



Taming the Alien in Burge-Dexter's *Othello* (1965)

Tarik Bouguerba

Assistant Professor, Ibn Tofail University, Morocco

Keywords

Shakespeare,
Othello,
Laurence Olivier,
Burge-Dexter,
film theatre,
nation-building,
exclusion,
inclusion,
blacks.

ABSTRACT

The article offers a thorough analysis of Burge-Dexter's filmed theatre Othello (1965) and traces the process wherein Shakespeare's grand narrative heightens racial politics in the British context. Such a reading I take up seems to shake and problematise Laurence Olivier's impersonation of Othello as a black external other who has systematically been excluded along lines where blacks as Europe's internal others. This article also pins down acts of narration and representation the production offered and explores how Olivier's apparent anxiety about maintaining his civilized control over a savage character becomes a platform where blacks in Britain are seen as outsiders who had failed to contribute to the nation-building back then. The article eventually questions the social-political relevance this production provoked in view of how Olivier's Othello reflects how black immigrants were not at ease at a time 'keep Britain white' was confirmed.

I. INTRODUCTION

This article takes off from the premise that filmic rendition of Shakespeare's *Othello* was in itself a politically liberating act. Such a rendition did shake the traditional Shakespearean establishment which treated the popular bard as English cultural asset that should be safely guarded within the confines of the playhouse or the opera house. Taking Shakespeare to the movie theater was in the eyes of so many traditionalists an insult to the spirit of the man and his monumental works.

Laurence Olivier's characterization of *Othello* attests to how blacks' have become subjects to systematic exclusion in which nationalism seems to move towards a morbid celebration of England and Englishness from which blacks are systematically excluded.

Being of a theatrical mode, the production this article explores is a formidable performance of *Othello* where Olivier's appropriation of the character reflects the post-colonial anxiety *white* Britain had entertained for so long. Although the production is not praised for its sacrifice of cinematic potential, the film is however appreciated for Olivier's performance and its contemporary relevance.

My reading of Burge-Dexter's *Othello* includes an examination of Laurence Olivier's impersonation of the

Moor in view of how otherness is constructed; which was seen by Anne Sukura Meredith as generally conceived outside Europe but "along lines first developed in relation to or patterned on Europe's internal others."¹ Such a reading of Olivier's creation of *Othello* allows the deconstruction of British racism as a collective and structural phenomenon. Olivier's performance is insidiously informed by xenophobic and racist sentiment attitudes that breed new racial others. Such performances, although on the surface of it free of racial sentiment, turn attributes such as skin into signs of otherness that justifies hegemonic practices of domination, inclusion and exclusion of others.²

These hegemonic practices are provoked by how the Britons came to define themselves. When Olivier, Britain's idol at the time, takes *Othello* to the stage and summons all the craft and artistry required to supposedly do justice to the character, he brought to the fore a version of nationalism that was characterized by Paul Gilroy as "a

¹Meredith Anne Skura 'Reading *Othello*'s Skin: Contexts and Pretexts'. *Philological Quarterly*. Summer/Fall2008, Vol. 87 Issue 3/4. P. 327.

²Ibid. P.300. Other attributes that flow out in constructing this new identity in Laurence Olivier's performance of *Othello* is communicated through his West Indian accent that correctly situated him outside the British identity.

morbid celebration of England and Englishness from which blacks are systematically excluded.”³ Oliver’s Othello is meant to define himself as a black either as a problem’ or victim, always to be suspended from the history of the nation.⁴

Barbara Hodgdon would therefore be useful to my reading of this production as she maintained that “Olivier’s Othello is an example of how cultural and theatrical fantasies foment the stereotypical perception of blacks and blackness. In her view, the real black body is relocated into and contained by a theatricality that revives a long tradition of whites blacking up for comic relief.”⁵



Sir Laurence Olivier as Othello

In John Dexter’s stage production for the National Theatre in 1965, Olivier’s rendition of Othello was hailed by many critics as a towering performance. The virtuosity and histrionics displayed by Olivier will not guard him or his director against the polemic in which the entire production mired. Once the production was transposed from the stage to the reels, and henceforth available to a larger viewership, Olivier’s impersonation fell under further scrutiny. The production, will be the first filmic

³Paul Gilroy. *There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack: the Cultural Politics of Race and Nation. USA: the University of Chicago Press, 1991.*P.12

⁴Ibid. P.26.

