



**Charles S. Gilpin's *The Emperor Jones*:
Afrocentric Acting Approaches and Subversion in Performance**

By Elizabeth M. Cizmar

In 1920, Eugene O'Neill (1888–1953) insisted on casting a Black actor as Brutus Jones in *The Emperor Jones*. Rejecting the late nineteenth-/early twentieth-century practice of blackface minstrelsy, O'Neill aimed to bring more authenticity to the role through the mediation of a Black body. And so, through his groundbreaking performance, Charles Sidney Gilpin (1878–1930) became the first Black actor to achieve stardom in a nonmusical drama.¹ Gilpin's run of fifteen hundred performances began with mutual respect and admiration between playwright and leading man, praise from critics, and recognition from both the Drama League and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). His success can be attributed to a carefully crafted approach in portraying a problematic role that on the page perpetuates harmful stereotypes about Black male aggression. Charles Gilpin asserted his artistic agency in strategically reauthoring Brutus Jones and subverting stereotypical representation by humanizing the character crafted in O'Neill's imagination. Gilpin serves as a significant case study in Afrocentric acting methods in that he infused complexity and humanity into a skewed representation of Blackness penned by a white playwright.

¹ David Krasner, "Whose Role Is It Anyway? Charles Gilpin and the Harlem Renaissance," in *A Beautiful Pageant: African American Theatre, Drama, and Performance in the Harlem Renaissance, 1910–1927* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002): 190.

Known as one of Eugene O’Neill’s most experimental and political plays, *The Emperor Jones* is about Brutus Jones, a Pullman porter who kills a man in a dice game and is consequently deported to a nameless Caribbean island. The play implicitly critiques the United States’ occupation of Haiti in 1915, and many O’Neill enthusiasts view the play as a cautionary tale against imperialism and a criticism of US foreign policy.² Specifically, the internalized racism expressed by Brutus in the play through lines such as “down in their hearts, they are just the same happy, idle irresponsible people we know of,”³ are reminiscent of the sentiments of Littleton Waller (1856–1926), a career officer in the US Marine Corps who led the occupation. The play chronicles Brutus’s self-coronation as “Emperor Jones,” his attempt to escape, and the hallucinations he experiences as he makes his way through the jungle. Brutus dodges a rebel uprising by the island’s indigenous inhabitants who revolt against his imposition of heavy taxation and forced manual labor. Brutus refers to the Caribbean inhabitants as the n-word⁴ from the brush⁵ echoing Littleton Waller’s racist language, and eventually refers to himself in the same manner. The story reveals the protagonist’s unraveling mental state, told mostly through monologues as the play oscillates between realism and expressionism.

Charles Gilpin applied an Afrocentric acting approach to reclaim and reauthor Brutus Jones, subverting a character that, as written by O’Neill, reflects what Donald Bogle calls the Black Brute stereotype.⁶ Just five years before *The Emperor Jones*’s premiere, D. W. Griffith’s

² Shannon Steen, “Melancholy Bodies: Eugene O’Neill, Imperial Critique, and Irish American Assimilation,” in *Racial Geometries of the Black Atlantic, Asian Pacific and American Theatre*, eds. Janelle Reinelt and Brian Singleton (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010): 81.

³ Steen, “Melancholy Bodies,” 81.

⁴ Efforts to omit the “n-word” in this paper are echoing Gilpin’s own performance strategy in refusing to utter this slur.

⁵ Eugene O’Neill, “The Emperor Jones,” in *Anna Christie/The Emperor Jones/The Hairy Ape* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995): 10.

⁶ Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks* (New York: Continuum, 2001): 13.

The Birth of a Nation (1915) had concretized the image of the Black Brute, a seething savage raising havoc, in addition to a host of other stereotypes. According to Bogle's analysis, in these portrayals the Black Brute's physical violence serves as an outlet for his apparent sexual repression and uncontrollable rage. In *The Emperor Jones*, the protagonist's given name, Brutus, connects the character to the stereotype, and his mental instability and violent tendencies reflect qualities associated with the Black Brute. Gilpin's iconic performance protested this image by offering a more nuanced and humanizing portrayal of Brutus Jones.

Gilpin's Afrocentric approach, based on the principles of rhythm, language, and style, were part of a tradition within Black theatrical spaces including the New Pekin Theatre and the Williams and Walker duo. This tradition is part of what Monica White Ndounou refers to as "On-the-Job-Training (OJT)" in Black companies, which is defined as a method of actor training that occurs during the rehearsal of productions rather than in formal education or degree-granting programs.⁷ Gilpin was a company member of the Williams and Walker duo in 1905, and the New Pekin Theatre in 1907. Based on the OJT model, his residencies with both companies as well as his lived experience arguably informed his radical portrayal of Brutus Jones. Gilpin's sophisticated and subversive approach to playing such a challenging role reflects a jazz aesthetic, a framework rooted in Black culture that expresses "the fundamental principles underlying the Afro-American response to the enveloping white world."⁸ Although O'Neill authored *The Emperor Jones*, authorship of the character came to fruition through Gilpin's body. Gilpin's

⁷ Monica White Ndounou, "Being Black on Stage and Screen: Black Actor Training before Black Power and the Rise of Stanislavsky's System," in *The Routledge Companion to African American Theatre and Performance*, eds. Kathy A. Perkins, Sandra L. Richards, Renée Alexander Craft, and Thomas F. DeFrantz (New York: Routledge, 2019): 125.

