



American Repertory Theater

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American Repertory Theater Announces Cast and Creative Team for *Othello*

**The Oregon Shakespeare Festival Production Directed by Bill Rauch
Beginning January 13 Plays Four Weeks Only**

[Images available for download here.](#)

Cambridge, MA—American Repertory Theater (A.R.T.) at Harvard University, under the leadership of Terrie and Bradley Bloom Artistic Director Diane Paulus and Executive Producer Diane Borger, announces the cast and creative team for *Othello* by **William Shakespeare**. The first Shakespeare production from the Oregon Shakespeare Festival (OSF) to play the east coast, the acclaimed staging by award-winning director **Bill Rauch** begins previews Sunday, January 13; opens Friday, January 18; and closes Saturday, February 9, 2019 at the Loeb Drama Center in Cambridge, MA.

In Shakespeare's most intimate tragedy, director **Bill Rauch** (*All the Way* at the A.R.T./Broadway transfer, *Fingersmith* at the A.R.T.) explores society's polarizing struggles with difference. Consumed by their bigotry and xenophobia, those who praised the Moorish general Othello for his military successes now reject his marriage to Desdemona. The newlyweds are determined to overcome this resentment, but Othello's assignment in Cyprus draws them into the web of his lieutenant Iago, whose jealousy knows no bounds.

"All of Shakespeare's plays are 'for all time,' as the adage goes, but I do feel that this play is particularly resonant with the United States of America in the twenty-first century," says Rauch. "*Othello* illustrates society navigating difference and otherness in a way that is painfully relevant right now. Shakespeare created a portrait of societal constructs and the ways that they hurt the individual psyche and heart. As an undergrad at Harvard ('84) I had the absolute privilege of directing a couple of plays on the Loeb mainstage when I was becoming a director. Now, this is my third professional production at the A.R.T. The space, the institution, the audience, and the Greater Boston community hold great meaning for me personally. It's a great honor to be able to come back and share this work."

"Bill is a visionary director who has a gift for bringing clarity, relevance, and vitality to complex stories, as he did with the A.R.T.'s production of *All the Way*," says A.R.T.'s Terrie and Bradley Bloom Artistic Director Diane Paulus. "I'm thrilled to welcome Bill back to Harvard and the A.R.T. with his production of *Othello* before he embarks on the next chapter of his professional career as Artistic Director of The Ronald O. Perelman Center for the Performing Arts at the World Trade Center."

Oregon press called the production “riveting,” and “haunting and powerful...Rauch makes this telling of **Othello** feel intimate...(Chris) Butler is stunning as Othello, (Danforth) Comins (as Iago) again proves to be a master at bringing the words of the Bard vividly to life, and Alejandra Escalante is heartbreakingly superb as Desdemona.”

OTHELLO CAST

- **Chris Butler** as Othello (three seasons at OSF that include *Love’s Labor’s Lost*, *A Raisin in the Sun*, and *The Piano Lesson*; *110 in the Shade* on Broadway)
- **Danforth Comins** as Iago (fifteen seasons at OSF that include *Julius Caesar*, *Twelfth Night*, and *Hamlet*; *Macbeth* at Chicago Shakespeare Theater)
- **Derek Garza** as Cassio and others (*Romeo and Juliet* at OSF and *The Mecca Takes* at Chicago Dramatists)
- **Stephen Michael Spencer** as Roderigo and others (four seasons at OSF that include *Love’s Labor’s Lost* and *Julius Caesar*; *The Heart of Robin Hood* at Mervish Productions)
- **Alejandra Escalante** as Desdemona (six seasons at OSF that include *Love’s Labor’s Lost*, *The Tempest*, and *Romeo and Juliet*; *Sense and Sensibility* at Guthrie Theater)
- **Amy Kim Waschke** as Emilia and others (four seasons at OSF that include *Snow in Midsummer*, *Julius Caesar*, *The Winter’s Tale*, and *The White Snake*; *The White Snake* at Berkeley Repertory Theater, McCarter Theatre, Goodman Theatre, and others)
- **Richard Howard** as Brabantio and others (thirty seasons at OSF that include *Love’s Labor’s Lost*, *Julius Caesar*, *Guys and Dolls*, and *The White Snake*)
- **Richard Elmore** as Duke, Handyman, and others (thirty-four seasons at OSF that include *Romeo and Juliet*, *Henry IV Part Two*, *All the Way*, and *The Great Society*)
- **Daniel José Molina** as Lodovico, Second Senator, and others (five seasons at OSF that include *Henry V*, *Love’s Labor’s Lost*, and *Henry IV, Parts One and Two*; *Fish in the Dark* on Broadway)
- **Neimah Djourabchi** as Montano, Police Officer, and others (*The Lake Effect* at GEVA Theatre Center and *The Thieves* at The Public Theater)
- **Vilma Silva** as Gratiana, First Senator, and others (twenty-four seasons at OSF that include *Destiny of Desire*, *Love’s Labor’s Lost*, *King Lear*, and *The Merchant of Venice*)
- **Rainbow Dickerson** as Bianca, Police Officer, and others (*August: Osage County* on Broadway and *Another Kind of Hunger* at Castillo Theater)

