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Publication Date

2024

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO

Becoming Juliet

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Theatre and Dance (Acting)

by

Colby Muhammad

Committee in charge:

Professor Ursula Meyer, Chair
Professor Marc Alexander Barricelli
Professor Stephen W Buescher
Professor Shahrokh D Yadegari

2024

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University of California San Diego

2024

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Becoming Juliet

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Colby Muhammad

Master of Fine Arts in Theatre and Dance (Acting)

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Professor Ursula Meyer, Chair

“How do I bring my full self into what I do?” This was the question I began asking myself at UCSD. I received the note from my movement professor, Stephen Buescher, “Your blackness is something to embrace and is, even, playable. Why do you not tap into that more often? Do you not feel comfortable doing that here?” Growing up in predominantly white schools, I learned code switching at an early age. It had not dawned on me that code switching

had manifested in my work. I only allowed my vernacular to show up in work that was specifically for people that looked like me.

In my final UCSD show, I was fortunate enough to play Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet*. Now, for a bit of context, my only Shakespeare experience prior to graduate school was a poorly done high school rendition of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. I played a fairy; I could not tell you which. Needless to say, I was terrified. I am thankful for the training I received from Marco Barricelli and Ursula Meyer. I found, however, that in the beginning I made acting choices based on how I thought Juliet should sound and act. What I found throughout was someone that looked, sounded, and acted much more like me.

Juliet is perceived as innocent and naïve, but is much smarter and more powerful than expected. She enjoys control and stability in her life and when she's not in control it gets a little messy. I am talking about Juliet remember? Not the actor that did not stop looking at her script between every scene until show #6. Definitely not talking about me. She is passionate and playful and, when I play Juliet, she is Black. She may roll her neck, pucker her lips, and flick her wrist to accentuate her words. Maybe she does code-switch when she is in mixed company or maybe she doesn't. I learned through this process that that is okay. In fact, it is great because who I am can also be who Juliet is. I can live in Shakespeare's canon, and I can bring all of me into every role I embody.

"You're going to do this." Marco Barricelli, my Shakespeare professor, once said to me. He meant Shakespeare, but what I took from that is that I can do this, I'm going to do this, and I can do it in my own way.