

Laurence Olivier's *Othello* (1965) and racialist reaction

James McDonald
21 November 2021

The latest salvo has been fired in the attempt by race-obsessed elements at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor to defend the administration's attack on composer and professor Bright Sheng.

On November 16, the student newspaper *Michigan Daily* published an opinion article penned by student Darby Williams, headlined "Olivier's *Othello* and Racism in Theatre." Williams' article—putting its obvious gaffes aside—presents a one-sided and ill-informed account of Laurence Olivier's performance in the 1965 film adaptation of Shakespeare's tragedy and of the work's reception. Apart from the piece's shoddy scholarship, it deserves nothing less than contempt for its falsehoods in promoting the racialist orthodoxy that dominates the official culture in Ann Arbor and at campuses throughout the country.

We must say from the outset that at issue in the Sheng case, as the IYSSE and WSWS have insisted from the start, is the democratic principle of academic freedom. This principle is under assault from oppressive forces that extend well beyond the university campus.

Sheng is the Leonard Bernstein Distinguished University Professor of Composition at Michigan's School of Music, Theatre and Dance (SMTD). Early in the fall semester, Sheng screened for his undergraduate seminar in composition Olivier's *Othello* in conjunction with teaching Giuseppe Verdi's opera *Otello*. Olivier, in fidelity to Shakespeare's play and its theme of racial prejudice, insisted on playing the "Moor" in very dark makeup. A first-year student in the class complained to the administration, later lamenting to the *Michigan Daily* that she had been "shocked" when she realized Othello was being played by a white actor. She had thought, the student said, that Michigan "was a safe space."

Sheng was called before the Dean of the SMTD, David Gier, and soon after the meeting "stepped away" from his teaching responsibilities, as the *Daily* put it. Gier, no doubt in a panic, announced in an email to his entire department that "Professor Sheng's actions do not align with our School's commitment to anti-racist action, diversity, equity and inclusion." The email also assured the SMTD faculty that the matter had been referred to the Equity, Civil Rights and Title IX Office. Sheng was quickly replaced by Professor Evan Chambers, who pronounced that Sheng had committed "a racist act, regardless of the professor's intentions."

The campus branch of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) participated in the defense of Sheng with a statement published on the WSWS October 11 asserting that the claim that Sheng had committed "a racist act" by showing Olivier's *Othello* "is as badly informed as it is false." The statement went on to educate readers as to Olivier's anti-racist intentions in deciding to wear dark makeup—Olivier believed it "snobbish" that, traditionally, white actors in the part had skirted the theme of race and the risk of offending audiences with the sight of a black man and a white woman in love by wearing much lighter makeup.

To claim that Sheng's presentation of Olivier's performance to his class was in itself "a racist act" is to spout nonsense, as well as to trivialize

racism. Nor have we patience for the sophist argument that Sheng's actual sin (for he is up against a religion) was in his failing to "contextualize" the film prior to showing it to his class, to offer them a "trigger warning," in the parlance of the times. This, first of all, takes as proven what in fact needs to be proved, that Olivier's interpretation was racist. It also turns the young adults in university classes into hothouse flowers whose sensibilities are so delicate they need protection from the world's greatest dramatist and one of its greatest actors.

For its part, the *Michigan Daily* has simply echoed the rhetoric of the administration and of the faculty and students who have, in effect, "canceled" Sheng. In its unquestioning use of the loaded term "blackface," for instance, the *Daily* reiterates the assumption that both Olivier and Sheng did something abhorrent. Nor has the *Daily*—nor the administration, nor the 12 faculty members who wrote an open letter to the university administration politely asking for Sheng's head—once looked into the historical content of the matter: Shakespeare's and Olivier's *Othello*.

Let's get to the point. Williams' article is both foul and reckless. Reckless with the giddy assurance that she is ensconced in the orthodoxy of identity politics. A safe space. Her attack on Laurence Olivier's performance is scurrilous and, as we will see, it is nothing new.

Williams opens by misidentifying the year 1604 as Elizabethan (Elizabeth died in 1603). She will go on to misspell Olivier's name (Lawrence instead of Laurence) on every occasion. These are small matters, but they are telling. She then gives a standard synopsis of the play, but she follows this with the statement that the play

has gained particular relevance in the wake of movements such as BLM, as Othello's undoing is reminiscent of many a senseless killing at the hands of a society entrenched in white supremacy.