OTHELLO CREATIVE TEAM

- **William Shakespeare**, Playwright
- **Bill Rauch**, Director (*Fingersmith* at OSF and the A.R.T.; *All the Way* at the A.R.T. and on Broadway—2014 Tony, Drama Desk, and Elliot Norton Awards; seven world premieres and fifteen plays by Shakespeare in sixteen seasons as Artistic Director of OSF)
- **Christopher Acebo**, Scenic Designer (*Fingersmith* at OSF and the A.R.T.—2017 Elliot Norton Award for Outstanding Design, Large Theater; *All the Way* at the A.R.T. and on Broadway; thirteen seasons at OSF that include *The Book of Will* and *Mojada: A Medea in Los Angeles*)

- **Dede M. Ayite**, Costume Designer (three seasons at OSF that include *UniSon*; *Henry IV, Parts One and Two*; and *The Wiz*; and *Tell Hector I Miss Him* and *Marie & Rosetta* at Atlantic Theater Company)
- **Xavier Pierce**, Lighting Designer (*Shakespeare in Love* at OSF and *Harvey*, *Native Gardens*, and *Blythe Spirit* at Guthrie Theater)
- **Andre J. Pluess**, Composer and Sound Designer (eleven seasons at OSF that include *Love's Labor's Lost*, *The Odyssey*, and *Great Expectations*, and ***Fingersmith*** at OSF and the A.R.T. 2017—Elliot Norton Award for Outstanding Design, Large Theater)
- **Tom Ontiveros**, Projection Designer (*Romeo and Juliet* and *Off the Rails* at OSF; and *The Exonerated* at The Culture Project)

Production support for ***Othello*** is provided by Fay and Bill Shutzer and the Hutchins Family Foundation.

TICKETING INFORMATION

Tickets start at \$25 and are available now online at americanrepertorytheater.org, by phone at 617.547.8300, and in person at the Loeb Drama Center Ticket Services Offices (64 Brattle Street, Cambridge). Discounts are available to Subscribers, Members, groups, students, seniors, Blue Star families, EBT card holders, and others.

PERFORMANCE DATES

7:30PM

January 13, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 29, 30, 31
February 1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9

2PM

January 19, 20, 23, 26, 27
February 2, 3, 9

11AM

January 30 and February 6

Press Performance: Friday, January 18 at 7:30PM

Audio Described performances: Saturday, February 2 at 2PM and Friday, February 8 at 7:30PM

Open Captioned performances: Saturday, February 2 at 2PM and Thursday, February 7 at 7:30PM

ASL Interpreted performances: Sunday, February 3 at 2PM and Wednesday, February 6 at 7:30PM

ABOUT AMERICAN REPERTORY THEATER

American Repertory Theater (A.R.T.) at Harvard University is a leading force in the American theater, producing groundbreaking work in Cambridge and beyond. A.R.T. was founded in 1980 by Robert Brustein, who served as Artistic Director until 2002, when he was succeeded by Robert Woodruff. Diane Paulus began her tenure as Terrie and Bradley Bloom Artistic Director in 2008. Under the leadership of Paulus and Executive Producer Diane Borger, A.R.T. seeks to expand the boundaries of theater by producing transformative theatrical experiences, always including the audience as a central partner.

Throughout its history, A.R.T. has been honored with many distinguished awards including the Tony Award for Best New Play for ***All the Way*** (2014); consecutive Tony Awards for Best Revival of a Musical for ***Pippin*** (2013) and ***The Gershwins' Porgy and Bess*** (2012), both of which Paulus directed, and sixteen other Tony Awards since 2012; a Pulitzer Prize; a Jujamcyn Prize for outstanding contribution to the development of creative talent; the Regional Theater Tony Award; and more than 100 Elliot Norton and IRNE Awards.

A.R.T. collaborates with artists around the world to develop and create work in new ways. It is currently engaged in a number of multi-year projects, including a collaboration with Harvard University's Center for the Environment that will result in the development of new work over several years. Under Paulus' leadership, the A.R.T.'s club theater, OBERON, has been an incubator for local and emerging artists and has attracted national attention for its innovative programming and business models.

As the professional theater on the campus of Harvard University, the A.R.T. catalyzes discourse, interdisciplinary collaboration, and creative exchange among a wide range of academic departments, institutions, students, and faculty members, acting as a conduit between its community of artists and the university. The A.R.T. has trained generations of theater artists through its Institute for Advanced Theater Training, and also plays a central role in Harvard's undergraduate concentration in Theater, Dance & Media.

Dedicated to making great theater accessible, A.R.T. actively engages more than 5,000 community members and local students annually in project-based partnerships, workshops, conversations with artists, and other enrichment activities both at the theater and across the Greater Boston area.

Through all of these initiatives, A.R.T. is dedicated to producing world-class performances in which the audience is central to the theatrical experience.

