

to play problems and flaws versus under-five lines, a character who comes in and sets up a joke or delivers the critical information to the police captain or is in the forensics lab. I tend to view those characters as lacking dimension and a kind of humanity, really.

For me, I choose not to take a lot of Asian roles because of the way they're written, and I end up playing roles that were originally not written Asian. If I was to say something to actors in light of the topic, I think we have a lot more power than we think that we have. We tend to fool ourselves into thinking that people won't listen to us or that we can't effect change in this industry, and I absolutely think that we can, and I say it as a person who has effected small changes here and there. If playing an accented waiter offends [an actor] for some reason, then they shouldn't do it. If they're not offended, then go ahead and take the paycheck and have fun onset. But we do have the power to say no, and furthermore we have the power to explain honestly why we said no. I think we tend to underestimate ourselves in this industry, and I hope that changes. I don't think the industry is filled with people who are trying to harm [minorities]. It's a situation where they'll continue with the status quo until someone educates them. I've come to believe that, ultimately, if we want change, we have to take responsibility for our part as minority actors.

I remember I ended up unsure—and I hope [director Shawn Levy] doesn't mind me talking about this—in *Big Fat Liar*, a

atic was an issue or I thought I wasn't getting cast or, you know, it was just hard, I never attributed it to that, because my agents have kind of always sent me out for things that went against what the breakdown said, and those were usually the roles that I got....

Working in New York is a completely different experience than working in L.A., and I spent 17 years in New York. I truly felt nontraditionally cast in New York. When you're working at the Public [Theater] and at Second Stage, and you're doing experimental theatre, none of that is usually based on race at all. In L.A. it's much more type-specific, and I could see where doors can get closed a little sooner here, because casting directors really are looking for type, not looking to go against type as much. So fortunately—knock on a whole bunch of wood—I've been working, so I haven't had to feel it. And even this role [on *Grey's*] was cast out of New York; I auditioned in New York. So to that extent I may have a different perception of what casting difficulties are because all of my experiences are out of New York....

In a way it's kind of all in the eyes of the beholder, because for the work that I've done I've felt like the right job has come along when it has needed to come along, and it has never been about [race].

—**Chandra Wilson**
Film: *Philadelphia*, *Strangers with Candy*; TV: 2006 Emmy nominee for *Grey's Anatomy*; Stage: *Caroline, or Change* (Broadway).

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Nontraditional casting has long been the norm—at least in the minds of casting directors.

BY GERARD RAYMOND

The first thing Arnold Mungoli, casting director and president of Mungoli Theatricals in New York, says when he starts a new project is, "I presume you are open to nontraditional castings?" If the answer is no, he says, "I know I'm in trouble, and the show is in trouble, because it is so clear right away that there is an unnecessary limitation on the creativity. Of course, I absolutely understand when something is race-specific and the script is making a point about race. But I think that is much rarer than



Arnold Mungoli

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people imply it is. The whole point about theatre is that it is a way for us to look at ourselves, and the world we live in has to be reflected on the stage in order for theatre to work most effectively."

Bernard Telsey of Telsey + Company concurs that nontraditional casting is now a given in the business, as far as casting directors are concerned. "Ten years ago it was not even a subject to talk about," says the casting director. "For us it's the more the merrier. Our job is to bring in the best actors we know for a creative team."



Sidney Poitier in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*

IN THE BEGINNING

There has certainly been a sea change in trying to understand the disproportionate representation of various minority groups in American theatre, film, and television. In 1947, Actors' Equity Association took a pioneering stand against racial inequality when it refused to allow a production of Maxwell Anderson's *Jean of Lorraine*, starring Ingrid Bergman, to continue at the National Theatre in Washington, D.C., because the audience was segregated. In 1959, the year Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, with its all-black cast, opened on Broadway, the union sponsored the first integration showcase for an audience of casting directors and producers by presenting a selection of famous scenes using what later became known as nontraditional casting. This concept, which

Equity has defined over time as "the casting of ethnic minorities, females, seniors, and disabled actors in roles where race, ethnicity, gender, age, and the presence of a disability is not absolutely essential to the development of the play or character," was introduced a little more than two decades later, in 1982.

Four years after that, the union completed a study that surveyed all the professional stage productions in the country. It showed that more than 90 percent of the actors hired at the time were Caucasian. "I think this really shocked everyone, because casting directors, directors, and producers had thought they were much more inclusive than the evidence showed," says Sharon Jensen, executive director of the New York-based Non-Traditional Casting Project. "The structures that had been in place for decades hadn't been challenged sufficiently to change [exclusion]."

The eye-opening study led to the First National Symposium on Non-Traditional Casting, which was held in November 1986 at the Shubert Theatre in New York City. Included in the two-day event were keynote speakers, panels, and 18 famous scenes in which 53 actors were cast nontraditionally, mirroring the 1959 showcase. The highlight was the performance of James Earl Jones as Big Daddy in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. "I was in the house, and it was absolutely electric," Jensen recalls. "You wanted them to go back to the beginning and do the whole play." The symposium was, in a sense, a litmus test to ascertain the need for an organization dedicated to addressing and seeking solutions to the problems of racism and exclusion in theatre, film, and television; NTCP was set up immediately after, and within three months it was incorporated as an independent organization.

