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### Review of Exploring Othello 2020

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## **“Exploring *Othello* in 2020”**

Presented by Red Bull Theater. 7, 14, 21, and 28 October 2020. Broadcast via Zoom and *YouTube*. Hosted and moderated by Ayanna Thompson. With Keith Hamilton Cobb, Franchelle Stewart Dorn, Jennifer Ikeda, Anchuli Felicia King, Peter Macon, Alfredo Narciso, DeAris Rhymes, Madeline Sayet, Jessika D. Williams, and Dawn Monique Williams.

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How do you solve a problem like *Othello*? The tragedy may not be one of Shakespeare’s well-known problem plays. But there can be no denying that it is nevertheless a problem. Whatever ideological work the play may have done in early modern England, it undertakes very different representational work now. Even if audiences see *Othello* as being about love or jealousy, they nevertheless bring to bear their presuppositions about Black masculinity, white femininity, and race on their engagements with it. This play thus may be, as Peter Erickson observes in *Citing Shakespeare*, a global emissary, but when in the wrong hands, the messages it carries are all too often, as Ayanna Thompson noted in a recent episode of the NPR podcast *Code Switch*, “toxic.”

Yet despite this toxicity, *Othello* continues to circulate, a jarring counterpoint in a world increasingly calling for racial justice. So, what does one do with *Othello*? Stop performing it? Transform it? Adapt or appropriate it? These are the very questions undertaken by “Exploring *Othello* in 2020,” a series of salon discussions placing BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) theater artists in conversation with none other than Thompson, the “*Othello* whisperer”

herself, in order to perform the play but also to interrogate its messages, characters, and fundamental difficulties. Hosted by Red Bull Theater, this dialog occurred for one-and-a-half hours every Wednesday in October 2020 over Zoom, and the recordings of each session are available online. A brief review cannot do justice to this nuanced, incisive, and bold conversation that interweaves a stripped down, experimental performance in which actors switch roles from scene to scene. What I offer here, then, are the insights the dialog most illuminated for me as a scholar deeply invested in the ideological work the play undertakes, but also who champions the way racial equity can and should inform scholarly, pedagogical, and theatrical engagements with Shakespeare.

In his essay “Leaping Out of Shakespeare’s Terror—Five Meditations on *Othello*,” Nigerian author Ben Okri notes how Othello’s history is missing, gestured toward but never filled in. This observation likewise arose repeatedly across the four sessions of “Exploring *Othello*.” Peter Macon, who has played the eponymous role on more than one occasion, observes that neither audiences nor actors know where Othello is from (Session 1). Actor Jessika D. Williams, who recently performed a gender-bending version of Othello for the American Shakespeare Center, similarly notes that “there’s not enough about Othello in the text.” Macon in fact argues that Othello is written “without the fundamental building blocks of almost every other character in the canon.” Certainly, not all the actors agree, including Franchelle Stewart Dorn, who remarks that actors do not always have sufficient information for many characters, including Hamlet (Session 2). Even so, why does it *feel* so different, so missing in *Othello*, her fellow actors ponder?

The discussion never lands on a firm answer, but what becomes evident is how much work the actors do to fill in these gaps. They craft meticulous motivations, states of mind,

affinities, and resentments for their characters, hoping to afford them humanity. Certainly, to Dorn's point, this is likely a common practice for Shakespearean performers. Even so, one grasps the particular mental and emotional gymnastics *Othello* demands. For instance, director, writer, and actor Madeline Sayet wonders why Emilia chooses to give Iago the handkerchief, and Macon responds that the only thing that makes sense is that she is an abused, emotionally battered woman (Session 2). Indeed, Dorn, who has played the character three times, assumes that Emilia has experienced all the oppression she speaks about in the Willow scene, likewise turning to abuse as a motivation (Session 4). Why is Othello seduced so quickly by Iago in 3.3, and why is murder the answer to Desdemona's "infidelity"? Actor Alfredo Narcisco offers up thea desire for assimilation as an answer, while Macon finds that motivation unconvincing and rather places emphasis on Othello's physical condition (Session 2). Playwright and actor Keith Hamilton Cobb, shares that the only thing that makes sense to him is to lean in to Desdemona's murder as an honor killing (Session 4), while Williams focuses on Othello's disability and the way that his "fit" may alter his state of mind.

These decisions have inevitable consequences on the actors' performances throughout "Exploring *Othello*." Macon plays Othello with an accent, signaling that he hails from elsewhere, even if that locale remains unknowable. In the Willow scene, Doran's Emilia comes across as more mature and world weary, manifesting her understanding of Emilia talking about her own experiences to the younger, more naïve Desdemona. Cobb plays Othello's murder of Desdemona without histrionics to signal that his is a cold, calculated decision. In the very first session, director Dawn Monique Williams raises the question, "What does it mean to do service to the play?" For these BIPOC theater practitioners, it means developing performances that resist the racist and sexist histories that mostly white directors, producers, and audiences may offer up.

