

CHARLES ALSTON
Untitled, 1963

ANOTHER OTHELLO

Production Concept
Harlan Epstein

THE PROBLEM OF OTHELLO

“... [b]eing a problem is a strange experience — peculiar even for one who has never been anything else, save perhaps in babyhood ...”

W.E.B. Du Bois

Othello is not considered one of Shakespeare's “problem plays”. The phrase is reserved for those of his plays that flit between genres, eschewing simple categorization. However, in the years between the play's writing and now, it has certainly become a problem, especially in America.

With the rapid acceleration of the Atlantic slave trade in the mid to late 17th century, racism became systematized as a means to steer public discourse away from the horrors of enslavement and towards more comfortable ideas of civilizing their inferiors. This led to *Othello*, a play-text as much about race as *The Tempest* is about magic, becoming “the black Shakespeare play”.

The racist interpretation of the play is that Othello's identity runs parallel to his actions, his violent and jealous nature the result of his blackness. But in Shakespeare identity is hardly if ever used to simplify. Here was a man who could find the other side of any perspective, whose emotional imagination and compassion for his characters has made them some of the most enduring of all time. Rather than pigeonholing a character, identity in Shakespeare is a shorthand to more quickly reach the complexity in which he is most interested.

The idea of “the moor” had, at the time of the play's writing, less in common with any idea of race (race at the time was conflated with nationality; the Spanish, for instance, were a race) and more with mythological beings like witches and vampires. Moors were closer to the mythical Greek centaurs, folkloric creatures representing the classic internal struggle between heart and mind, the horse and the rider. The fact that you could have met a real black person and learned “what they were like” for yourself – research finds evidence for a few hundred free black people in parishes across England at the time – was of no consequence: plenty of folks were just as sure they'd met witches.

Thus Othello is a moor the way *The Tempest*'s Prospero is a magician, as a way of quickly establishing expectations; just as an audience would understand the role of the magician as shorthand for a vain desire to control nature, the moor would be clear shorthand for one who was “great of heart”, and the struggle of controlling one's emotions.

Half by circumstance and half by the concerted effort of racists looking to excuse their investments in slavery, by the late 17th century Shakespeare's moor was no longer a metaphor for an instinct within us all, nor a portrait of one black man. Instead, it became the definitive perspective on blackness by one of the greatest writers in the English language, a vehicle at once for white virtuosity and black mockery: How entertaining this white actor was in his over-emotionality! And how impressive for the actor (and the playwright) to find such pathos in a character so different to him, so innately “black”. It should be noted that this continued well into the 20th century:

in her review of Laurence Olivier's 1966 performance of the role on film, Pauline Kael wrote, “I saw Paul Robeson [the first black man to play Othello on Broadway] and he was not black as Olivier is”.

Unsurprisingly, when black actors began to tackle the role, it became all the more fraught. As Ayanna Thompson points out, to this day reviewers rarely if ever praise black actors for their virtuosity in playing the role. Instead they tend to praise with words like “naturalism”, talk of a “raw” and “honest” performance that tacitly endorses the racist reading of the play that understands Othello's character as a function of his blackness. Therein lies the problem for a black actor playing the part: He is asked to portray this person honestly while being deeply aware of the ways doing so will reinforce racial stereotypes. This part, which he has spent his life being told will be the great apex of his Shakespearean career, is not a gift but a cruel trap that forces him to choose between his art and his identity.

Particularly when paired with the overwhelming whiteness of theater audiences, critics, and practitioners, this leads to a feeling of impotence and isolation. Thompson relates the particular misery of Adrian Lester, one of the great living actors of Shakespeare, when he played Othello at the National Theater in 2013. When she had talked to him during the run, he told her his take on the part was that it was not about race at all, that it was “about men in a military setting”:

... two years later Adrian and I were asked to do a dialogue together at ... [t]he World Shakespeare Congress and ... I was like, “So do you want to talk

about Othello at all?” And he paused and he goes, “I hated that f*cking show.” And I was like, “Wait, what?” And he said “Every night I looked out into that white audience and I could tell they were laughing at me, and they wanted me to be tricked by Iago, and they wanted me to kill Desdemona, and they wanted to laugh at me at my expense. And my soul died every night that I looked into the sea of white faces mocking me.” And I was like, “But when we talked in 2013 you were like ‘It's a military experience!’” And he said, “That was the lie I had to tell myself every night to survive. I would not have survived the production otherwise.”

The role of Othello is as impossible a double-bind for black actors as the role of Venetian general is for Othello. Especially in a white-centered theater world, to ask them to play the role as written is at best careless and at worst abusive. But to dispose of the whole play would be its own tragedy: it contains some of Shakespeare's most beautiful writing, some of his most indelible characters.