⁵ Patricia Tatzpaugh. ‘The Tragedies of Love on Film’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Film. USA: Cambridge University Press, 2007.* P.157

production in colour, will come under fire mainly for how Dexter and Olivier handled skin colour. A white actor’s portrayal of Othello does not replicate the image of the Moor as pale-skinned, but a strikingly black African if not West-Indian.⁶ Speech rhythm was accentuated to match skin colour in the interest of some mode of contemporary social realism.⁷

Given the naturalistic mode in which it was inscribed, this production was by many accounts, a trenchant and powerful rendition of the source text. ⁸ The fact that Othello was presented at the National Theatre, an uncompromisingly British establishment, and trusted to Olivier, an undisputedly iconic figure, makes this production, in both its stage or screen versions, a truly national product that betrayed the anxieties of culture that is still experiencing contact with its formal colonial others. Harold Hobson recognized an important aspect of this Olivier’s performance,

[Olivier] has the wifful, tense and nervous frivolity of a man who is not at home with the people among whom he lives. He stands in the midst [of the senators] with an uneasy insolence. He speaks with a grave, increasing dignity, but at the end of his account of his courtship he laughs apologetically, like a man to ingratiate himself with people he distinctively distrusts.⁹

The uneasiness felt by Olivier’s Othello within a dismissive community makes him retreat to his own psychological territory in the hope of mitigating the effect of racism that resulted from venturing into other heavily guarded territories. Stuart Hall describes this “work of racism as being directed to secure [the blacks] over here and [the whites] over there, to fix each in its appointed species place.”¹⁰

⁶Anthony Davies. ‘An Extravagant and Wheeling Stranger of Here and Everywhere’. *Characterizing Othello on Film: Exploring Seven Film Adaptations in Shakespeare in Southern Africa.*Vol.23, 2011.P. 16.

⁷Ibid.

⁸ James Fisher ‘Olivier and the Realistic Othello’ in *Literature Film Quarterly*, 1, no.4. (1973). P.322.

⁹Harold Hobson,*The Sunday Times*, In Kenneth Taynan. P.104. See Anthony Davies. ‘An Extravagant and Wheeling Stranger of Here and Everywhere’.*Characterizing Othello on Film: Exploring Seven Film Adaptations in Shakespeare in Southern Africa.*Vol.23, 2011.P. 16.

¹⁰Eds. Stuart Hall, Paul Du Gay.*Questions of Cultural Identity.*Sage Publications (1996).P.99.

The aspect that elicited the greatest theatrical figure of the 20th century if not its greatest actor,¹¹ the most controversial aspect of Olivier's portrayal of the Moor is his blacking-up including the inadequacies of his make-up. Although such inadequacy does not harm Olivier's performance in its fine final form, the concept of Dexter's make-up remains more offensive than any other similar concepts refashioned in other film productions of

Shakespeare's *Othello*. An example of this would be Sergei Yutkevich whose rendition of *Othello* was evaluated as less racist compared to the unacceptable *over-racist* Olivier's performance.¹² If Shakespeare's *Venetian state* promises to such aliens more than tolerance and if it offers them a legitimate, valued and to some degree respected place within the social, economic and political community,¹³ his theatre-film production seems to have blurred this mythical image of Venice as a site for cultural tolerance in the way that Olivier gives "an outrageous impression of a theatrical stereotype."¹⁴ Such *primitiveness* characterizing the portrayal of Olivier's Othello was an *embarrassment*.¹⁵

The film remains merely a record of a captivatingly powerful performance, and its questionable theatrical appropriateness defines it as a watershed moment in the history of screening *Othello*.¹⁶ The film's canonicity resides in both historicity and histrionics, or put it differently, in both its rendition of blackness at a time of concern over black migration flows into the island. At the heart of such conflation between history and histrionics is Olivier's famous reaction to his make-up 'I am, I... I am Othello.'¹⁷

In monitoring the nationalist pulse and recording British anxiety over the influx of black immigrants into the social and ethnic fabric the island(s), Olivier's *formidable* performance bespeaks deep-seated racial and colour prejudices. As Lena Cowen Orlin rightly suggested, "Olivier's transparent anxiety about maintaining" his

civilized control over a *savage* character, permeates the entire show.¹⁸ Olivier himself describes his attachment to Othello, stating that "Othello is my character. He's mine. He belongs to no one else; he belongs to me."¹⁹ This measure of possessiveness, acknowledging this thing of darkness, Othello his own, is indicative of a Prospero-Cliban relational postcolonial strategy devised to contain migratory flows. Anthony Davies' insight is pertinent in this instance. For him, "Olivier erases distinctions between self and other to take ownership of Othello, as though he were colonial property,"²⁰ and the exaggerated make-up – with which he invests Othello sets Othello far apart from whites.²¹

The filmed theatre-production even reflects the hostility towards blacks in the sixties on the grounds that they posed serious threat to the socio-economic stability of the country back in the sixties. The undue emphasis on Othello's blacks, through accentuated make-up and speech summons the image of *the exotic alien* who is often encircled by respectful but potentially hostile whites.²² Such a stereotypical portrait of a man who made himself indispensable to a society which denies him full membership is much indicative of how black immigrants were and are probably still systematically excluded from the participation in the rewriting of British history. As indicated in this production, Othello, the black immigrant, remains "the enemy within" and an active participant in "the unarmed invasion."²³

Olivier admits that although performing Othello this way entailed a successful erasure of the distinctions between self and other, "throwing away the white man was difficult but fascinating."²⁴ Sir Laurence Olivier would even imagine that he can often "feel black down to [his] soul" and subsequently "look out from a black man's world."²⁵ In my view, staging or filming *Othello* in the

¹¹See Anthony Holden's the Arts Column article in the *Observer*, Sunday, May 7th, 2007 in <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2007/may/27/theatre2>

¹²See Patricia Tatzpaugh. 'The Tragedies of Love on Film'. P. 157.