And we're off. First, by referring to "the wake" of BLM (Black Lives Matter), Williams clearly alludes to the historic protests against the police murder of George Floyd in 2020. That she identifies those protests with BLM indicates her cultural alignment with identity politics. In fact, the protests were notable for their global, multiracial, multiethnic character.

Second, the racialist narrative of police killings—a narrative intended to efface the actual class character of official violence—has it that, rather than brutal police officers with guns and batons, it is "white people" who are responsible for police killings of working class African Americans. That "society" is "entrenched in white supremacy" is only one of the ethno-communalist myths that plays into the hands of, while playing at the same reactionary game as, actual white supremacists.

Williams' logic in the article is generally muddled, and in places it is contorted to create insinuation. For example, this paragraph:

Early productions of “Othello” developed concurrently with the practice of blackface, a form of theatrical makeup used predominantly by performers of non-African descent to portray a caricatured dark-skinned person of African descent. Blackface is often associated with minstrel shows in the early 19th century, which exemplified racial stereotypes in a hackneyed and often vulgar manner. The role of Othello was taken on by white actors in blackface in theatre and film through the better half of the 20th century.

Here Williams intertwines two distinct cultural strands, performances of *Othello*, which first occurred in the opening decade of the 1600s, and the development of racist minstrelsy, and ties them together with the single term “blackface.” The disingenuous and false implication is that white actors portraying Othello “exemplified racial stereotypes in a hackneyed and often vulgar manner.” In fact, the classical interpretation of the play and the character is that Othello is distinguished by his nobility and dignity. It is worth mentioning that much of Williams’ paragraph above is an unattributed, verbatim quotation from the Wikipedia entry for “blackface.”

Continuing her analysis, Williams incorrectly identifies Ira Aldridge as “the first Black actor to play Othello,” in 1825. In fact, Aldridge was only 14 at the time of the establishment of the first black acting troupe, the African Company, in New York City in 1821, which soon after its founding performed *Othello*. According to reviewer Gary Jay Williams, in the *Shakespeare Quarterly* in 1986, a member of this company was “James Hewlett, who played Othello (and, to my knowledge, is the first black man of record to do so).” Aldridge did play Othello in London in 1825 at the age of 17.

In any case, Williams then notes that “A few decades later” (12 to be precise) Paul Robeson became the first African American to play Othello in the US. From this history, she draws the following conclusion: “For a moment in time, black actors were able to reclaim the role in a way that honored the dignity and complexity of the tragic hero.” Putting aside the falsity and anachronism of black actors’ “reclaiming” the role of Othello, we must take seriously what the rest of that sentence implies.

Few who have heard recordings of Robeson’s performance of Othello can doubt that he “honored the dignity and complexity” of the role. In an interview, available on YouTube, Robeson speaks feelingly about the dignity the role held for black actors, a dignity not often available to them in the mid-20th century. But Robeson, who genuinely had to struggle for his opportunities, like all actors owed a debt to those who had come before, as those who came after were influenced by Robeson. Art does not and cannot segregate itself.

Also, Williams seems to imply here that other actors, with whom she is clearly unfamiliar, failed to honor “the dignity and complexity of the role.” Does she mean to say that every white actor in the role of Othello (including Richard Burbage, Edmund Kean, William MacCready, John Gielgud, Orson Welles, Paul Scofield, Anthony Hopkins, etc.), in one of Shakespeare’s finest tragedies with some of his most beautiful poetry, approached the part as an opportunity to mock the character, and all people of African descent, with racist, minstrel-show buffoonery?

Williams continues, “The legacy of the film and the play itself has been fraught with controversy since its very inception.” We note that in this sentence Williams links the “controversy” phrase to a web page that briefly provides an informative but bland account of the play’s textual history and some of the actors who played Othello down through the centuries. We are told that Burbage’s performance as the first Othello was “amazing,” but there is no controversy to be found on the page.

She then comes to Olivier’s performance itself.

Williams links twice to the same article, Bosley Crowther’s February 2,

1966 *New York Times* review of Stuart Burge’s film, in support of her claim that Olivier’s performance, which Crowther likens to minstrel shows, is “in short, the very antithesis of tragic masterpieces like ‘Othello.’” Crowther’s review of the film takes Olivier to task for his dark makeup (which Crowther calls “blackface”) and for what he sees as exaggerated eye rolling in moments when Othello is in anguish or enraged. Nevertheless, he does not claim that Olivier’s performance is the “antithesis” of the play. In fact, Crowther did have this to say of Olivier:

He commands us with graphic devices—his strutting movements, his gleaming smiles, his stormy frowns, his blood-chilling muscular tensions, his howlings of anguish at the sky. And in this respect, this “Othello” is one of the boldest you’ll ever see. But it never achieves full liberation from that theatrical stereo-type frame.

