's ability to enforce Beckett's stage directions through cease-and-desist letters and threatened litigation will end, first in America and then in Europe. Any director, any theatre, any producer will be free to stage "Waiting for Godot" with an all-female cast, an all-Black cast, a cast of children, a cast of marionettes, or a cast of one. The text will be available to everyone. The authority to control its performance will belong to no one.

Most of O'Neill's plays have already entered the public domain, his earliest works freed from copyright restriction a decade ago, but "Long Day's Journey into Night," published posthumously in 1956 and the play this book examined in Chapter 10, will not enter the American public domain until 2052, two years after "Godot." Wilson's plays will eventually follow. Miller's, Williams', Hansberry's: all will enter the commons, available for anyone to use for any purpose, without the playwright's consent, without the estate's oversight, without any mechanism for enforcing the playwright's intentions beyond the cultural values of the people who produce the work.

When copyright expires, the question of who decides becomes purely cultural. There will be no legal framework to protect the ethnic anchor. There will be no licensing agreement to enforce. There will be no estate to issue a statement of dissociation. There will be only the text, and the question of whether the people who produce it choose to honor what the playwright wrote.

The precedent from the public domain is not encouraging. Shakespeare's plays, which have been in the public domain for centuries, are routinely subjected to casting choices that Shakespeare could not have imagined and would not have endorsed. Some of these choices are illuminating. Some are arbitrary. Some are politically motivated. All are legal. No one can prevent a director from casting a woman as King Lear or a Black actor as Hamlet, and many such productions have been artistically powerful. But Shakespeare did not specify the ethnicity of his characters in stage directions, because the Elizabethan theatre did not operate within the same framework of racial and ethnic identity that the modern theatre does. Chapter 1 of this book examined how the all-male stage of Shakespeare's era created its own set of casting conventions, conventions that were not about identity in the modern sense but about theatrical practice. The modern non-traditional casting of Shakespeare is, in a meaningful sense, the continuation of a tradition of theatrical reinterpretation that has been operating since the plays were first performed.

The distinction is not temporal. It is structural. Shakespeare wrote within a theatrical convention in which the actor's body was already understood as an instrument rather than a fixed carrier of identity. Boys played women. The text survived the substitution because it was designed to survive it. When a woman plays Rosalind today, she is not overriding Shakespeare's specification. She is updating the instrument of delivery within a system that always treated the instrument as variable. Chapter 1 traced this convention from the Greek mask, which resolved the question of the actor's identity architecturally, through the Elizabethan bare-faced stage, where training and costume resolved it. Shakespeare's plays were built for a convention in which the performer's body was secondary to the theatrical contract between stage and audience. Colorblind casting of Shakespeare continues that convention. It does not violate it. The principle this book defends is not "the playwright decides until enough time passes," as though distance in time erodes authorial authority. The principle is that the nature of what the playwright decided determines how much latitude interpretation legitimately has. Shakespeare decided to write within a convention that separated the actor's identity from the character's identity. Wilson, O'Neill, Beckett, and their twentieth-century successors decided the opposite: they wrote within a convention in which the actor's body is the character's meaning, and they specified that meaning with a precision Shakespeare's convention did not require.

The canonical American plays of the twentieth century are different. Wilson specified Black characters. O'Neill specified Irish characters. Miller wrote Jewish characters. Beckett specified male characters. These specifications are not ambiguous. They are not open to reasonable disagreement. They are features of the plays as deliberately as a key signature is a feature of a musical composition. A production that changes them is not reinterpreting the play. It is rewriting it. And when the copyright expires, no one will be able to prevent the rewriting.

This is why the argument of this book is not merely legal but cultural. The legal protections will expire. The cultural argument must persist. The argument is that playwrights' intentions matter, that the specificity of their creations is a form of artistic integrity that deserves respect, and that the text means what it says even after the author is dead and the copyright has lapsed. This is an argument about honor: the honor we owe to the people who created the works we continue to perform, the honor of receiving their creations as they were offered rather than as we wish they had been.

* * *

I want to close with a personal note, because this book began with a personal story and should end with one.

I am a playwright. I have been a playwright since I was sixteen years old, when I wrote my first television script and registered it with the Writers Guild. I have spent more than four decades writing, directing, publishing, and teaching. I founded The United Stage on the principle that the playwright has the right to direct the first public performance of the playwright's own play. I founded David Boles Books on the principle that the author controls the work from creation to publication. Every professional decision I have made in my career has been organized around a single conviction: that authorship means responsibility, and responsibility requires authority.

The Columbia anecdote that Chapter 11 recounted was the moment that conviction was tested. Rex McGraw's insult at UNL was the moment the conviction was born. Austin Pendleton's answer at the ATW seminar was the moment the conviction was confirmed. The founding of UnitedStage.com was the moment the conviction became a public position. This book is the moment the conviction becomes an argument.

The argument is not against inclusion. I want to say this as directly as I can, because the casting debates in the American theatre have become so polarized that any defense of the playwright's authority is immediately coded as opposition to diversity. I am not opposed to diversity. I am opposed to the appropriation of the playwright's authority by institutions that use the vocabulary of diversity to justify the seizure of creative control. The distinction is not subtle, but it is persistently ignored, because ignoring it serves the interests of the people who benefit from the seizure.

The argument is for authorship. The argument is that the playwright who creates a character is the person who determines what that character is, and that no institution, however well-intentioned, has the right to override that determination. The argument is that cultural specificity is not a limitation but a form of artistic integrity, and that a play's ethnic, racial, religious, and cultural context is as much a part of its architecture as its dialogue, its structure, and its dramatic action. The argument is that the Dramatists Guild Inclusion Rider, despite the good faith of its creators, represents a redirection of the playwright's authority toward institutional objectives that the playwright may not share. The argument is that non-traditional casting, when chosen by the playwright, is artistic freedom, and when imposed by the institution, is artistic coercion.