¹³See Graham Holderness. *Shakespeare and Venice*. UK: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2010. P.93.

¹⁴See Patricia Tatzpaugh. 'The Tragedies of Love on Film'. P.157.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶See 'An Extravagant and Wheeling Stranger of Here and Everywhere'. Characterizing Othello on Film: Exploring Seven Film Adaptations in *Shakespeare in Southern Africa*. Vol.23, 2011.P. 16. While many were just significant stage productions with white actors blacking up for the role of Othello, none of them has this remarkable memorability of Olivier's characterization of Othello. Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid. P.17.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹See 'An Extravagant and Wheeling Stranger of Here and Everywhere'. Characterizing Othello on Film: Exploring Seven Film Adaptations in *Shakespeare in Southern Africa*. Vol.23, 2011.P. 17.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹This exaggerated make-up implies the British historical rhetoric of blacks as aliens, sources of problems and even as victims of the entire socio-political system. Relentless efforts were made to set the British Othello outside the social structure.

²²See Patricia Tatzpaugh. 'The Tragedies of Love on Film'. P.157.

²³See Gilroy's *There Ain't no Black in the Union Jack*. P.45.

²⁴Laurence Olivier. *On Acting*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986. P. 153.

²⁵Ibid. Barbara Hodgdon suggests that Olivier's characterization of Othello draws on the idea that mimicry might efface and completely obliterate notions of cultural difference and might ultimately dissemble such complexity of 'power relations between black and white bodies. See Barbara Hodgdon. 'Race-

Olivier style betrays a genuine concern over the self and a clear indication that blacks, as members of *alien cultures*, constitute direct menace to the homogeneity that Britain has been fighting to preserve. Right Wing politicians of the times ascribed the precipitation of the National Decline to the influx of black immigrants to British islands in the sixties.²⁶ The Dexter-Olivier joint project could therefore be considered an indictment of a migratory situation that jeopardized the whole idea of Britishness. Laurence Olivier plays the Moor as “a blue-black velvet Negro with a hip-rolling swagger that lapses, with his descent to the bestial into a slinking crouch. He rolls his eyes and laughs with his tongue pressed impudently against his lip.”²⁷

Whilst the production is not praised for its total sacrifice of cinematic potential, ²⁸the film is most vigorously defended on the grounds of Olivier’s characterization with its strong contemporary social relevance and for its great value as a record of Olivier’s theatrical power in the role.²⁹ The film however fails to communicate an authentic theatricality because the camera constantly focuses too often on only one character.³⁰The film’s failure to achieve a satisfactory cinematic stature also stems from the adamant closeness of the camera.³¹ Brushing a red rose across his lips, Olivier’s remarkable performance of the Moor character marks the already-existing difference between “the real thing” and the painted-on new identity of Othello’s colonial theatrical (cinematic as well) legacy, writing back to the location of an actor who is much like Frantz Fanon’s “Negro” would first experience what it means to be black in an insidiously *negrophobic* society- as was Britain- where blackness, in

ing *Othello*, Re-engendering White-out’ in *Shakespeare The Movie: Popularizing the Plays on Film, TV and Video*. Eds. Lynda E. Boose and Richard Burt. Britain: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 1997. P.26. For Hodgdon, Olivier’s Othello confirms an absolute fidelity to white stereotypes about blackness. Ibid.

²⁶ Gilroy’s *There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack*. P.46. Probably repositioning *Othello* in such a context where the political system went to great lengths to exclude blacks from the socio-political scene would rather be communicated through Olivier’s provocative rendition of the role.

²⁷See ‘Othello by Stuart Burge : Antony Havelock-Allen ; John Braebourne’, Review by Constance Brown in *Film Quarterly*, Vol.19, No. 4. (Summer, 1966).P.50.

²⁸Ibid.P. 48.

²⁹See Anthony Davies .*Filming Shakespeare’s Plays: The Adaptations of Laurence Olivier, Orson Welles, Peter Brook, Akira Kurosawa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988. P. 10.

³⁰Ibid. Jack Jorgens also emphasizes this unusual realistic tone of the portrayal of this Othello by referring to the meticulous naturalistic details of the performance. Ibid.