⁸ William J. Harris, *The Poetry and Poetics of Amiri Baraka: The Jazz Aesthetic* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1985): 14.

interpretation and method modeled a strategy for African American actors navigating a white-dominated and discriminatory industry.

Gilpin's radical work in upending the stereotype as written by O'Neil and integrating Afrocentric cultural modes of expression in voice and body echo Sharrell D. Lockett and Tia M. Shaffer's framework in *Black Acting Methods: Critical Approaches*. Specifically, recasting Gilpin's approach as a "culturally specific contribution to performance pedagogy"⁹ resurrects his legacy in terms of theatre history but also in terms of a model for contemporary practitioners. Thus, I propose Gilpin as an acting theorist in practice which aligns with the aims of Lockett and Shaffer's work to "honor and rightfully identify Blacks as central co-creators of acting and directing theory by filling the perceived void of Black acting theorists."¹⁰ By engaging with Black historical figures in both academic spaces and rehearsal studios, scholars and practitioners will be able to identify the continuum of Black acting theorists and honor traditions rooted in Afrocentric modes of expression. Thus, as argued by Lockett and Shaffer, *Black Acting Methods* is central in the development of acting methodologies and theatre history.

Viewing Gilpin's subversive performance through the lens of Black acting theory and theatre history allows us to see the implications of his portrayal. By reauthoring his character, Gilpin offered a compelling example of how actors can implement strategic resistance and empower a marginalized group. Gilpin's career followed on the heels of the emergence of Black acting institutions, which began to form in the late nineteenth century, challenging what Ndounou identifies as "the idea that Black performers [were] 'natural actors,' lacking intellect and artistry."¹¹ Gilpin's acting approach and strategic resistance are aligned with Molefi Kete

⁹ Lockett and Shaffer, "Black Acting Methods," 1.

¹⁰ Lockett and Shaffer, "Black Acting Methods," 2.

¹¹ Ndounou, "Being Black on Stage and Screen," 125.

Asante's notion of Afrocentricity, a worldview that understands Black bodies as subjects rather than objects.¹² On the page, Brutus Jones is certainly viewed as an object, bringing to mind George Yancy's conception of Blackness in the "white imaginary": "The corporeal integrity of my Black Body undergoes an onslaught as the white imaginary which centuries of white hegemony have structured and shaped, ruminates over my dark flesh and vomits me out in a form not in accordance with how I see myself."¹³ In performance, through an Afrocentric approach, Gilpin reconciled this corporeal integrity and reauthored Brutus Jones, crafting a three-dimensional character and yielding a powerful portrayal that refuted the Black Brute stereotype while promoting the agency of the Black artist.

Gilpin and O'Neill's Tumultuous Relationship

Although Gilpin received accolades from audiences and critics early on, his success in the role was diminished as animosity and conflict grew between Gilpin and O'Neill. The dominant narrative explains this decline by charting Gilpin's increasingly erratic behavior, both on and off stage and fueled by liquor, and O'Neill and Gilpin's explosive arguments. As David Krasner articulates, "history has not been especially kind to Charles Gilpin, who is most often remembered as an actor who played a single role and who spent the last decade of his life in alcoholic despair."¹⁴ Eventually, as a result of his unpredictable performances and ever-changing character portrayal, Gilpin was fired.

Early in the play's run, critics acclaimed Gilpin's portrayal of the dictator in both Broadway and touring productions even while his performances led O'Neill and Gilpin to argue. Despite these disagreements, O'Neill was a staunch advocate for Gilpin during the play's initial

¹² Molefi Kete Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), xii-xiii.

¹³ George Yancy, "The Elevator Effect," in *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 19.

¹⁴ Krasner, 190.

run. For example, when the Drama League excluded Gilpin from the guest of honor list of its annual dinner, even though his portrayal of Brutus was a huge success with critics and audiences, the infuriated Irishman demanded an invitation for his leading man. The mutual admiration did not last long, however, given Gilpin's Afrocentric approach.¹⁵ According to biographers, O'Neill responded to Gilpin's assertion of authorship by saying, "If I ever catch you rewriting my lines again, you black bastard, I'm going to beat you up."¹⁶ Later, the relationship was further strained by Gilpin's refusal to acquiesce to O'Neill's perception of Brutus, a resistance that led to Gilpin's dismissal.

While O'Neill's depiction of Brutus falls short of a fully human, three-dimensional African American character, the play interrogates the institutions of US power in the 1910s. The playwright recognized the oppressive nature of an imperialistic society and exposed the danger of white power. Scholar Shannon Steen asserts, "While O'Neill used Brutus Jones to mock the way these Afro-Caribbean leaders visually coded their self-determination, he may well have appreciated the way this coding itself mocked white power, especially its visual trappings."¹⁷ Thus, the historical context of imperialism complicates and enriches the understanding of the controversial play. Conversely, many scholars and practitioners of the time, such as Alain Locke and contributors to *The Crisis* magazine, acknowledged that the play inaccurately represented Black identity. They did, however, recognize the importance of the production's casting. Poet and critic William Stanley Braithwaite asserted that despite O'Neill's good intentions, "the real tragedy of Negro life is a task still left for Negro writers to perform."¹⁸ Gilpin's performance of

¹⁵ John G. Monroe, "Charles Gilpin and the Drama League Controversy," *Black American Literature Forum* 16, no. 4 (Winter 1982): 140.

¹⁶ Krasner, 191.

¹⁷ Steen, 87.