It is necessary to take some time here to consider the reception Crowther’s review registered in the February 20, 1966 pages of the *Times* under the headline “Arguing ‘Othello.’” Actor John Pleshette, for example, saw in Olivier’s performance “an exceptionally brilliant acting job.”

Roy Skodnick and a young David Denby, who would go on to become a film critic for the *New Yorker*, found Crowther’s review “confused and offensive,” asserting that his “American liberal sensibility” was outraged by a stereotype that “was only in Mr. Crowther’s mind.” They note that Crowther, “—or the sensitive American viewer as he presumptuously chooses to call himself—seems actually nauseated by a white actor playing a Negro...” Skodnick and Denby conclude by stating that Crowther wast[ed] most of his piece in needlessly defending the American Negro and the movies from constructs of his own mind.” *Pace* Ms. Williams.

Morris Glaser, who wrote an especially perceptive letter to the *Times*, opened with the observation that “Crowther’s response to Laurence Olivier’s makeup is, in the strictest sense of the word, superficial.” Glaser noted of Crowther that, along with failing “to comment on many aspects of the film that might interest filmgoers,” he also, “paradoxically, by seeing only makeup ... fails to respond to a crucial element in Olivier’s presentation, namely, Othello’s blackness.”

Glaser asserts that “Olivier’s emphasis is on the passionate frailty of Othello so that he can be seen to go mad.” He closes with this insight:

...there is, of course, Othello’s blackness, which is behind all of Othello’s character. How wise Olivier was to make it impossible to be unaware for a moment that Othello is black by the simplest solution. How many actors both Negro and white have we seen who play Othello with dignity only? This is the first Othello of our time who is an outsider, is frail, and who destroys himself.

Williams asserts, perhaps because of inadequate research, that in America “audience responses ranged from indifference to discomfort and outrage. The film was shown in 51 movie theatres across the country, but screenings ceased after only two days in the theater.” The implication is clearly that public “outrage” shut down the film in the US, but that simply is not the case. As Crowther himself makes clear in his review, the film was only scheduled for a run of two nights in these theaters. Olivier and his theater company, the National Theatre, had produced the film on a shoestring budget, and very little money went into marketing and distribution.

Directly contradicting Williams’ contention, the Internet Shakespeare

Edition, sponsored by the University of Victoria in British Columbia, which in fact criticizes Olivier's "impersonation of blackness," acknowledges that Burge's film "was widely praised at the time for its ostensible authenticity and was greeted with enthusiasm by audiences." Daniel Rosenthal's *Shakespeare on Screen* comments that the film took in a "remarkable \$1.2 million in its first weekend on release in the US." According to Ultimate Movie Rankings, the 1965 *Othello* took in \$9.8 million at the domestic US box office, with an approval rating of 76 percent from reviewers. The Internet Movie Database (IMDb) ranks the film the 42nd most popular released in 1965 out of 2,987 titles. Olivier and the other three principals in the film were all nominated for Academy Awards. And for what it's worth, to this day the film earns 4.5 out of 5 stars on Amazon with 102 ratings.

Williams hopes to persuade the reader that Olivier's *Othello* was subjected to a cold and hostile reception. She is simply wrong and, given the easy access to information, she is being dishonest.

Before he committed *Othello* to film, Olivier presented his interpretation on the stage to great acclaim. It was because of its celebrated success on the stage that Olivier's *Othello* was preserved as a motion picture. In a review for the *New York Times* of April 22, 1964, under the headline, "Olivier Triumphant in Debut as Othello," the London correspondent reports,

Sir Laurence Olivier took on the role of Othello tonight for the first time. It is a tremendous assumption, and it was greeted at the National Theatre with a spontaneous release of cheering.

Of genuine interest is the fact that, in September 1965, Olivier brought his stage production of *Othello* to the Kremlin Theater in Moscow and became the first Western theatrical company to perform in that venue. In a *New York Times* review from Moscow, "Olivier and Troupe Cheered in Moscow," we read this:

Sir Laurence Olivier and his National Theatre troupe received a ten-minute standing ovation today after a performance of *Othello*... Replying to the prolonged applause, Sir Laurence, who played the title role, said in well-accented Russian: "Comrades, it has been our dream to play for you here in Moscow. We want to thank you for having made our dream so beautiful."

