

Shakespeare from a Minority Point of View: Ted Lange's *Othello*

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Abstract: *Othello* (1989) is a little-known independent film directed and produced by Ted Lange. Released at the end of the 1980s, a decade of mounting racial tension in the United States, the film offers an interpretation of Shakespeare from a minority point of view. This examination of the director's motives and directorial choices reveals the strategies employed by Lange to make Shakespeare relevant and more available to a non-traditional audience, especially to African-Americans. In addition, delving into the acceptance and distribution difficulties that Ted Lange faced gives insight into the issue of discriminatory assumptions related to applying a minority point of view to a traditionally highbrow domain.

Keywords: Ted Lange, *Othello*, African-American, minority, discrimination

Theater artists worldwide strive to find ways such as “erecting a historical space” or investigating “new theater practices” to “connect modern audiences, raised on film and TV,” to the works of Shakespeare.¹ In the late 1980s Ted Lange developed a strategy to approach *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice* from a minority point of view to make the play relevant and more available to a non-traditional audience, especially to African Americans. His efforts culminated in the 1989 independent film *Othello*. The rejection of the film by domestic distributors, which was based on film quality and discriminatory assumptions related to applying a minority point

1 Michael Kahn, “Shakespeare meets the 21st century”, *The Washington Post*, August 3, 2012, (Accessed September 25, 2016), https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/shakespeare-meets-the-21st-century/2012/08/03/2562cc6a-d4ed-11e1-829d-8eedd9e3ac96_story.html?utm_term=.011134b50524.

of view to a traditionally highbrow domain, severely limited the viewing of the film as well as the consideration of Lange as a dramatic actor. Examining the directorial choices that Lange applied to his interpretation of *Othello* supports the idea of the cultural universality of Shakespeare, and highlighting the film's historical significance in terms of the racist attitudes that led to the distribution difficulties gives insight into how race was viewed in terms of accepted filmic content in 1980s American culture.

The American film versions of *Othello* have featured iconic white actors such as Orson Wells and Laurence Olivier. Some sources credit Laurence Fishburne as being the first African American to cinematically corporealize Shakespeare's Moor in Oliver Parker's 1995 film. However, those sources overlook earlier American films, which feature a person of color in the title role, that were not released by a major film studio but rather by independent film makers. One of these independent films is Ted Lange's *Othello* (1989).

Even though Ted Lange's film was well received at the 1989 Cannes Film Festival,² I found nothing about this atypical interpretation in academic journals. However, it was mentioned in a few academically oriented books. In *What Ever Happened to Orson Welles? A Portrait of an Independent Career*, Joseph McBride indirectly acknowledges the existence of Lange's independent film and the 1980 independent film directed by African American thespian Liz White³ by mentioning the actors cast as Othello. McBride wrote, "it took until late in the twentieth century for black actors such as Yaphet Kotto, Ted Lange, and Laurence Fishburne to be allowed to play Othello on the motion picture screen."⁴ In *Four Tragedies: Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth*, Kenneth Muir fleetingly mentions Lange's *Othello* as an "interesting experiment in mixed-race casting" and White's *Othello* as a film that "features an all-black cast."⁵ The most extensive discussion of Lange's film appears in *This Wide and Universal Theater*:

2 "Othello (1989)," *The New York Times* (Accessed December 13, 2014), <http://www.nytimes.com/movies/movie/154074/Othello/overview>.

3 Liz White shot her independent film *Othello* in stages between 1962 and 1966 but did not release it until 1980. Peter S. Donaldson discusses this film in-depth in "'Haply for I am Black': Liz White's *Othello*," *Shakespearean Films/Shakespearean Directors* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 127-144 and in "Liz White's Othello," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 38.4 (1987): 482-95.

4 Joseph McBride, *What Ever Happened to Orson Welles?: A Portrait of an Independent Career* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2006), 113.

5 William Shakespeare, *Four Tragedies: Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth*, ed. David Bevington and David Scott Kastan (NY: Bantam Dell, 2005), 307.

Shakespeare in Performance, Then and Now, in which David Bevington highlights it as “a comment on race relations in late twentieth-century Los Angeles.”⁶ Other books, such as *The Reel Shakespeare: Alternative Cinema and Theory* and *A History of Shakespeare on Screen: A Century of Film and Television*, merely place the film on a list or in an endnote.⁷

To compensate for the lack of prior research, I turned to primary sources. The use of a primary source such as a printed review of a specific cultural production or an interview “allows us to immerse ourselves in the look and feel of an era gone by, to understand its people.”⁸ Articles published in four well-known newspapers (*Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times*, *The Morning Call* and *San Francisco Chronicle*) and live interviews posted on the Internet proved to be valuable sources. I also discussed the film with Ted Lange during a short phone interview. Direct quotes from these sources are used frequently in this article for purposes of clarity and to give an accurate minority voice.⁹ The credibility of comments gleaned from various entertainment websites is similar to the credibility of comments made in editorials, so I considered them as opinion rather than as fact. A VHS video tape of the film is a part of the Ted Lange Collection at the Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee Theatre Research Institute at The Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio. Research on the film and filmmaker, employing the sources listed above, afforded insight into a minority guided interpretation of Shakespeare and led to a desire to give Ted Lange’s *Othello* academic attention.

