

Oppose the right-wing, racist attack on composer Bright Sheng at University of Michigan

International Youth and Students for Social Equality at the University of Michigan
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The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) at the University of Michigan denounces the racist smear campaign against renowned composer, conductor and pianist Bright Sheng. The claim by a group of students and faculty that he committed a “racist act” by screening a film version of *Othello* with Laurence Olivier is as badly informed as it is false. All serious and democratic-minded students should refuse to be intimidated and come to Sheng’s defense.

On Friday, David Gier, the dean of the University of Michigan School of Music, Theatre & Dance (SMTD), announced that Sheng would stop teaching his undergraduate music composition course this semester but remain on faculty. The decision came a month after Sheng screened for the class the 1965 film adaptation of William Shakespeare’s *Othello*, directed by longtime theater and television personality Stuart Burge and featuring the great Shakespearean actor Laurence Olivier playing Othello with black make-up.

Sheng, the Chinese-born Leonard Bernstein Distinguished University Professor of Composition, is a world-class composer, who has been teaching at the University of Michigan since 1995. He was a Pulitzer Prize finalist and was given a MacArthur “genius” fellowship in 2001. The Foundation described him as “an innovative composer whose skillful orchestrations bridge East and West, lyrical and dissonant styles, and historical and contemporary themes to create compositions that resonate with audiences around the world.”

The “crime” for which Sheng has been forced out of teaching the class has only been made possible by the whipping up of racist frenzy on the university campuses and in the media. No honest or fair-minded individual could find anything remotely offensive about Olivier’s performance or the film as a whole.

Sheng was “turned in,” according to the *Michigan Daily*, by one of his freshman students, Olivia Cook, who took note that Olivier was playing Othello in black make-up. “I was stunned,” Cook said. “In such a school that preaches diversity and making sure that they understand the history of POC (people of color) in America, I was shocked that (Sheng) would show something like this in something that’s supposed to be a safe space.”

Cook, who evidently knows nothing about the play, its history, or Olivier’s career and intentions in his 1965 performance, has thus far been fully supported by the university in the baseless

claim that Sheng’s showing of the film and the film itself were “racist.”

After the September 10 class and the subsequent manipulated uproar, Sheng issued an apology to the students and canceled a planned *Othello* project for the course. According to the report, SMTD Dean Gier and several faculty members rushed to accept the claim that Sheng’s showing of the film was a “racist act.”

In a statement to the *Michigan Daily*, composition Professor Evan Chambers—who is replacing Sheng in the course—wrote, “To show the film now, especially without substantial framing, content advisory and a focus on its inherent racism is in itself a racist act, regardless of the professor’s intentions.” Chambers presents absolutely no evidence to support such an outrageous claim. The public is apparently simply expected to take his word for it. Gier reported the “incident” to the university’s Office of Equity, Civil Rights, and Title IX.

Sheng then issued a formal department-wide apology on September 16. The letter conveyed his opposition to racism and pointed to his many collaborations with artists of different races, genders and ethnicities to demonstrate that he “never considered myself discriminative in any way.”

The formal apology was then seized upon by a group of SMTD graduate and undergraduate students and several faculty members, as supposedly “inflammatory” for “implying” that Sheng was “responsible” for the “success” of the artists noted in his letter. The collective issued this denunciation in a letter to the dean, demanding that Sheng be removed from his position for the rest of the semester, because he had created a “harmful environment.”

After the open letter was issued last week, however, Sheng removed himself from instructing the course at Gier’s urging.

The whole incident is foul and shameful. For all the hand-wringing about students “needing context” and “trigger-warnings” about the play, there is virtually no discussion of the actual work or film adaptation.

Othello, likely first performed in 1603, is one of the masterworks of the English-language theatrical canon. The title character is a Moorish general in the Venetian army who has secretly married Desdemona, the daughter of a leading senator, Brabantio. The latter first accuses Othello of using magic and witchcraft to carry off his daughter, until Desdemona appears and reveals her great love for her new husband. Iago, an ensign in the same military,

hates Othello and plots successfully to make him jealous of his bride. The stoic general of the first half of the play gradually succumbs to Iago's maneuvers in the second half, and the tragedy culminates in Othello's murder of Desdemona in a fit of blind, jealous rage. Othello is a deeply sympathetic, tragic figure, undone by the Machiavellian Iago.

The play has been performed countless times over four centuries in every corner of the globe and adapted in many forms, including opera, most notably by Italian composer Giuseppe Verdi in 1887.