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The new edition is packed with essential contact information for franchised Talent Agencies, Casting Companies & Film Commissions throughout the U.S. and Canada, Actors' Unions and Regional Offices — A must have for professional entertainers.

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Film: *Freedomland*. IV: *Gal: NY, Law & Order, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, NYPD Blue, Six Degrees*.



The world is becoming so unified because access to traveling is now so open to pretty much everybody. I see Swedish people who are black, and I have Korean friends who are French. I hope that people are beginning to open their minds a little bit to the many possibilities. That's the only way I see [the world]. People have to take a little trip down to Brazil to see all of the different cultures and how people of different colors mix together to make one fantastic race. So far people to say, "Oh, yeah, you look so Spanish!"—Spanish could be 17,000 different things. It takes traveling [to understand that]. Many of these people who are actually casting movies and shows, the first thing I would say is travel a little bit. Get familiar with what you're casting, because the worst thing you can do is fall into a stereotype of things.

—Cete de Pablo
TV: *MGS, The Jury*

look. You walked in. They videotaped you front and profile like a mug shot. It scared the hell out of me. But you know what? On the breakdown, it specified "Caucasian." I have never in my life seen that. All I saw was "Male, Caucasian, Female, Caucasian." I couldn't believe I was seeing that. I was so stunned. I thought, "I'm going to pick one of these [breakdowns] up on my way out." I've been going up for commercials since 1976, and I've never, never seen that. I was the first black spokesman for Allstate [Insurance]—in 1983! They had the comic guys, but I was the straight-on guy. First black man ever. Not now, I guess. Racism has always been in my face.

—Russell Costen
Stage: *Fences* (Yale Repertory Theatre),
Othello (Amas Repertory Company),
Caligula (All Souls Players), *Paul Robeson*
(Shadow Theatre Company).

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TYPES OF TYPES

Jensen clarifies a common misapplication of the term "colorblind" as a synonym for nontraditional casting. In the early years after the founding of NTCP, pioneering African-American actor and director Harold Scott, who died in July, laid out a set of guidelines for nontraditional casting. One of them was colorblind casting. Among the others was "conceptual" casting, in which a specific point was being made by casting someone of color—for example, as a servant in a Chekhov play, which has a stratified social order in the context of the play. "Cross-cultural" was another guideline, exemplified by *Shogun Macbeth*, John R. Briggs' 1986 adaptation of Shakespeare's classic, staged at New York's Pan Asian Repertory Theatre, which relocated the play's action and characters to 13th-century Japan. "Societal" described a situation in which CDs consciously targeted roles such as lawyers or doctors for casting nontraditionally.

"I thought 'colorblind' was an unfortunate term to begin with, frankly," says Jensen. "But the guidelines were only meant to be a gateway into the discussion and not a formula. We started moving away from those definitions only for the simple reason that we didn't want people getting caught up in a sort of smoke screen of intellectual discussion about words. What we were much more concerned with were the practices and the ideas underneath the language."

NTCP set up the Artist Files project to provide a free resource for casting directors and producers who wanted to familiarize themselves with the previously

untapped talent pool of non-Caucasian actors. African-American, Asian-Pacific American, Caribbean black, Latino, South Asian, Native American, Arab-American, Persian-American, and other nonwhite artists, as well as artists who are hearing-, visually-, or physically impaired or otherwise disabled, can submit an industry headshot and résumé for inclusion in NTCP's Artist Files Online. Actors of color are asked to indicate their cultural identification; actors with a disability should specify any accommodation they use.

"In the beginning our focus was the actor, because the actor is the one who communicates to our culture who we are and our relationship to each other," Jensen says. "I think there was some naive thought in the beginning that, if you focused on those issues, everything was going to fall into place. Of course the more involved you get, the more there is to do. It requires diligent, ongoing, and sustained efforts over a long time." NTCP now also functions as an advocate and educational resource, helping extend inclusiveness to other arenas: creative teams, decision makers, staffing, the boards of directors at institutional theatres, and more. Although it is almost routine at this point for casting directors to call in actors of color for auditions, Jensen notes that the profession still has a long way to go with regard to actors with disabilities. "Ultimately the goal is about changing perceptions and attitudes toward more-inclusive standards and practice," she says.

Equity's mission, as explained by Willie Boston, the union's equal employment opportunity business representative, is to increase employment opportunities for its diverse membership. The daylong Diversity Networking Event, held Sept. 25 in New York and co-sponsored by Equity's EEO Committee and the League of Off-Broadway Theatres and Producers, was organized

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so that actors from underrepresented segments of the population could meet with and drop off pictures and résumés for Off-Broadway producers, casting directors, and artistic directors. "It's a way to remind employers that this is a new world and our diversity should be reflected on our stages," Boston says. He notes that all Equity contracts include a nontraditional-casting clause. "I have been here since 1992, and there are more employment opportunities for actors of color," he says. "Are we where we really want to be? No, but that does not negate the progress that has been made."