#OthelloOSF @americanrep

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***Othello* Production Photos | Photos by Natasha Moustache**

Available for download from americanrepertorytheater.org/media/othello-production-photos/



Derek Garza, Chris Butler, Vilma Silva, and Danforth Comins in *Othello*. | Photo: Natasha Moustache



Alejandra Escalante and Chris Butler in *Othello*. | Photo: Natasha Moustache



Danforth Comins and Chris Butler in *Othello*. | Photo: Natasha Moustache



Alejandra Escalante and Chris Butler in *Othello*. | Photo: Natasha Moustache



Stephen Michael Spencer, Richard Elmore, and Danforth Comins in *Othello*. | Photo: Natasha Moustache



Alejandra Escalante, Richard Elmore, and Chris Butler in *Othello*. | Photo: Natasha Moustache



Danforth Comins, Daniel José Molina, and Derek Garza in *Othello*. | Photo: Natasha Moustache



Amy Kim Waschke and Danforth Comins in *Othello*. | Photo: Natasha Moustache



Danforth Comins in *Othello*. | Photo: Natasha Moustache



Danforth Comins and Alejandra Escalante in *Othello*. | Photo: Natasha Moustache



Derek Garza, Daniel José Molina, Chris Butler, and Neimah Djourabchi in *Othello*. | Photo: Natasha Moustache



Danforth Comins and Chris Butler in *Othello*. | Photo: Natasha Moustache



Amy Kim Waschke and Alejandra Escalante in *Othello*. | Photo: Natasha Moustache



Chris Butler and Danforth Comins in *Othello*. | Photo: Natasha Moustache

January 13 -
February 9, 2019
LOEB DRAMA CENTER

OTHELLO

Written by
WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Directed by
BILL RAUCH

*An Oregon Shakespeare
Festival Production*

In Shakespeare's most intimate tragedy, director Bill Rauch (*All the Way, Fingersmith*) explores society's polarizing struggles with difference. Consumed by their bigotry and xenophobia, those who praised the Moorish general Othello for his military successes now reject his marriage to Desdemona. The newlyweds are determined to overcome this resentment, but Othello's assignment in Cyprus draws them into the web of his lieutenant Iago, whose jealousy knows no bounds. A.R.T. brings the original company of Oregon Shakespeare Festival's acclaimed production to Cambridge.

A.R.T. Production Sponsors
Fay & Bill Shutzer

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THE EDGES OF ACCEPTANCE

Imagining *Othello* in a contemporary US context

*A.R.T. Editor and Assistant Dramaturg Robert Duffley spoke with **Othello** director (and Oregon Shakespeare Festival Artistic Director) Bill Rauch and actor Chris Butler, who plays the title role in the OSF production arriving at the A.R.T. in January.*

Bill, as a director, what drew you to *Othello* in this particular moment?

Bill Rauch: All of Shakespeare's plays are "for all time," as the adage goes, but I do feel that this play is particularly resonant with the United States of America in the twenty-first century: *Othello* illustrates society navigating difference and otherness in a way that is painfully relevant right now. Racism, misogyny, homophobia, religious bigotry, Islamophobia—Shakespeare has created a portrait of these societal constructs, and the ways that they hurt the individual psyche and the individual heart.

How has that resonance informed the setting of this production?

BR: We think of our Venice as a contemporary Venice located in the United States. Then, when the characters go to Cyprus, they are actually on the island of Cyprus. There's not actually a US naval base on the island of Cyprus, but there

are naval bases all over the world, so that change felt like a Shakespearean elision: Shakespeare collapses Elizabethan England—his own time and place—with wherever the play happens to be set. As a director, I felt inspired by that mixture.

Othello represents many different types of other: he is seen as a racial outsider, but also as a national and religious foreigner. How does that intersectional otherness appear in this production's contemporary US setting?

Chris Butler: Othello's position as a racial other is something that I'm always aware of, and something I was prepared to embrace when I got involved with the production. In addition to Othello's status as a racial other, Bill also thought that it was very important to highlight that he is a foreigner in an adopted country. I was resistant at first, because I wanted to play Othello as an American Black guy. But given conversations about refugees and the closing of borders in the US (and the world) today, Bill felt that we really needed to not ignore that part of the story. Othello's religion is also a factor in this production. He's a convert, trying his best to be a Christian in America, but the fact that he is a convert keeps him on the edges of acceptance in society.

BR: When we started talking about Othello being an immigrant to the country that he serves,



Directed by Bill Rauch, the Oregon Shakespeare Festival production of *Othello* features a cast of twelve in a contemporary setting. Here, unaware of his motives, Emilia (Amy Kim Waschke) gives her husband Iago (Danforth Comins) Desdemona's beloved handkerchief.

Chris made a connection to the Lost Boys of Sudan. And the more deeply I learned about them, the more I saw how their stories converge with Othello's biography as written by Shakespeare. So we imagine that before he was pulled into military service in his home country, our Othello probably came from an animist tradition in a village. Then he was converted to Islam as a part of his enforced military service as a child, and then in his adopted homeland, he converted to Christianity. I think that Othello struggles powerfully with trying to stay true to who he is, because he's suffered lifelong cultural whiplash beginning with his traumatic upbringing.

What can you tell us about who the other characters are within this production's contemporary landscape?

CB: I am an admiral in the Navy, and Cassio is still a lieutenant. The senators are senators. But one interesting shift is that Emilia isn't just a servingwoman in this production—she's a petty officer in the Navy. I think that choice informs why she might not immediately be very close to Desdemona: it's just a military assignment. Then she grows more loyal—it's an interesting journey, and a strong arc.

BR: From the get-go, it was also really important to me that we not have eleven white people and the actor playing Othello. In order to reflect the complexity of the country and the world that we live in, we wanted a more multi-racial cast. Very specifically, Iago, Roderigo, and Brabantio are all played by white actors, and there are many other actors of color—and therefore characters of color—in the play. For instance, Emilia is played by an Asian American woman, and Montano is played by a Middle

Eastern actor as a Muslim Kurd.