The American theatre has always been a negotiation between the individual artist's vision and the institution's demands. The negotiation is productive when both parties recognize that the artist's vision is primary and the institution's role is to serve it. The negotiation becomes destructive when the institution decides that its demands take precedence over the artist's vision, and particularly when the institution cloaks its demands in a moral language that makes resistance appear ignoble. The language of inclusion, equity, and anti-racism is not itself the problem. The problem is the use of that language to justify the transfer of creative authority from the person who created the work to the institution that produces it. The language is a vehicle. The destination is control.

I have been writing plays for more than forty years. I have defended my work against directors who wanted to change it and institutions that wanted to appropriate it. I have cancelled productions rather than allow my characters to be altered without my consent. I have built a career on the principle that the playwright's name on the program means the playwright stands behind every word. I will continue to stand behind my words, and I will continue to argue that every playwright in the American theatre has the right and the obligation to do the same.

August Wilson said it at the Town Hall in 1997, facing Robert Brustein and the institutional theatre establishment: "I am what is here, and what is here to say." Wilson stood on the ground of his own authorship and refused to cede it. Beckett stood on the ground of his stage directions and refused to negotiate. O'Neill stood on the ground of his Irishness and wrote it into every line. The ground they stood on is the same ground every playwright stands on when the playwright says: this is my play, these are my characters, and no one changes them without my consent.

That is the ground on which this book stands.

The playwright decides.

Glossary of Key Terms

Alliance for Inclusion in the Arts. The organization formerly known as the Non-Traditional Casting Project (NTCP). Renamed in 2010 to reflect its expanded mission. Closed in 2016. See also Non-Traditional Casting Project.

Authorial choice. A casting decision made by the playwright as part of the playwright's creative vision for the work. Lin-Manuel Miranda's casting of actors of color as the Founding Fathers in "Hamilton" is the paradigm of authorial choice. Distinguished from institutional override, in which the casting decision is imposed by an entity other than the playwright.

Bill of Rights (Dramatists Guild). The Dramatists Guild's statement of professional standards, maintained since the first Minimum Basic Agreement of 1926. Affirms the playwright's rights to approval over casting, the creative team, and production elements; to be present at rehearsals; to ownership of copyright; and to the integrity of the text. Not a legally binding contract but a professional standard that informs licensing agreements.

Blackface. The practice of white performers darkening their faces with burnt cork, greasepaint, or shoe polish to caricature Black people. Originated in the American minstrel show of the early nineteenth century. Thomas Dartmouth "Daddy" Rice's "Jim Crow" character (c. 1828) is generally cited as the first widely popular blackface act. The practice persisted on the American stage and in film well into the twentieth century.

Casting, color-blind. A casting practice in which the actor's race, ethnicity, and gender are not considered in casting decisions. The original framework proposed by the Non-Traditional Casting Project. Sometimes called "nontraditional casting." The term has been largely replaced in institutional usage by "color-conscious casting."

Casting, color-conscious. A casting practice in which the actor's race, ethnicity, and gender are actively considered in casting decisions, sometimes to ensure that historically excluded groups are represented, sometimes to align the cast's demographics with specific artistic or institutional objectives. Distinguished from color-blind casting, which treats identity as irrelevant to casting.

Casting, non-traditional. The NTCP's original definition: "the casting of ethnic, minority and female actors in roles where race, ethnicity or sex is not germane to character or play development." The term now encompasses a broader range of practices, including the casting of disabled performers in non-disabled roles and the deliberate racial recasting of historically white roles.

Casting, traditional. Casting that follows the playwright's specifications for the characters as written in the text, including any explicit or implicit identity markers in the dialogue, stage directions, and dramatic context.

CODA. Child of Deaf Adults. A hearing person raised by one or more Deaf parents. CODAs typically acquire sign language as a first or early language and occupy a distinctive position between the hearing and Deaf cultural worlds. Keith Wann, the ASL interpreter at the center of the Lion King case, is a CODA.

Conduit model. The professional principle that an interpreter functions as a neutral channel for linguistic information, conveying meaning from one language to another without inserting the interpreter's own identity, opinions, or perspective. Codified in the NAD-RID Code of Professional Conduct. Central to the argument of Chapter 8.

Copyright. The legal ownership of intellectual property, including dramatic works. Under U.S. law, copyright for works created after January 1, 1978, extends for the life of the author plus seventy years. For works published before 1978, the term is generally ninety-five years from publication. Copyright gives the playwright legal authority to control the reproduction, performance, and adaptation of the work.

Delegated choice. A casting decision authorized by the playwright or the playwright's estate but executed by another party, such as a director or a licensing organization. The Rodgers and Hammerstein Organization's approval of Ali Stroker's casting in "Oklahoma!" is an example of delegated choice. Authority remains the playwright's; it is exercised through a representative.

Director's theatre. A theatrical tradition, originating in European practice, in which the director is considered the primary creative authority of the production, with the power to reinterpret, restructure, or alter the playwright's text. Contrasted with the American tradition of playwright primacy, in which the playwright's text is the governing document of the production.

DG21. Shorthand for the Dramatists Guild Inclusion Rider, released in October 2021. See Inclusion Rider (Dramatists Guild).

Dramatists Guild of America. The professional association of playwrights, composers, lyricists, and librettists working in the American theatre. Founded as a committee within the Authors' League of America in 1919, formally named the Dramatists Guild in 1922, and established its first Minimum Basic Agreement with producers in 1926. The Guild is not a union but a professional association; it does not engage in collective bargaining.

Equity rider. The original term for the inclusion rider concept, coined by Stacy L. Smith of USC's Annenberg Inclusion Initiative in a 2014 guest column for The Hollywood Reporter. The Hollywood version attaches to an actor's contract and uses the actor's market power to require diverse hiring on film productions. See also Inclusion Rider (Dramatists Guild).

Ethnic anchor. A term introduced in Chapter 10 of this book to describe the condition in which a play's cultural identity is so deeply woven into its dramatic fabric that the identity cannot be separated from the work without destroying the work's meaning. The Irishness of O'Neill's Tyrone family, the Jewishness of Miller's Loman family, and the Blackness of Wilson's Pittsburgh cycle are examples of ethnic anchors.

