

## Brian Eugenio Herrera

### MY ACTOR ALIBI

I study the history of actors, emphasizing the historical conditions of their working and creative lives amid the ever shifting cultural and performance conventions guiding which bodies are privileged in the telling of which stories. My research expeditions have routinely prompted me to follow a given actor from the stage, often to screens large and small and, just as frequently, to the ostensibly nontheatrical realms of politics, community organizing, or education. Sometimes these actors return to the theatrical stage, but not always. But I go where actors go, no matter the industry, enterprise, or discipline. If they're an actor, and they're up to something, I'm interested. That's what I call my actor alibi.

I started using my actor alibi while dissertating as this century turned. It was a historical moment when questions of mediation troubled the ontological partitions that had defined the emergence of performance studies (and, to an only slightly lesser extent, theatre studies) as an interdiscipline. My habit of following actors as they stepped beyond the theatre compelled any number of interlocutors—academic advisers, peer reviewers, job committees, conference commentators—to ask: “but if it's film (or television, or animation, or video), is it truly performance?” In such instances, I found that my actor alibi provided a handy “get out of methodological jail free” card.

My actor alibi proved additionally useful, as an interdisciplinary license of sorts, when I set out to evince the scholarly trace left by the actors I was tracking. I quickly discerned that the industrial boundaries separating film, theatre, and television also tacitly structured the disciplinary apparatuses undergirding film, theatre, and media studies. My actor alibi nagged: How might performance history develop the methodological and theoretical tools necessary to apprehend performance more fully as a constellation of practices that moves, often surprisingly, across and among disparate sites, media, traditions, and platforms?

This question became an imperative as I undertook to chart the life and work of an actor you might not know that you know: Juano Hernandez.

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Juano Hernandez—who would become one of the most ubiquitous black actors in serious genre films of the 1950s and 1960s—was born in the very late 1890s in Puerto Rico. After a childhood spent shuffling between relatives in San Juan and Sao Paolo, Hernandez entered his teen years an already experienced busker and supported himself by performing tricks with a carnival that toured throughout Central America, the Caribbean, and the US Gulf Coast. By 1915, Hernandez was finding regular work in New Orleans, appearing variously on the vaudeville, minstrel, and prizefighting circuits. By the mid-1920s, having taught himself (with the aid of correspondence courses) to speak unaccented English through the memorization of Shakespeare, Hernandez's trouping introduced him to the independent African American arts scenes in both New York and Chicago. There, he worked, respectively, with the Provincetown Players and with Oscar Micheaux, while also appearing in the original Broadway production of *Showboat*. By the 1930s, Hernandez's vocal dexterity led to regular radio work—most notably, as the title character in *John Henry Black River Giant*, the first nationally broadcast radio serial to feature an African American hero. On radio, Hernandez voiced a diversity of roles across an array of genres, while also regularly appearing on the legitimate stage and occasionally touring his "One Man Othello" (presented, depending on the venue, in English, Spanish, and/or "Harlemese"). His role in the 1949 film *Intruder in the Dust* launched Hernandez into two decades regular film and television work, during which he also served as founding director for the theatre program at the University of Puerto Rico. As the 1960s began, Hernandez also opened what might well be the first bilingual professional actor-training program in the United States (the short-lived Lyceum of Dramatic Art in Los Angeles). By the time of his death in 1970, Juano Hernandez had worked, for the entirety of the twentieth century, in nearly every segment of the burgeoning entertainment economy—stage, screen, circus, radio, TV, vaudeville, and concert stage, as well as in both the academic and for-profit training sector.

Juano Hernandez was pretty much everywhere in twentieth-century popular performance. Yet, when I started to write about his career, it was as if he had fallen between the historical cracks. Hernandez's relative absence in the scholarly record struck me as both astonishing and appalling. My experience using my actor alibi, however, suggested that the scholarly elision of Hernandez's story might be as typical as it is extraordinary. A similar fate awaits many an actor, especially those who happen to be minority, women, and/or queer; those laboring across media without the benefit of star billing and without self-sustaining fan networks; and those whose careers were rerouted by scandals (whether sexual or legal) or scares (whether red or lavender). Even so, my actor alibi had convinced me of the potential scholarly significance of actors like Juano Hernandez, whose work might never have reached an especially artistic pinnacle and whose lives may or may not sustain a biographer's excavation. Such lives, perhaps uniquely, reveal the complicated snarl of otherwise invisible interstitial networks, structures, and routes that chart how popular performance actually manifests and circulates, particularly in periods of industrial transition.

As the twentieth-century industries that disciplined the formation of theatre, film, and media studies acceded to shifting twenty-first-century models of

production, distribution, and presentation, performance historians might seize the opportunity to develop our own holistic (or “multiplatform” or “convergent”) scholarly methods that aptly engage not only “transmedial” accounts of contemporary performance but also those embedded in the past, those hidden in plain sight—like Juano Hernandez—in the vast archive of twentieth-century popular performance. We should aspire to be as methodologically nimble as those we purport to study. So, please, adopt my actor alibi or—better yet—adapt it to your own purposes. Deploy it as a methodological get-out-of-jail-free card, as an interdisciplinary license, or as a theoretical imperative. But use it. Our field needs the stories that such an alibi reveals.