There are several film versions, including a legendary 1951 effort directed by and starring Orson Welles (with Irish actor Micheál MacLiammóir as Iago), a 1981 version with Anthony Hopkins (Othello) and Bob Hoskins (Iago)—directed by Jonathan Miller—and a 1995 adaptation (Oliver Parker), featuring Laurence Fishburne as Othello and Kenneth Branagh as Iago.

The 1965 Burge-Olivier version is a faithful and important interpretation. Though the *Michigan Daily* reported that the film was “controversial at the time,” it was in fact strongly praised in many quarters. All the lead actors in the film were nominated for Academy Awards, including Frank Finlay (Iago), Maggie Smith (Desdemona), Joyce Redman (Emilia) and Olivier.

Othello, “the Moor of Venice,” is commonly understood to be of North African origin, from the region of present-day Morocco. It was highly uncommon for Moors to be featured in plays of the time (Shakespeare included the villainous Aaron the Moor in his *Titus Andronicus*), and numerous critics contend that Shakespeare consciously introduced race as one of the sources of tension in the play, most obviously between Desdemona's father and Othello, as well as one of the motives driving Iago.

The Soviet critic Aleksandr Smirnov made a strong case that Shakespeare demonstrates his humanism in *Othello*, writing that “Desdemona loves Othello despite his race and color. In their tragic passion, the racial problem as such does not exist, nor does it influence the Doge's [the Venetian ruler] attitude towards Othello. Shakespeare solves the race problem in a more radical fashion than in *The Merchant of Venice*. In the latter, only one monologue, which is not even an integral part of the play, treats the problem whereas in *Othello*, the theme is treated in full. Othello is a thorough representative of the new age.”

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The denunciation of Olivier's performance, which he had previously given on the British stage, is particularly reactionary in that the actor was attempting to take on the timid, semi-racist approaches to the Othello character that had prevailed for a century and a half.

In representing Othello as black, as an African, Olivier was rebuffing various commentators appalled at the thought of the white maiden Desdemona falling head over heels in love with a black man. As Elise Marks commented in a 2001 essay, “Olivier was one of the first light-skinned actors to play Othello in black makeup since 1814. ... In his autobiography, Olivier boasts that his black Othello was more genuine, more daring, more forceful than the ‘pale’—he might almost have said ‘diluted’—Othellos of his immediate predecessors.” Indeed, Olivier goes on to explain in that memoir that the dominant “coffee-colored compromise” had

arisen “out of some feeling that the Moor could not be thought a truly noble Moor if he was too black and in too great contrast to the noble whites: a shocking case of pure snobbery.”

Laura Reitz-Wilson, in “Race and Othello on Film,” points out that the “1965 Othello is more revolutionary than the previous two [versions], bringing the issue of race to the forefront. Laurence Olivier plays a very black Othello. Most of the racial language in the play is included. Even small references, those of Emilia and Desdemona, are not cut. Othello's references to his race are kept as well and are interpreted, by Olivier, as Shakespeare intended them.”

Any suggestion that there is a hint of racism about Olivier's performance is preposterous. The actor takes pains to bestow his character with the greatest possible dignity and humanity. The *Michigan Daily* wrote that in a letter sent to the *Daily Sheng* explained “that the original intent was to show how the opera composer Giuseppe Verdi had adapted Shakespeare's play into an opera. Since cross-casting was frequent in opera, he did not think Laurence Olivier's performance was ‘intended to be the same as the minstrel performances which did degrade African Americans.’”

Moreover, whether it is fully intended or not, Olivier is also paying tribute to the performances of the great African American actor and singer and Communist Party supporter Paul Robeson, who played Othello on numerous occasions. In a 1956 interview, Robeson described Othello as “a black man in a white society,” which goes some distance toward explaining the character's desperate reactions to Iago's plotting, which preys on his isolation and vulnerabilities.

In his interview, Robeson refers approvingly to the writings of British critic A.C. Bradley, who strongly argued that Shakespeare “imagined Othello as a black man” and attacked the “horror of most American critics ... at the idea of a black Othello.”

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality unequivocally condemns the campaign against Sheng, which has absolutely nothing to do with left-wing or progressive politics. Those students crying about “safe spaces” and a “harmful environment” created by the showing of *Othello* should grow up and actually learn something. That is what a university education is supposed to be about.

The IYSSE calls on all students and faculty concerned by what has been done to speak out against it. The campaign of intimidation against any critique of the noxious framework of racist and identity politics must be rejected and opposed.



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