One approach to rehabilitating this text is being explored by the *Untitled Othello Project*, an effort to recenter the play on its eponymous character led by, among others, Keith Hamilton Cobb. (Cobb has already contributed greatly to modern scholarship on the role with his mostly-one-man show *American Moor*.) His work, along with the work of many black and brown academics and intellectuals (listed at the back of this deck) have been indispensable in the conception of my own take on *Othello*, a radical meta-exploration of the play as it is, and of white American theater's un-self-aware obsession with the play.

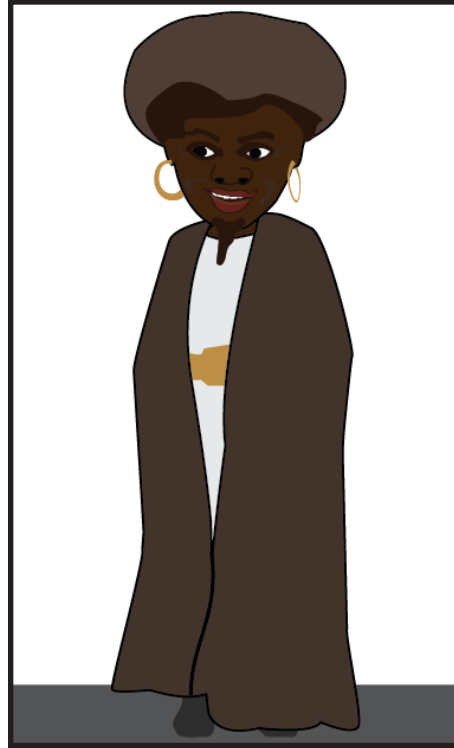
NOTE: ILLUSTRATIONS ARE CONCEPTUAL, NOT FINISHED DESIGNS

ANOTHER OTHELLO

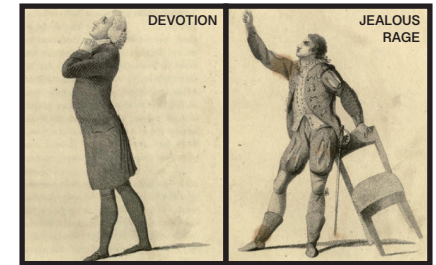
"I have been ready for some thirty years to at least attempt [Shakespeare's] lovers, his warriors, his fools. And yet to most, I have only ever looked like this one."

Keith Hamilton Cobb

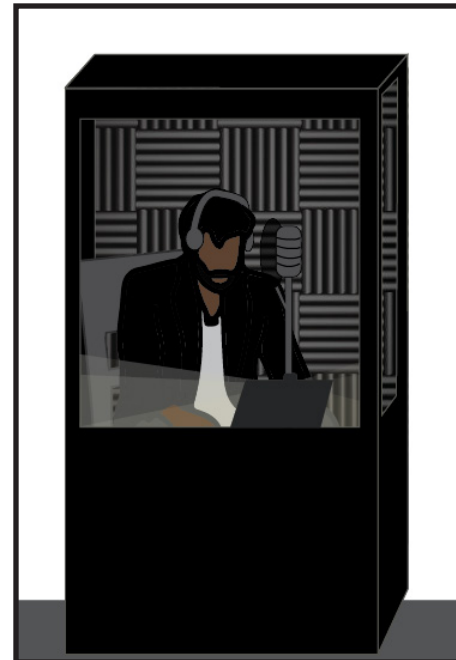
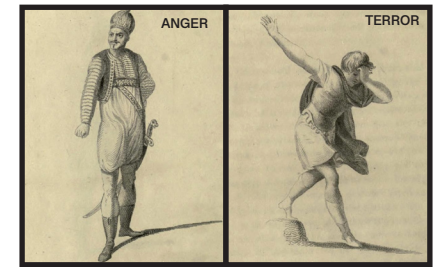
This production (set in the great room of a grand old house) literally splits the eponymous character into the two parts that are so often seen conflicting: **Othello** and **The Moor**.



The Moor is Othello's physicality, performed by a tall, well-built actor of indeterminable race who wears a large papier-mâché "moor" head and mutely emotes with violent bombast and melodrama throughout, his action-figure-like poses and gestures taken from minstrel shows and a 19th century melodrama guide.



Illustrations taken from Henry Siddons' 1822 book *Practical Illustrations of Rhetorical Gesture and Action*



Othello's voice is provided by a black actor in a booth downstage. He plays the role with nuance, grace, and self-possession, restrained in his delivery almost to the point of madness.

As Keith Hamilton Cobb puts it, he goes *"from reserved, even in love, to reserved, even insane"*.