³¹Ibid. P. 13. Such awkwardness of the filmed version resides in the suitability of the picture to the small screen. The film has probably been ‘tailored for TV’. Ibid.

the colonizer’s terms, is concurrently a marker of identity and a problem, a site of existence and a source of resistance.³²Significant in this production is the emphasis on *Othello* as a site through which the problem of the black body in the white community gains considerable visibility. In his autobiography, Sir Laurence Olivier speaks of his ‘becoming’ Othello

Black all over my body, Max Factor 2880, then a lighter brown, then Negro No.2, a stronger brown. Brown on black to give a rich mahogany. Then the great trick: that glorious half-yard of chiffon with which I polished myself all over until I shone... The lips blueberry, the tight curled wig, the white of the eyes, whiter than ever and the black, black sheen that covered my flesh and bones, glistening in the dressing-room lights... I am, I... I am Othello... but Olivier is in charge. The actor is in control. The actor breathes into the nostrils of the character and the character comes to life. For this moment of time, Othello is my character- he’s mine. He belongs to no one else; he belongs to me.³³

Primarily seeking comic effects, such an exaggerated make-up problematizes the act of ‘staging gazer relations because it repels analysis by creating a complicity of racist ideologies and negrophobic attitudes with theatrical pleasure. A made-up Othello warrants that both blackness and whiteness, in this British context, remain separate, for fear of cultural miscegenation.³⁴

The dilemma Olivier’s Othello goes through is emphasized more in this production than in any other film versions of *Othello* as it creates a strong feeling of (un)belonging to the British nation.³⁵ Olivier’s

³²See Barbara Hodgdon. ‘Race-ing *Othello*, Re-engendering White-out’ in *Shakespeare The Movie: Popularizing the Plays on Film, TV and Video*. Eds. Lynda E. Boose and Richard Burt. Britain: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 1997. P.27.

³³Laurence Olivier. *On Acting*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986. PP. 158,159.

³⁴See Barbara Hodgdon. ‘Race-ing *Othello*, Re-engendering White-out’ in *Shakespeare The Movie: Popularizing the Plays on Film, TV and Video*. Eds. Lynda E. Boose and Richard Burt. Britain: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 1997. P.26. For Hodgdon, “putting race matters succinctly, blacking up is whitening out”. Ibid.

³⁵This dilemma the British Othello lived is indicative of how new British identities were and are still invented and how other new transnational identities are also transplanted living new

characterization, portrayal as well as impersonation of Othello testify to how difficult it is for a black to exist within the English language and into an afro-Caribbean tradition.³⁶ Olivier's Othello perhaps articulates forms of 'writing back' to the Empire in its British version through which 'the silent' black Othello speaks and acts on a territory taken back from this Empire.³⁷ Metaphorically speaking, Olivier seems to have revisited Gilles Deleuze's concept of territory as concurrently geographical, literary, political, as well as linguistic. Through the West Indian accent he adopts, Olivier has given voice to the peoples of the Caribbean and simultaneously claims to occupy the physical and theatrical territory in question.³⁸

The film's portrayal of Olivier's Othello as 'an extravagant stranger' is quite compelling for the deep hue of the skin. Othello's deep skin blackness profusely contrasts with the whiteness of his teeth, eyes, range of voice, his stabbing gaze and his physical presence on screen; thereby giving his character a stature markedly different from the Venetians-white British- around him. The array of his externalized emotions puts him at further distance from both Cypriots and Venetians.³⁹

Olivier plays not a tragedy of 'broken trust' but a tragedy of wild jealousy. Dexter roots the tragedy in a real socio-political context although literally the film's world is played out in a meagre theatrical style. Brabantio's fear of his white daughter "making the beast with two backs" with the black Moor also emphasizes the pertinent concept

experiences. Transnationalism is a multifaceted, multi-local process. *Transnationalism from Below*. Ed. Michael Peter Smith and Luis Eduardo Guarnizo. New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1998. P. 6. It is also useful to read *Othello* in the British context in the way that transnationalism is always used as a counter-hegemonic space where the black can act and counteract. Ibid. P.5.

³⁶Alexander Irvine. "Betray Them Both, Or Give Back What They Give": Derek Walcott's Deterritorialization of Western Myth' in *Journal of Caribbean Literatures*; Vol.4, No.1 (Fall 2005). P. 124.

³⁷See Edward Said. *Culture and Imperialism*. USA: Vintage, 1993. P. 31.

³⁸Alexander Irvine. "Betray Them Both, Or Give Back What They Give": Derek Walcott's Deterritorialization of Western Myth' in *Journal of Caribbean Literatures*; Vol.4, No.1 (Fall 2005). P. 124.