¹⁸ Steen, 82.

Brutus Jones therefore not only offered him stardom but also created a model for using Afrocentric approaches to revise and reclaim problematic characters in performance.

An Afrocentric Acting Approach

Charles Gilpin's technique is part of the continuum of Afrocentric acting methods in the early twentieth century, and his practical intervention into acting theory as a means of resistance speaks to larger discussions regarding methods outside white Eurocentric traditions. While actor training in the mainstream has focused on white cultural traditions, Ndounou reminds us that "Various theatre studies and biographies reveal a rich history of Black actor training grounded in careful study of craft, cultural expression, artistry, history, and lived experiences."¹⁹ Formal Black acting methods began to develop in the early nineteenth century, most notably within the all-Black African Grove Theater founded by William Henry Brown (d. 1884).²⁰ While Konstantin Stanislavski (1863–1938) was creating his system in Russia in 1906, the New Pekin Theatre and the Williams and Walker duo were developing their own approaches in Black acting methods.

Early Black acting methods, including Charles Gilpin's portrayal of Brutus Jones, can be understood as an Afrocentric acting approach. Analyzed within an Afrocentric framework rather than a Eurocentric one, these techniques—and Gilpin's approach—can be seen as reflecting the history and culture of people of African descent. Much as there are a multiplicity of experiences and identities within Black culture, so too are there multiple Afrocentric approaches to acting. But there is also an overlap of experience among those who survived the Middle Passage and a shared culture that continues to thrive despite oppression and dehumanization.

¹⁹ Ndounou, "Being Black on Stage and Screen," 124.

²⁰ Errol Hill, *Shakespeare in Sable: A History of Black Shakespearean Actors* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1986).

Three aspects of Asante's Afrocentric framework for analyzing Black language and discourse speak particularly to Gilpin's approach to tackling and revising the Brutus Jones role: rhythm, style, and improvisation.²¹ In *The Afrocentric Idea*, Asante analyzes Malcolm X's and Martin Luther King Jr.'s rhetorical speeches and finds them exemplary in their application of rhythm, style, and improvisation. These three interconnected elements rely on one another for effective oratorical performance. Defining Asante's notions of Afrocentric rhythm, style, and improvisation according to acting theory is necessary to understanding Charles Gilpin's approach to character creation as a mode of strategic resistance and empowerment.

The success of Charles Gilpin's portrayal of Brutus Jones as well as his conflict with O'Neill²² in revising the problematic role are due to his mastery of rhythm, style, and improvisation. Rhythm relates to how well a speaker, or in this case an actor, can "regulate the flow of words," introducing "indentations," or pauses, to create an "intimate fellowship" with the audience.²³ Notably, Asante's conceptualization of rhythm echoes the interplay involved in call-and-response.²⁴ In a theatrical context, rhythm relates to how the actor maintains the audience's attention and creates tone, action, and meaning in the ephemeral relationship between actor and audience. The actor's manipulation of language and mannerisms in that transitory performative moment to favorably impact the audience is what Asante calls style.²⁵ Improvisation is therefore

²¹ Asante cites six elements from the work of Badi Foster and Vernon Dixon that constitute the Black referent: the value of humanism, value of communalism, attribute of oppression/paranoia, value of empathetic understanding, value of rhythm, and principle of limited reward. He adds a seventh element, the principle of styling.

²² Krasner, 191. Evidenced by letters and interviews, David Krasner charts the contentious relationship between O'Neill and Gilpin. As time progressed and Gilpin took more liberties with the script and his drinking increased, playwright and actor were at odds.

²³ Asante, *Afrocentric Idea*, 49.

²⁴ Call-and-response is a succession of two distinct phrases derived from sub-Saharan African cultures in which call and response is a dialogue in rituals and songs. The form developed into gospel music, which is most visible in the Baptist Church community today.

²⁵ Asante, *Afrocentric Idea*, 50.

at the heart of rhythm and style: the actor, even with a memorized script, must react in the moment and shift according to the relationship with the audience, adjusting tone, pauses, and other elements to yield a powerful performance. Combining rhythm, style, and improvisation is a sophisticated approach, especially when an actor performs the same role night after night in front of multiple audiences in venues across the country. Specifically, Gilpin privileged performance over text, refusing to utter racial slurs, and crafted the character to be “a credit to [his] race”²⁶ in order to “favorably impact the audience.” He upended the role by reauthoring the role from an Afrocentric perspective.

Asante uses jazz as a reference point for discussing improvisation, which, as shown below in the analysis of Gilpin’s shifting portrayal of Brutus Jones, is at the core of his efforts to subvert and protest stereotypes. The Harlem Renaissance gave birth to jazz in music, theatre, and literature; Gilpin’s revision of text mirrors the revision of Western scales to blues scales in jazz. Therefore, the aesthetics of jazz can be applied to musicians who subvert white musical forms as well as to actors who subvert plays written in the white imaginary. William H. Harris defines the jazz aesthetic as “a procedure that uses jazz variations as paradigms for the conversion of white poetic and social ideas into black ones.”²⁷ Harris cites John Coltrane’s *My Favorite Things*, which repeats the melody of the popular song from *The Sound of Music* and then inverts it to produce moments of harmony and dissonance. The transformation of the Western musical scale into a blues scale of “bent tones”²⁸ challenges a white Western musical form and creates a genre and aesthetic grounded in African American culture. The height of Gilpin’s career was this subversion of Brutus Jones and assertion of Black agency in performance. His early influences

²⁶ Krasner, 195.