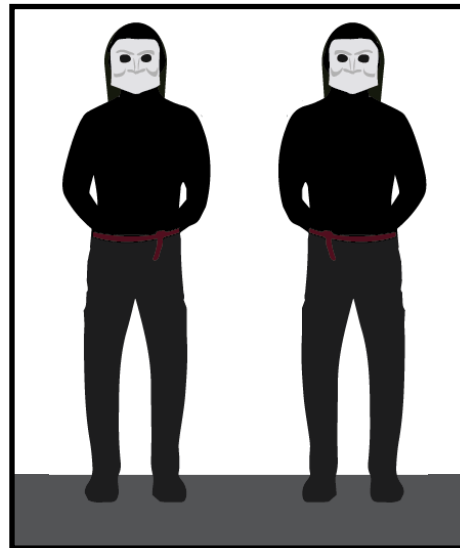
IAGO'S OTHELLO

"...another reason for my hesitancy [to play Othello] was that I knew all too well how easy it is for Iago to steal the play: it may be Othello's tragedy, but it is Iago's play. An actor of skill, given ample material to charm an audience, will charm that audience."

Hugh Quarshie



Othello is, in some ways, a misnomer: like *Antigone* in *Antigone*, Othello is not the main character of his play, only the central one. As Hugh Quarshie says in the above quote, it is **Iago's** play; Othello is as much its protagonist as the protagonist of *The Tempest* is the storm itself.



In this production, not only does **Iago** play many of the auxiliary roles, he is also in control of the **Attendants**, a small retinue of silent servants in Venetian Bauta masks (pictured above) who facilitate his drama. At times we see him holding a copy of the play, and more than once we see him explicitly cut scenes from the play in mid-production.



Iago plays Desdemona's father **Brabantio** with immense pathos, never irony or glibness. Here is the aggrieved white man he feels such kinship with, who has been similarly maligned by this Moor.



With only the addition of a red nose, Iago becomes **A Clown In Othello's Employ**. Entirely unrecognizable to the rest of the cast, he plays this role with a naughty, winking irony.



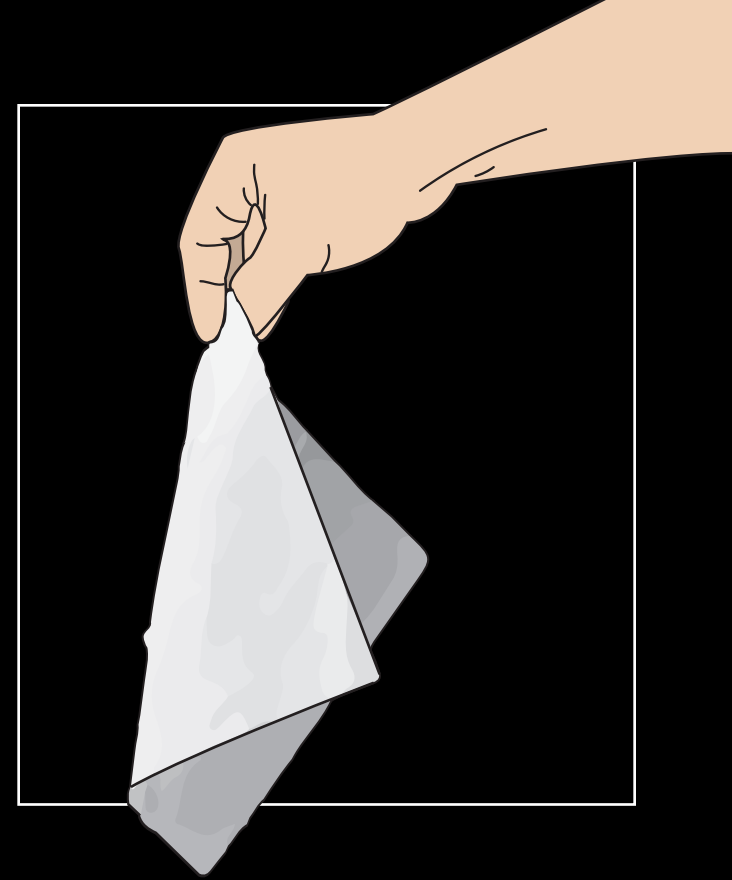
Bianca is represented by a fishnetted leg and a long-gloved hand poking out from one of the wings. As Cassio caresses her, Iago voices her in a Monty-Python-esque falsetto.

How It Ends

AS **OTHELLO** STEELS HIMSELF TO KILL **DESDEMONA**, **THE MOOR** STANDS AT THE FOOT OF HER BED WITH A PERFECT STILLNESS LIKE THE KILLER IN A SLASHER MOVIE.

DESDEMONA WAKES, AND **OTHELLO** TELLS HER TO PREPARE FOR DEATH: THE HANDKERCHIEF IS PROOF OF HER ADULTERY. **THE MOOR** GOES OFF STAGE TO GET THE HANDKERCHIEF. **HE** RETURNS, HOLDING IT.