³⁹See 'An Extravagant and Wheeling Stranger of Here and Everywhere'. Characterizing Othello on Film: Exploring Seven Film Adaptations in *Shakespeare in Southern Africa*. Vol.23, 2011. P. 16. Probably the reason why the film's attempt to alienate the Moor is emphasized in this British version than in any other previous or forthcoming version of *Othello* is simply that Othello in this British context alludes to the migratory flows to Britain during the Sixties.

Othello could make for contemporary audiences.⁴⁰ Whilst Orson Welles's Othello, for example, is 'everyman', Sir Laurence Olivier's is a *black* everyman.⁴¹ Olivier's rendition of the Moor of Venice is chimes with Derek Walcott's awareness about the schizophrenic condition felt by (post) colonial subjects, the tearing ambivalence that results from the curious blend of love and hate for things English. In 1956's 'A Far Cry From Africa' Walcott asks

I who am poisoned with the blood of both,
Where shall I turn, divided to the vein?
I who have cursed
The drunken officer of British rule, now choose
Between this Africa and the English tongue I
love.⁴²

Olivier's Othello is an Othello 'poisoned with the blood of both'; an Othello whose loyalty to the Union Jack is bound to be undermined by the feeling of dismissal, rejection and contempt he feels. Unconsciously, Olivier, the British legendary, attests to the emergence of such 'a new political identity' that was trying to carve some space within British society in the sixties, but which would later fully claim the rights to both recognition and difference.

Olivier's strong sense of Britishness made him foreground the inferior status of Othello in relation to other character, using all his craft, as a naturalistic actor, to create effects of psychological realism. Olivier whips himself constantly into wrath which increases into shattering, furious hysteria that contrasts with the stoicism and composure for the British mind is famously known for. Olivier's boastfulness and perceptible self-esteem, comes across as a lurking sense of 'inferiority'. Othello's purported confident status is potentially shakeable and it would take only a slight push from the villainous Iago to throw the Moor into a fit of murderous jealousy that borders on madness.⁴³ To convey such a psychological unease, Olivier executes the scenes of jealousy with terrific, savage, outrageous intensity that earned him the

⁴⁰See Jack Jorgens. P. 192.

⁴¹Ibid. I fully endorse Jorgens's argument that Olivier's Othello is an ideological statement on how blacks are socially and politically discarded from participating in the socio-political life. A black is not to make 'the beast with two backs' with a white woman, and he should not have ruled the white army. Destabilizing and interrupting such a white British tradition would be to accept an Othello in Caribbean character taking the position of people of white noble siege.

⁴²Walcott in 'A Far Cry from Africa' cited in Alexander Irvine. 'Betray Them Both, Or Give Back what They Give: Derek Walcott's Deterritorialization of Western Myth' in *Journal of Caribbean Literatures*, Vol.4. No. 1. (Fall 2005). P. 123.

⁴³See 'Othello by Stuart Burge : Antony Havelock-Allen ; John Braebourne', Review by Constance Brown in *Film Quarterly*, Vol.19, No. 4. (Summer, 1966). P.49.

distinction of 'a bravura actor. It must be stressed that Olivier's rendition of Othello was not merely an intellectual and emotional experience, but essentially a physical experience as well.⁴⁴

If Welles has, to some extent, managed to blur the racial borders in Shakespeare's play and strip it of its 'racial thematics' or at least allay the over-"racial difference to the fundamentally cinematic grid of black and white photography,"⁴⁵Olivier has perhaps failed to even shake this existing 'colour bar' between whites and blacks in Britain. Instead of striving for some political, ideological or moral correctness of cinema, this film version of *Othello*, in particular, seems to have fallen into the same 'Hollywood racial trap'.⁴⁶The film is also disappointing in cutting away from the frame much of the social as well as spatial context for the action. If William Shakespeare has brought the play to its grand dramatic zenith through the Moor's appearance before the Venetian Senate, the film under study remains a mere record of Sir Laurence Olivier's 'formidable' performance, as there are only fleeting indications of how the Venetians come to accept Othello.⁴⁷ What attests to this disappointment of the film experience is Olivier's meticulous aesthetic preparation for *Othello* that would transform him into the Moor. "The whole thing will be in the lips and the colour." "I have been looking at Negroes lips every time I see them on the train or anywhere, and actually their lips seem black or blueberry-coloured really than red."⁴⁸

⁴⁴Ibid. P.50. This awkwardness communicated through Olivier's rendition is much indicative of a significant moment in the British history. A statement could probably be made here is that blacks had contributed and are still contributing into what has been historically known as 'the British Malaise'.

⁴⁵Holderness, Graham. *Shakespeare and Venice*. UK: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2010. P.125.

⁴⁶Deborah Cartmell. *Interpreting Shakespeare on Screen*. UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000. P.67.

⁴⁷See 'An Extravagant and Wheeling Stranger of Here and Everywhere'. Characterizing Othello on Film: Exploring Seven Film Adaptations in *Shakespeare in Southern Africa*.Vol.23, 2011.P. 17. Such refuting attitude of Othello communicated through the film production of the play is indicative of how black immigrants were often and are still systematically excluded from participating in political affairs, confirming Britain's striking political slogan of the sixties 'Keep Britain White'.

⁴⁸Laurence Olivier speaking to *Life Magazine* in <http://www.arogundade.com/sir-laurence-oliviers-othello-in-blackface.html> . This experience of voyeurism Olivier went through in filming *Othello* is much more significant in the way it draws from colonial rhetorics governing the relationship between colonizers and their colonial subjects: surveillance. For other colonial rhetorics, see David Spurr's *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing, and Imperial Administration*. USA: Duke University Press, 1993 in which he speaks in details of other tactics used by imperial powers in

If *Othello* is very specifically a drama of concealed perspectives, Laurence Olivier, in my view, had not failed to articulate the racial prejudice circulating in the white tradition of / in Britain. The production is also a significant attempt to accurately express Britain's *anxiety* of such a social mobility blacks of Britain have already achieved namely in affairs of the state. Watching such a remarkable performance would only be an attempt to interrupt the British white working conceptions of its internal black others. "This eye-rolling, pink-lipped, tongue-thrusting coal-black Pappy is a demonstration of the most rearguard white man's concept of the *primitive negro*.⁴⁹Only in Burge-Dexter could the spectator travel through the catalogues whites are making of their blacks. As Allan Seymour stated, "persons who like their Shakespeare poetic and uncontaminated contact by any contact with sordid reality could well be appalled by the prosaic rendering of the Moor as a cheeky nigger who has sauntered in from Westbourne Park Road."⁵⁰

Through his Shakespeare film, Olivier, in his capacity as filmmaker and actor, "was trying to sell realism in Shakespeare" although "[he] does not speak poetry badly, he does not speak it at all."⁵¹Although being "treated with immense sweetness, kindness, thoughtfulness, consideration, generosity by all his family," it was this atmosphere of 'genteel poverty' that fired his talent as an actor.⁵²A realistic mode would only have brought the production into a moment where the Moor of Venice could create an accurate concept of blacks in modern Britain. An example of this should be confirmed through Olivier's natural physical strength, and how it had contributed to such a formidable characterization of Othello. On being asked about how he keeps himself fit for difficult roles as Othello, Laurence Olivier comments

I keep myself very fit now, I have to. I go to a gym twice or three times a week, not merely to look tremendously muscular, but I have to keep fit for my job. I'm

dealing with the inferior colonial subjects. Some of these tactics are surveillance, naturalization, appropriation, aestheticization, negation, classification, debasement, affirmation, insubstantialization, eroticization, and resistance.

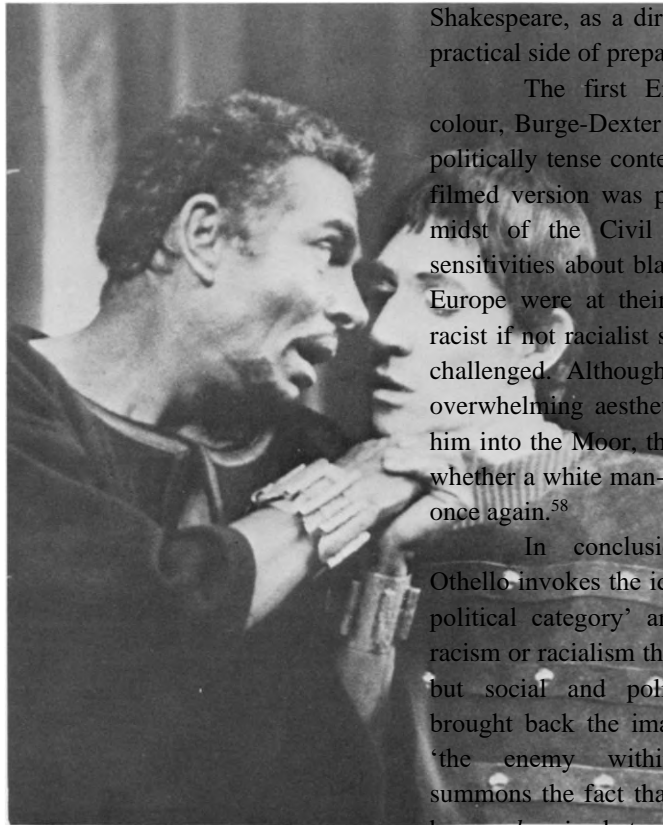
⁴⁹Alan Seymour cited in Alexander Anikst, in *Othello: The National Theatre Production*, Ed. Kenneth Tynan. New York: Stein and Day, 1967. P.13. I totally criticise this idea of describing the black immigrant as negro.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹See Laurence Olivier and Kenneth Tynan. 'The Actor: Tynan Interviews Olivier' in *The Tulane Drama Review*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (Winter, 1966). P. 82.