²⁷ Harris, 13.

²⁸ Harris, 15.

with Williams and Walker and the New Pekin Theatre laid the groundwork for his highly developed method and activism in performance.

Gilpin's Training: Williams and Walker and the New Pekin Theatre

Long before joining the Williams and Walker minstrel duo in 1905, Charles Gilpin was a child performer, singing and dancing at local honky-tonks in Richmond, Virginia. As a young adult, after being driven out of his mechanic job at a white Philadelphia newspaper, he returned to performing. During this time, Gilpin was a chorus member of Williams and Walker's *Abyssinia* and a company member of the New Pekin Theatre; and in 1915 he was hired by Anita Bush to help establish Harlem's Lafayette Theatre.²⁹ He was then cast as the Reverend, a minor role, in John Drinkwater's *Abraham Lincoln* on Broadway in 1919. Of these experiences, his work with Williams and Walker and the New Pekin Theatre were the most significant for refining his craft. Williams and Walker provided Gilpin with a model for subverting stereotypes of Blackness and the New Pekin allowed the young actor to explore his range in the context of an all-Black company absent of the white gaze.

By the time Gilpin starred in *The Emperor Jones*, blackface minstrelsy had fallen out of vogue, but its remnants, in the form of stereotypes about Blackness, continued to dominate American consciousness. As Eric Lott has discussed, the nineteenth-century genesis of blackface minstrelsy in northern cities began as a money-making venture in which white men caricatured African Americans for sport. As a consequence, blackface entertainment became socially acceptable: "the minstrel show indeed seems a transparently racist curiosity, a form of leisure that inventing and ridiculing the slow-witted but irrepressible 'plantation darky' and the foppish

²⁹ Krasner, 193–94.

‘northern dandy negro,’ conventionally rationalized racial oppression.”³⁰ In Williams and Walker productions, Bert Williams (1874–1922), who performed in blackface, and George Walker (1872–1911), known for “storytelling, singing, dancing, face-making, beating the tambourine, and rattling the bones,”³¹ toured the minstrel circuit along with their company members and graced the Broadway stage. Yet Williams and Walker challenged the “darky” stereotype and established strategies “to revise, reinvent and eradicate the evolving ‘darky’ image by performing a formula for Broadway productions that incorporated black cultural sensibilities.”³² Williams and Walker studied white minstrels’ blackface performance and concluded that they lacked natural actions, resulting in dull performances. Hence, the duo’s reappropriation of minstrelsy developed into a sophisticated “approach to black representation.”³³ Williams and Walker established an innovative acting technique that enabled their success on the Great White Way while simultaneously instituting a company that nurtured and developed Black actors.³⁴

Fifteen years before debuting in O’Neill’s play, Gilpin joined Williams and Walker’s “incubator for black talent” as a chorus member in *Abyssinia* and honed his craft according to the OJT paradigm.³⁵ At this time, the incubator was “admittedly male-centered.”³⁶ Ndounou uses archival evidence from Williams and Walker to analyze their approaches to acting technique

³⁰ Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 15.

³¹ Monica White Ndounou, “Early Black Americans on Broadway,” in *The Cambridge Companion to African American Theatre*, ed. Harvey Young (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 63.

³² Ndounou, “Early Black Americans,” 63.

³³ Ndounou, “Early Black Americans,” 64.

³⁴ Ndounou, “Early Black Americans,” 65.

³⁵ Ndounou, “Early Black Americans,” 65.

³⁶ Ndounou, “Early Black Americans,” 65. Other performers noted to be part of this incubator include Will Marion Cook, Harry T. Burleigh, Bob Cole, Billy Johnson, Jesse A. Shipp, Will Accoo, and Paul Laurence Dunbar.

during *Abyssinia* as training grounds for Black performers involved in the production. Gilpin joined the company at this time as a chorus member, observing the performers and their subversion of white modes of entertainment. Williams and Walker portrayed the two protagonists of *Abyssinia*, Rastus Johnson and Jasmine Jenkins, respectively, who win a \$15,000 lottery and return to their homeland in Abyssinia (present-day Ethiopia). The duo appropriated minstrelsy both in content and form, altering language and intent and integrating “black cultural sensibilities.” The African characters also speak the King’s English and parody Western imperialism. In *Abyssinia* there was “a deliberate attempt to use languages as a technical device or situate the African in an elevated status, as opposed to degrading images of Africa and the American ‘darky.’”³⁷ Williams and Walker’s parody, subversion, and assertion of Black agency provided training for young, Black actors in the OJT model. From Williams and Walker, Gilpin learned how to craft a nuanced characterization of seemingly problematic figures. From a show business perspective, Gilpin also observed that the duo’s trajectory to the Broadway stage necessitated navigating the resources offered by white producers and writers.

With Williams and Walker, Gilpin studied the art of revision and character creation in musical comedy. At Chicago’s New Pekin Theatre, which he joined in 1907, he had the opportunity to explore a variety of other genres, although he had a predilection for drama. The theatre was established by Robert T. Mott, a saloon keeper and notorious gambler who converted his watering hole into a theatre after a 1906 fire, renovating the space to seat twelve hundred people.³⁸ With the appointment of J. Ed Green as the director of amusements in 1906, the New Pekin became the only all-Black theatre in America, with exclusively Black actors, writers,

³⁷ Ndounou, “Early Black Americans,” 70.