Lange’s film was produced at the end of the 1980s, a decade strongly influenced by an administration¹⁰ that did little to support civil rights on the national level and in which racial tensions were mounting. The leadership of the African American community began to initiate non-violent expressions of discontent. In 1985 the National Association for the Advancement

6 David M. Bevington, *This Wide and Universal Theater: Shakespeare in Performance, Then and Now*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 157.

7 Lisa S. Starks-Estes and Courtney Lehmann, *The Reel Shakespeare: Alternative Cinema and Theory* (Madison [N.J.]: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2002), 268; Kenneth S. Rothwell, *A History of Shakespeare on Screen: A Century of Film and Television* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 294.

8 Allan M. Winken, *The Cold War: A History in Documents* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2000), 6.

9 Some quotes contain a dialect known as African-American English (AAE) or black vernacular. Quotes from live interviews were directly transcribed, so they may contain incomplete sentences or grammatical errors.

10 Ronald Reagan was President of the United States from January 1981 to January 1989.

of Colored People (NAACP) boycotted Steven Spielberg's film adaptation of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* because it was a white man's film of a black author's text, even though the cast and crew were mostly black or other minorities.¹¹ Neil Taylor attributes this boycott to the idea that if "a black character is represented by a white actor or a white company or production team, the black spectator may well be caught between an automatic *identification* with that black character and an *alienation* from the particular representation of black identity and experience."¹² In 1987, controversy swirled around the lack of recognition of Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*. The *New York Times* reported: "Forty-eight black writers and critics have signed a statement deploring the fact that Toni Morrison has not won a National Book Award or the Pulitzer Prize - something they attribute to 'oversight and harmful whimsy'."¹³ The appeal for fairness by the African American literary elite brought awareness to the issue and in April 1988 Morrison was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for fiction.¹⁴

In 1989 in the Cannes Film Festival market two films directed by African American directors were shown, Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* and Ted Lange's *Othello*. Lee's film about an intercity neighborhood where "the white-owned Sal's Famous Pizzeria is torched when black rage and racism ignite"¹⁵ became a critical and commercial success. It also matched the racial struggles faced by many African Americans. Willis Edwards, President of the Hollywood chapter of the NAACP, tagged Lee's film as a "powerful" film "that makes you think about what's going on in the world and what your responsibilities are in your own community and what you have to give back."¹⁶ On the other hand, Lange's film did not feature an African

11 Neil Taylor, "National and Racial Stereotypes in Shakespeare Films" in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Film*, ed. Russell Jackson (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 268.

12 Taylor 2000, 268.

13 Edwin McDowell, "48 Black Writers Protest By Praising Morrison," *The New York Times* (Accessed May 21, 2016), <http://www.nytimes.com/1988/01/19/books/48-black-writers-protest-by-praising-morrison.html>.

14 Dennis Hevesi, "Toni Morrison's Novel 'Beloved' Wins the Pulitzer Prize in Fiction," *The New York Times* (Accessed April 13, 2016), <http://www.nytimes.com/1988/04/01/nyregion/toni-morrison-s-novel-beloved-wins-the-pulitzer-prize-in-fiction.html>.

15 Mark Chalon Smith, "Movie Review: Spike Lee's 'We Cut Heads' Foretells Great Things: The movie maker's first film, produced in 1982 covers about the same ground as 'Do The Right Thing' and is sometimes clumsy but revealing. It will screen tonight at UC Irvine," *Los Angeles Times* (Accessed April 12, 2016), http://articles.latimes.com/1990-06-09/entertainment/ca-753_1_advanced-movie-maker.

16 Jack Mathews and Claudia Puig, "'Do the Right Thing' - What Does It Say About Race Relations?,"

American community or traditional black issues. Instead of presenting a struggle for equality, Ted Lange's *Othello* presented equality by featuring a Shakespearian actor/director who just happened to be an African American.

From an early age, Ted Lange was exposed to the theatre through his father, who was an actor at L.A.'s Ebony Showcase Theater, which "gave Blacks a chance to play non-stereotypical roles and show them as actors."¹⁷ In addition, his mother would often take him "to see ballet and civic light opera plays" in San Francisco.¹⁸ Lange's activities at school also helped opened the door to his passion for acting and for Shakespeare.