The salonseminars likewise illuminate the challenges that prevent such character reorientations to manifest on stage, such as the strong grasp of *Othello*'s performance traditions. Certainly, familiarity is a strength. There is a particular confidence, clarity, and comfortability in Dorn's Emilia and Macon's and Cobb's respective Othellos, for they have embodied these characters before. Familiarity, however, can be a curse as much as a boon. That becomes clear as repeatedly, the actors articulate a version of, "it could be performed this way, but I've never seen it done." Sayet mentions she would love to see how a "strong" Desdemona would change the play's ending (Session 2). Macon wonders what a production would look like if it were to make Iago "earn" the title of "honest Iago" rather than his honesty being presumed from the outset. Roderigo is often played as a fool, but what if he came across as "rapey and dangerous" (Macon Session 3) like a "Jeffrey Epstein figure" instead (Thompson)? And Cobb asserts how vital it is that audiences see Othello working through the contradictions Iago cannot paper over, potentially making his way to the truth. Yet, as Thompson notes, the role is rarely played that way.

"Exploring *Othello*" reveals the importance of destabilizing such performance expectations, for doing so forces one to see, hear, and understand characters anew. When Williams played Desdemona (Session 1), I realized I had never heard a Desdemona with a lower vocal timbre, though Othello's voice is often especially deep. How does the sound of their voices play into perceptions of their identities as a white woman and a Black man? Alternately, when actor Jennifer Ikeda played Desdemona, her higher voice in comparison with Dorn's as Emilia emphasized an age difference between the women that made Desdemona's naivete in 3.3 more grating than I have felt it before (Session 2). Shifting away from sound, in 3.4 Narcisco's Othello was calm and reserved during the handkerchief scene, and Cobb played him similarly in

Desdemona's death scene. These are both more restrained versions of those moments than I have frequently seen, making me wonder if audiences would accept an Othello controlled rather than bereft, and how presuppositions about race may affect such acceptance. These nuanced decisions also newly illuminate the play's lines. Thompson remarks that until this performance, she had never noticed that Emilia asserts that she will commit suicide (Session 4). Similarly, I kept thinking about the perhaps seemingly insignificant line in Desdemona's death scene, "my Lord," which she and Emilia repeat, stressing the patriarchal link between husband and master.

Ultimately, in various ways, shifting characters and thereby moving away from expected performance choices disrupts the viewer from filling in the "Othello" or "Iago" or any other character they know. Yet, as Sayet observes, "It takes work to bring the characters to a different place," and there is often insufficient time, money, and in the worst circumstances, inclination, to undertake that work.

In many ways, this change in character between scenes, themselves disrupted by incisive discussion and debate, upsets the mimetic potential of *Othello* that Thompson notably critiques in her introduction to *The Arden Shakespeare Othello*. Rather than letting audiences settle into a receptive mode that allows them to approximate the play with "real life," "Exploring *Othello*" interrupts their experience, shaping it as the performance unfolds. Audiences must therefore think more critically about the performance choices made than something like program notes might have asked them to before. Furthermore, there are no visual or aural elements to compete foreextend their focus, for "Exploring *Othello*" depends solely on the play text, eschewing common theatrical elements such as lighting, scenery, costumes, and blocking. This is not to suggest the page's primacy but rather to note that every element of a typical *Othello* is doing work to either direct or distract the audience's attention. And what "Exploring *Othello*" exposes

is that theater artists and audiences alike must ask themselves, “What race work is this theatrical choice doing?” This may seem like the most obvious of comments. But when these elements are stripped away, one realizes the multifaceted attention being demanded at the theater. In the play, divided duty cannot be reconciled. What about divided attention?

Division occurs not just within the audience, however. As “Exploring *Othello*” closes, the artists make clear that a rift also exists between those who want to transform the play and, as Cobb articulates it, those who almost always employ a white lens to stage it. Significantly, as playwright Anchuli Felicia King contends, this lens entails a “real psychic, psychological cost...that comes on the back of people who are already historically disenfranchised and excluded from the canon.” These artists are not passive in the face of such challenges, however. They insist that the theater world can be better by ensuring support that is currently often unavailable: proper time for rehearsal and dialog, leadership that listens to BIPOC artists, an ensemble who focuses on *Othello* rather than Iago, and the opportunity to undertake these dialogs with audiences, to name but a few. Ikeda reminds theaters that such changes would be in their own self-interest because audiences are “hungry” for the complexity and diversity that Red Bull Theater has made possible. I wholeheartedly agree. Having attended numerous *Othellos* on regionally, nationally, and internationally recognized stages, I can assert confidently that the *Othello* crafted in “Exploring *Othello*” is one of the best I have seen because it was one of the most thoughtful and engaging in the most active sense of that word. It is also one of the most hopeful, turning a critical eye to the past and present of this vexing play in order to envision its promise. How does one solve a problem like *Othello*? There are likely many answers, but “Exploring *Othello*” reveals that at least in part, it entails placing the play in thoughtful, ethically orientated, diverse hands that “grapple” with “Shakespeare as a weapon of white supremacy”

(Sayet Session 1) in order to imagine a better future for not only *Othello*, but all of Shakespeare's plays.

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