

# BWW Feature: AMERICAN MOOR Returns to Washington, D.C.

by Naomi Ducat Dec. 26, 2018



Photo Credit: Chris Lang

American Moor, written and performed by the esteemed **Keith Hamilton Cobb** and directed by Drama Desk nominee **Kim Weild**, returns for a four week engagement at **Anacostia Playhouse**, from January 9- February 3, 2019.

Inducted into the Folger Shakespeare Library, American Moor began as an expression of the experience of a black male exploring implicit bias in American theater through the metaphor of **William Shakespeare's** character, Othello. Since its debut in 2013, it has transformed into an interactive performance, generating discussion about omnipresent power, which perpetuates racial and gender biases that shape perceptions of who we are and who we ought to be. Keith, in this enactment, travels through what Kim describes as "four modalities," a feat which requires "physical and emotional athleticism." He transitions between a contemporary black American actor who is

forced to put on a façade conforming to the predisposed ideas of a small, white, male director, who in his position has inherent power over Keith; a man, engaging with the audience about his desire to be seen and heard for who he is and not for who he is expected to be; a man in solitude, imploding with frustration about the confines imposed by powers to which he must submit; and Othello, an isolated and moorish character, who has to defend himself in front of a senate by obliging to their notions of his identity-akin to the way Keith must oblige to the ethos of a theater director and of the world, as a black man in America.

The idea for this play is derived from what Keith describes as "the frustrations, anxieties, and confusion that are inherent to finding life in this world." When Keith started exploring these ideas on page, he quickly realized that there is no separating life as an African American male and life as an African American actor. The two are unavoidably seen and understood as one, and therefore dictate perceptions of who he can be-both in his own life and in character on stage.

Keith chose the metaphor of Othello because of its resemblance to his own experience. He explains that there is an agenda guiding what we all do, and that agenda serves a powerful group of people. "My goal as an actor is and has always been to push back on that agenda." As an actor, Keith knows too well the role of a director-an unseen power who tells an actor who and how to be. This director has the authority to judge-but does not necessarily share or even know how their judgments manifest, and so the actor is left asking the director (who does not know him and cannot understand him) who the actor should "be." Analogously, Othello has to stand before a senate to prove himself a "noble" person. In doing so, he must justify his actions while "ingratiating the senate by being jovial and compelling."

While rich in dialogue, *American Moor* is simple in set. In Keith's words, "there are no lighting cues, there is just one large African American man on a stage. Symbolically, that alone is astounding." At times, a director's voice looms from where the audience sits. "This voice symbolizes the voice of authority in society telling us how to behave and what is 'okay.' African Americans hear this voice loudest."

Keith divulges, "The audience sits with the director- as if they are all complicit. It's a profound experience."

When asked if the lessons of this performance are intended to reach distinct audiences in different ways, Keith enthusiastically replies, "No...The themes woven into the threads of this play are universal. The message connects to all because the depictions in this performance and the biases they represent impact everyone." He notes, "The play is intense and unapologetic and demands answers to unasked questions. It has the ability to make people uncomfortable. Ultimately, this play is a vehicle for discussion that we all absolutely need." Because of this, the cast hosts a post-performance discussion lead by three facilitators, who invite the audience to react and engage.

Kim, the Director, has a strong interest in stories that have not been seen or heard before, which explains why she has become so deeply invested in what she describes as a, "vitally important piece of writing and a stunning performance." In her view, American Moor is "visceral, vulnerable, and very direct," because it brings light to truth that has not been told before-of a black man not being seen and not being heard, both as a person and as an actor. Kim stresses the importance of embracing diversity and inclusion in theater, and challenges us all to ask, "What does it take to really see another human being?" It is this question, she explains, that makes American Moor is so powerful. "It cracks people open and engenders dialogue."

In response to the question of how her identity as a white female fuses with her direction of American Moor, she explains, "It's about listening, not assuming. I am aware of my strengths as a director and this piece demands a lot of me. It allows me to be uncomfortable and sit in my discomfort, and it allows us to converse about it." She adds, "To dare to experience means you have to put yourself aside and listen." She openly discusses moments of realizing her own, "inherited interpretation of gender and race relationships," and admits that we all have our own history, and therefore have an obligation to educate ourselves and recognize the ways in which we have been misguided. "American Moor challenges us to have the courage to engage and talk to one another...it won't be comfortable and there will be

disagreements, but we need to have the courage to take the first step." Highlighting some of the many moments in the performance that touch her the most, Kim notes, "There is one at the end of the performance when he [Keith] asks a question... and when he does, he is filled with hope for the possibility of change, and that sense of hope has never left me."