University of Michigan drops investigation of composer Bright Sheng for screening Laurence Olivier's *Othello*

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World-renowned composer and University of Michigan (UM) professor Bright Sheng will not be investigated by the university's Equity, Civil Rights and Title IX office (ECRT) for possible discrimination practices. UM School of Music, Theater and Dance (SMTD) Dean David Gier reported Sheng to the ECRT after Sheng screened the 1965 Stuart Burge-Laurence Olivier film adaptation of Shakespeare's *Othello* in his undergraduate music composition course.

University officials made no public announcement as to why they were no longer considering an inquisitorial ECRT review of Sheng's curriculum. Instead, according to *MLive* news, they communicated their decision to his lawyer. The university's action not to review the incident simply confirms the fact that the claims of "racism" were always slanderous and baseless.

However, nothing of substance has yet been done by UM to repair Sheng's reputation. The IYSSE at UM demanded in an open letter to SMTD Dean David Gier that the university had to reinstate Professor Sheng in the course from which he was removed as well as issue an apology and publicly repudiate the smear that he had carried out a "racist act" by screening a well-known and honored film.

A small group of SMTD students denounced Sheng after the 1965 screening because the famed Shakespearean actor Olivier performed the title role in dark make-up. One of Sheng's students subsequently stated to the *Michigan Daily* that she was "shocked that [Sheng] would show something like this in something that's supposed to be a safe space." How a serious, complex performance of an epic, 400-year-old play created an "unsafe" space can only be explained by the student herself and the race-fixated layers that pursued the attack on Sheng.

Olivier played Othello as a dark-skinned Moor of African descent living among white Venetians in part to emphasize the racial tensions present in the 1603 play. The actor intended to honor what most consider to be Shakespeare's original concerns, as well as to repudiate the timidity of previous British productions of the play, which downplayed the interracial relationship between Othello and Desdemona. Olivier and the play's other leads were nominated for Academy Awards in 1965.

Sheng made an informal apology to his class and then a formal apology to the department. A group of at least 33 SMTD students and faculty then seized upon the apologies to issue an open letter to the dean demanding Sheng be removed from his course for creating a "harmful environment." The SMTD officialdom endorsed this reactionary nonsense, issuing a department-wide email stating that "Professor Sheng's actions do not align with our School's commitment to anti-racist action, diversity, equity and inclusion."

In this frenzied environment, Sheng stepped down from the course at the dean's insistence.

The rush to support the claims of racism by the SMTD and campus administration was utterly shameful, indicative of an extremely low level of historical and artistic awareness, to say nothing of democratic sensibilities and rational thought on the campus.

The IYSSE at UM launched a campaign on the campus to oppose the attacks on Sheng, issuing an open letter to Dean Gier and speaking with students and faculty on campus about the artistic, democratic and class issues involved. Though the *Michigan Daily* ignored the club's request to publish its open letter in the student newspaper, several professors and artists from around the country have sent notes of support for this campaign and for Sheng.

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Composer Kevin Scott posted a lengthy denunciation of the racialist attack on Sheng and Othello on the popular *Slipped Disc* classical music website. The IYSSE open letter was subsequently published on the site as well, followed by numerous statements of support.

On Monday, the Academic Freedom Alliance, "a coalition of faculty members from across the country who are committed to upholding the principles of academic freedom and professorial free speech," issued a letter to UM President Mark Schlissel in defense of Sheng. Although the letter does not make clear that neither Sheng's actions nor the *Othello* production was "racist," it nonetheless sharply warns of the implications of the attack for academic freedom and intellectual life in the coming period:

"Unfortunately, efforts to suppress classroom materials and censor classroom instruction because they might be divisive are all too familiar. The cornerstone of recent state legislative efforts, including those in Michigan, to outlaw 'divisive concepts' like critical race theory or 'racist theories' from the classroom is precisely the belief that instructors should not be allowed to expose students to materials or ideas that they might find disturbing or racist. Universities are in no position to resist such efforts if they are themselves willing to punish their professors on that self-same basis."

With regards to the action of Dean Gier, it states: "If such an assertion of power by a dean were accepted, it would carve a large and perilous hole in academic freedom protections that will loom over faculty at the university for years to come."

A comment is in order about the political climate in which Sheng has come under attack. Over the course of several decades, systematic efforts have been made at the University of Michigan—as at every leading campus in the US—to promote identity politics and variations of anti-Marxist, postmodern philosophy as the axis for so-called left politics. This has been driven by various pseudo-left appendages of the Democratic Party.

Even as they precipitously and recklessly re-open the university under conditions of a deadly pandemic, administration officials shift ever more resources toward ensuring that race and gender remain a central focus of students, and not the massive social and public health crisis devastating the lives of billions on the planet.

The university set up an Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) in 2016, which underwrites and encourages the concept that race and the effort to achieve "equity"—not social equality—are the most pressing issues facing students and young people. The office has thus far been given $125 million to develop strategic "training" plans across most units on campus.

In response to the September 2020 strike by 1,200 UM graduate student workers—which culminated in a betrayal of the main demands for safe working conditions during the pandemic—the university seized on a portion of the issues raised involving opposition to "racism on campus." Instead of keeping students out of dangerous classrooms and paying graduate students decent wages, the university set up a "task force on policing" to include the so-called Students of Color Liberation Front. They also committed millions of dollars to hiring 20 new full-time faculty members "with scholarly expertise in racial inequality and structural racism."

This semester figures like Nikole Hannah-Jones and Chanda Prescod-Weinstein, who advocate ignorant and racialist theories of history and science, respectively, have been invited as featured guest speakers on the campus.

It is in this toxic environment that some SMTD students opposed the screening of *Othello*, insisting that Olivier's performance was "blackface" and Sheng's decision to screen it—regardless of the context or intent—was a "racist act."

Students, workers and faculty must oppose this attack on Sheng, academic freedom, and democratic rights. If the attacks on Sheng go unopposed from a genuinely left and socialist perspective, the entire intellectual and political terrain is ceded to the far right, which will step into the vacuum and fraudulently posture as defenders of "academic freedom" while simultaneously mobilizing fascistic forces.

All concerned students, faculty and workers are encouraged to email Dean Gier, demanding the reinstatement of Professor Sheng, atdgier@umich.edu, and to copy the World Socialist Web Site, *comments@wsws.org.*

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

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