



LEADING

"I DON'T KNOW WHAT YOUR DESTINY WILL BE, BUT ONE THING I KNOW: THE ONLY ONES AMONG YOU WHO WILL BE REALLY HAPPY ARE THOSE WHO HAVE SOUGHT AND FOUND HOW TO SERVE."

ALBERT SCHWEITZER



FAREWELL THE TRANQUIL MIND

Sacred Heart plays host to Keith Hamilton Cobb and the Untitled Othello Project, a multidisciplinary approach to unpacking a script that for centuries has stood at the intersection of art, race and culture—for better or for worse.

ART MAKES NO SENSE WHATSOEVER. It is utterly inefficient to make—a single work may take as little as hours or as long as a lifetime to complete—with no guarantee of success. Then, at its best, art's impact transcends any quantifiable measure—a touch of brush to canvas may teach as much about the emotions of love and loss as it does about the science of color and sight; a shift in key may reduce an audience to tears or send a nation to war; the truth of a moment in a book, film or play may reveal more about ourselves than we'd otherwise be willing to admit.

And, to this last, sometimes the opposite is true. Sometimes it is a moment's *un*-believability—and our willingness to accept it anyway—that is most telling.

Keith Hamilton Cobb has issues with *Othello*. "I don't think it's a great play," he says of Shakespeare's classic, which (it should be noted) ranks among the most frequently produced plays in the country year after year. "It's plot driven [meaning the characters do unbelievable things solely because the action of the play requires it]. The characters are stereotypical tropes. I don't like the character of Othello. He's badly written, boorish and blunt ... but I care for him."

That dichotomy—a feeling intellectual's frustration with ingrained and endorsed stereotype versus an empathic actor's mission to find the true human in every character—is at the heart of Cobb's Untitled Othello Project, which took up residency on campus at Sacred Heart for two weeks at the start of this past December. Stereotype and caricature are, of course, the antithesis of complexity and depth and, in a play notably built around racial tensions, now more than ever that lack of complexity is inexcusable, regardless of who wrote it. If *Othello* is to earn its production, it should be for more than name recognition and perceived diversity that is, in truth, little more than gross cliché.

Thus, moderating an assembled panel of artists and performers in collaboration with New York's Blessed Unrest Theatre Company, as well as historians, philosophers, theologians, ethicists and students of all disciplines from both Sacred Heart and afield, Cobb and company took a 60-hour, line-by-line



**WHITEWASHING
BLACKFACE.**

**OTHELLO WAS
WRITTEN RELYING ON
RACIST STEREOTYPES
400 YEARS AGO.
DOES THE PLAY HAVE
A PLACE ON TODAY'S
STAGE?**

deep dive into the text of the play. Weighing historical intention against modern sensibilities, cultural shorthand as it existed then and now and the understanding that a modern audience will never fully divorce itself from its modernity, the team sought to unpack the play's intentions and determine if a better narrative exists inside the one we've accepted on merit for so long.

"Stellar" is the word Cobb uses without hesitation to describe his two weeks on Sacred Heart's campus. The group pored over the script with an attention to detail never afforded in traditional theatrical rehearsal. Over the course of 60 hours, discussion never progressed past Act 2, Scene 1. For perspective, it's typically only 80 to 90 hours that most regional and small New York theatres get to attempt a fully fledged production of a play such as this.

"There may be a story in there where Othello's journey toward crashing and burning—which he does—can be made legitimate," he says. "But you're not going to find it when you've only got three weeks to recycle what everyone already thinks they know."

So when Cobb and company take on *Othello*, it's not just this play and its author they are putting under the microscope. They're holding a mirror up to an industry. How can the art of theatre truly be an art when its business model requires it to value profitability over authenticity? Furthermore, what does it say about a culture that not only accepts these stereotypes for so long, but elevates them unquestioningly as the work of genius?

Finding the *Othello* that could be there—indeed, the one some might say *should* be there—is no small task, but



KEITH HAMILTON COBB (ABOVE, CENTER) DURING THE UNTITLED OTHELLO PROJECT'S TWO-WEEK RESIDENCY ON CAMPUS. THE EVENT WAS LIVESTREAMED AND SHARED WITH UNIVERSITIES ACROSS THE COUNTRY.

the opportunities that quest presents are too rich to pass up. "From the first day [of the residency]," says Professor Emily Bryan of the department of languages and literature, "you saw human beings searching and reaching for hope about how to be in the world with each other, to be mindful of past harms, to forge a way forward."

In such a way, art becomes life becomes art becomes life—a visceral connection between creativity, intellectualism and humanity that is exactly the sort of project venture studio Midnight Oil Collective had been hunting. When Sacred Heart's opportunity to host the event was closing faster than the University's likelihood of securing



funding to support it, Cobb turned to the Collective for help. The group was instrumental in making December's residency happen and is looking to continue their work with the University on other projects down the road.

As for Cobb, standing before giants

ranging from the American capitalist business model of theatre in this country to the Bard himself, the man shows no signs of laying down his sword. "I've been swinging at this stuff all my life," he says. "So here I am. It's go big or go home." [SHU](#)