Historically Excluded Group(s). The term used in the Dramatists Guild Inclusion Rider to define the communities the rider is intended to serve. The DG21 definition includes "people who identify themselves as women, Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC), Latine, Asian and/or Pacific Islander (API), Middle Eastern and/or North African and/or South Asian (MENASA), people with disabilities, within the LGBTQIA+ community, genderqueer or non-binary, or those who identify with a religion, culture, age, ethnicity, nationality, or alienage that have been historically excluded in theatrical productions, or people having a combination of these attributes."

Inclusion Rider (Dramatists Guild). A contract addendum released by the Dramatists Guild in October 2021 (DG21), designed as a voluntary tool that playwrights can attach to their licensing agreements. It requires producers to use "reasonable efforts" to cast actors and hire creative team members and crew from Historically Excluded Groups in numbers reflecting "a significant and representative proportion" of the total positions available. Includes a carve-out protecting the playwright's explicit stage directions and an audit mechanism requiring producers to keep records of all hiring decisions. Examined in detail in Chapter 12.

Institutional override. A casting decision imposed by an institution, whether a theatre, a funding body, an advocacy organization, or a professional guild, that the playwright has not authorized and may not endorse. Distinguished from authorial choice and delegated choice, in which the playwright retains control. The term is introduced in Chapter 13's taxonomy of authority relationships.

MBA (Minimum Basic Agreement). The standard contract framework between playwrights and producers, first established by the Dramatists Guild in 1926. The MBA codifies the playwright's rights over the text, casting approval, and production elements.

Minstrelsy. The American theatrical tradition, dominant from the 1830s through the early twentieth century, in which white performers in blackface caricatured Black Americans through music, dance, and comedy. The minstrel show established racial stereotypes that persisted in American entertainment for more than a century.

Moral right. The author's right to the integrity of the work as the author conceived it, including the right to be identified as the author and the right to object to derogatory treatment. Broadly codified in European law (particularly French droit d'auteur and the Berne Convention). In the United States, moral rights have limited statutory protection (the Visual Artists Rights Act of 1990 covers visual art only), but the Dramatists Guild maintains them as professional standards.

NAD-RID Code of Professional Conduct. The ethical code governing American Sign Language interpreters, jointly maintained by the National Association of the Deaf and the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf. Requires interpreters to "provide service delivery regardless of race, color, national origin, gender, religion, age, disability, sexual orientation, or any other factor."

Non-Traditional Casting Project (NTCP). An advocacy organization founded in 1986, growing out of the First National Symposium on Non-Traditional Casting held in New York City. Led by Clinton Turner Davis and Harry Newman. The NTCP advocated for the casting of minority and female actors in roles not traditionally associated with their demographic groups. Renamed the Alliance for Inclusion in the Arts in 2010. Closed in 2016.

Onnagata. Male performers who specialize in female roles in Japanese Kabuki theatre. The onnagata tradition developed after the Tokugawa shogunate banned women from the Kabuki stage in 1629 and young boys in 1652. Onnagata are trained from youth in feminine movement, voice, and deportment, and the role is considered one of Kabuki's highest art forms.

Posthumous imposition. A casting decision made after the playwright's death, either by the estate enforcing the playwright's known wishes or by a production proceeding without estate oversight after copyright expiration. The fourth category in Chapter 13's taxonomy of authority relationships.

Public domain. The legal status of a work whose copyright has expired, making it freely available for anyone to reproduce, perform, adapt, or otherwise use without the author's or estate's permission. Under current U.S. law, works published before 1931 are in the public domain (as of 2026). Works by authors who died before 1956 will begin entering the public domain as their life-plus-seventy-year terms expire.

Reasonable efforts. The legal standard used in the Dramatists Guild Inclusion Rider to define the producer's obligation to cast and hire from Historically Excluded Groups. "Reasonable efforts" is a recognized legal term requiring demonstrable action rather than mere aspiration. Combined with the rider's audit mechanism (Section 4), the standard transforms the rider from a statement of intent into an enforceable compliance framework.

TDF (Theatre Development Fund). A nonprofit organization that administers accessibility programs for Broadway, including ASL-interpreted performances, audio-described performances, and open-captioned performances. TDF also operates the TKTS discount ticket booth in Times Square. TDF was the employer in the Keith Wann discrimination case examined in Chapter 8.

Usurpation. The term used in Chapter 14 to describe the institutional override of a playwright's casting intentions. The word is chosen to emphasize that the institution is exercising authority that belongs to the playwright, using the playwright's characters, words, and name to advance the institution's objectives while the playwright bears the consequences.

Plays and Productions Discussed

“1776” (Sherman Edwards/Peter Stone, 1969). Roundabout Theatre revival, 2022. Chapters 6, 12, 13.

“A Moon for the Misbegotten” (Eugene O’Neill, 1947). Chapter 10.

“A Raisin in the Sun” (Lorraine Hansberry, 1959). Chapters 5, 10, 14.

“A Streetcar Named Desire” (Tennessee Williams, 1947). Chapters 10, 14.

“A Touch of the Poet” (Eugene O’Neill, 1958). Chapter 10.

“An Octoroon” (Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, 2014). Chapter 2.

“Antony and Cleopatra” (William Shakespeare, c. 1607). Chapter 1.

“As You Like It” (William Shakespeare, c. 1599). Chapters 1, 4.

“Bring in ’Da Noise, Bring in ’Da Funk” (Savion Glover/George C. Wolfe, 1996). Chapter 2.

“Cat on a Hot Tin Roof” (Tennessee Williams, 1955). Chapter 3.

“Death of a Salesman” (Arthur Miller, 1949). Chapters 10, 12, 14.

“Dear Evan Hansen” (Benj Pasek/Justin Paul/Steven Levenson, 2016). Chapter 8.

“Der Rosenkavalier” (Richard Strauss/Hugo von Hofmannsthal, 1911). Chapter 1.

“Dutchman” (Amiri Baraka, 1964). Chapter 2.