⁵²Ibid. P. 74

determined to hold on my job. I love it.... Some idiotic childish reasoning tells me that a strong body means a strong heart and I daresay it will look after me.⁵³



Laurence Olivier as Othello with Frank Finlay as Iago

Othello remains therefore the most difficult role Olivier had ever played in his career as an actor. He did never feel physically equipped for the part in different respects. That was what had troubled him. “[He] didn’t think that [he] had the voice for it”. Olivier went through a rigorous physical training course,⁵⁴ given he was very reluctant at the very beginning to play a British Othello. “It was a terror” and “it was almost impossible” to play the Moor.⁵⁵ Such an impossibility to play the role resides in the urgent need for an animalistic tone that the character of the Moor highly requires. Kenneth Tynan therefore argues that “there is also a sense of a caged animal” in Olivier’s performance.⁵⁶ It was almost difficult on the part of a noble

British citizen to discard his white identity and subsequently act out the part by investing so much in the acclaimed savage nature of blacks. It was also difficult for him to act out in a scene where ‘a black man’ will kill a white woman. However, I would not fully endorse such a claim and go even further to argue that throughout his work in *Othello*, as an actor, and his other adaptations of Shakespeare, as a director, Laurence Olivier “stresses the practical side of preparing a role- to observe, to listen...”.⁵⁷

The first English film version of *Othello* in colour, Burge-Dexter’s attempt to film the play in such a politically tense context was authentic but irrelevant. This filmed version was produced when the USA was in the midst of the Civil Rights movement and at a time sensitivities about black identities both in America and in Europe were at their peak. It was also produced when racist if not racialist stereotypes were also being critically challenged. Although Olivier was meticulous about the overwhelming aesthetic preparation that would transform him into the Moor, the entire film experience interrogated whether a white man- as Olivier- should ever play the role once again.⁵⁸

In conclusion, Olivier’s characterization of Othello invokes the idea that ‘blacks’, as a race, remain ‘a political category’ and these forms of institutionalizing racism or racialism this film production carried along were but social and political constructs. Olivier therefore brought back the image of ‘the black immigrant’ as the ‘the enemy within’.⁵⁹ His formidable performance summons the fact that in British history there has always been a barrier between the white part of the world and ‘those who live within the veil of colour’.⁶⁰ Othello, in Olivier’s style, is much more a problem for than a victim of Iago’s socio-political agenda.⁶¹ The performance was also authentic in the sense that Olivier submits to the white will, and that Othello’s identity, in a British context as this of the Sixties, had been much harder to pin down given

⁵³Ibid. P. 79.

⁵⁴Ibid. P.93.

⁵⁵Ibid. P.92. ‘It’s very tough on your imagination, it’s very tough on your resourcefulness of variations of all kinds, and therefore, it’s also a very great strain physicality’. ‘Othello is all of that and you have to black up as well’. Ibid.

⁵⁶Ibid. P.94.

⁵⁷Albert E. Kalson. ‘On Acting: by Laurence Olivier’, a Review in *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol.38, No.4 (Winter, 1987). P.544.

⁵⁸See <http://www.arogundade.com/sir-laurence-oliviers-othello-in-blackface.html>

⁵⁹See Paul Gilroy. *There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack: the Cultural Politics of Race and Nation. USA: the University of Chicago Press, 1991.* PP. 34, 38.

⁶⁰This is Dubois’ argument cited in Paul Gilroy. *There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack: the Cultural Politics of Race and Nation. USA: the University of Chicago Press, 1991.* Paul Gilroy. P. 11.

⁶¹Such a paradox in representing Otherness is reminiscent of how Venetians have always adopted double standards in their strategy of treating their others. Othello is always the victim while a character like Shylock has always been treated as hero. See Graham Holderness’s *Shakespeare and Venice.* P.114.

that a Moor could be the African, Muslim, Christian, North African, Dark-skinned, Black immigrant, black African-American, or black South African. Iago's racist attitudes against Othello could also be ultimately justified either as psychological or socio-political.⁶²

II. CONCLUSION

This article on Burge-Dexter's *Othello* production has managed to pin down rites of narration and representation of Shakespeare's *Othello* in a filmotheatrical mode. Such a production, daring as it is, becomes part of a contemporary trend to make the classic available to audiences. As this article seems to be an attempt to examine tactics of appropriating a Renaissance narrative to the British context where a black, I mean the British Othello of the 1960's here, is a black who was denied agency in contributing to the nation-building in the UK. Being staged in the National Theatre, an ingenuously British house, and Othello being trusted to Olivier, an iconic white British figure of the time, this production, both in its stage and screen versions, historicises for an important moment in the British history where Great Britain is in contact with its former colonial others. Oliver's Othello is therefore represented much more a problem to Britain than a victim of Iago's dream to systematically deny blacks' agency in the writing of the Kingdom's history from within. In short, whilst this production under question is not praised for its total sacrifice of cinematic potential, the film is yet heartily safeguarded on the grounds of Olivier's characterization and with its tough contemporary social relevance in Britain.