The practice of nontraditional casting is not solely about ignoring the specific ethnicity of an actor when casting a role. Because of past practice to the contrary, it has also applied to letting an actor play a role of his or her own ethnicity. Many will recall the controversy in 1990 over the casting of Jonathan Pryce in the role of a Eurasian in *Miss Saigon*. Twenty-two years earlier, Asian actors protested the Broadway premiere of *Flower Drum Song*, in which Caucasians were cast in Asian roles, but the to-do passed with little ado. The *Saigon* dispute, on the other hand, made headlines and highlighted how far the industry needed to go toward full inclusion and diversity. Although the show was not recast, tangible gains were made through agreements with the management to guarantee employment for Asian-Pacific American actors in subsequent productions. A few years later, Broadway featured revivals of *Flower Drum Song* and *The King and I* in which no Caucasian actors were cast in Asian roles.

"I think that *Miss Saigon* was a great moment of progress because it was a moment that heightened for all of us our awareness," says Mungioli. He quotes German



A scene from *Flower Drum Song* in 1961

philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer to illustrate how he believes nontraditional casting will eventually become accepted as the norm: "All truth goes through three stages. First it is ridiculed. Then it is violently opposed. Finally it is accepted as self-evident." Mungioli recalls the raised eyebrows when he cast Diahann Carroll in the Toronto production of *Sunset Boulevard*. The character of Norma Desmond, he explains, is one of the greatest stars of all time, and she is dealing with her fear of aging. "Having someone of the star power of Diahann Carroll in that role was extraordinary, and that was only magnified and enhanced by the fact that she was a woman of color," he says. "Our only barriers are the limits of our own imagination. And since imagination is the stock and trade of our business, it is surprising that the issue should even come up."

AFFIRMATIVE ACTING

Opportunities for actors of color in film and particu-

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larly in television appear to be better, perhaps only because of the greater number of roles available. Diversity occurs when casting is open to all actors of all ethnicities and when roles are written with specific ethnicities in mind. Here, too, change has come about within the last decade. Talent agent Adam Lieblein, president of Acme Talent & Literary in Los Angeles, recalls that when he started his agency in 1993, even though studios and networks were required by law to fill out affirmative action reports on their hiring practices, the unvoiced assumption was that agents were to submit Caucasian actors unless the role specifically required otherwise. "Now there is almost a 180 degree switch, and the assumption is submit everything unless you are told otherwise." As a direct result of this, Lieblein reports, "we have to sign more clients that are of different ethnicities, and we have to submit them within each role, just to make sure that we are covered."

Still, there is no telling how open the decision makers may turn out to be. Manager Paulo Andrés of Link Talent Group in Los Angeles picks up a casting breakdown that has just arrived on his desk: It calls for a mid-50s male, alcoholic and described as attractive but wounded. "It says nothing about his ethnic background," Andrés says. "But at the very end it says the prototype is a younger Nick Nolte. Obviously, they have identified him as somebody who is white."

Orion Barnes of the Rogers Orion Talent Agency recalls that when he started in the business about five years ago, actors just needed to look like they were from a particular region to play an ethnic-specific part. "Now it seems like there are several roles on the show *The Shield*, for instance, where they want Armenian,



Orion Barnes



Adam Lieblein

and you have to be Armenian," he says. Andrés' client Masi Oka recently earned a spot on the freshman NBC series *Heroes*, which premiered Sept. 25. "This particular job was specifically written for a Japanese actor who spoke Japanese, and I had him." Another change Andrés says he has noticed over the past few years is that, whereas 15 or 20 years ago nearly all ethnic-specific parts were written in stereotypes, now there is greater diversity in the writing. He cites a Latina client in her early 40s who says she books the "crying moms" all the time. "Today they want to move on and show diversity in their work, not necessarily in ethnic background," he says. "They don't go around saying, 'I want to be Pakistani or Italian.' They say, 'I want to be a 42-year-old woman, and I want to be Latina, because that's who I am.'"

The advice from everyone we talked to: Keep up your training, and keep going to auditions. "I know that's easy for me to say, sitting up here in some office," says Boston. "Often the rejoinder we get is 'No one showed up.' They need to see that you exist and that you have a talent—if maybe not for this role, then for the next or the one after that." Telsey advises going to the audition even if the casting notice doesn't seem to allow for diverse casting. "Be a professional about it, but educate us as to who you are," he says. "Don't limit yourself because we are limited." Mungoli recommends getting into NTCP's Artist Files and says, "Don't be afraid to take roles that are racially specific." A résumé that includes the Broadway production of *Miss Saigon*, he says, indicates credentials that may transfer to something different in a nontraditional-casting situation. He notes, "When I look at a résumé of a person of color—and this is something I have learned from the NTCP—I am always aware that what is not on the résumé may not represent a lack of talent, it may represent a lack of opportunity." <