

# The Washington Post

Theater & Dance

## One actor takes on the hazards of 'Othello' in his play, 'American Moor'



Keith Hamilton Cobb, writer and star of "American Moor" at the Anacostia Playhouse. (Chris Lang)

By **Geoffrey Himes**

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Keith Hamilton Cobb is a tall African American actor. He gets asked two questions over and over again. Does he play basketball? And has he done "Othello" yet? Cobb doesn't play hoops, and he hasn't done a full production of the Shakespeare play. But he's so passionate about the show that he has turned down casting

offers that didn't include enough rehearsal time to do justice to the drama. He has even written his own play about all the issues a black actor must wrestle with when auditioning to play the title character.

*[Dispute over race and casting disrupts a Broadway revival of "All My Sons"]*

That play, "American Moor," had a brief summer run at the [Anacostia Playhouse](#) in 2015, and it returns there next week (after successful runs in Boston and at the Globe Theatre in London) in a drastically revised version for a 3 ½ -week stay. It tackles several problems at once, arguing that the American theater is afflicted not only by racial stereotypes, but also by shortened rehearsal times and by directors whose experience of the world has mostly been limited to graduate school.

Cobb is alone onstage for 85 minutes (though Josh Tyson has a key offstage role), and he uses Shakespearean asides to share with the audience the auditioning actor's thoughts that he can't share with the neophyte white casting director for fear of losing the job.

In Shakespeare's play, Othello is a mercenary soldier who's so effective that the Italians make him a general. The skills and confidence that made this promotion possible, combined with his exotic looks, cause Desdemona, the daughter of a rich local, to fall in love with Othello and marry him. After the elopement, the Venetian Senate summons the newlywed husband, the only black face in a sea of white, to explain himself. He does so with great restraint, displaying neither the anger nor the defensiveness one might expect.

"He can be nonchalant," Cobb points out, "because he knows they need him to fight the war in Cyprus. At the same time, there are certain things he can't say, because he works for them."

The parallels between Othello's defense before the senate and an audition by a black actor (or an actor from any marginalized community) before a white director provide the connective sinew of "American Moor." Sometimes Cobb is an eager-for-work actor trying to placate a narrow-minded director; sometimes Cobb is a frustrated artist muttering to himself; and sometimes he's Othello, a general addressing a committee of politicians.

“Every time I’ve seen that speech,” says Kim Weild, Cobb’s friend since they were undergrads at New York University and his director since early in the development of “American Moor,” “it’s Othello ingratiating himself to the senate. What Keith is offering up is Othello as a warrior who knows his worth, who’s very savvy politically and knows how to get what he wants. People always say, ‘It’s really Iago’s play,’ but Keith brings a depth that makes the audience look at Othello in a much more fleshed-out, human way.”

The play also asks: What makes Othello tick? Why would a successful general with an affectionate new bride succumb to some dubious gossip and go into a murderous rage?

“That’s for the actor to supply,” Cobb claims. “He has to say, ‘There’s a path to explain this, because of what happened in the past.’ Iago [the antagonist] says, ‘I have seen the cannon when it hath blown his ranks into the air.’ If that’s the truth, it’s like Iraq, where people see their comrades blown up and come back with post-traumatic [stress].

“So think of Othello coming back with PTS and about to go back into war. ‘As long as people call me a warrior,’ he thinks, ‘I know how to be myself.’ Then he meets this woman, who sees something in him that no one has ever seen before, and she throws a light switch in him. In a situation like that, we begin to see how a word from someone like Iago might trigger a reaction.”

That’s why the auditioning actor in “American Moor” grows so frustrated. He knows that a performer has to fill in parts of the character, and that an African American actor brings something different, perhaps special, to that process. “Actors will come to this and say, ‘Yeah, I’ve been in that situation,’ ” says Cobb. “But so will a guy who’s been trying to get a job at the post office. When I first wrote this play, I thought it was basically my experience as an African American male actor doing his three-minute elevator pitch at an audition. And it’s still that. But as I began to do it for audiences, the response told me it was also more. I had a 57-year-old white woman say, ‘I’ve experienced sexism and ageism at the same time, and I know what it’s like to want to say certain things and not say them. That character is me.’”

**IF YOU GO**

**American Moor**

Anacostia Playhouse, 2020 Shannon Pl. NE.  
202-290-2328. [anacostiaplayhouse.com](http://anacostiaplayhouse.com).

**Dates:** Jan. 11-Feb. 3.

**Tickets:** \$30-\$40.