OTHELLO HESITATES BEFORE SAYING HIS FINAL LINES TO **DESDEMONA**. AS **THE MOOR** SMOTHERS HER, **OTHELLO** TURNS OFF HIS LIGHT.



WHEN HIS NEXT LINE DOES NOT COME, **THE MOOR** LOOKS BACK TOWARDS THE BOOTH. SEEING IT IS DARK, HE IS MOMENTARILY STUNNED. THEN, WITH A SUDDEN MANIA, HE RUSHES TO THE FIREPLACE UPSTAGE AND THROWS THE PAPIER-MACHÉ HEAD TO ONE SIDE. **HE** REACHES UNDER THE GRATE TO THE SOOT AND BEGINS TO RUB IT INTO HIS HANDS AND FACE.

THE MOOR TURNS BACK TOWARDS THE AUDIENCE. IT IS **IAGO**, BLACKED UP, AND HE PLAYS **OTHELLO** LIKE **OLIVIER** DID, WITH ALL THE NUANCE AND SOPHISTICATION OF **AL JOLSON**.

“THAT’S HE THAT
WAS OTHELLO.
HERE I AM.”

WHEN “OTHELLO” FINALLY ALLOWS EMILIA TO ENTER, SHE RUSHES TO DESDEMONA’S SIDE. DISTRAUGHT AT HER MISTRESS’ DEATH, SHE DOES NOT LOOK AT “OTHELLO”. SHE CAN ONLY STARE NUMBLY AT THE CORPSE.

ONLY WHEN, HEARING HIM DRAW HIS SWORD, EMILIA FINALLY STANDS TO CONFRONT “OTHELLO”, DOES SHE SEE HER HUSBAND WITHIN HIM, BOTH MEN IN ONE BODY LIKE SOME GROTESQUE WORK OF CUBISM.

EMILIA CALLS OUT FOR HELP. IAGO KILLS EMILIA AND BEGINS TO FLEE. OTHELLO RUNS ONSTAGE AND TACKLES HIM TO THE GROUND.

THEY WRESTLE UNTIL IAGO LIES DEFEATED AND UNABLE TO MOVE. OTHELLO DESPAIRS AT WHAT IAGO HAS MADE OF HIM.

AS LODOVICO AND CASSIO ENTER AND ARREST IAGO, OTHELLO FINALLY GETS TO PLAY ALL PARTS OF HIMSELF (ALL TOO LATE) AND THE PLAY CONCLUDES AS IT USUALLY DOES.



RESEARCH:

KEITH HAMILTON COBB'S PLAY *AMERICAN MOOR*, AS WELL AS HIS MYRIAD WRITINGS ON THE TOPIC, INCLUDING HIS 2020 ESSAY FOR THE FOLGER SHAKESPEARE LIBRARY, *THE IRONY OF THE AMERICAN MOOR*.

W.E.B. DU BOIS' BOOK *THE SOULS OF BLACK FOLK*

ANIA LOOMBA'S BOOK *SHAKESPEARE, RACE AND COLONIALISM*.

BEN OKRI'S *LEAPING OUT OF SHAKESPEARE'S TERROR – FIVE MEDITATIONS ON OTHELLO*, AN ESSAY FROM HIS BOOK *WAYS OF BEING FREE*

GHANAIAN-BRITISH ACTOR **HUGH QUARSHIE**'S WRITINGS ON *OTHELLO*, BOTH IN 1998 (*SECOND THOUGHTS ON OTHELLO*) AND 2016 (*PLAYING OTHELLO*), AS WELL AS THE DEBATE *IS OTHELLO A RACIST PLAY* AT THE RSC [AVAILABLE ON YOUTUBE] BETWEEN HIM, FELLOW ACTOR **LUCIAN MSAMATI**, AND HISTORIAN **ONYEKA NUBIA**.

AYANNA THOMPSON'S BOOKS *PASSING STRANGE* AND *BLACKFACE (OBJECT LESSONS)*, HER LECTURE *SHAKESPEARE AND BLACKFACE/SHAKESPEARE AND UNFREEDOM* [AVAILABLE ON YOUTUBE] AS WELL AS HER INTRO TO THE ARDEN SHAKESPEARE'S EDITION OF *OTHELLO*.

OBVIOUSLY I ALSO READ THE USUAL SHAKESPEARE PEOPLE ON *OTHELLO*, FROM COLERIDGE TO ELIOT, BLOOM TO BRADLEY. BUT I THINK THEY'VE ALL GOTTEN ENOUGH PRESS.



LAURENCE OLIVIER AND MAGGIE SMITH IN *OTHELLO* (1965)