(Terry Coleman, an Olivier biographer, noted that the Soviet audience "surged forward en masse in its enthusiasm. Hundreds from the dress circle came down to the orchestra to add to the crush." Coleman pointed out that *Othello* was "the best known of Shakespeare's plays" in the USSR and that the audience at Olivier's performance "knew its Shakespeare so well that it had been able to follow *Othello* in English.")

Influential critic Pauline Kael, then writing for *McCall's*, observed that *Othello* with Olivier "is a filmed record of the theatrical production; it would be our loss if we waited for posterity to discover it" and that this "*Othello* is history already; it's something to remember." Critic Andrew Sarris in the *Village Voice* raised the issue of Olivier's "startling" makeup and offered aesthetic criticisms of Burge's film. "However," Sarris went on, "I never expect to see a more emotionally effective Othello despite all my reservations about Olivier's interpretation," and later referred to "Olivier's sinuous subtlety and devoted detailedness that soar to the highest reaches of acting as an art."

In an October 1973 article in the journal *Literature/Film*, "Olivier and the Realistic *Othello*," James E. Fisher argued that the film "In its

essentials, ... amounts to a great *Othello*." Fisher also cited a comment by Olivier in a *Life* magazine interview:

Othello has pretty much always been played as a truly noble man who was overjealous, overgullible. But the director, John Dexter, and I have come together on the idea that he was only a goodish fellow who had merely fixed the earmark of nobility on himself. And the tragic fissure which destroys him is self-delusion.

As an actor, Olivier clearly approached the role of Othello with great thought and care. Williams refers to Olivier's autobiography, in which the actor "goes into excruciating detail about the specificities of embodying the role." Yet she is then able to turn around and assert that "Olivier's mannerisms seem to be informed solely by his own racist preconceptions." In fact, Olivier may have been one of the first actors to portray Othello as a real and essentially ordinary man (in what is, after all, a domestic tragedy), as opposed to a romanticized, albeit noble, exotic.

Williams goes still further, claiming that, of Olivier's performance, "To thespians, it's a source of humiliation and disgust." This is ignorance of the first order and must be sharply countered. We have seen the reception Olivier's stage and screen *Othello* received. Reasonable minds can disagree on the effectiveness of various choices Olivier made, and again, a university classroom is an ideal setting for such a disagreement. But to label Olivier a racist and condemn his performance as such betrays a staggering shallowness and amounts to a form of libel.

In one stroke, however, Williams makes quite clear what drives her own assessment of Olivier's performance. We must quote the paragraph in its entirety in order to appreciate its full effect.

Yet old habits die hard, and no production serves as greater evidence for this than Lawrence Oliviers [sic] 1965 portrayal of Othello. Olivier had garnered eight Academy Award nominations prior to his stint as Othello, including Best Actor for his portrayal of Hamlet. He is widely considered to be one of the best Shakespearean actors of all time, and the Olivier awards, recognizing excellence in London Theatre, are named in his honor. In theory, he should have hit Othello out of the park. There was simply one problem: Lawrence Olivier was white.

One must pause. Here the "race" of the actor has become an aesthetic consideration. This cannot be tolerated. For those of Williams' generation, who have been drilled in the racialist language of identity politics, such a declaration of Olivier's "problem," unfortunately, will at least sound familiar, if not legitimate. To those who have lived through other eras, it is immediately chilling. Or should be. One thinks of the Nuremberg Laws and the ban on Jewish actors performing in German plays and Jewish theater-goers attending German theaters. One also thinks of "Whites-only" lunch counters and drinking fountains.

Behind Williams stand the *Michigan Daily*, the University of Michigan administration, the *New York Times* with its obsessive racialism and the Democratic Party. Williams herself in the article argues for a "more inclusive" theatre and clearly believes she is promoting progressive ideas. She could not be more mistaken.

Faculty and students, at Michigan and on campuses across the country, must stand up and insist that enough is enough. Malignant pieces like Williams' article on Olivier are only the crudest expressions of what has become an intolerably repressive culture of racialism in academia, a contemporary version of Orwell's thought police. Under assault are

academic freedom, academic honesty, due process, acting, culture, artistic empathy itself. It out-Herods Herod.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact