



(Ab)using Fadoul and Elisio: Unmasking Representations of Whiteness in German Theatre¹

Sharon Dodua Otoo, 27 May 2014

White people have not always been “white,” nor will they always be “white.” It is a political alliance. Things will change.

(Amoja Three Rivers)

*Whiteness*² is created and perpetuated in a myriad of ways, through tiny and massive interactions on a micro and macro level every single day. The “Blackface debate,” initially sparked in Berlin early in 2012 through the public advertising of Schlosspark Theater Berlin’s production of *Ich bin nicht Rappaport*, featured many examples of this: the use of blackface by Joachim Bliese, the *white* actor cast in the role of an African-American man was merely the tip of the iceberg, indeed the use of blackface is a demonstration and celebration of *whiteness*. In this article, I focus on how *whiteness* is represented in modern German theatre, using Michael Thalheimer’s 2012 production of Dea Loher’s play *Unschuld* (engl. “Innocence”) as an example. *Unschuld* was another target of criticism for the use of blackface and the site of the first in-theatre protest by the then newly-formed activist group *Bühnenwatch* (engl. Stagewatch). As is typical of most German theatrical productions, the non-racialised characters in *Unschuld* are all *white* by virtue of the fact that their *whiteness* is uncommented: it is self-evident, a matter-of-course. Loher (a *white* woman) and Thalheimer (a *white* man) obviously believe that this underlines the universality of the play’s message, but it is in fact the first clue to a problematic understanding of who, in their theatrical world, is “in” and who is “out.” Who “belongs”? Who is “othered”? The answers to these questions can be found, in part, through a closer examination of the characters Elisio and Fadoul.

¹ This article is based on part of the chapter “Reclaiming Innocence. Unmasking Representations of Whiteness in German Theatre,” which first appeared in S. Micossé-Aikins and S. D. Otoo (eds.) *The Little Book of Big Visions. How to be an Artist and Revolutionise the World*, Münster: Edition Assemblage, 2012.

² In this article, the socio-political categories “Black” and “*white*” are marked by the specific way they are written – capital “B” for Black, italics for white (for further discussion see *ibid*, p. 13).

The play opens with Elisio and Fadoul, two friends, witnessing the suicide of a young woman. They are consumed with guilt: they could have done something to save her, but did not decide to do so fast enough. Despite the fact that these two men, of all the characters in the play, are the ones who arguably display the most humane responses to the circumstances they find themselves in, Elisio and Fadoul are not conceived of people like “us.” They are described in the list of characters as “*illegale schwarze Immigranten*” (engl. “illegal black³ immigrants”)⁴. In Thalheimer’s production, two white actors are cast in the roles. Loher provides guidance for this circumstance, stating: “... *keine ‘Schwarzmalerei’, lieber die Künstlichkeit der Theatermittel durch Masken o.ä. hervorheben ...*”⁵ – which means: do not use black make-up, but rather emphasise the artificiality of the theatrical devices using masks or something similar.⁶ The face-paint used on the actors playing Elisio and Fadoul is black and is applied in a mask-like way: uneven, smudgy and, for example, it can also be seen on Absolut’s face after Fadoul kisses her. By the end of the play it is almost completely gone. It has been argued that this effect was apparently intended to demonstrate that as the audience and other characters in the play get to know Elisio and Fadoul better, the friends become increasingly “human.”⁷ They become “real individuals”. It is intended that our prejudiced view of them gives way to a more differentiated perspective, which in turn should allow us to access feelings of empathy and compassion for them (or more accurately: we are given the opportunity to experience and celebrate ourselves in the roles of the Great Empathic and the Great Compassionate). This representation and construction of “non-Europeans” is problematic because it relies on a consensus which equates “whiteness” with European, with “us”, with belonging, with agency, with visibility. This construction is assisted by the creation of its opposite: “blackness”, which is equated with “helplessness”, “them”, “illegality”, “victimhood” and “foreignness.” This is a consensus that is not exclusively the domain of Loher, Thalheimer or Deutsches Theater but a very telling example of what happens on 21st-century German stages. Furthermore, the consensus employed in the characterisation and staging of the

³ As mentioned in the previous footnote, the word “Black” is written with a capital “B” in this article. The only exception is where the word is used in a direct quote.

