



Senior Adrienne Embry looks off into the back of the theater in her role as Fortinbras during the final seconds of a performance of this season's "Hamlet." Embry is a founding member of the group BBBTT, or Black Brown & Beige Theater Troupe, whose goal is to promote the inclusion of people of color in the IU theater department.

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The prom would be perfect, the protesters decided.

Their audience would be there: the majority of faculty and students from the IU's Department of Theatre, Drama, and Contemporary Dance would be in attendance at the 2018 Drama Prom, the annual end-of-year departmental scholarship award banquet in the Tudor Room of the Indiana Memorial Union.

Everyone would have to listen.

In the middle of one of the student actors backed out during practice. It was too risky especially when the protest would be aimed at the people controlling casting.

Before the awards ceremony, two of them pretended to be emcees and walked to the podium to begin while the rest waited in their seats in the audience, waiting for their cue. A false introduction later, the seated protesters started to speak out from their seats.

"I support the right of every student to an equal education," one said as they stood.

"I know we can do better," another said as she rose. "Because every community can do better."

As they stood, they walked toward the podium. They continued: "I experience discrimination."

"Men in this department have always tried to control my body."

"I don't see myself onstage."

Words and spoken-word poetry snuck out, some came from some audience members, but many simply stared as they continued.

Some laughed.

"This is our house, our shared house," actress and black woman Adrienne Embry said in the piece. "And what happens to each of us in our house happens to us all."

The protest's model came out of a movement in Chicago theater called "Not Our House," which was created to address sexual harassment and abuse in the industry. The IU version was called "Not in Our Haus," a reference to one of the season's productions, and was expanded to include more student concerns — race chief among them.

Some students in IU's department say the department has mismanaged issues of race and gender and deprived them of equal educational opportunities. They are pushing toward a more progressive approach through casting, production details and independent student projects is trying to correct that.

IU Theatre's selected shows tend to be ones that traditionally let white men act shine, such as this season's "Hamlet" or other Shakespeare productions, or 2017's "Peter and the Starcatcher," which featured 17 roles for men and only one role for a woman.

Students, of course, have had limited options for meaningful stage roles, frequently cast as ensemble members or roles with few lines. Plays with more than one person of color, such as last fall's "Barbecue," give students the opportunity to tell stories not focused on the white experience. But they're outnumbered by more traditional choices, such as



The costumes of an ensemble member; Queen Gertrude and King Claudius, designed by Justin Gannaway, stand in the costume design studio in the IU theater building.



The cast of "Hamlet" stands on stage Dec. 3 during the first act. Director Jonathan Michaelson cast more women than men for this production of "Hamlet."

this fall's production of "Hamlet."

Considerations for the play seem to be the size of the cast, the size of the theater and the needs of actors in the graduate program. IU's productions are chosen through a committee composed of faculty members and two students from the department's Student Advisory Board, who consider proposed plays and eventually carve the list down to the season's shows.

These considerations, some students say, have left them behind.

"I came here completely blindsided," Embry, a senior, said. "I didn't know I was going to be a token."

Room A200 of the Lee Norvelle Theatre and Drama Center looks more like a high school gym than a Danish castle, with its wooden panel floors, tape demarcations of marks and imaginary coffins.

When "Hamlet" finally makes its debut at the Lee Norvelle through N. Hulls Theatre in December, the set is complex and evokes the disjointed mood that director Jonathan Michaelson is aiming for. But for rehearsals, a rectangle of four tables with mismatched chairs was enough to be the Danish royal castle, Elsinore.

While the original play only has two women characters, this production's cast has more women than men. For the purpose of this production, originally, all female roles have been gender-swapped to fit the actors, such as M.E.A. actor Glynnis Kunkel-Ruiz playing Horatio and associate professor Nancy Lipschultz playing Polonius.

Another gender-swapped character is Norwegian crown prince Fortinbras, who appears after the Danes have all met their end by way

of stabbing or poison or poisoned stabbing.