In the rehearsal process, my directorial instinct was to keep pushing the otherness of the characters, while Chris was very thoughtful about the fact that if we highlighted that otherness too much, that approach might diminish the way that Othello himself is othered. I think the result of those conversations was a great collaboration, and I'm proud that we found a way to make the world of the play more complex in terms of both racial and cultural expressions while making sure that Othello's unique blend of otherness really remains the dominant issue in the story.

Chris, given the possibly painful relevance of the play, what do you draw on to bring this role to life, and how do you take care of yourself while living this tragedy every night?

CB: This has been a surprisingly personal story to tell. The themes of the play really resonate with my life today, and having lived with the role for nine months now, it's had a heavier personal effect on me than anything else I've done so far. The hardest part for me isn't necessarily the racial aspect of it; it's how I treat Desdemona—my wife, someone whom I love. I'm not a violent person, but I certainly know what it's like to make a mess of things—to look down and realize you're the one who made that mess. That's a dark place to go at the end of a story, and it has been trying. However, in terms of handling that in the long term, we have a wonderful cast—a very warm, professional group of people. We treat each other with kindness and compassion, and that positive working experience has been nourishing.

Speaking of Othello's treatment of Desdemona, this production is coming in the midst of a widespread conversation about sexual violence and violence against women. As artists looking at classic texts with painful topics, how do you responsibly bring those texts to life in a way that adds to the wider conversation?

BR: As a director, you try to cast the strongest possible actors in every role. There are four women in our cast. They're all powerhouses, and they have fought—in the best sense of the word—for the integrity of their characters. Alejandra Escalante, who plays Desdemona, is a strong artist who portrays a strong woman. There's nothing wispy or generic about her performance.

I wrestle with this question a lot as the head of a Shakespeare festival. When Shakespeare has a passage that is misogynist, or racist, or homophobic, is he endorsing those things, or is he exposing them? I've learned that you can't make excuses for the man in terms of his being a product of a time and a place, and you can't diminish the ugliness of what he brings forward, but at the same time, his humanity as a writer is so exceptional, as is his ability to have empathy, understanding, and love for every character he creates.

CB: From the very beginning of rehearsals, Bill didn't want us to gloss over the ugliness in this play. People have asked, "Did you add some of those adjectives and epithets directed at Othello?" No. All of that is there. We wanted you to hear it, because we didn't want to apologize for it. We wanted to make sure you could hear it in order to have a deeper understanding of the play.

BR: I think the question I'm hearing beneath your question is, "Is it worth putting this ugliness onstage? Is it worth bringing more ugliness into the world?" And I think

Shakespeare's humanity as an artist, and the humanity of the artists interpreting these roles, do make it worth our time. There's a cost—Chris talked about the cost of having to go there emotionally. There's a cost to the artist, and to the audience, too, who go on the emotional ride that is the play.

But in some ways, the question is "Why do we do tragedies at all? Why show the ugliest things that human beings are capable of doing to one another? Do we learn from those immersions in the ugliest parts of our nature?" And I believe that we do, but it has to be done with unbelievable care, thoughtfulness, emotional risk-taking, and integrity.

CB: This production asks a lot of the audience: it goes to an emotionally intense and unrelenting place. And people come away from the production with different feelings. People have left thinking about how to find the lags in their own lives, and also with a greater love and respect for the women in their lives. I want this play to be an impetus for kindness, because of the ugliness. It's clear in the images that Bill creates that everyone in society is responsible for its ugliness. We all have a hand in it, and at some point, we all have an opportunity to do something about it.

BR: There's one moment in particular that relates to what Chris is describing. As we enter the scene before Othello approaches the bedroom in the final act, everybody in the ensemble rotates the bed—it's a moment of ritual movement. It was very important to me to highlight that these tragedies are not simply stories of individual pathology. These are societal tragedies—and that is something I believe very strongly. That's not to take away responsibility from each of us

as individuals for how we deal with those social constructs, but nevertheless, the social constructs are real and are part of what we're all grappling with as individuals. I think Shakespeare understands that dynamic and creates it in his work, and we wanted to be able to underscore that aspect of the play in our production.

I think those reflections are very useful for audience members seeing the show. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