⁴ This description is provided in the cast list (see D. Loher, “Unschuld” *Theater heute*, vol. 44, no. 10, 2003, pp. 47-59, here: p. 47) – one which is highly problematic both due to the use of the word “illegal” to describe a human being and also for the exclusive racialisation of the only two Black characters in the play. The implication of this for the casting and production as well as the broader implied comment on society is one of the subjects of this article.

⁵ The term *Schwarzmalerei*, however, also has the unfortunate connotation of meaning “seeing things pessimistically.”

⁶ Loher, *ibid.*, p. 47.

⁷ Post-performance discussion with *Unschuld* ensemble at *Deutsches Theater*, Berlin, in March 2012.

play not only imagines a *white* theatre ensemble, but also assumes a common starting point, or background, of all members of the audience.

Loher's supposed examination of humanity, and Thalheimer's theatrical interpretation of it, requires "*whiteness*" to be normative and universal. *Whiteness* functions like this because it seems not to be there – it becomes an absence of *race*. The *white* characters presented in *Unschuld* are, to use the words of Dyer, "... not of a certain race⁸, they are just the human race."⁹ In the German theatre landscape this is not at all unusual and fits in very well with the everyday invisibility of *whiteness*. How does Loher achieve this in *Unschuld*?

The first and most obvious testimony to the fact that the playwright also perpetuates the invisibility of *whiteness* in her play can be found in the list of characters. As has already been mentioned, the only two racialised characters are Fadoul and Elisio. But beyond this, the only specific casting tip made by the author is with reference to Fadoul and Elisio:

... Wenn Elisio und Fadoul mit schwarzen Schauspielern besetzt werden, dann bitte, weil es ausgezeichnete Schauspieler sind, nicht, um eine Authentizität zu erzwingen, die unangebracht wäre ...¹⁰

Which means: "... if Elisio and Fadoul are to be played by black actors, then please, only because they are excellent actors, and not in order to force an authenticity, which would be inappropriate ..." Clearly, it is unnecessary for Loher to make the same recommendation regarding the other characters of the play: it is simply obvious that the actors or actresses cast will be qualified for the role. Moreover it is implicitly stressed that the excellent Black actors or actresses in question would only be "appropriate" for the roles Elisio and Fadoul. Loher's assumption (or even: preference?) that the theatre ensemble will be predominantly, if not exclusively *white*, sets the tone for the entire play. The second testimony to the invisibility of *whiteness* in *Unschuld* comes with the names of the main characters. For the German context "Rosa", "Franz", "Ella" and "Helmut" represent very standard names speaking to (and of) hegemonic Germany. Also the names "Absolut", Frau "Habersatt" and Frau "Zucker", while stylised and labelling, are not strange to the German ear. Indeed these names have a number of connotations which provide further insights as to the types of character in question. For example, "Zucker"

⁸ In this article, the word "*race*" is written italics to indicate that it is a socio-political construct. The only exception is where the word is used in a direct quote.

⁹ R. Dyer, *White. Essays on Race and Culture*, London: Routledge, 1997, p. 3.

¹⁰ Loher, op. cit., p. 47.

(engl. sugar) makes a thinly-veiled reference to the character's diabetic condition; "Habersatt" sounds like the German equivalent of "had enough" or "completely fed up"; and "Absolut" has the same connotations as the English "absolute" – "completely", "entirely", "exclusively." Only the names "Elisio" and "Fadoul" are not traditional *white* German names. It is certainly not coincidental that these two are also the only non-*white* characters.

A third example of the invisibility of *whiteness* is the dialogue that takes place towards the end of the play between Frau Habersatt and Elisio beginning with the words so many Black and other people of color in Germany dread:

... *Sie sind sicher nicht von hier ... Von woher kommen Sie denn...*¹¹

In English: "... you are obviously not from around here ...where do you come from?" This scene can only work because it is clear to everyone that Frau Habersatt is *white*. And yet this fact is not actually stated anywhere. This is implicit knowledge – it is the norm.

As is illustrated in the opening quote of this article – *whiteness* has not always functioned in this way. *Whiteness* is a *social* construct. Loher does not act in isolation or write in a vacuum. According to Garvey and Ignatiev¹², *whiteness* works by creating a club, the membership of which is conferred only to certain individuals at birth without their consent. Members of the club are then awarded certain privileges through little or no effort of their own. The members of the club assume that "... all those who look white are ... fundamentally loyal to it"¹³, and most people¹⁴ simply comply with this assumption, which facilitates the perpetuation of *white* privilege. Most *white* people will (choose to) remain unaware of this throughout their lives.

