

An interview with veteran Australian actor, director John Bell: Eliminating Shakespeare is “like having a part of your brain removed”

David Walsh
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The *World Socialist Web Site* has written recently about the attacks on culture, and the classics in particular, from right-wing, gender- and race-fixated social elements.

In October, composer and professor Bright Sheng came under attack at the University of Michigan for showing his class Stuart Burge’s 1965 film version of William Shakespeare’s *Othello*, with British actor Laurence Olivier playing the “Moor of Venice” in dark makeup. Sheng was accused of having committed a “racist” act by screening the film. Meanwhile, the #DisruptTexts website, along with allied forces, is in the business of displacing Shakespeare and other significant figures, including F. Scott Fitzgerald.

In our view, every attempt to deprive the population of access to important artistic work is a dangerous assault on the political and cultural development of the working class, the growth of its class consciousness and general awareness. Shakespeare, Balzac, Dickens, Tolstoy and many others provide objectively invaluable and indispensable insight into life. Through art, we arrive at a deeper and richer understanding of the workings of society and the human personality.

We first spoke to John Bell, one of Australia’s most distinguished theatre personalities, a decade ago at the time of the release of *Anonymous*, directed by Roland Emmerich and written by John Orloff. The film crudely and ignorantly argued that the Earl of Oxford, Edward de Vere, was the actual author of the three dozen plays attributed to Shakespeare.

After graduating from the University of Sydney in 1962, Bell worked for the Old Tote Theatre Company, all of Australia’s state theatre companies, and was an Associate Artist of Britain’s world-famous Royal Shakespeare Company. He returned to Australia in 1970, taught at the National Institute of Dramatic Art, and co-founded the Nimrod Theatre Company in Sydney.

In 1990, he founded the Bell Shakespeare Company. Since then, his productions as director have included *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Richard III*, *Pericles*, *Henry IV*, *Henry V*, *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *The Comedy of Errors*, *Wars of the Roses*, *Measure for Measure*, *Macbeth*, *The Tempest* and *As You Like It*, as well as Goldoni’s *The Servant of Two Masters*, Gogol’s *The Government Inspector* and Ben Jonson’s *The Alchemist*.

His roles as an actor for Bell Shakespeare have included Hamlet, Shylock, Henry V, Richard III, Macbeth, Malvolio, Berowne, Petruchio, Leontes, Coriolanus, Prospero, King Lear, Andronicus and Jaques.

As an actor and director, Bell’s many awards include a Helpmann Award for Best Actor (*Richard III*, 2002), a Producers and Directors Guild Award for Lifetime Achievement and the JC Williamson Award (2009) for extraordinary contribution to Australia’s live entertainment industry. In November, Bell delivered the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s long-running and prestigious “Boyer Lectures,” a series of

four lectures broadcast annually on the state-funded network and available as a podcast and audiobook. Bell’s lectures, which are titled “Shakespeare: Soul of the Age,” explore how and why Shakespeare remains essential reading in the 21st century.

We spoke recently by phone.

David Walsh: The trigger for the immediate controversy involving Bright Sheng at the University of Michigan was British actor Laurence Olivier’s performance in the film of *Othello*, released in 1965. In your memoir, you mention the impact of Olivier’s film version of Shakespeare’s *Henry V*, and then later his *Hamlet* and *Richard III*. You say, “My fate was sealed.” I am curious to know your opinion about Olivier’s performance in either the theater or film version of *Othello*, or both. I believe you were in Britain at the time. Did you see the stage version?

John Bell: Yes, I was very fortunate. I arrived in England at the end of 1964, and I managed to see his *Othello* on stage four times, as well as many other of his late great performances. I also saw performances by John Gielgud and Ralph Richardson and others.

So I arrived at a very fortunate time. I would say that his performance as Othello was the greatest stage performance I’ve ever seen. It was quite astonishing how he managed to fill that theater with the least possible effort. But when I saw it on film some years later, it was, I’m afraid, a travesty of what I’d seen on stage.