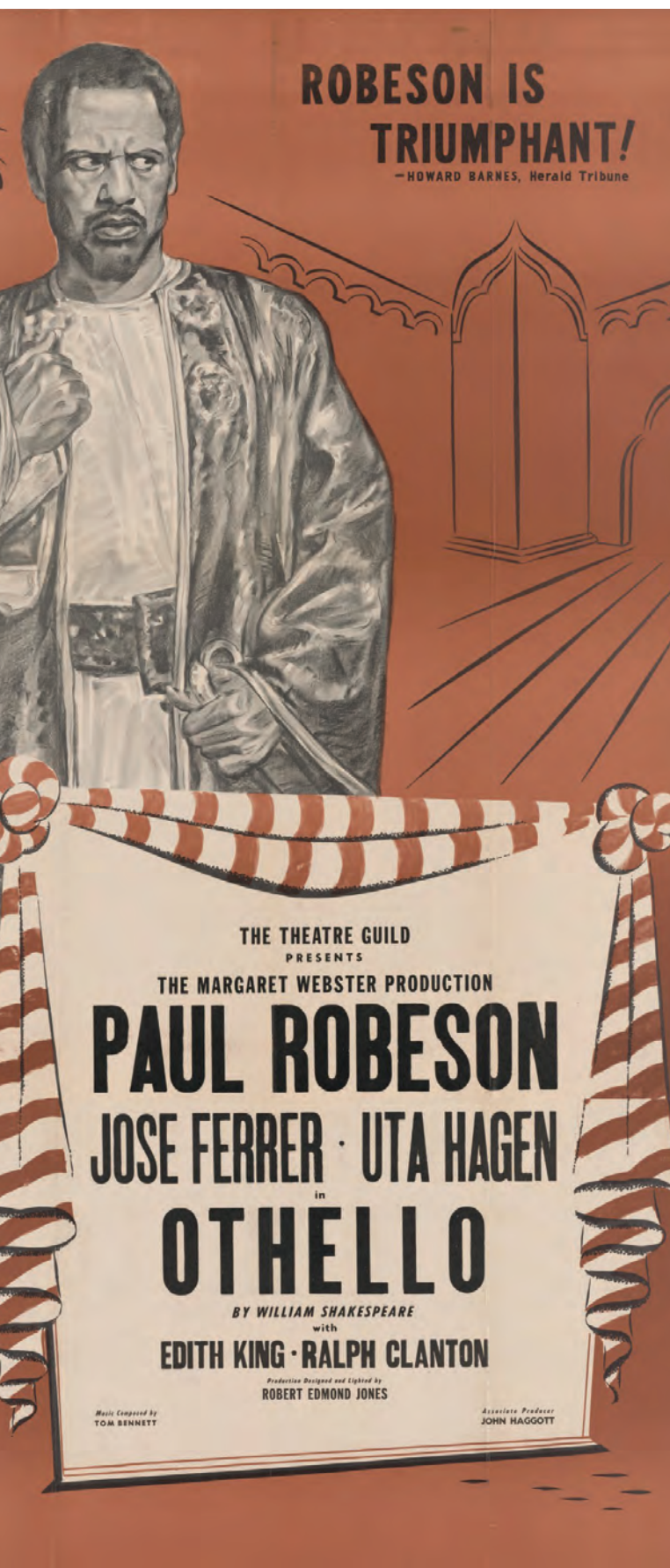
BR: On a personal note, I will just add that I was an undergrad at Harvard and had the absolute privilege of directing a couple of plays on the Loeb mainstage as a student when I was just becoming a director. Now this is my third professional production at the A.R.T., so the space, the institution, the audience, and the Greater Boston community hold great meaning for me personally—it's a great honor to come back and to be able to share this work. It's also the first Shakespeare production that OSF has toured to another city in many decades. So it's a big deal for OSF to be invited to bring one of our Shakespeare productions to an institution like the A.R.T.

CB: And I have never been to Boston, so I am tremendously looking forward to it.

Interview by Robert Duffley, A.R.T. Editor & Assistant Dramaturg.



Othello and Desdemona (Chris Butler and Alejandra Escalante, center) join their entourage (Ensemble) in celebrating the destruction of the Turkish fleet.



“SPEAK OF ME AS I AM”

Finding Othello in the Harvard Theatre Collection at Houghton Library

by Elizabeth Amos

Shakespeare's *Othello* is a character of contradictions. Othello is, in his own words, the paradoxical “honorable murderer”: he is the perpetrator of a terrible crime, but also the victim of Iago's ruthless deceptions. He is confident in the art of war but feels insecure in his own marriage. Despite his high-ranking position in its military, he is an outsider in the Republic of Venice, referred to throughout the text as “The Moor” while other characters, individualized, are called by their given names. In the seventeenth century when *Othello* was written, the term “Moor” was generally understood to mean “Muslim” and was applied to peoples of Berber and Arab descent—usually from North Africa, but also from the Middle East or Spain. Additionally, the term was more widely used to refer to peoples from across the African continent, regardless of their religious or cultural affiliations, and there are ongoing scholarly debates as to what Shakespeare specifically intended in his use of the word as applied to Othello. Throughout the play's production history, these complexities have resulted in a wide variety of interpretations of the role. Records from generations of performance reflect a changing image of Othello, shifting in tandem with conceptions of masculinity, nobility, and race within the public imagination.

The first recorded performance of *Othello* took place on November 1, 1604 starring Richard Burbage, one of the most famous actors of Shakespeare's company, The King's Men. Othello was one of the best-known roles of Burbage's varied career, which included characters ranging from Romeo to Richard III. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the lineage of white actors performing Othello in blackface was effectively a who's who of notable players, including David Garrick (England, 1745), Edmund Kean (England, 1814), and Edwin Booth (America, 1881). During this time, exoticized stereotypes of blackness—with roots in Elizabethan processions and plays depicting Moors as giants—meant that Othello was expected to be tall and imposing. A small man, Garrick was considered ill-suited for the role, while the handsome and more physically commanding Irish actor Spranger Barry became the eighteenth century's most esteemed Othello. As the popularity of Napoleon began to rise, however, the image of heroic warrior-types started to shift. Slender builds and highly polished manners became acceptable expressions of the character, and slight-framed performers, including Kean and Booth, played Othello to great acclaim. This trend would be interrupted by Italian actor Tommaso Salvini, who took the English-speaking world by storm in the 1870s with a fervent performance that rejected the preference many actors of the time were showing for beautiful speech over action. Seeing an Italian actor perform the role thrilled American and British audiences. Echoing the sentiments of many audience members who saw Salvini's performance, one critic observed, “the Moors are akin to the Latins...being of Latin temperament, Othello is played better by Latins than Englishmen.”

This enthusiasm for a non-Anglo-Saxon Othello had not been widely



Left, opposite spread: poster from the 1943 Broadway production of *Othello*, starring Paul Robeson (1944). Above (left-right): Ira Aldridge as Othello (1854), Costume design for James Earl Jones as Othello by Robert Fletcher; American Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford, Connecticut (1981).

shared by Ira Aldridge's audiences 40 years earlier who, in 1833, saw a prominent Black performer play the character for the first time. A month after Edmund Kean's final performance as Othello at Drury Lane, Aldridge, an American actor with a long and lauded career, received mostly lukewarm reviews after his debut in the role at Covent Garden. 1833 was the year that slavery was abolished in the British colonies, and some, perhaps in response to this political shift, bemoaned the notion of a Black man stepping onto a major British stage in one of Shakespeare's great tragic roles. A few nights after Aldridge's *Othello* opened, an outbreak of influenza in London forced the theater to close for five days. When the theater reopened, *Othello*—and the other two shows in which Aldridge had been featured—were removed from the repertory. As the *National Omnibus* reported: "Mr. Aldridge has been the victim of an unmanly, vindictive, and unprincipled persecution, got up by a gang of callous, mischievous ruffians, who took the advantage of an unworthy prejudice, which still lingers in the minds of weak persons."

American actor Paul Robeson's three turns as Othello marked a junction in the performance history of the play. Robeson, who became an actor in part because of the racial prejudice he experienced as an African American lawyer, achieved early success in his career on stage. He was approached about playing Othello at the Savoy Theatre in London and agreed on the condition that he be allowed to spend several years in England perfecting his pronunciation of the material. For this 1930 production, directed by Ellen van Volkenburg, Robeson chose Peggy Ashcroft to play opposite him as Desdemona. The production met with mixed reviews. Most agreed that Robeson spoke the text well but felt the direction of the piece was poorly conceived. Audiences also protested the number of times Robeson and Ashcroft, who were having an affair at the time, kissed on stage—ironically replicating the same anxiety surrounding interracial relationships that informs the plot of the tragedy.

By 1943, Robeson, who had become increasingly politically minded while travelling extensively throughout Europe, including parts of Soviet Russia, Nazi Germany, and wartime Spain, had come to firmly identify the cause of Black Americans with the situations of oppressed peoples around the world. Believing it was time for the United States to see an interracial *Othello*, Robeson approached Margaret Webster to direct him on Broadway. Contractually, Robeson had exclusive final say on all casting and costume decisions, and he shared artistic control over all aspects of the production. "In our conflict," stated the show's program note, "all races are allied to fight for common ideals." Despite an air of idealism in an America professing strong anti-fascist beliefs, the production was launched cautiously with a trial engagement at the Brattle Theatre in Harvard Square. After a warm reception in Cambridge, it moved to Broadway for a record-breaking 296-performance run.

The multicultural production featured Uta Hagen as Desdemona and José Ferrer as Iago, neither of whom had the star power of Robeson at the time. Both would have been dropped from the Broadway production had

Robeson not argued on their behalf, going so far as to negotiate top billing for them both. In line with Robeson's broader and uncompromising advocacy for equality, when the company toured, they refused to perform at segregated theaters. After the war, Robeson was one of many artists, including Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes, questioned by the House Committee on Un-American Activities. Robeson was seen as having controversial political attitudes, and his passport was withdrawn in 1950. Nine years later, in a successful attempt to force the return of his passport, the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre invited Robeson to play Othello in Stratford, England.

After Robeson first played Othello in 1930, one reviewer announced that "no white man should ever dare presume to play [Othello] again." This was not to be the case. On film, Orson Welles played the role in 1952, followed by Laurence Olivier's Oscar-nominated 1965 performance. In fact, in England,

white actors would continue playing the role well into the 1980s. And, while many established actors of color—including Earle Hyman (1953), Ben Kingsley (1986), and Laurence Fishburne (1995)—have now lent their talents to the role, opinions on who should play Othello continue to vary. In 1998, Ghanaian-born British actor Hugh Quarshie asked: "When a black actor plays a role written for a white actor in black make-up and for a predominantly white audience, does he not encourage the white way, or rather the wrong way, of looking at black men...?" In a similar vein, Sidney Poitier once told James Earl Jones (*The Night of the Iguana*) that he refused to play the role because, as he put it, "I cannot go on stage and give audiences a black man who is a dupe." Jones himself played the role in seven different productions between 1956 and 1982. Jones rejected producers' encouragement to perform "black rage," instead finding inspiration in imagining an Othello born into a rich historical Muslim culture, such as that of Spain before the Moorish expulsion. "Was Othello a savage?" asked Jones. "All I had to do was go to the Alhambra in Spain to know that it could not be so."