REFERENCES

- [1] Anikst, Alexander in *Othello: The National Theatre Production*, Ed. Kenneth Tynan New York: Stein and Day, 1967
- [2] Cartmell, Deborah. *Interpreting Shakespeare on Screen* (2000). UK: Palgrave Macmillan
- [3] Davies, Anthony. *Filming Shakespeare's Plays: The Adaptations of Laurence Olivier, Orson Welles, Peter Brook, Akira Kurosawa* (1988). UK: Cambridge University Press.
- [4] Davies, Anthony. 'An Extravagant and Wheeling Stranger of Here and Everywhere'. Characterizing Othello on Film: Exploring Seven Film Adaptations in *Shakespeare in Southern Africa*. Vol.23, (2011).
- [5] E. Kalson, Albert. 'On Acting: by Laurence Olivier', a Review in *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol.38, No.4 (Winter, 1987).
- [6] Fisher, James. 'Olivier and the Realistic Othello' in *Literature Film Quarterly*, 1, no.4. (1973).
- [7] Gilroy, Paul *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: the Cultural Politics of Race and Nation*. (1991) USA: the University of Chicago Press.
- [8] Gilroy, Paul. *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line*. (2000) USA: Harvard University Press.
- [9] Hall, Stuart and Du Gay, Paul. Eds. *Questions of Cultural Identity*. Sage Publications (1996).
- [10] Hodgson, Barbara. 'Race-ing Othello, re-engendering white-out' in *Shakespeare the Movie II: Popularizing the Plays on Film, TV, Video, and DVD*. Eds. Lynda E. Boose and Richard Burt (1997, republished in 2003). U.K: Routledge,.
- [11] Hodgson, Barbara. *The Shakespeare Trade: Performances and Appropriations* (1998) Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- [12] Hodgson, Barbara. 'Race-ing Othello, Re-engendering White-out' in *Shakespeare The Movie: Popularizing the Plays on Film, TV and Video*. Eds. Lynda E. Boose and Richard Burt (1997). Britain: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group.
- [13] Holden, Anthony. *Laurence Olivier, Volume 1990. Part 1* (1990) Indiana: Collier Books.
- [14] Holden, Anthony. *Laurence Olivier* (1990) UK: Collier Books.
- [15] Holden's the Arts Column article in the *Observer*, Sunday, May 7th, 2007 in <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2007/may/27/theatre2>
- [16] Holderness, Graham. *Shakespeare and Venice* (2010). UK: Ashgate Publishing Company.
- [17] Irvine, Alexander. "Betray Them Both, Or Give Back What They Give": Derek Walcott's Deterritorialization of Western Myth' in *Journal of Caribbean Literatures*; Vol.4, No.1 (Fall 2005).
- [18] Jorgens, Jack J. *Shakespeare on Film* (1977). USA : Indiana University Press.
- [19] Laurence Olivier speaking to *Life Magazine* in <http://www.augundade.com/sir-laurence-oliviers-othello-in-blackface.html> .
- [20] Laurence Olivier and Kenneth Tynan. 'The Actor: Tynan Interviews Olivier' in *The Tulane Drama Review*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (Winter, 1966).
- [21] Olivier, Laurence. *On Acting* (1986). New York: Simon and Schuster.
- [22] 'Othello by Stuart Burge : Antony Havelock-Allen ; John Braebourne', Review by Constance Brown in *Film Quarterly*, Vol.19, No. 4. (Summer, 1966).
- [23] Smith, Peter, Michael and Eduardo Guarnizo, Luis. Eds. *Transnationalism from Below* (1998). New Jersey: Transaction Publishers.
- [24] Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism* (1993). USA: Vintage.
- [25] Skura, Meredith Anne. 'Reading Othello's Skin: Contexts and Pretexts'. (Summer/Fall 2008) *Philological Quarterly*. Vol. 87 Issue 3/4.

⁶²For further details on Othello's identity See Graham Holderness's *Shakespeare and Venice*. P. 47.

- [26] Spurr, David. *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing, and Imperial Administration* (1993). USA: Duke University Press.
- [27] Tatzpaugh, Patricia 'The Tragedies of Love on Film' in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Film* (2007). USA : Cambridge University Press.
- [28] Taynan, Kenneth. Ed. *Othello: The National Theatre Production* (1967). New York: Stein and Day.