³⁸ Thomas Bauman, *The Pekin: The Rise and Fall of Chicago’s First Black-Owned Theater* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 41–43.

backstage laborers, and administrative staff. Gilpin was not the only crossover artist from Williams and Walker. Composers Jesse A. Shipp and Marion Cook also joined the up-and-coming theatre. Two years after Green was appointed director, “the stock company that he and Motts assembled accomplished a feat unparalleled in the history of the American theater: they wrote, set to music, produced, and performed twenty-six new full-length musical comedies” in a single year.³⁹ The scale of this feat is highlighted when compared with the fact that between 1890 and 1915, Black performers in New York staged only around thirty new productions.⁴⁰ In late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century theatrical productions, Black characters were typically comic ones.⁴¹ Yet at the New Pekin, Gilpin had the latitude to build upon the skills he learned with Williams and Walker and, with his fellow company members, grow his skillset in various genres.

At the beginning of Gilpin’s residency with the New Pekin Theatre, he was cast in minor roles; but he impressed castmates, audiences, and critics and quickly became one of the theatre’s standout actors, even receiving praise from notoriously harsh critic Sylvester Russell, who described Gilpin as “the best actor in the cast.”⁴² Much of the New Pekin’s success can be attributed to J. Ed Green’s leadership, casting, and efforts to foster young Black talent; aligned with the OJT model, Green provided opportunities for actors to learn from professionals and directly apply their training in performance. Given the context of the early twentieth century, it stands to reason that an all-Black company would be an OJT institution in that these actors developed their craft within an Afrocentric tradition. Scholar Thomas Bauman notes that Gilpin’s “career, more than any other, attests to the role the Pekin played under Green’s aegis as

³⁹ Bauman, 54.

⁴⁰ Bauman, 54.

⁴¹ Ndounou, “Early Black Americans,” 61.

⁴² Bauman, 56.

a training ground for young actors.”⁴³ At the New Pekin, artists like Gilpin were able to demonstrate their versatility by performing in vaudevillian acts, musicals, and dramas. It consequently became one of the most popular theatres in Chicago.

Though Gilpin performed in comedies and directed a musical while at the New Pekin, as he honed his craft he gravitated toward serious dramas. In 1912, the Pekin Players mounted Terrevous L. Douglas’s full-length drama *The Carib*, about a young West Indian in New York City searching for the man who “dethroned the chastity of his mother” and “robbed his father of fortune.”⁴⁴ The playwright portrayed the main role, and Gilpin was cast as both the son and the ruined husband. The reviews were tepid, but Gilpin was praised as the most compelling actor in the production, revealing the actor’s dramatic potential and capability.

In interviews, Gilpin discussed only the New Pekin Theatre’s serious works, which further suggests a desire to depart from vaudevillian comedies. Moreover, he focused on the theatre’s integrity and its efforts to showcase the range of talent and artistic depth among the all-Black company. Gilpin stated:

When the report got out that a company of colored people was producing regular plays, quite a good many white people thought it would be an amusing experience to visit the theatre. They expected to find it very funny—like going to a darky camp-meeting, or something of that sort. So they came to laugh. But they remained to applaud. We proved to them negroes *can* act. Even the critics admitted it.⁴⁵

Embedded in this quote from Gilpin is the collective we, in which he identifies as part of the community of the all-Black company. This collective we and the confidence he exudes suggests

⁴³ Bauman, 56.

⁴⁴ Bauman, 56.

⁴⁵ Bauman, 56.

a sense of company pride related to their Black identity. The OJT model at the New Pekin therefore provided space free of the white gaze and the experience of what W. E. B. Du Bois refers to as double consciousness:

this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of the others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of the world, that looks on in amused and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.⁴⁶

As “a training ground for young actors” the New Pekin provided this environment for Black actors, allowing them to expand their skills into other genres and access inner strength and community pride to assert artistic agency. This sense of pride would serve Gilpin well as he took on the role of Brutus Jones.

In the majority of interviews, Gilpin distanced himself from comedy and from vaudevillian acts, perhaps due to the problematic stereotypes of Black people that pervaded America as well as his desire to establish a serious Black artistic presence in the professional theatre. Although blackface minstrelsy and vaudeville acts had declined in popularity by the time he was cast in *The Emperor Jones*, the harmful stereotypes from those forms of entertainment persisted in popular culture. However, his tenure with the Williams and Walker team provided a model to challenge minstrel characters. These experiences of subverting Black characters in the white imaginary and forming an all-Black collective at the New Pekin, which promoted Black pride, prepared him for the strategic resistance and empowerment of African Americans in his portrayal of Brutus, and yet these were the very reasons he was dismissed.

⁴⁶ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 8.

Charles Gilpin's Authorship of Brutus Jones

Gilpin's fifteen hundred performances as Brutus Jones, based on an Afrocentric acting approach and his own ontological reality, directly challenged white perceptions of Black identity in the commercial theatre. In early twentieth-century mainstream theatre productions, Black characters were often played by white men in blackface. The problems of white dominance also characterized playwriting in the mainstream. O'Neill's adoption of the Black Brute stereotype who inflicts violence on his own race offers one example of how racist tropes were prevalent in white American theatre in the 1910s and 1920s.⁴⁷ However, O'Neill's insistent casting of Gilpin in the leading role is a significant departure from minstrel shows of the early twentieth century. Patricia Bradley asserts that *The Emperor Jones* introduced "the great American themes of guilt, rapacity, and memory by means of powerful theatricality in which the most ordinary of men, an American Pullman porter, became a tragic hero."⁴⁸ Gilpin tackled these themes within the play and challenged the Black Brute stereotype by applying an Afrocentric acting approach based in rhythm, language, and improvisation to ultimately reauthor the character of Brutus Jones through his performance.