Hugh Quarshie later decided that the role should continue to be played by Black actors, as long as Othello was played as a man responding to racism, "not giving a pretext for it." As Quarshie has identified, there are complex politics at play in Othello's identity. Each production that engages with these complexities must find its own answer to the question of who Othello is, or should be. By doing so, each production joins in dialogue with the play's rich and varied history. In the Oregon Shakespeare Festival production coming to the A.R.T. this winter, director Bill Rauch's contribution to that history is a production that avoids casting one Black actor to play Othello in an otherwise white ensemble. "Given the glorious complexity of our society, that felt like the wrong direction for this production," says Rauch. The production's cast of twelve features eight actors who identify as people of color, creating new possibilities in answer to the question: "Who is Othello?"

Elizabeth Amos is the A.R.T. Dramaturgy Apprentice.

Sources: Milly S. Barranger, Margaret Webster: *A Life in the Theater* (University of Michigan Press, 2004); Sheila Tully Boyle, Paul Robeson: *The Years of Promise and Achievement* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2001); Sarah Hovde, "A contract for Othello" (Folger Shakespeare Library, 2016); Bernth Lindfors, *Ira Aldridge: The early years, 1807-1833* (University of Rochester Press, 2011); Lois Potter, *Shakespeare in Performance: Othello* (Manchester UP, 2002); Marvin Rosenberg, *The Masks of Othello: the search for the identity of Othello, Iago, and Desdemona by three centuries of actors and critics* (University of California Press, 1961); Dale Stinchcomb, "Full freedom, not an inferior brand" (Houghton Library Blog, 2016).

American Repertory Theater
presents
the Oregon Shakespeare Festival
production of

OTHELLO

By
WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Scenic Design
**CHRISTOPHER
ACEBO**

Costume Design
**DEDE M.
AYITE**

Lighting Design
**XAVIER
PIERCE**

Composer &
Sound Design
ANDRE J. PLUESS

Projection Design
**TOM
ONTIVEROS**

Associate Director
**SHANNON R.
DAVIS**

Production Stage
Manager
MOLLY NORRIS

Directed by
BILL RAUCH

First performance at the Loeb Drama Center on January 13, 2019.

This production of *Othello* was originally produced at
Oregon Shakespeare Festival
Bill Rauch, Artistic Director
Cynthia Rider, Executive Director

PRODUCTION SPONSORS

Fay and Bill Shutzer
Hutchins Family Foundation

A.R.T. SEASON SUPPORT



The A.R.T. 2018/19 Season is supported in part by the Massachusetts Cultural Council, which receives support from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and the National Endowment for the Arts.

CAST

(in alphabetical order)

| | |
|--|--------------------------------|
| Othello <i>an admiral in the service of Venice</i> | CHRIS BUTLER |
| Iago <i>Othello's ensign</i> | DANFORTH COMINS |
| Bianca <i>an independent Cypriot businesswoman</i> Security Officer..... | RAINBOW DICKERSON |
| Montano <i>Governor of Cypress</i> Security Officer..... | NEIMAH DJOURABCHI |
| Duke of Venice Hektor <i>a Cypriot handyman</i> | RICHARD ELMORE |
| Desdemona <i>Brabantio's daughter, Othello's wife</i> | ALEJANDRA ESCALANTE |
| Cassio <i>Othello's lieutenant</i> | DEREK GARZA |
| Brabantio <i>a senator, Desdemona's father</i> Kosta <i>a Cypriot cook</i> | RICHARD HOWARD |
| Lodovico <i>a Marine captain</i> A Sailor..... | DANIEL JOSÉ MOLINA |
| Gratiana <i>a senator, Brabantio's sister, Desdemona's aunt</i> Andela <i>a Cypriot serving woman</i> | VILMA SILVA |
| Roderigo <i>a Venetian gentleman</i> | STEPHEN MICHAEL SPENCER |
| Emilia <i>a petty officer first class, Iago's wife</i> | AMY KIM WASCHKE |

Understudies never substitute for listed players unless a specific announcement for the appearance is made at the time of performance.

ADDITIONAL STAFF

| | |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Assistant Stage Managers..... | TAYLOR BRENNAN, GWEN TUROS |
| Fight Director..... | U. JONATHAN TOPPO |
| Voice and Text Director..... | REBECCA CLARK CAREY |
| A.R.T. Voice and Text..... | ERIKA BAILEY |
| Production Dramaturg..... | DAWN MONIQUE WILLIAMS |
| Textual Consultant..... | BARRY KRAFT |
| Scenic Design Associate..... | RICHARD L. ANDERSON |
| Associate Lighting Designer..... | WILBURN BONNELL |
| Sound Associate..... | RAY NARDELLI |
| Projections Supervisor..... | MICAH STIEGLITZ |
| OSF Wigmaster..... | MICHEAL LEON |

Additional sound equipment provided by Sound Associates.

SPECIAL THANKS

Stephen Greenblatt; Matthew Wittmann, Micah Hoggatt, Dale Stinchcomb,
Harvard Theatre Collection at Houghton Library

This show runs approximately three hours, with one fifteen-minute intermission.

A Note from Director Bill Rauch

All of Shakespeare's work reinforces Ben Jonson's contention that he is "not of an age, but for all time," but is there a play in the canon that speaks more precisely to this twenty-first century American moment than *Othello*? As we watch its characters disastrously navigate differences of race, religion, gender, and national origin, this 400-year-old masterpiece reflects the tragedies of racism, religious bigotry, misogyny, and xenophobia that feel ripped from today's headlines.

