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Poet gives Othello a Black voice in Commonwealth production

Commonwealth Theatre's production of "The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (Abridged)" features the voice of Rochester poet and performer Dominique Jones.

Written By: [John Molseed](#) | 7:00 am, Jul. 28, 2021



Dominique Jones (Contributed photo)

LANESBORO — In Commonwealth Theatre's production of "The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (Abridged)," the three characters, attempting to present and interpret all 37 known Shakespeare plays, pause on "Othello."

The script calls for a short rap about the show, which features Shakespeare's best-known Black character.

In Commonwealth's version, Othello "speaks" for himself.

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Rochester poet and actor Dominique Jones provides a poetic expository voice-over he scripted. Actors Elizabeth Dunn, Ben Gorman and Brandt Roberts, who are white, interact with Jones' recorded voice. They match his verbal cadence and listen to him describe who Othello was and how Iago plotted his downfall while Othello plotted to discover whether his wife, Desdemona, was unfaithful.

"There's this plotting element I wanted to express," Jones said, adding that it's reflective of the constant cunning and vigilance people of color need to deploy against racism.

"A lot of things we have to learn to deal with or navigate around and code-switch," he said. "That type of plotting becomes necessary."



"The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (Abridged)" stars (clockwise from left) Elizabeth Dunn, Ben Gorman and Brandt Roberts. (Courtesy Commonwealth Theatre)

The narration represents a brief shift in tone during the otherwise-comedic show. Jones said that was inevitable as Othello tells his own story.

"I wanted to lead into a more serious tone, because cultural appropriation is a serious issue," he said.

Director Jaclyn Johnson reached out to Jones to pen the piece.

"I think it's important to find the big ways, and also the little ways, we can make ourselves visible," Jones said. "This was an opportunity."

Jones met Johnson at a diversity workshop hosted by Commonwealth last summer. He worked with other actors and performed a piece of his poetry during the workshop. Johnson said she wanted a person of color to voice Othello. The original playwrights encourage future directors and actors to add to the script and adapt it to keep it more relevant, she told Jones.



"This whole production and story was a way for me to ... explore the roots," says Dominique Jones of his work with SteppingStone Theatre for Youth in St. Paul.

Jones said that shows a commitment from Commonwealth to fight racism and avoid cultural appropriation.

"They're starting to do the necessary work," he said. "It says something, too, that they see this work as necessary, and they're not putting it off or making excuses."

Othello is described as a "moor." Dunn, Gorman and Roberts note that in Shakespeare's time, the term was a catch-all phrase used for African, Somali, Ethiopian, Negro, Arab, or someone of general North African descent.

That interpretation has given "Othello" an enduring legacy as commentary on race and racism to explain Iago's fervent and baseless hatred for Othello.

Jones saw how his work was incorporated in a preview performance of "The Complete Works." He said he was pleased with how it fit with the other material and how the actors interacted with his voice.

"I was pleasantly surprised," he said, adding that it was odd to hear his own voice from the audience.

"Usually when it's something I've written, I'm the one performing it," he said.



Dominique Jones (Contributed photo)

If you go

What: Commonwealth Theatre's "The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (Abridged)"

When: Performances continue through Oct. 24. See commonwealththeatre.org for details.

Where: Commonwealth Theatre Company, 208 Parkway Ave. N., Lanesboro

Tickets: Call 800-657-7025 or 507-467-2525, or email tickets@commonwealththeatre.org.