Part of Gilpin's protest in performance resists the notion that Black communities are unable to self-govern. George Yancy's study of the ontological implications of Black corporeality demonstrates the underpinnings of such assumptions as they relate to a Black man in

⁴⁷ However, many scholars such as Shannon Steen and Cedric Robinson refer to the connection between the discrimination of Irish Americans in the mid-nineteenth century and the struggle of African Americans circa 1815. Specifically, Irish American's were classified in the same labor category as African Americans. Steen, "Melancholy Bodies," 69; Cedric Robinson, "Ventriloquizing Blackness: Eugene O'Neill and Irish-American Racial Performance," in *The Black and Green Atlantic: Cross-Currents of the African and Irish Diaspora*, eds. Peter D. O'Neill and David Lloyd (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 47–63.

⁴⁸ Patricia Bradley, *Making American Culture: A Social History 1900–1920* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 136.

power (Brutus Jones) and mental instability (his hallucinations). Yancy identifies the stigma placed on the Black body as the Other and how Black men can internalize hegemonic white hatred of the Black body. He argues that because of the everyday racism that Black men face beginning in childhood, the distortions of the white gaze eventually turn inward.⁴⁹ Hence, the Black male body becomes dehumanized and an apparent threat to both society and himself. Yancy's link between the Black body's dehumanization, the implied mental instability, and the apparent danger of the Black Brute resonates with the ideology implied in O'Neill's play, questioning the Black community's ability to self-govern.⁵⁰

The stigmas attached to the Black body by the white gaze are thus complex and socially charged. Yancy states, "The body is codified as this or that in terms of meanings that are sanctioned, scripted, and constituted through processes of negotiation that are embedded within and serve various ideological interests that are grounded within further power-laden social processes."⁵¹ Yancy effectively argues that the codified body is still relevant today, as is apparent when a woman clutches her purse a little harder as a Black man passes her on the street or, in its worst manifestation, when it leads to police brutality and its tragic outcomes. These everyday racisms prevalent in contemporary society emerge in part from the Black Brute stereotype and its perpetuation of the alleged primitivism of Black men. White colonizers and imperialists were fascinated by the symbolism of the Black Other and enriched by the economic gain from their labor. Fear accompanies confrontations with the Other and with fear comes the propensity to dominate and subjugate.

⁴⁹ George Yancy, "Whiteness and the Return of the Black Body," *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 19, no. 4 (2012): 216, doi:10.1353/jsp.2006.0008, 224.

⁵⁰ Bradley, 133.

⁵¹ Yancy, "Whiteness," 215.

Physically and mentally, and in his clothing and language, Brutus Jones manifests internalized white hatred. He is dressed in a military uniform, a parallel of Jamaican political activist Marcus Garvey, and embodies the white domination of the Other. Brutus becomes a repository of the white gaze's negative views of Blackness; he seals that fate when he murders a fellow Pullman porter and fulfills the stereotype of the violent Black man. On the island, Brutus's internalized white domination is expressed in his fascist rule of the indigenous population. Through O'Neill's story, the audience sees the psychological effect of this domination on Brutus's mind and body: "the body is a battlefield, one that is fought over again and again across particular historical moments and within particular social spaces."⁵² The enslavement of his own mind and body leads to delusions in which Brutus is confronted with his personal and cultural history. His enslavement and hallucinations intensify as he imagines and reenacts the selling of Africans during the slave trade. As Shannon Steen's analysis of Brutus's corporeal enslavement makes clear, the casting of a Black actor in this role is crucial because the Black body serves as a repository of Brutus's fears, including of Black bodies objectified on the slave block. O'Neill's casting of a Black actor in the lead role provides insight into the complexity of Gilpin's portrayal by which the racist attitudes written into the play are ricocheted back into the character's body. The character's devolution into the primitive Other is not only due to the loss of power but also symbolic of African Americans' "collective racial grieving."⁵³

Gilpin took ownership of the role most notoriously through the use of language, reflecting the jazz aesthetic by reclaiming a white form of speech, riffing off the story and language of a white playwright and converting "a white poetic and social ideas into black

⁵² Yancy, "Whiteness," 216–17.

⁵³ Steen, 75.

ones.”⁵⁴ One particularly poignant example is his response to the “n” word, which O’Neill perhaps used to show Brutus’s internalized racism and his disdain for the island’s inhabitants. The word appears repeatedly, and Brutus Jones says it twenty-five times. It would be challenging, at best, for a Black actor, performing just five decades after the Emancipation Proclamation, to portray a character who inflicts hatred on his own race. By refusing to utter this violent term and replacing the racial slur in performances with “black baby, Negro, or colored man,”⁵⁵ Gilpin strategically utilized his Afrocentric approach, altering language, and reauthoring the role of Brutus. In Afrocentric terms, Gilpin demonstrated a mastery of rhythm and style, altering the play’s language and making it more accessible to African American audiences.

