Statements of support for composer Bright Sheng

22 October 2021

Bright Sheng’s removal from his teaching duties at the University of Michigan for screening Laurence Olivier’s 1965 performance of Othello has drawn attention and outrage from around the country. The following is a selection of letters sent to David Gier, the Dean of the School of Music, Theater and Dance, in response to an open letter published by the International Youth and Students for Social Equality at UM.

Dear Professor Gier,

I am writing to express my dismay at your university’s deplorable treatment of one of its most distinguished faculty members, Professor Bright Sheng is an internationally renowned composer, conductor, and pianist, who has taught at your School of Music, Theatre, and Dance for nearly twenty years; he is amongst those who have done most to establish Michigan’s reputation as one of the world’s leading universities. Yet he has now been publicly humiliated and stood down from teaching for the alleged offence of showing his class one of the best-known films of Shakespeare’s Othello.

This was apparently triggered by a student’s complaint against being shown a film centered upon the figure of a white actor in so-called “blackface.” As the editor of the play’s Oxford edition, I am of course fully aware of the production’s controversial reputation—to which, indeed, I devote several pages of my own introduction. But, mistaken as Laurence Olivier’s decision to play Othello as a black African may seem, it is important to realize that it was partly inspired by the performances in which the great African American singer and actor, Paul Robeson, had sought to liberate the play from its racist history: hence, in the details of his acting and appearance, Olivier was at pains to separate his Moor from the crude “blackface” travesties of the minstrel tradition.

That does not necessarily exonerate the result; but it is important to pay full understanding of the performance. Of course, Professor Sheng’s interest in John Dexter’s film must necessarily have been focused upon its use of music and its relation to Verdi’s Otello; but any concern with Olivier’s appearance ought surely to have provided an occasion for serious class discussion of the issues it raises, rather than a complaint to higher authority. Indeed, a principal reason for the very existence of any university worth the name is to provide a forum for such discussions.

Instead, your institution chose to make an ill-informed student attack on a prominent professor an occasion for a display of public bullying, in which Professor Sheng was forced to make two public apologies, and then suspended from teaching his course. It is only a short step from such repressive action to the banning of Shakespeare’s tragedy itself.

I believe that the University of Michigan owes a public apology to Professor Sheng, who should immediately be returned to his teaching commitments.

Yours sincerely,

Michael Neill
Emeritus Professor of English
University of Auckland
Editor of the Oxford edition of Othello

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There was a time not so long ago when it would have been this incident that precipitated shock, more so than Olivier’s outre appearance in the role. That an exhibit of a performance by one of the great actors of history, in a work by the greatest writer in English, would prompt such backlash would have seemed bizarrely counterintuitive in another era. Previously, the reactionary stance entailed expressions of indignation about canonical figures like Shakespeare disappearing from college curricula in favor of dumbed-down pop culture, or Zora Neale Hurston. Now the regime of “diversity and inclusion” requires, precisely, the exclusion of Olivier’s troubling, commanding vision of the play and the exclusion of a MacArthur fellow of global renown who is, in fact, a “person of color” himself—all because the infliction of this material on impressionable freshpersons might have deprived them of their expectation of a “safe space.”

One could object unequivocally that a Black actor should have played the part. Would this have appeased the freshpersons? My hunch is that then they’d have just been bored. Historically, a great Black actor had played the role—Paul Robeson in 1943—but he was among the first since the play’s appearance around 1603, and on Broadway, the next Black actor to play Othello was Moses Gunn in 1970, five years after Olivier’s film. Anthony Hopkins played it in a reticent bronzer in 1981. Would we now deign to cancel Hannibal Lecter himself?

We need not dwell on the question of whether Shakespeare was “racist.” Though it’s possible to cast more recent presumptions backward in time, even with some intellectual legitimacy, the attribution would remain as ahistorical as calling Saint Augustine (of Berber descent) a Moor. But what would our furious social-justice warriors know of Moors? For them, it would seem, “persons of color” are something of a constant quantity, a virtually undifferentiated mass—the “BIPOC”!—about which what we mainly know is that their current well-being or disparagement hinges in some yet unarticulated manner on the showing of a sixty-year-old movie. (The phrase “people of color” would have fallen on ears even a few years past as a jarring locution, recalling the roundly rejected designation “colored people,” even as it falls today as having an apparently universal validity.) Had discussion of the course material not been so curtailed, in any case, some reflection on these matters might have transpired, with every opportunity to air objections and perhaps even achieve some understanding of one’s own feelings of disgust.

As it happens, Moors were mixed-race Muslims of Arab, North African, and/or Southern European descent, a small number still residing in Mauritania and Mali. In other words, a nearly extinct ethnic population, named with a word mainly used by Europeans and usually intended pejoratively (though they sometimes distinguished “white Moors” from “blackamoores”). What was this Moor doing in Venice, anyway, in a play by a writer who never left England? Alas, no chance to raise the question presented itself. In the Venice of Shakespeare’s imagination, that port city was a hub of cosmopolitanism in which many different kinds of people mingled, in stark contrast to his own homogeneous Stratford. He set plays there because he was interested in exploring questions of human
Dear Dean Gier,

I am a civil-rights attorney in Southern California. I am a regular reader and occasional contributor to the World Socialist Web Site, which brought to my attention the despicable actions taken against Maestro Sheng for showing “Othello.”

The attitude of the university with regard to the subject of Professor Sheng’s assigning the Laurence Olivier film of William Shakespeare’s Othello is appalling. On the basis of a complaint by an undergraduate who appears to know nothing about Shakespeare, or film history, the university has capitulated to a distorted view of culture expressed by a student who seems to think that a university is a kindergarten for the shelter of fragile infant minds.

A university is not supposed to be a “safe place.” A university is supposed to be a place where young minds are challenged by knowledge to expand their limited childhood consciousnesses and receive the wisdom of the world. To reduce the mission of a university education to one of pandering to adolescent ignorance on the basis of some spurious racialist doctrine, in effect taking instruction from someone that you should be instructing, is a travesty and an insult to the very idea of a university or, indeed, of any institution that professes to be a source of enlightenment.

Regarding the apparent lack of knowledge of the Olivier film of Othello, and Olivier’s reasons for performing the role in black makeup, your decision expresses complete ignorance of the circumstances and intent of the artist and a frankly plebeian lack of cultural knowledge or experience. The lowering of standards indicated by your attack on Professor Sheng is indicative of the deterioration of university education generally, and cultural and artistic education in particular.

The University of Michigan, if it wishes to continue to be considered a legitimate institution of higher education, must reinstate Professor Sheng and apologize to him for its insult to his scholarship.

Carolyn Zaremba
Actress
San Francisco, California

Dear Dean Gier,

I am a civil-rights attorney in Southern California. I am a regular reader and occasional contributor to the World Socialist Web Site, which brought to my attention the despicable actions taken against Maestro Sheng for showing “Othello.”

The use of makeup so that Sir Lawrence Olivier could represent the Moor theatrically in the cross-ethnic romance at the heart of the tragedy was entirely appropriate. Regardless, many important cultural works include blackface that, unlike “Othello,” actually reflect hurtful stereotyping of their period. That is no reason to protect students from exposure, however. Would you prohibit “Swing Time,” perhaps the greatest of the Astaire-Rogers films, because Fred Astaire pays tribute to Bill Robinson in blackface and minstrel dress? Perhaps “New Orleans”
should be banned because the immortal Billie Holiday was compelled to play a maid opposite Louis Armstrong?

The history of art and culture raises tough questions, and the role of higher education is to give students the tools to work through them in a progressive and enlightened manner, not to reinforce ignorance and stupidity.

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