Othello is an outsider in multiple ways to the society he serves. A Black man whose country of origin is not the primarily white country whose navy he leads, he is a convert to the Christianity that predominates in his adopted nation's civic and military structures. In thinking about Othello's life through our production's contemporary

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lens, actor Chris Butler and I have been particularly inspired by the Lost Boys of Sudan. Torn from family and rural animist traditions by a conflict with Muslims in the north during the Second Sudanese Civil War (1983–2005), facing untold violence after being forced into military service at a young age, perhaps sold into slavery, and eventually becoming refugees in the Western world, the lives of the Sudanese Lost Boys in many ways parallel Othello's own biography.



The ensemble of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival production of *Othello*.

The vast majority of the play's action is set on the island of Cyprus, where an aborted offstage war with the Turks resonates with realities four centuries after the play's composition. Even today, Cyprus' residents are majority Greek Orthodox with a significant Muslim minority; its divisions as a country in politics and architecture reflect age-old religious and cultural rifts that reverberate throughout the play. Also revered as the birthplace of Aphrodite (at the center of mythology's most famous love triangle), Cyprus is the folkloric birthplace of jealousy itself. This playwright knew what he was doing!

Although epic in its glorious language and its thematic ambitions, ***Othello*** is Shakespeare's most intimate and domestic tragedy. We've chosen to share this story with a focused cast of a dozen powerhouse actors. In this way, we hope to intensify the pressure cooker of a plot in which our characters' lives unravel in what is paradoxically a grotesquely blunt morality play with psychological insights of unparalleled nuance. Even under threat of torture, Iago won't reveal his true motivations. It's left to us to search for meaning in the wreckage that our human addiction to bias leaves in its wake.



About the Oregon Shakespeare Festival

Founded by Angus Bowmer in 1935, the Oregon Shakespeare Festival (OSF) has grown from a three-day festival of two plays to a major theatre arts organization that presents an eight-month season consisting of 11 plays that include works by Shakespeare as well as a mix of classics, musicals, and new works. The Festival draws attendance of more than 400,000 to approximately 800 performances every year and employs approximately 575 theatre professionals.

OSF's mission statement: "Inspired by Shakespeare's work and the cultural richness of the United States, we reveal our collective humanity through illuminating interpretations of new and classic plays, deepened by the kaleidoscope of rotating repertory."

OSF invites and welcomes everyone, and believes the inclusion of diverse people, ideas, cultures, and traditions enriches both our insights into the work we present on stage and our relationships with each other. OSF is committed to diversity in all areas of our work and in our audiences.

The 2019 season includes four plays by Shakespeare—*As You Like It*, *Macbeth*, and *All's Well That Ends Well*, as well as *La Comedia of Errors*, a bilingual adaptation by Bill Rauch and Lydia G. Garcia of Christina Anderson's *Play on!* translation. World premieres include *Mother Road*, Octavio Solis's sequel to John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, and *Between Two Knees*, an American Revolutions commission by Native American sketch comedy troupe The 1491s. Running all season is *Hairspray—The Broadway Musical*, an ebullient celebration of diversity made even more inclusive in OSF's production by the casting of several special-needs youth performers. Also featured is *Indecent*, Paula Vogel's American Revolutions commission coming home to OSF after its Tony Award-winning run on Broadway; *Cambodian Rock Band* by Lauren Yee; the West Coast premiere of *How to Catch Creation* by Christina Anderson; and *Alice in Wonderland* by Eva Le Gallienne and Florida Friebus, adapted from Lewis Carroll.

"American Revolutions: the United States

History Cycle" is OSF's multi-decade program of commissioning and developing 37 new plays sprung from moments of change in United States history. Bringing together artists, historians, and institutions from around the country, American Revolutions works to establish a shared understanding of our nation's past while illuminating the best paths for our nation's future. To date, 10 American Revolutions commissions have been produced at OSF (counting 2019's *Indecent* and *Between Two Knees*), including Robert Schenkkan's *All the Way*, which then played at the American Repertory Theater in Cambridge before moving to Broadway, where it won the Tony Award for Best Play. Other American Revolutions commissions that went on to later success include *Party People*, *American Night*, *Roe*, and *Sweat*, which won the 2017 Pulitzer Prize for playwright Lynn Nottage.

OSF has earned a well-deserved reputation for nurturing new works that have gone on to acclaim at other theaters, including *Head Over Heels*—the fourth OSF play to run on Broadway—and *Fingersmith*, which had a successful run at A.R.T. in 2016.

OSF's "Play on! 36 playwrights translate Shakespeare" commissioning program took 36 playwrights and paired them with dramaturgs to translate 39 plays attributed to Shakespeare into contemporary modern English. By seeking out a diverse set of playwrights (more than half writers of color and more than half women), Play on! brings fresh voices and perspectives to the rigorous work of writing 39 unique side-by-side companion translations of Shakespeare's plays that are both performable and extremely useful reference texts for both classrooms and productions. Begun under the auspices of OSF, Play on! has become an independent nonprofit organization.

OSF has embarked on an ambitious Canon-in-a-Decade (2015–2024) initiative, aiming to produce all 37 of Shakespeare's plays in 10 years, half the time it normally takes the Festival to cycle through the canon.