

# “Othello”--Paul Robeson, Uta Hagen, Jose Ferrer, and others (1943)

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*Uta Hagen and Paul Robeson on stage*

During the 1943 Broadway season, the New York stage hosted an event which had never occurred in the United States: an African American actor performed the lead role in William Shakespeare’s “Othello.” On opening night in October, the crowd at the Shubert Theatre offered its praise of the production in multiple ovations. Critics raced to their typewriters following the show to record their thoughts on the historic revival. The “New York Herald Tribune” printed one of many glowing reviews noting that the show was “a tribute to the art that transcends racial boundaries.” In a letter to her parents back home in Great Britain, director Margaret Webster confided that the opening was one of the rare occasions onstage when everything came together and “magic happened.” Paul Robeson was the African American actor who headed the cast which included Uta Hagen as Desdemona and, her husband at the time, José Ferrer as Iago. Robeson and Webster both felt strongly that casting an actor of African descent was crucial to fulfilling Shakespeare’s vision of a Moor in Venice. Robeson’s presence onstage was also vital to opening the doors of Broadway stages for future African American actors and playwrights. Robeson, however, had not always envisioned himself as the world-renowned and path-breaking artist that he ultimately became.

Born in Princeton, New Jersey, in 1898, Paul Robeson’s upbringing was humble economically but girded in the strength of the African American church community. Raised mainly by his father, a minister, Robeson was taught to always aim to reach his full potential in academics and all other endeavors. This turned out to be crucial advice for the young Robeson whose talents blossomed in many arenas. He excelled at his studies as well as singing, oratory, debate, and numerous sports. A high school English teacher had the foresight to cast Robeson in a production of “Othello.” The youthful actor, however, was not so sure of her selection. In his memoir, Robeson recalled feeling “nervous and scared” and unconvinced that he should pursue acting as a career.

In fact, he did not study acting but rather was on a course to law school in his undergraduate years at Rutgers University. Robeson, a Phi Beta Kappa scholar, was a nationally recognized football player by the time he arrived in New York City in 1919 to attend Columbia Law School. The stars were aligning for Robeson, but not in the direction that he anticipated. Upon completing law school, Robeson ran straight into the color line when he sought work as a lawyer in the city. Fortunately, the arts were blossoming in the neighborhood where Robeson lived: Harlem. Since he had the time, he took a role in a play at the YMCA and thus began what was to be a storied acting career on both stage and screen.

By 1930, Robeson was well known as an artist having performed on the New York stage in numerous productions including several well-received plays by Eugene O'Neill. That year, he was invited to play Othello in a revival on London's West End. While this interpretation of the play received mixed reviews, many of which were animated by racial prejudice, this experience did help Robeson mature as an actor. It also planted the idea of mounting an "Othello" revival one day in New York. Robeson spent much of the decade of the 1930s abroad performing in concerts across Europe and acting in films. In 1936, Robeson flew to Hollywood to be in the film version of "Show Boat" in which he revisited the role of Joe that had been adored by theater-goers who especially loved his version of the song "Ole Man River." The following year, Robeson made public his growing political consciousness in a strong anti-fascist speech at a London event for refugees of the Spanish Civil War. This political awareness was also fused to his vision for an interracial "Othello" in the United States.

When Paul Robeson teamed up with Margaret Webster she was an accomplished director who was recognized by Brooks Atkinson in the "New York Times" as "the finest director of Shakespeare this town ever had." She and Robeson both made a powerful case for casting a black Othello which broke the longstanding tradition of the character being played by a white actor wearing dark makeup. Webster argued that a black Othello is the key to making the jealousy plot succeed because, as she wrote in her book, "Shakespeare Without Tears," "the difference in race between Othello and every other character in the play is indeed, the heart of the matter." In a letter to "PM" magazine, Robeson explained his belief that "this is a play which is of great interest to us moderns today as we face the whole problem of relations between different races and cultures." Finding a theatre to host an interracial cast, however, was, at first, difficult. Following a jubilant reception to a preview in the summer of 1942 at the Brattle Theatre in Cambridge, Massachusetts, the Theatre Guild, who was producing the show, was able to find a home for an engagement in New York. The show did not open on Broadway until the autumn of 1943 due to Robeson's busy concert schedule.

There had been some whispering about tensions over a black actor kissing--and indeed murdering--a white actress onstage in America where racism, and fear of miscegenation, were deeply rooted in the culture. To the relief and joy of the cast, the reception of Robeson as Othello was overwhelmingly positive. The revival ran for a total of 296 shows, shattering previous records for Shakespearean productions. The cast also mounted an eight-month U.S. tour which was historically significant not only for its interracial cast but also for the company's adamant refusal to perform in any segregated theaters. Segregation was the norm in many theaters in the North as well as the South at that time, and Robeson, supported by the cast, would not perform if racial segregation was occurring. The World War II context of the production was

also important. In an article in “The American Scholar,” Robeson pointed out that Othello lived at a time of transition when the Renaissance was beginning and medievalism was being broken asunder. Similarly, Robeson suggested that because of the current war “we stand at the end of one period in human history and before the entrance of a new.” Hopefully, he proposed, this could be the war which attained “speedy freedom and equality for all peoples.”

While there are many still photos and reviews by critics, this recording of “Othello” is the only artifact that documents the cast of the Broadway production in their own voices. Unfortunately, because it was recorded in a studio, and not onstage during a performance, it can be argued that the recording fails to recreate the “magic” of experiencing these actors before a live crowd. Nevertheless, the recording stands as a vital testament to one of the most significant chapters in the stage history of the United States.

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\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.