The refusal to use this oppressive term is significant within the historical context as well as within standard Eurocentric approaches to theatre-making in which the playwright’s agency supersedes the actor’s contribution to the production process. By altering the white racist language, Gilpin engaged in an insurgent act of protest against the dehumanizing of African Americans in performance. Additionally, the “Black dialect” O’Neill employs in the text of the play was not a recognized dialect but a more generalized and nondescript language, mirroring the practice of late nineteenth-century minstrels who would lampoon what they imagined to be, based on stereotypes.⁵⁶ Scholar Joel Pfister’s analysis of O’Neill’s language recalls civil rights activist James Weldon Johnson’s observation of another Gilpin role as William Custis in John Drinkwater’s *Abraham Lincoln* (1919): “a dialect . . . such no American negro would ever use . . . a slightly darkened pidgin-English or the form of speech a big Indian chief would employ in

⁵⁴ Harris, 13.

⁵⁵ Krasner, 199.

⁵⁶ Mamrol, Nasrullah, “Critical Analysis of Eugene O’Neill’s *The Emperor Jones*,” *Literary Theory and Criticism*, September 28, 2020, <https://literariness.org/2020/09/28/critical-analysis-of-eugene-oneills-the-emperor-jones/>.

talking with the Great White Father at Washington.”⁵⁷ As time progressed, Gilpin incorporated more textual edits and spontaneity into his performances, continuing to resist the problematic character written on the page. O’Neill was less than thrilled with the actor’s liberties with the script; however, by altering the play’s language, Gilpin connected with the audience, and by adjusting the intent of O’Neill’s text in performance, he humanized a stereotyped character, a revolutionary act in the 1920s.

Altering language and bringing an improvisatory approach to character portrayal both recall an Afrocentric theatrical tradition of privileging performance over text.⁵⁸ Eurocentric narratives and literature have historically prioritized the written word. David Krasner asserts that “Gilpin may have been said to have endowed his performance with elements of oral tradition, reflecting not only the blues and signifyin(g), but also a trope that marked a sense distinct from the rest of the cast.”⁵⁹ The Afrocentric notion of improvisation further connects to what Henry Louis Gates Jr. refers to as “speakerly text”:

The speakerly text is that text in which all other structural elements seem to be devalued, as important as they remain to the telling of the tale, because the narrative strategy signals attention to its own importance, an importance which would seem to be privileging oral speech and its inherent linguistic features.⁶⁰

Gilpin’s performances, changing from night to night with each performance, can be considered speakerly text—as text became speech, it took on new meaning. These variations within speakerly text relate to rhythm (flow of words, pauses, and indentations), and the shifts in

⁵⁷ Joel Pfister, *Staging Depth: Eugene O’Neill and the Politics of Psychological Discourse* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 132–33.

⁵⁸ Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), xxiv.

⁵⁹ Gates, 202.

⁶⁰ Gates, 195.

Gilpin's onstage mannerisms relate to style, all integrated to establish a heightened connection with the audience. Through his Afrocentric approach, Gilpin successfully reauthored a character created within a white man's imagination; Gilpin believed he was well suited to interpret the character and did so, altering the language to challenge O'Neill's representation.

As time progressed, O'Neill grew increasingly agitated with Gilpin's improvising, but Gilpin continued to assert his artistic autonomy in front of live audiences. At the New Pekin, Gilpin aimed to fine-tune his dramatic skills in more serious pieces surrounded by Black artists and Afrocentric sensibilities. "Gilpin had become the poster child for the Pekin as a conservatory that prepared talented blacks for subsequent careers in theater and film, mainly owing to his having created the title role of Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* in New York in 1920."⁶¹ The improvisational aspect of Gilpin's method emphasized what Krasner calls the "African American theatrical orality and stylistic musicality."⁶² Critics at the time, such as Maida Castellum from the *New York Call*, praised Gilpin's portrayal, pointing to aspects of Afrocentric acting, this "theatrical orality and stylistic musicality": "The acting of the main part by Charles S. Gilpin is an extraordinary achievement. The rich and varied tones of a voice that changed from arrogance to whining, contrition, the variety and power of his performance are amazing."⁶³ The word "contrition" is rarely used in reference to the character of Brutus Jones because he is rarely understood as a sympathetic character. He murdered a fellow Pullman porter, used violent language toward the other Black inhabitants of the island, and hallucinated delusions of grandeur. But through a deliberate and finely honed Afrocentric acting technique, Gilpin was

⁶¹ Bauman, 56.

⁶² Krasner, 202.

⁶³ Maida Castellum, "O'Neill's 'The Emperor Jones' Thrills and Fascinates," *New York Call*, November 10, 1920, 1.

able to interpret and portray the complexity of Brutus Jones from his perspective as a Black man living in America.

Black institutions initially accepted that Gilpin's portrayal represented progress in their efforts to increase the presence of African American actors in mainstream theatre, though initial praise for the play was followed by critiques. In 1920, W. E. B. Du Bois stated in *The Crisis* that *The Emperor Jones* was "a splendid tragedy,"⁶⁴ and, in 1921, the NAACP awarded Gilpin the Spingarn Medal. As Gilpin continued to perform the role and gain notoriety, Black commentators shifted to a racial critique of O'Neill's work. In 1926, Du Bois commented in *The Crisis* that African American characters are "still handicapped and put forth with much hesitation," citing *The Emperor Jones* among other examples." Gilpin responded to such assertions:

I tell my friends who protest against Brutus Jones that stage characters are mere stage characters. You take them as you find them. I ask them to consider that the worthy presentation of a character by a negro actor is a credit to our race, even though the character itself is unworthy.⁶⁵

Gilpin understood the difficulty of taking on such a controversial role. His revision of language and improvisation were thus part of an Afrocentric performance aesthetic, "a credit to [his] race."

