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Response Paper 2.2:
Text and Context

Part A: Question/Problem

Cloistered in a castle in Denmark, *Hamlet* may be Shakespeare's whitest play, but The Show Must Go Online performs it (like their other plays) with a multi-cultural cast that looks to celebrate and promote racial equality. How do the power dynamics in Shakespeare's play relate to the racial dynamics of twenty-first century theater practices?

Part B: Contexts

1. Gender and Race in *Hamlet*

Prince Hamlet has been played by female actors dating back to Sarah Siddons, Asta Nielsen, and Sarah Bernhardt in the nineteenth century (Dobson and Sharpe). It is not particularly innovative or shocking for The Show Must Go Online to cast a female actor, Kristin Atherton, to play Hamlet. Their casting of a female actor to play Claudius—Emily Carding—is a bit more noteworthy. It means that the three Danish royals—Claudius, Gertrude, and Hamlet—are all female, to which we could add the other royal in the play, Fortinbras, played by Doireann May White. While the Ghost of King Hamlet is played by a Latin American man, Miguel Pérez, the other three Danish royals—Claudius, Hamlet, and Fortinbras—are played by white women. That creates a complicated dynamic between Claudius and Hamlet on the one side, played by white women, and Gertrude and Ophelia, played by women of color, Seeta Indrani and Tanvi Virmani, both of Indian heritage. Whereas scholar David Sterling Brown's introduction to The Show Must Go Online's *Hamlet* describes Shakespeare's original play as one of white-on-white violence, the show itself made the victims of Claudius and Hamlet—King Hamlet, Queen Gertrude, Ophelia—people of color, creating a new dynamic of white-on-brown violence.

2. Structural Inequality

The Show Must Go Online's *Hamlet* raises questions about structural inequality—specifically, whether the production perpetuates or critiques white supremacy. These questions come in the context of the troupe's clear efforts to support the fight for racial diversity, equity, and inclusion in the theater world. Their *Hamlet* has actors of many different racial and ethnic backgrounds. At the same time, the actors in the play who have the most lines—Hamlet, Claudius, Polonius, and Horatio—are all played by white actors. In contrast, Laertes, Ophelia, Gertrude, and the Ghost are played by actors of color. Does this make the actors of color second-class characters, as it were? While The Show Must Go Online may fight for racial justice, it may still exhibit structural inequality, the defining feature of which is not explicit bigotry toward minority groups, but

instead the social positioning of one group in a position of power, and the subordination of other groups to it (Scott).

3. Color-Blind vs. Color-Conscious Casting

In light of the racial dynamics at work in The Show Must Go Online's *Hamlet*, we must ask about (1) the approach to race and casting employed, and (2) the deliberateness of the radicalized casting. With respect to the first question, did The Show Must Go Online employ color-blind casting or color-conscious casting (Thompson)? That is, did the production ask audiences to ignore the racial identities of the actors, which (in this approach) need not match the racial identities of the characters they're playing? That's color-blind casting. Or, did The Show Must Go Online ask audiences to see the race of its actors, and to use the dynamics created by the radicalized casting to condition how they engage with the characters and the story being told? That's color-conscious casting. Those possibilities open up the second question noted above: did The Show Must Go Online intend for the racial identities of its actors to signify? That is, did the production design the racial dynamic of their *Hamlet* purposefully, perhaps hoping that audiences would recognize social tensions between empowered white people (Hamlet, Claudius, Polonius, and Horatio) and disempowered people of color (Laertes, Ophelia, Gertrude, and the Ghost)? If not, the production may be liable for perpetuating harmful structural inequalities. If so, then the production may be critiquing those structural inequalities by pointing out the origins of this tragedy—*Hamlet* is, after all, a story of catastrophic collapse—in whiteness. (It should be noted that, even if The Show Must Go Online didn't *intend* for its racialized casting to signify, it still *does* to audiences.)

Works Cited

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