Having over most of the play a threat of a foreign conqueror that becomes a reality by the end of the story when there's not much left to conquer. It's not a big role and in some productions, the character is omitted for the sake of a shorter run time.

In IU Theatre's production, Embry will play the traditionally white male role.

Fortinbras is a trained soldier, and she's ready as," Michaelson said to the cast while discussing some of the gender changes in the show before the first rehearsal.

As the production's cast goes around the table to introduce themselves, she is the only black person in the room. The production's only other black actor, Kenny Arnold, wasn't at the first rehearsal. Arnold is playing the priest and the ghost of Hamlet's murdered father, appearing only as a voice over and a lighting effect for the latter. Like most of the other roles have limited lines in the play.

Most of the lines in the play go to Hamlet himself, played by M.E.A. actor Michael Bayler. A baseball cap covers his blond hair during most of the first rehearsal as Bayler's voice fills the room for hours.

Embry crossed her arms and rested her head on them as Hamlet and Horatio spoke to the ghost of the murdered king, waiting for her turn.

Fortinbras is a Scandinavian prince and military leader originally written for a 400-year-old play based on a medieval legend. Embry is a 22-year-old black woman who grew up in an Indianapolis area so surrounded

by gun violence it inspired her to write a play she's hoping to stage next semester as an independent project, which has the working title "Not in Our Haus."

At first, she had no idea how she was going to relate to the role. It takes time to get to a point of connection with your character, and with some it just doesn't happen.

Her first role in IU Theatre was in the play "Nice Nails," which was written by one of the then-playwriting graduate students. Embry played an African immigrant named Nomfundo who worked in a nail salon.

The character's recurring joke was that she didn't know how underpaid she was. At one point in the show, she asks: "Minimum wage? What is... minimum wage?" Embry just felt stupid in the role. She describes roles like that as feeling like someone else's skin is stretched over her face instead of settling into the character.

She originally auditioned to play Gertrude or Ophelia, but Michaelson, who directed the play, Fortinbras instead — a daunting task for her to sink into a role so unlike herself. She watched three different "Hamlet" productions to see how other actors embodied Fortinbras: all three were white men who leaned into the authoritative nature of the role.

Playing Fortinbras didn't really click for her until one day before rehearsal. She was listening to Houston rapper Megan Thee Stallion, known for songs such as "Savage," "On Freak" and for coining this past summer's social media dominating catchphrase "Hot Girl Summer."

Megan is all confidence and precision in her songs, with a mix of attitude and structure that has catapulted her to an up-and-coming class of musicians in a genre famously inhospitable to most women artists.

In "Freak Nasty," the song Embry was listening to while driving to rehearsal, Megan raps: "And I walk and talk like a pimp, 'cause I am."

Then, it clicked in Embry's head: If Fortinbras was a female rapper in 2019, she would be Megan Thee Stallion.

Now, she sees Fortinbras being portrayed by a black woman as fitting.

"If that is not the world...how I view black women, we're strong," she said. "We carry shit."

In a side room on the second floor of the theater building, those working in the Costume Shop for "Hamlet" are tasked with a big job: making the production accessible to modern audiences.

Costumes in theater are more than just clothes, they're intensely purposeful choices. In large theaters, when individual facial expressions can be difficult to see in detail, costumes do a lot of the work of shaping how characters are perceived.

"Hamlet" was originally written sometime between 1599 and 1602, but costume designer Justin Gannaway, who is designing the

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Excerpts from the Not in Our Haus protest

Each line was spoken by a different one of the actors, with some lines being said by multiple actors or the whole cast for effect.

"I am Indiana University's Department of Theater, Drama and Contemporary Dance."

"I love my department."

"This is our home."

"This is our house, our shared house, and what happens to each of us in our house happens to us all."

"I support the right of every student to an equal education."

"I want to strive for excellence so that every student can succeed."

"I know we can do better, because every community can always do better."

"Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

"I experience discrimination."

"I feel my experience in life is not equal to that of other people."

"I feel my experience in this department is not equal to that of other people."

"Experience microaggressions, not only outside the department but within it."

"Not only within the department but outside it."