You just can’t put a camera out front, point it and say, that’s the performance. It looked pretty overblown and quite hammy, unfortunately. So it has rather spoiled my memory of the stage performance, but I can still see it very clearly in my mind.

Of course, the problem is now that you just can’t do that anymore. I think he was probably the last white actor to wear black makeup in *Othello*. Not long after that, I was working with Paul Scofield and he was preparing to play *Othello*. He thought Olivier had been too black. He was going to play the character more like an Arab character, which would suit Scofield better.

I can understand that the black makeup offends current sensibilities, but that shouldn’t cancel the past. In no way was Olivier’s performance insulting or lacking in reverence. It’s what you did to play Othello. It’s amusing. I was working with Patrick Stewart. He told me that he had been to a party in Harlem and he was the only white person in the room. He thought this was extraordinary and that this was how Othello must have felt, being the outsider. So he produced *Othello* with himself playing without makeup and the rest of the cast all black. And I asked him, how did that work? Stewart said it was a disaster. It made no sense at all.

DW: Oh, well, the best of intentions...

JB: All this “wokeness” is not very helpful.

DW: Since you saw Olivier as Othello four times, what was so striking

about the stage performance?

JB: He did a physical representation of a black person. Not offensively, accurately. His voice was very powerful. I think he managed to lower his voice a semi-octave. But he managed to convey all that passion, that intensity with ease, without seeming to strain. He just somehow filled the stage and you couldn't take your eyes off him.

DW: So I'm assuming that you don't see the screening of that film as a "racist" act.

JB: Of course not. It's a piece of history. We can look back on many films made in the 1930s, '40s, '50s and find something that is now not to our taste, whether it's sexist or racist or classist or ageist. It's an artifact of the time.

I think what's missing in most of the arguments is any concern for the sheer beauty, the sheer excellence of works of art. That doesn't come into the discussion. Whether you're talking about a play, a painting or a piece of music, its sheer quality as a piece of art should have some point in the discussion. But that's totally brushed aside and doesn't matter. There's no aesthetic judgment applied. It's all to do with political agendas.

DW: I understand your theater company staged *Othello* in 2007, and I believe an Aboriginal actor played the leading role. Could you tell me something about that production and your overall experience with or attitude toward *Othello*?

JB: I didn't direct the production, but it was the Bell Shakespeare Company. A very fine Aboriginal actor, Wayne Blair, played Othello. It was done more or less in contemporary costume. He made no attempt to be anything other than an Australian Aboriginal man. In fact, he even worked into it some kind of Aboriginal dance moves. I was very proud of that. This was the most challenging *Othello*, nobody has ever seen one quite like this. He was very convincing. He was obviously a victim of racial prejudice, on the part of Iago particularly. It really rang true in a country that's still grappling with its own history of racism, a history of persecution of or indifference toward native people.

It was a very powerful statement and I was very proud to see an Aboriginal actor take on the part. No white actor can play it at the moment. I think that will shift in the future, as these fashions keep changing all the time. Maybe in ten years' time, there'll be a way that a white actor can play it, not in black makeup, but by use of costume or some other theatrical convention. It's a pity that a white actor should be denied the chance to play a great role like that, just as it's a pity if a black actor were denied the same chance.

DW: Did you ever play Othello or Iago?

JB: No, I never played either. I played Richard III, which comes pretty close to Iago.

DW: How do you feel about *Othello* as a play?

JB: Oh, it's a wonderful play. There's no way one could accuse it of being racist. You can accuse Iago of being racist and even some of the Venetian senators. The doge says to Brabantio that "your son-in-law is far more fair than black." That's one of the condescending racist statements, but it's coming from the white establishment.

I see *Othello* as a very tragic and moving story about a man who is trapped and betrayed by a vicious and envious rival. It's not primarily about race. Race is one card in the deck, but it's not the whole story. Iago is jealous and resentful of Othello.

DW: Shakespeare is astonishing in his ability to see how racism in fact could be used.