“Endgame” (Samuel Beckett, 1957). ART production directed by JoAnne Akalaitis, 1984. Chapters 4, 12, 13, 14.

“Fences” (August Wilson, 1985). Chapters 5, 13, 14.

"Fiddler on the Roof" (Jerry Bock/Sheldon Harnick/Joseph Stein, 1964). Chapter 10.

"Gem of the Ocean" (August Wilson, 2003). Chapter 5.

"Giulio Cesare" (George Frideric Handel, 1724). Chapter 1.

"Green Grow the Lilacs" (Lynn Riggs, 1931). Chapter 9.

"Hamlet" (William Shakespeare, c. 1600). Chapters 1, 14.

"Hamilton: An American Musical" (Lin-Manuel Miranda, 2015). Chapters 6, 12, 13, 14.

"Happy Days" (Samuel Beckett, 1961). Chapters 4, 14.

"Helen and Teacher" (proposed film, 2021). Chapter 7.

"In the Heights" (Lin-Manuel Miranda, 2008). Chapter 6.

"Joe Turner's Come and Gone" (August Wilson, 1988). Chapters 5, 14.

"King Lear" (William Shakespeare, c. 1606). Chapters 3, 14.

"Krapp's Last Tape" (Samuel Beckett, 1958). Chapters 4, 14.

"Long Day's Journey Into Night" (Eugene O'Neill, 1956). Chapters 10, 12, 14.

"Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" (August Wilson, 1984). Chapter 5.

"Not I" (Samuel Beckett, 1972). Chapters 4, 14.

"Oklahoma!" (Richard Rodgers/Oscar Hammerstein II, 1943). Broadway revival directed by Daniel Fish, 2019. Ali Stroker as Ado Annie. Chapters 9, 13, 14.

"Othello" (William Shakespeare, c. 1603). Chapters 1, 2, 3.

"Radio Golf" (August Wilson, 2005). Chapter 5.

"Rockaby" (Samuel Beckett, 1981). Chapters 4, 14.

"Ruined" (Lynn Nottage, 2009). Chapter 14.

"Seven Guitars" (August Wilson, 1995). Chapter 5.

"Spring Awakening" (Steven Sater/Duncan Sheik, 2006). Deaf West Theatre revival, 2015. Chapter 9.

"Sweat" (Lynn Nottage, 2017). Chapter 14.

“The Lion King” (Elton John/Tim Rice/Roger Allers/Irene Mecchi, 1997). Broadway production directed by Julie Taymor. ASL interpreter discrimination case, 2022. Chapters 8, 13, 14.

“The Miracle Worker” (William Gibson, 1959). 2010 Broadway revival. Chapters 7, 13.

“The Piano Lesson” (August Wilson, 1990). Chapters 5, 14.

“The Tempest” (William Shakespeare, c. 1611). Chapter 3.

“Topdog/Underdog” (Suzan-Lori Parks, 2001). Chapter 14.

“Two Trains Running” (August Wilson, 1992). Chapter 5.

“Waiting for Godot” (Samuel Beckett, 1953). Chapters 4, 13, 14.

“West Side Story” (Leonard Bernstein/Stephen Sondheim/Arthur Laurents, 1957). Chapters 6, 8.

“Wicked” (Stephen Schwartz/Winnie Holzman, 2003). Chapter 8.

Timeline of Key Events

c. 534 BCE Thespis becomes the first known actor in Western theatre, performing at the festival of Dionysus in Athens. All performers are male.

c. 1599 Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre opens. All female roles performed by boy actors.

1629 French actresses perform at Blackfriars Theatre in London. The audience riots. In the same year, the Tokugawa shogunate bans women from performing Kabuki in Japan.

1642 English Parliament closes the theatres under Puritan rule.

1660 Charles II restores the English monarchy and issues a royal warrant requiring female roles to be performed by women, ending the all-male stage in England.

c. 1828 Thomas Dartmouth “Daddy” Rice popularizes the “Jim Crow” blackface character, launching the American minstrel show tradition.

1843 The Virginia Minstrels, the first full minstrel troupe, perform in New York City.

1903 Bert Williams and George Walker star in “In Dahomey” on Broadway, among the first Black performers to appear on the mainstream American stage.

1912 Authors’ League of America incorporated in New York.

1919 Playwrights’ committee formed within the Authors’ League of America.

1922 The playwrights’ committee is formally named the Dramatists Guild.

1926 The Dramatists Guild establishes its first Minimum Basic Agreement with producers, codifying the playwright's rights over the text, casting approval, and production elements.

1935 George Gershwin's "Porgy and Bess" premieres, with an all-Black cast performing roles written specifically for Black performers by a white composer and librettist.

1943 "Oklahoma!" by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II premieres on Broadway.

1946 Eugene O'Neill tells his son: "The one thing that explains more than anything about me is the fact that I'm Irish."

1953 Samuel Beckett's "Waiting for Godot" premieres in Paris.

1957 Beckett's "Endgame" premieres.

1959 Lorraine Hansberry's "A Raisin in the Sun" premieres on Broadway, directed by Lloyd Richards, the first Black director of a Broadway play. William Gibson's "The Miracle Worker" premieres on Broadway.

1964 Amiri Baraka's "Dutchman" premieres off-Broadway, a landmark of the Black Arts Movement.

1968 Larry Neal publishes "The Black Arts Movement" in The Drama Review, articulating the philosophical foundation for a racially specific Black theatre.

1976 The Supreme Court, in a decision written by Justice Thurgood Marshall, rules that 42 U.S.C. Section 1981 (a Reconstruction-era civil rights statute) protects white plaintiffs as well as Black plaintiffs from racial discrimination in contracts.

1984 JoAnne Akalaitis directs an all-Black "Endgame" at the American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Beckett issues a program statement dissociating himself from the production and considers legal action.

1984 David Boles joins the Dramatists Guild of America on July 2 as member number 45010, at the urging of his freshman playwriting teacher Joe Baldwin at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

1984 August Wilson’s “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom” premieres at Yale Repertory Theatre, directed by Lloyd Richards.

1985 Wilson’s “Fences” premieres at Yale Rep.

1986 The Non-Traditional Casting Project holds its First National Symposium in New York City. Rex McGraw tells David Boles at UNL: “Playwrights don’t know what their plays are about.”

1988 Austin Pendleton, at an ATW “Working in the Theatre” seminar, advises a young playwright (David Boles): “Run. Take the play and go.”

1989 Samuel Beckett dies on December 22 in Paris.

1990 The Visual Artists Rights Act provides limited moral rights protection for visual art in the United States. No equivalent protection exists for dramatic works.

c. 1990s David Boles cancels a production of his play at Columbia University after a director attempts to split a single character into bipolar twins under the banner of non-traditional casting.

1994 Joe Baldwin, playwright, poet, and playwriting teacher at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, dies on December 27 in Lincoln. He was seventy-six.

1996 August Wilson delivers “The Ground on Which I Stand” as the keynote address at the Theatre Communications Group national conference, June 26.

1996 Robert Brustein responds with “Subsidized Separatism” in American Theatre magazine.

1997 Wilson and Brustein debate at Town Hall in New York City, January 27, moderated by Anna Deavere Smith. Broadcast on NPR’s Fresh Air.

1998 The Beckett estate threatens legal action against a Washington, D.C., production of “Waiting for Godot” that casts two women in the leading roles.

2005 August Wilson dies on October 2, having completed all ten plays in the Pittsburgh cycle.

2005 The NAD-RID Code of Professional Conduct is published, establishing ethical standards for ASL interpreters, including the principle that services must be delivered “regardless of race.”

2009 Advocacy groups challenge the casting of Abigail Breslin as Helen Keller in a Broadway revival of “The Miracle Worker,” arguing the role should be played by a disabled actress.

2010 The Non-Traditional Casting Project renames itself the Alliance for Inclusion in the Arts.

2011 David Boles publishes “The Ruse of Non-Traditional Casting” and “Texas Mud and Racism in The King and I” on Boles-Blogs.com, the seed articles for this book.

2014 Stacy L. Smith of USC’s Annenberg Inclusion Initiative publishes a guest column in The Hollywood Reporter proposing the “equity rider” concept for film contracts.

2015 Lin-Manuel Miranda’s “Hamilton” opens on Broadway, casting actors of color as the Founding Fathers as an integral element of the work’s artistic vision.

2016 The Alliance for Inclusion in the Arts closes after thirty years.

2016 Stacy L. Smith delivers the TED Talk “The Data of Hollywood Sexism.”

2018 Frances McDormand speaks two words at the Academy Awards ceremony on March 4, accepting the Best Actress award for “Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri”: “Inclusion rider.” The term becomes the most searched phrase on Merriam-Webster’s website that night.

2019 Ali Stroker wins the Tony Award for Best Featured Actress in a Musical for her performance as Ado Annie in Daniel Fish’s Broadway revival of “Oklahoma!,” becoming the first wheelchair user to win a Tony.

2021 The Dramatists Guild releases its Inclusion Rider (DG21) in October, the first contract addendum in theatre history designed to redirect the playwright's copyright authority toward institutional demographic objectives.

2022 Keith Wann, a hearing CODA and ASL interpreter, is removed from a "Lion King" interpreting assignment because he is white and the actors on stage are Black. He files a federal discrimination lawsuit against TDF on November 8.

2022 Roundabout Theatre Company's revival of "1776," cast entirely with performers who identify as female, non-binary, or trans, opens on Broadway in October.

2023 The University of Groningen in the Netherlands cancels a student production of "Waiting for Godot" because the play requires an all-male cast and the university will not permit auditions restricted by gender.

2050 "Waiting for Godot" (first published in English, 1954) is projected to enter the public domain in the United States on January 1.

2053 "Endgame" (published 1957) is projected to enter the public domain in the United States on January 1.

Sources Referenced by Chapter

The following sources were consulted in the preparation of this book. They are organized by chapter of primary relevance. Sources that appear in multiple chapters are listed under the chapter in which they are most extensively used.

Chapter 1: The All-Male Stage

Stephen Orgel, “Impersonations: The Performance of Gender in Shakespeare’s England” (Cambridge University Press, 1996).

Thomas Brande, letter of November 8, 1629, on the French players at Blackfriars (printed by J. Payne Collier, “A History of English Dramatic Poetry,” 1879, vol. i, p. 452).

William Prynne, “Histrio-Mastix” (1633), on the 1629 French actresses at Blackfriars.

Philip Stubbes, “The Anatomie of Abuses” (1583).

Elizabeth Howe, “The First English Actresses: Women and Drama, 1660-1700” (Cambridge University Press, 1992).

Biographical sources for Margaret Hughes, Anne Marshall, and the Restoration stage.

Historical accounts of Japanese Kabuki, including the Tokugawa shogunate’s 1629 and 1652 bans. Chinese Yue opera and all-female troupes. European castrati and trouser role traditions.

Chapter 2: Blackface, Minstrelsy, and the Racial Canvas

Frederick Douglass, “The Hutchinson Family.—Hunkerism,” *The North Star* (Rochester, N.Y.), October 27, 1848, Vol. I, No. 44.

Larry Neal, “The Black Arts Movement” (The Drama Review, vol. 12, no. 4, Summer 1968).

Historical sources on Thomas Dartmouth “Daddy” Rice, the Virginia Minstrels (1843), Bert Williams and George Walker, Ira Aldridge, and the development of American minstrelsy.

Laurence Olivier, “Othello” (National Theatre production, Old Vic, London, opened April 23, 1964; film directed by Stuart Burge, 1965).

Bosley Crowther, review of “Othello” (1965), New York Times, February 2, 1966.

Turner Classic Movies, “Othello” (1965), production history and critical reception.

Internet Shakespeare Editions, “Othello: A History of Performance” (University of Victoria).

“Everybody Sing” (1938), MGM, directed by Edwin L. Marin, starring Judy Garland.

“Babes in Arms” (1939), MGM, directed by Busby Berkeley, starring Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland.

Harvard Film Archive, “Conversation” on “Babes in Arms” and blackface in Hollywood musicals, featuring Rhae Lynn Barnes.

New York Times, Washington Post, Deseret News, coverage of the Friars Club Roast of Whoopi Goldberg (October 8, 1993).

Ted Danson, interview on NPR’s “Fresh Air” (2009), discussing the Friars Club incident.

David Boles, “Texas Mud and Racism in The King and I” (Boles-Blogs.com, June 27, 2011).

Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, “An Octoroon” (2014), discussed as contemporary engagement with minstrelsy’s legacy.

Chapter 3: The Non-Traditional Casting Project and Its Evolution

Clinton Turner Davis and Harry Newman, eds., “Beyond Tradition: Transcripts of the First National Symposium on Non-Traditional Casting” (Non-Traditional Casting Project, 1988).

Clinton Turner Davis, “Non-Traditional Casting: An Open Letter” (African American Review, vol. 31, no. 4, 1997).

Harry Newman, “Holding Back: The Theatre’s Resistance to Non-Traditional Casting” (TDR, vol. 33, no. 3, 1989).

Angela C. Pao, “No Safe Spaces: Re-Casting Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality in American Theater” (University of Michigan Press, 2010).

Brandi Wilkins Catanese, “The Problem of the Color[blind]: Racial Transgression and the Politics of Black Performance” (University of Michigan Press, 2012).

NTCP/Alliance for Inclusion in the Arts organizational history and press materials.

Chapter 4: Samuel Beckett and the Playwright’s Moral Right

James Knowlson, “Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett” (Bloomsbury, 1996).

Matthew Rimmer, “Damned to Fame: The Moral Rights of the Beckett Estate.”

Matthew Rimmer, “Waiting for Copyright to Expire: The Legal Endgame of Samuel Beckett” (April 2023).

Samuel Beckett, program statement for the American Repertory Theatre production of “Endgame” (Cambridge, Massachusetts, December 1984).

Athol Fugard, Washington Post interview on Beckett and all-Black casting (November 1998).

Harvard Crimson, “’Endgame’ Director Defends Production” (December 15, 1984).

Playbill, “Beckett Estate Probes D.C. Studio’s Godot” (1998).

Washington Post, “At Studio, ’Godot’s’ Woes” (November 9, 1998).

The Irish Times, “Waiting for Gobnait? Beckett’s Ban on Women Challenged” (October 19, 2020).

UKrant (University of Groningen), “All-male play banned because only men were allowed to audition” (February 1, 2023).

UKrant, Berber Aardema, “Cancelling Waiting for Godot is scarily close to censorship” (February 9, 2023).

The Irish Times, “Irish director’s all-male Beckett play cancelled” (February 4, 2023).

Chapter 5: August Wilson and “The Ground on Which I Stand”

August Wilson, “The Ground on Which I Stand” (TCG keynote, June 26, 1996; published American Theatre, September 1996; definitive version published by TCG, September 2001).

Robert Brustein, “Subsidized Separatism” (American Theatre, October 1996).

“On Cultural Power: The August Wilson/Robert Brustein Discussion,” Town Hall, New York City (January 27, 1997), moderated by Anna Deavere Smith; broadcast on NPR’s Fresh Air, February 5, 1997.

Backstage, “Wilson v. Brustein: A Drama” (1997).

Variety, “On Cultural Power: The Wilson-Brustein Discussion” (January 29, 1997).

Playbill, “The Big Event: Wilson vs. Brustein At Town Hall” (January 1997).

Playbill, “August Wilson Assails Colorblind Casting” (September 1996).

American Theatre, “The Ground on Which He Stood: Revisiting August Wilson’s Speech” (April 2016).

American Theatre, “The Great Color-Consciousness Raiser” (June 2016).

American Theatre, “The Distance We Have Traveled,” Harry J. Elam Jr. (June 2016).

Emily Mann, “The Ground Together,” American Theatre (June 2016).

Chapter 6: Hamilton, 1776, and the Color-Conscious Experiment

Howard Sherman, “What Does ’Hamilton’ Tell Us About Race In Casting?” (HowardSherman.com, December 3, 2015).

“There’s No Business Like Show Business: Abandoning Color-Blind Casting and Embracing Color-Conscious Casting in American Theatre” (Harvard Journal of Sports & Entertainment Law, 2018).

William & Mary Journal of Race, Gender & Social Justice, “The Legality of and Shift in Racial Preferences Within Casting” (Vol. 26, 2020).

Harvard Crimson, “Unpopular Opinion: Color-Blind Casting Isn’t ’Woke’ – It’s Racist,” Emi P. Cummings (December 2020).

IndieWire, “’Hamilton’ Cast and Casting Directors On the Diversity of the Show” (July 4, 2020).

Backstage, “How Broadway’s ’Hamilton’ Was Cast” (2015).

WTTW Chicago, “’Color-Conscious’ Casting: Putting Diversity in the Spotlight” (April 5, 2016).

Snopes, “Producers of ’Hamilton’ Issued ’Non-White’ Casting Call” (2016).

Playbill, “Civil Rights Attorney Slams Hamilton for Casting Notice” (2016).

ABC News, “’Hamilton’ Changes Casting Call Wording After Backlash” (April 1, 2016).

HowlRound, “Why Hamilton is Not the Revolution You Think it is” (2016).

Roundabout Theatre Company, “The Evolution of Non-Traditional Casting” (1776 Upstage Guide).

Deadline, “’1776’ Broadway Review: A New World Declares Independence” (October 7, 2022).

Time Out New York, “Review: 1776 returns to Broadway with a twist” (October 6, 2022).

NPR/Houston Public Media, “In the Broadway musical ’1776,’ the revolution is in the casting” (October 15, 2022).

amNewYork, “Revival of ’1776’ Musical Gets Mixed Reviews from Critics” (2022).

Chapter 7: The Miracle Worker and the Authenticity Trap

New York Times, Patrick Healy, “Advocacy Groups Challenge ’Miracle Worker’ Casting” (October 2009).

BroadwayWorld, “Advocacy Groups Challenge THE MIRACLE WORKER Casting” (October 29, 2009).

Broad Street Review, “Who should play Helen Keller?” (2009 and 2021).

Jezebel, “Should Able-Bodied Actors Play Disabled Characters?” (2009).

Jezebel, “Miracle Worker Welcomes First Visually-Impaired Actress” (2010).

TheWrap, “Millicent Simmonds, Rachel Brosnahan to Star in ’Helen & Teacher”’ (October 14, 2021).

Hollywood Reporter, “’A Quiet Place’ Star Millicent Simmonds Teaming With Rachel Brosnahan for Helen Keller Biopic” (October 14, 2021).

The Limping Chicken, “Helen Keller film sparks debate after Deaf actress Millicent Simmonds cast in DeafBlind role” (October 18, 2021).

Alliance of Women Film Journalists, “SPOTLIGHT July 2025: Millicent Simmonds” (June 29, 2025).

Disability Visibility Project, “Why We Need to Stop Making Movies about Helen Keller” (November 15, 2021).

Perkins School for the Blind, “Anne Sullivan Medal” biography.

Chapter 8: The Lion King, the Interpreter, and the Conduit Problem

Keith Wann v. Theatre Development Fund, federal discrimination lawsuit (filed November 8, 2022, Manhattan Federal Court).

Emails from Lisa Carling and Shelly Guy (obtained by New York Post, November 2022).

New York Post, “Lion King sign-language interpreter Keith Wann says he was fired for being white” (November 12, 2022).

The Daily Moth, “Keith Wann sues TDF alleging racial discrimination over Lion King interpreting gig” (November 16, 2022).

OnStage Blog, “Lawsuit over ’Lion King’ ASL interpreters is new low for Broadway” (November 13, 2022).

BroadwayWorld, “THE LION KING Interpreter Removed From the Production For ’Being White’ Settles Case” (November 28, 2022).

Black Enterprise, “White Interpreter Says He Was Fired From ’The Lion King’ Show Because of His Race” (November 16, 2022).

Law Commentary, “Discrimination Lawsuit Filed Against B’way Hit Lion King by Sign Language White Interpreter” (2022).

New York Theater, “The Lion King ASL Discrimination Suit: The Deaf/ASL Community Reacts” (November 17, 2022).

The Valley Voice/CBS, “Broadway’s Lion King interpreter fired for being white settles case amid backlash” (November 26, 2022).

Keith Wann, personal website (keithwann.com/interpreter).

NAD-RID Code of Professional Conduct (2005).

Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf founding history and certification system.

Pop Goes the Page (Princeton University), Shelly Guy biographical profile.

Chapter 9: Oklahoma!, Ali Stroker, and the Body on Stage

Rodgers & Hammerstein official website, "Oklahoma! – 2019 Broadway Revival" production page.

Deadline, "'Oklahoma!' Review: Daniel Fish's Brash New Dive Into Old Territory" (April 8, 2019).

Washington Post, "A radical new 'Oklahoma!"' (April 8, 2019).

OnStage Blog, "Broadway Review: 'Oklahoma!' Fails to Measure Up" (April 13, 2019).

Deadline, "'Oklahoma!' Director Daniel Fish Found Answers In The Dark" (June 2019).

CNN, "Ali Stroker makes history as the first Tony award-winning actor in a wheelchair" (June 10, 2019).

PBS NewsHour, "Ali Stroker becomes first actor in a wheelchair to win a Tony Award" (June 10, 2019).

Deadline, "Ali Stroker On Her Historic Tony Win for 'Oklahoma!': 'It Inspires People To Keep Going"' (June 11, 2019).

Playbill, "Ali Stroker Talks Making Broadway History With Her 2019 Tony Nomination" (May 2, 2019).

Music Theatre Dance Journal, "'It's a Scandal! It's an Outrage!': Disrupting Nostalgia in Daniel Fish's Revived Oklahoma! (2019)."

Chapter 10: O'Neill's Irish Family and the Ethnic Anchor

Irish America, "Eugene O'Neill: Irish American Playwright" (February 2006).

IrishCentral, "Celebrating Eugene O'Neill on the anniversary of his death" (November 27, 2025).

Fintan O'Toole, "What Haunted Eugene O'Neill?" (New York Review of Books, November 8, 2007).

The Irish Times, "'The fact that I'm Irish': Eugene O'Neill, US playwright and Irish revolutionary" (April 27, 2016).

Kilkenny Observer, “Eugene O’ Neill, A Kilkenny Nobel Prize-winner” (November 6, 2024).

Nobel Prize, “Eugene O’Neill Biographical” (nobelprize.org).

Eugene O’Neill Review, “Bound East for Cardiff, In the Zone, and The Long Voyage Home” (vol. 40, no. 1, 2019).

London Theatre, “’A Moon for the Misbegotten’ review” (Almeida Theatre, June 2025).

Chapter 11: The Columbia Anecdote and the Director’s Theatre

David Boles, “The Ruse of Non-Traditional Casting” (Boles-Blogs.com, March 21, 2011).

Joseph B. Baldwin, “Producing New Plays in the University Theatre” (Educational Theatre Journal, Vol. 7, No. 1, March 1955, pp. 22-26).

Joseph B. Baldwin, biographical entry, Stanley Drama Award complete history (Wagner College, 1957-2018).

American Theatre Wing, “Working in the Theatre” seminar #137: Playwright, Director and Choreographer (September 1988, CUNY Graduate Center Television Studio). Austin Pendleton, panelist.

Rex McGraw, theatre credits: AboutTheArtists.com profile.

Dramatists Guild of America, “The Dramatist’s Bill of Rights” (dramatistsguild.com/rights).

Charlayne Woodard, “Dramatist’s Bill of Rights” (Dramatists Guild article on directorial overreach).

Backstage, “Play Rights: Wise Words on Guarding Your Work” (November 5, 2019).

Chapter 12: The Dramatists Guild Inclusion Rider

Dramatists Guild Inclusion Rider (DG21, Copyright © 2021, The Dramatists Guild of America, Inc.). Full document in David Boles’s files.

Christine Toy Johnson, cover letter accompanying Inclusion Rider (September 26, 2021).

"The Art of Negotiating Theatre Contracts" (DG companion document, released with Inclusion Rider, 2021).

Dramatists Guild website: dramatistsguild.com/inclusion (main page), dramatistsguild.com/service/inclusion-rider (download page), dramatistsguild.com/news/how-use-new-dg-inclusion-rider (webinar announcement, September 27, 2021).

BroadwayWorld, Dramatists Guild press release (September 28, 2021).

American Theatre, "Dramatists Guild Announces First Inclusion Rider" (September 28, 2021).

Hollywood Reporter, "Dramatists Guild Creates Model Inclusion Rider to Support Equity and Diversity in Theater" (September 29, 2021).

Broadway News, "Dramatists Guild creates inclusion rider for theater" (September 28, 2021).

Stacy L. Smith, "The Data of Hollywood Sexism" (TED Talk, 2016).

Stacy L. Smith, guest column proposing the "equity rider" (The Hollywood Reporter, 2014).

Frances McDormand, Academy Award acceptance speech (March 4, 2018).

NPR, "What's An Inclusion Rider? Here's The Story Behind Frances McDormand's Closing Words" (March 5, 2018).

Dramatists Guild of America history: Authors' League of America (1912), playwrights' committee (1919), Dramatists Guild (1922), first MBA (1926).

Chapter 13: Who Decides?

This chapter draws on all sources cited in Chapters 1 through 12 and synthesizes them into a structural argument. No additional primary sources are introduced.

Chapter 14: What Is Lost, What Is Found

U.S. Copyright Office, duration of copyright guidance (copyright.gov).

Cornell University Library, “Copyright Term and the Public Domain in the United States” (March 2021).

Duke University School of Law, Center for the Study of the Public Domain, “What Could Have Entered the Public Domain on January 1, 2014?” (includes Beckett’s “Endgame” copyright timeline).

This chapter draws on all sources cited in Chapters 1 through 13 and synthesizes them into a closing argument. No additional primary sources are introduced beyond copyright law reference materials.

Author’s Published Work (Seed Articles)

David Boles, “The Ruse of Non-Traditional Casting” (Boles-Blogs.com, March 21, 2011).

David Boles, “Texas Mud and Racism in The King and I” (Boles-Blogs.com, June 27, 2011).

Acknowledgments

This book was written alone, as books are, but it was made possible by people who taught me what authorship means and what it costs.

Austin Pendleton answered a question I asked from the audience at an American Theatre Wing seminar in September 1988 and, without knowing it, gave me the professional principle I have followed for the rest of my career. His answer was three sentences. I have been living inside them for nearly four decades.

Janna Sweenie, my collaborator and co-author on American Sign Language educational materials, contributed her expertise on Deaf culture, interpreter ethics, and the professional standards that govern ASL interpretation. Her knowledge of the NAD-RID Code of Professional Conduct and her decades of work in the Deaf community informed the Lion King interpreter chapter and sharpened this book's understanding of the conduit model. The errors in this book are mine. The precision in the interpreter analysis is hers.

The Dramatists Guild of America has been my professional home since July 2, 1984, when I enrolled as member number 45010 on the advice of a freshman playwriting teacher who knew what I would need before I knew I would need it. This book criticizes the Guild's Inclusion Rider, and I want to be clear that the criticism is offered from within the Guild, by a member who has paid dues without interruption for more than forty years, who believes in the Guild's foundational mission, and who writes this book in defense of it. The Guild was built to protect the playwright. I believe this book serves that mission.

Joe Baldwin, my playwriting teacher at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, read the first one-act play I ever wrote and told me to join the Guild that week. He was the first person in the professional theatre who treated me as a playwright rather than a student, and the membership he insisted on has been the single most important professional decision of my career. I did not understand that at eighteen. I understand it now.

The Authors Guild and PEN America have provided professional community and advocacy for the rights of writers in all forms. Their work matters.

Columbia University's School of the Arts, where I earned my MFA, is the setting of this book's most personal story. I am grateful for what Columbia taught me, including the lesson that arrived in the form of a director who wanted to split my character into twins.

The playwrights whose work this book examines, whether living or dead, created the dramatic literature that makes the argument possible. August Wilson, Samuel Beckett, Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, Lorraine Hansberry, Lin-Manuel Miranda, William Gibson, Oscar Hammerstein II, and every playwright who has written a character and insisted that the character means what the playwright said it means: this book is written in their defense.

About the Author

David Boles is a playwright, author, editor, publisher, and educator based in New York City. He holds an MFA from Columbia University and has taught at Columbia, NYU, Rutgers, NJIT, and Fordham. He has been a dues-paying member of the Dramatists Guild of America since July 2, 1984 (member number 45010), and is a member of the Authors Guild and PEN America.

Boles founded David Boles Books Writing & Publishing in 1975. He is the creator of The United Stage (UnitedStage.com), an advocacy platform built on the principle that the playwright has the right to direct the first public performance of the playwright's own play. His writing spans dramatic literature, cultural criticism, investigative literary journalism, and education.

His publications include the Fractional Fiction literary series, the EleMenTs young adult fantasy trilogy, the Prairie Voice investigative journalism archive, and educational works on American Sign Language co-authored with Janna Sweenie. His critical writing appears on BolesBlogs.com, HumanMeme.com, and PrairieVoice.com.

Boles has worked in medicine, law, and dramatic literature. He began writing at sixteen, registering his first television script with the Writers Guild of America. He has spent more than four decades arguing, in practice and in print, that the person who creates a work of dramatic literature is the person who controls it.

He lives in New York City with two British Shorthair cats, Percy and Lotty, who have no opinion on non-traditional casting but strong opinions on everything else.