In the context of *Unschuld*, *white* privilege makes itself visible through the presentation of the *white* characters in the play. As they are not racialised, they are not explicitly representative of their *race*, but are simply human. The actress playing "Absolut" can represent a stripper on stage and the actress playing "Rosa" can bear her breasts no less than three times to the audience, without this amounting to making a statement on "how

¹¹ Ibid., p. 57.

¹² See J. Garvey and N. Ignatiev, "Toward a New Abolitionism. A *Race Traitor* Manifesto" in M. Hill (ed.) *Whiteness. A Critical Reader*, New York: New York University Press, 1997, pp. 346-349, here p. 346.

¹³ Ibid., p. 347.

¹⁴ Garvey and Ignatiev use the wording: "... those who look white," which actually necessarily also includes those who may appear to be *white* but are actually of color. It is beyond the scope of this article to go into detail on this point; suffice to say, the acts of complicity for *white* people and of color people who (can) pass as *white* involve entirely different acts of suppression and should not be equated.

(all) *white* women are.” This is a luxury which – in a predominantly white context – is simply not afforded to Black actresses. In Thalheimer’s production, the male actor who portrays “Ella” is able to kill her husband on stage by biting him in the neck, afterwards standing triumphantly in front of the audience showing her blood-covered face, without reviving fantasies of “primitive white people” or “European cannibalism”. It is highly unlikely that a Black actor could do the same.

Whiteness is a seductive construct for those who identify as, or are considered to be, *white*. It allows a director to experiment with controversial and offensive images of “the other” and yet remain seemingly immune to any challenges that critics may have of this. It allows actors to ignore the social and political realities of asylum seekers and refugees, but still claim the competence to portray (their constructed version of) these very realities on stage. It allows an award-winning playwright to make assumptions about the homogeneity of her audience and not be held accountable when it is shown that she has gotten it very wrong. *Whiteness* permits serious acts of misrepresentation, while at the same time claiming innocence for the perpetrators. However, we should be clear: any work of art which attempts to make a commentary on the plight of those who exist only at the edge of a predominantly *white* society – those who do not “belong” – and chooses not to examine notions of *whiteness* is seriously flawed. *White* cultural producers who engage in the production of such art deserve to be challenged. The characters Fadoul and Elisio created by Loher, Thalheimer and the ensemble of Deutsches Theater have very little to do with actual illegalised people: they do not exist as subjects. They are conceived of as two-dimensional portrayals of “the other”. They are (ab)used in order that “we” can become and remain whatever it is that they are constructed as not being.

The work of modern German cultural producers is – or should be – for us all. A claim to universality must be able to incorporate the visions and perspectives of those who do not fit the constructed norms around gender, *race*, sexuality, illegalisation status and ability especially if the production claims to be precisely about those who do not fit these norms and especially if the ensemble claims to take the issues of these communities seriously. Without this there is either no “us” or – equally problematic – the “us” is incomplete.

Many thanks to Elisabeth Bokemeyer for her very helpful comments on earlier versions of this article.

Bibliography

R. Dyer, *White. Essays on Race and Culture*, London: Routledge, 1997.

J. Garvey and N. Ignatiev, "Toward a New Abolitionism. A *Race Traitor* Manifesto," in M. Hill (ed.), *Whiteness. A Critical Reader*, New York: New York University Press, 1997, pp. 346–9.

D. Loher, D., "Unschuld" *Theater heute*, vol. 44, no. 10, 2003, pp. 47–59.

S. Micossé-Aikins and S. D. Otoo, "Introduction," in S. Micossé-Aikins and S. D. Otoo (eds.), *The Little Book of Big Visions. How to be an Artist and Revolutionise the World*, Münster: Edition Assemblage, 2012, pp. 8–14.

S. D. Otoo, "Reclaiming Innocence. Unmasking Representations of Whiteness in German Theatre," in S. Micossé-Aikins and S. D. Otoo (eds.), *The Little Book of Big Visions. How to be an Artist and Revolutionise the World*. Münster: Edition Assemblage, pp. 54–70.

D. R. Roediger (ed.), *Black on White: Black Writers on What it Means to be White*, New York: Schocken Books, 1998 (for quote by Amoja Three Rivers).