JB: There's no question as to whose side Shakespeare is on. I've seen a great many black actors, especially in America and England, take on that role, just as a great many Jewish actors relish the role of Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*.

DW: I saw you on YouTube recently on a television talk show, ABC's Q&A. The parts that I saw seemed pretty unserious or hostile. We had a reader who wrote in. She commented that the program was "devoted to

attacks on Shakespeare ... The loaded questions posed included: Does Shakespeare's voice dominate at the expense of others? Are the performance of his plays a capture of elitism, power and knowledge by a few? Isn't Shakespeare a poster boy for western civilisation being the best? Two panelists had done their homework by calculating that only 17 percent of parts written by Shakespeare are for women! Spitefulness and envy were proudly displayed as the promotion of diversity." How did you see the program?

JB: I think I walked into an ambush, quite frankly. I didn't realize what the panel was or who was on it, and I wasn't warned about the nature of the questions. Several on the panel came with very fixed agendas about what they wanted to promote. They were quite hostile and I was taken aback by it. I wasn't expecting that kind of discussion at all. That's the kind of program that likes a little bit of controversy. The Q&A program sets up that sort of debate, they want a bit of fisticuffs.

DW: Arts funding is being cut everywhere, including in Australia, as I understand. You wrote in a recent lecture: "At the time I'm writing this, the Australian Federal Government is actively discouraging university students from engaging with the humanities by hiking up the fees; theatre studies courses are disappearing from our campuses; the work of our greatest writer, Shakespeare, is increasingly becoming a specialised study at both a secondary and tertiary level, and our state theatre companies are performing one of his plays every couple of years, if that." I wonder if you could speak a little about your company and its work in schools, and perhaps the challenges it is now encountering, if the situation has changed?

JB: One way we have to try and counteract the hostility to the classics is by performing them. If you get kids who are young enough before they get too prejudiced or turned off the classics and get them to be entertained and to use the language, to perform the plays themselves, that makes a big difference. We have a scholarship program where kids from all over the country can audition with a Shakespeare monologue and come to work with the company for a week. That is a program that has really got kids excited about performing. There's another company in Sydney called Sport for Jove that does a lot of school work as well and Shakespeare performances, and they are also making a very good impact.

In terms of the education system, we're in danger of seeing Shakespeare downgraded or having him sort of disappear from the syllabus little by little. I worry that we will have only the so-called "brightest ones" reading him. People say it's too difficult or not relevant. And there are all the problems with supposed racism and sexism and misogyny. The trouble begins in academia. Many academics have this sort of outlook and are caught up in an ideological debate among themselves. University students, or some of them, are copying the same kind of stuff from the academics, so overall it is a challenge.

DW: "Relevance," as it's currently interpreted, is often a hollow and empty word. As I wrote recently, why not simply teach *People* magazine and television commercials, if we want to be truly "relevant"? Calculus is difficult, biochemistry is difficult. Generally speaking, everything important is difficult, and I think that students, if they recognize the ultimate goal and if they can see it's worth something, are prepared to tackle very difficult things.

JB: Latin and Greek are being dropped from the syllabus almost completely because they're too difficult. We are losing something by losing languages. Learning "Elizabethan" is a lot easier than learning French or Italian. We could teach Elizabethan as a language, it might be one way to get into Shakespeare. There's an element of intellectual laziness. Kids are told that it's all about "career opportunities." The government promotes this, claiming that they can see immediate employment being the outcome.

They don't see the humanities as being relevant to employment, unfortunately. The word "relevance" involves shrinking everything down

to my little circle. If it's not about me, it's not "relevant." Kids in drama schools are refusing to perform Eugene O'Neill and others because it's not relevant. It's about old white guys. They've refused to act in *Hamlet* because it's misogynistic, etc., etc. It's deplorable in many ways.

DW: The atmosphere in the humanities on college campuses, as the recent controversy surrounding Bright Sheng at the University of Michigan indicates, is pretty dreadful. At the same time, there is opposition to it. Some 750 faculty members signed an open letter opposing Sheng's treatment, and quite strongly. It's a battle going on, frankly.

I wrote about the #DisruptTexts website, and its #DisruptShakespeare wing. It's staggering to have that as your platform—the "disruption" or elimination of Shakespeare from school curricula. What's your own reaction to this?

JB: I think it's appalling. There are certain landmarks in our cultural history and Shakespeare is one of them. If you grow up not knowing anything about Shakespeare, Michelangelo or Picasso or Matisse, or Shostakovich ... People should know about these figures and what they've achieved, just as they do in regard to Einstein or Stephen Hawking. Human beings have made breakthroughs in science and people should know about them. It doesn't mean you have to become a Shakespeare expert, but you should know something about the man and his times, what he wrote. You should have some knowledge of at least some other plays or poetry, otherwise you're missing out. It's like having a part of your brain removed. you're just missing something that's now part of our cultural DNA.

I think the hardest part of course is teaching it. There aren't that many teachers skilled in teaching Shakespeare. I've met so many people throughout my life who say, 'Oh, I had a terrible time at school with Shakespeare.' It takes a certain skill and dedication and imagination to teach Shakespeare in a way that's inspiring to teenagers. It is difficult, but I think it's also indispensable.

DW: Of course, there's the claim as well that this is part of the establishment, this is "white culture." There is an establishment Shakespeare. In Britain, there is certainly an establishment Shakespeare and there are political, patriotic-nationalist reasons and so forth, but that's not the essential truth of it. There is some connection between Shakespeare and the modern world. Not that the world developed from his work, but that he reflected upon and provided some of the most profound insight into this developing modern world and you can't understand that world fully without his understandings and his art.

JB: Shakespeare has been adopted by the establishment and used, I suppose, especially during the colonial era as a kind of shining example of what the establishment could achieve. But he himself was a down-to-earth entertainer who had nothing to do with big establishment as such. We have to understand what he was doing and what his work is really about. It exists entirely outside the establishment and most theater companies aren't part of the establishment. They are self-starting, surviving, living on the smell of an oily rag. This kind of company manages to exist not with the heavy support of the establishment.

I went to England when I was 24 and joined the Royal Shakespeare Company, so I guess I was part of that establishment.

DW: Except that it was doing quite radical, experimental work at the time.

JB: There are many other companies performing Shakespeare that are not remotely part of the establishment, like the Northern Broadsides company, the Actors Company and many smaller companies that still exist.

Shakespeare is not a monarchist, he's not an aristocrat. He's speaking from the people, for the people on the whole. We have to look at his origins and what he was talking to at the time and how popular he's been over 400 years with the audience of all classes. There's no denying his

popularity, you can't say he's only been attended by the upper crust of society, far from it.

DW: I think his radicalism lies principally in his relentless pursuit of the truth about things, of saying what is.

JB: It's interesting how many left-wing artists and directors have been attracted to Shakespeare for that very reason. People like director Michael Bogdanov, for instance, with whom I worked at the National Theatre in London. Many directors and others have been attracted to Shakespeare because his radicalism reflects their own left-wing values. It's easy to present Shakespeare as something rather radical. It's more difficult to present him as a conservative, because he's so critical of conservative values on the whole.

DW: For a recent article, I decided to look into the responses of various African American political and literary figures to Shakespeare. I wrote a few paragraphs, I could have gone on for pages.

To discover that Frederick Douglass, the former slave and great abolitionist, belonged to a Shakespeare society and that on one occasion he played Shylock was an episode almost overflowing with historical resonance.

JB: Yes, absolutely fascinating, but, of course, Abraham Lincoln's love of Shakespeare is well known, his mastery of a number of the plays. Lincoln would regale his generals with passages from *Macbeth*.

DW: In fact, I was going to mention the occasion, only five days before his assassination, when Lincoln visited Richmond, Virginia, the former Confederate capital, where he was mobbed by newly freed slaves. One of the members of the party wrote in his diary about the return trip by steamboat: "Mr. Lincoln read to us for several hours passages taken from Shakespeare. Most of these were from *Macbeth*, and in particular the verses which follow Duncan's assassination." In those passages, Macbeth falls prey "to the most horrible torments of mind." The diarist explains, "Lincoln paused here while reading and began to explain to us how true a description of the murderer that one [passage] was, when, the dark deed achieved, its tortured perpetrator came to envy the sleep of his victim; and he read over again the same scene." Can anyone imagine any world leader today doing such a thing? Can anyone imagine a world leader with a conscience?

JB: That's right.

DW: You discuss Shakespeare's empathy in one of your recent lectures: "An instinctive empathy is the basic tool of the artist, the ability to see the world through the eyes of others, to imagine their pain and joy, to walk, as they say, a mile in their shoes.

"Shakespeare had the most remarkable empathy. He could put himself inside the mind of a thirteen-year-old girl, a crazy old king, or a pathological killer. His mind was androgynous, equally at home with any gender role, and he tapped into all of society from high to low—kings and gravediggers, princes and paupers."

It is astonishing, his ability to work out the logic of almost everyone's behavior. Not to condone it necessarily, but to understand it.

JB: It's the basis of any art, isn't it? Whether you're looking at a painting or listening to a piece of music that's particularly amazing, it's because the artist has touched something very personal and revealing about him or herself. Shakespeare must have imagined himself into those roles, especially the women's roles. It's extraordinary that he could write about like Rosalind in *As You Like It*, for instance, or Juliet, not yet fourteen, or Paulina in *The Winter's Tale*. To speak with a woman's voice so authentically and with such understanding.

DW: In watching and reading *Othello* recently, I was very struck by Emilia in general. Because she ends up being such a heroic figure. She rebels against her husband, Iago, who keeps telling her to shut up and she won't shut up, even though it costs her life. And there's that scene in Act IV, Scene III where she gives her version of Shylock's speech, "let husbands know their wives have sense like them: they see and smell and

have their palates both for sweet and sour...”

JB: It's just extraordinary, especially for that period. There's no other writer of that time has that ability. The women in Ben Jonson's plays are just caricatures for the most part, Christopher Marlowe never wrote a good woman's role in his life. In John Webster, you have primarily archetypal figures, none of whom has the real authentic, individualized voice that Shakespeare gives his women characters.

DW: How do you see the future of this? How do you see this playing out? In our view, there has to be a real fight for culture, a real fight for Shakespeare, a real fight for profound ideas. I think it will find an audience. The university atmosphere is to a certain extent the aberration, I don't think those are the feelings of the vast majority of the population.

JB: It depends very much on theater performances being maintained at a high level of expertise and being truly entertaining. My fear is that theater is going the same way as the universities in terms of being “woke” rather than performing the plays as they actually exist.

The pendulum may swing back the other way to allow us to see the play as it was written. If so, Shakespeare will remain popular. There was a recent production of *As You Like It* in Melbourne, which was, I suppose, more “traditional” and authentic, and it had a huge impact on the audience. People hadn't seen that kind of Shakespeare in a long time. So there is hope. Meanwhile, I wish the academics would get more on board and fight for the cause, rather than giving in or being bullied into silence.

DW: If you were to summarize, and I realize it's impossible to do so—what has Shakespeare meant to you from the age of 15 onward and what does he mean to you now?

JB: One can go on reading the plays, examining them, reading various critiques of them and one keeps learning more and more, uncovering new layers. I suppose I keep coming back to *King Lear* as one of the great model fables. One of the panelists on the talk show asserted that Shakespeare was not really “universal.” For our purposes, Shakespeare comes close. If you look at *King Lear*, there is the best and worst of humanity. On the one hand, loyalty and truthfulness and integrity, and, on the other, cruelty, selfishness, arrogance, treachery. The balance between the potential of humanity to be destructive and evil and the potential to be heroic and truthful and honest is a tremendous template of what life is, and how bad and how good it can be, depending on who we are and how we treat our fellow human beings. As challenging as *King Lear* is, one of the great texts of all time, it obliges us to keep pondering and examining.



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