Charles Gilpin was known to have a destructive relationship with alcohol and his erratic performances have been attributed to this. The scrutiny by O'Neill, his community, and the public exacerbated his alcohol addiction, which did inevitably destroy his spirit. However, the textual edits and spontaneity in performance may not have been fueled by liquor. Instead, Gilpin was motivated by the desire to represent a tragic Black character with his Black body and

⁶⁴ Krasner, 196.

⁶⁵ Krasner, 195.

Afrocentric worldview. Much like Williams and Walker, Gilpin deliberately integrated Black cultural modes to create his character while subverting O'Neill's depiction. In doing so, he employed a jazz aesthetic, converting a white artistic form into a Black one. The powerful nature of Gilpin's authorship was rooted in the ontological reality of living in a Black body, and he achieved artistic acumen through his subversion of the white gaze.

On the page, Brutus Jones fulfills the Black Brute stereotype, inflicting hatred on his own race, spiraling into a web of delusions, and devolving into savage violence; a descent that culminates in his death. The play's representation of Blackness disseminated negative stereotypes and employed racist language, presumably making it a challenging role for an African American actor to play. As one of the early Black Americans on the commercial stage of a primarily white creative and production team, Gilpin deliberately reauthored the role of Brutus Jones to promote Black pride and upend the Black Brute stereotype.

In both his acting technique and his socio-political intervention, Gilpin's strategic implementation of rhythm, style, and improvisation embodied the jazz aesthetic. William J. Harris outlines five identifying components of jazz that echo Gilpin's performance aesthetic: an emphasis on rhythm, digressing the Western scale into the blues scale, the notion of revision and spontaneity, the parodic model, and the "particular American radical situation to which the parody is responding."⁶⁶ The "particular radical situation" points to the everyday and systematic racism found in all facets of American life. By engaging the jazz aesthetic and bringing "preexisting themes into a new idiom,"⁶⁷ Gilpin's authorship of Brutus Jones and revision of O'Neill's character can be understood not as an isolated act of subversion in performance, but as the embodiment of a radical Black American aesthetic to resist and reinvent.

⁶⁶ Harris, 15.

⁶⁷ Krasner, 195.

Conclusion

As a performer in *The Emperor Jones*, Charles Gilpin was presented with a character that reflected the Black Brute, a stereotype perpetuated by the entertainment industry across white America. His acting technique reflect Luckett and Shaffer's definition of "Black Acting Methods:" "an African centripetal paradigm where Black theory and modes of expression are the nucleus that informs how one interacts with various texts, literary and embodied, and how one interprets and (re)presents imaginary circumstances."⁶⁸ His residencies with Williams and Walker and the New Pekin and the OJT model he learned there provided a foundation in strategic resistance and collective empowerment. His Afrocentric approach in taking on Brutus Jones simultaneously offered a site of social resistance as well as a portrayal that aimed to empower and uplift his community. This nuanced portrayal of a profoundly damaging stereotype further embodied the jazz aesthetic, which, in the musical genre, protests white dominant modes of expression and reflects "Black cultural sensibilities" by converting Eurocentric scales into blues scales. Through his application of rhythm, style, and improvisation, Gilpin impressed audiences and critics alike while transforming O'Neill's Brutus Jones into a fully dimensional human being.

Gilpin developed his mastery of rhythm, style, and improvisation through his experiences and training with Williams and Walker and with the New Pekin Theatre. Williams and Walker's innovative minstrel act, which challenged the "darky" image and put forth an alternative approach to Black representation in the theatre, provided Gilpin with a strategy to assert artistic agency in authoring Brutus Jones. Although casting Gilpin meant the role did not require blackface, the character itself reflected a stereotypical understanding of Black males as

⁶⁸ Luckett and Shaffer, "Black Acting Methods," 2.

aggressive, mentally deficient, and animalistic. At the New Pekin Theatre, J. Ed Green's conception of an all-Black company afforded Gilpin the opportunity to be immersed in serious dramatic works with other Black artists. Working in an all-Black theatre, absent of white producers, writers, or directors asking Black actors to perform caricatured representations of African American stereotypes, may have offered Gilpin the opportunity to develop his artistic autonomy. These experiences helped Gilpin successfully tackle *The Emperor Jones*, humanizing Brutus Jones, challenging the white-dominated industry, and ultimately creating a provocative, political, and radical piece of theatre.

The work of early twentieth-century African American actors such as Charles Gilpin exemplify the use of a sophisticated and deliberate Afrocentric acting approach in which Black artists subvert Black characters created in the white imaginary. By being the first African American to star in a white playwright's mainstream nonmusical production and employing an Afrocentric acting technique to develop a character that challenged mainstream theatre and received accolades from critics and audiences alike, Gilpin created a pathway for future generations of Black artists. As a case study, Gilpin's portrayal of Brutus Jones provides practitioners and scholars with the vocabulary to rethink, through an Afrocentric lens, dominant historical narratives about performers' language, ephemerality, and artistic agency. By tracing Gilpin's training with Williams and Walker and the New Pekin Theatre, practitioners and scholars can uncover a rich history of actor training rooted in Black cultural traditions. As a significant figure in theatre history, Gilpin provides an important model for how artists can infuse performances with their own cultural sensibilities and make acting a site of strategic resistance.

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