



What I love about theatre is...its ability to transform audiences and artists alike by engaging our collective imagination. Theatre reveals our humanity and allows us to confront the complexities of our differences while recognizing our similarities. Through the power of the theatre, we remember the past, reflect on the present, and create a vision that leads us into the future.

I became a director because...much of my childhood was shaped by my passion for theatre. I began acting at a young age, performing in the community as well as professionally. As I got older, I became more and more conscious of casting limitations imposed on Black and Brown actors. I began to feel betrayed by my own passion, until I began directing—my first time was at the Langston Hughes Performing Arts Center in Seattle. As a director, I found I could impact what stories got told on stage, help determine who gets to tell them, and help shape the aesthetics of how they get told. I wanted to build a career in directing that could support my family, so eventually, I found a way to pursue an MFA in directing from the University of Washington, where I was mentored by **Jon Jory** and **Valerie Curtis-Newton**, and became interested in looking at “classic” texts through the lens of Black culture.

I started teaching in the academy because...of the extraordinary intellectual and creative freedom as well as the daily inspiration that comes from working with college students—some of the most resilient young people from all over the world. Arthur Miller said, “I have felt for a long time that universities were potentially capable of opening exhilarating perspectives in modern theatre...they contain an audience which is seeking rather than jaded, open to fresh experience rather than nostalgic for what it has comfortably known.” In the academy, I teach courses that encourage the next generation of audiences and artists to reimagine how we use theatre, as well as develop innovative productions that incorporate the talents of professional artists and gifted students.

PRE-SHOW
/
POST-SHOW

WITH

**JUSTIN
EMEKA**

OBERLIN COLLEGE

Some unique productions I've directed on campus include...*Death of a Salesman*, featuring **Avery Brooks** as Willy Loman; *Macbeth*, set in the South during Reconstruction after the Civil War; the regional premiere of Dominique Morisseau's *Follow Me to Nellie's*; Alice Childress's *Wedding Band* with a set designed by Richard Morris, Jr.; and an original play about the relationship of W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington called *The Compromise*, written by Gabriel Emeka. I am currently rehearsing Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, adapted by Lydia Diamond.

Some unique classes I have taught are...“Heightened Movement, Heightened Text”; “Movement for the Actor” (based in capoeira); “Advanced Scene Study: Black and Latino Playwrights”; “Directing II: Staging from Non-Dramatic Sources”; and “Non-Traditional Approaches to Playing and Casting Shakespeare.”

Before opening, I...always remind my cast of the sacred nature of our work together in the theatre and what an honor it is to have the opportunity to share our talents with our community through a playwright's imagination. I remind them of the importance of honoring the staging created in rehearsal and to maintain that work even as they continue to find new possibilities within the staging. I urge them to take care of themselves and each other, both on stage and off, while investing everything they have, every night, in every show, no matter if there is one person in the audience or 1,000. And last, I encourage them not to discuss reviews of the performance backstage or in dressing rooms. Then I thank them; say, “Goodbye”; and let the production walk in the world on its own.

I think it's important for the American theatre to...take chances in reflecting the richness of the many cultural traditions that define America. To be effective, conversations on equity and diversity should be directly related to creating opportunities and resources for artists and producers of color. It is imperative that theatres get persistent in their commitments to hiring directors of color; recruiting board members of color; and producing work written by artists of color as well as redefining approaches to casting roles in the canon of classic texts that were written for white actors but now, as a result of many generations of struggle and protest, are being played by actors of color. I believe most people in the arts want to be more inclusive, but they also have to be willing to give up privileges they have come to expect in order to achieve it, which is always much easier said than done—for us all.

JUSTIN EMEKA is a professional director and a tenured professor of theatre and Africana studies at Oberlin College. At the Classical Theatre of Harlem, he adapted and directed *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Romeo and Juliet*. At the Karamu House in Cleveland, he directed Dominique Morisseau's award-winning *Detroit '67*; at Intiman Theatre in Seattle, he directed Lydia Diamond's *Stick Fly*; at Yale Repertory Theatre, he served as the movement coordinator and played the role of Edgar in a unique African American production of *King Lear*. Recently, he published an essay titled “Seeing Shakespeare Through Brown Eyes.”