He'd found his calling after playing Macbeth in the ninth grade at Oakland's Golden Gate Junior High. He played the role of Banquo in "Macbeth" a few years later at Oakland Technical High (Anita Pointer of the singing Pointer Sisters was Lady Macbeth), where drama teacher Tom Wayne and his wife nurtured his talent. Wayne, who took him to plays and operas, told him that things were opening up for African Americans and that Lange could make a living as an actor.¹⁹

Tom Wayne's suggestion became a reality when Lange joined the original Broadway cast of *Hair* and then went on to make a living as a television actor and director.²⁰

Los Angeles Times (Accessed May 3, 2016), http://articles.latimes.com/1989-06-24/entertainment/ca-1917_1_racial-tension-film-early-screenings.

- 17 The Ebony Showcase Theater was founded in 1950 by Nick Stewart, a regular on the *Amos and Andy* television series. See "Nick Stewart, Actor Who Founded the Ebony Showcase Theater," *African American Registry* (Accessed January 20, 2015), http://www.aaregistry.org/historic_events/view/nick-stewart-actor-who-founded-ebony-showcase-theater. In regards to his father, see Mario Hemsley, "Morning Coffee With Mario Hemsley," interview with Ted Lange and J.D. Hall on *Paxstereo TV*, an Internet television network, on August 18, 2010 (Accessed May 15, 2015), www.paxstereo.tv/morningcoffee. Also available on Youtube in 10 parts (Accessed September 19, 2016), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KXsBdi3n0WQ>.
- 18 "Love Boat's Ted Lange," *Ebony*, March 1, 1981, 69.
- 19 Jesse Hamlin, "Ted Lange sails past 'Love Boat,'" *SFGATE.com* (Accessed March 23, 2016), <http://www.sfgate.com/entertainment/article/Ted-Lange-sails-past-Love-Boat-2660236.php>.
- 20 Regarding *Hair*, see "Ted Lange" at *Internet Broadway Database* (Accessed February 13, 2015), <http://ibdb.com/person.php?id=105539> and "Now And...Then" *Jet*, 75.17 (1989): 75. The acting role that made Ted Lange known to many Americans was Isaac Washington, the loveable cruise ship bartender, in the television sitcom *The Love Boat*. Regarding professional and academic accomplishments, see "Ted Lange," *J. Cast Productions* (Accessed September 22, 2016), <http://www.castproductions.com/tedlange.html>.

Jessie Hamlin noted that “Lange thought of himself as a dramatic and Shakespearean actor until he moved from New York to Los Angeles and got pegged as a funny guy.”²¹ In an entertainment website chat, Lange explained what led him back to Shakespeare and how he found himself studying at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts in London:

I was directing Lynn Redgrave on “The Love Boat,” and we started talking, and we talked about the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts, which I had heard of but had never gone to. And she encouraged me to check it out, and I did, and I found out that they had a special program in the summertime for Americans, but I had to get a letter of recommendation. So I got a letter of recommendation from Lynn Redgrave, went over there, studied Shakespeare, and the professor over there encouraged me to do “Othello.”²²

Inspired by his London experience, Lange returned to L.A. and produced a stage version of *Othello* at the Inter City Cultural Center, the first art institution in the United States to embrace the concept of multiculturalism.²³ As an extension of the live performance, Lange staged and filmed the production at various locations around Los Angeles, then produced it through Rockbottom Productions.²⁴

Interpretation from an African American Point of View

The full title of the play, *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice*, places the main character in a land that is not his heritage homeland. Thus, the

21 Hamlin.

22 Will Harris, “A Chat with Ted Lange...? You got it!” *premiumhollywood.com* (Accessed March 14, 2016), <http://www.premiumhollywood.com/2010/04/23/a-chat-with-ted-lange-you-got-it/>. Lange also discussed this in more detail in an interview with Robert Hooks for “The Urban Roundtable” on *IncomTV* (Accessed September 14, 2016), http://www.incomtv.com/video/video_more_urban_roundtable_shows.html.

23 Jan Breslauer, “A Trailblazer for Diversity: Long before it became popular, C. Bernard Jackson and the Inner City Cultural Center were preaching and gospel of multiculturalism,” (Accessed September 16, 2016), http://articles.latimes.com/1991-03-31/entertainment/ca.2329_1_cultural-center/2.

24 Rockbottom Productions is Lange’s own corporation. Dick Kleiner, “Actors Use Imaginations in Naming Corporations”, *The Daily Item – Sumter, S.C.* (Accessed September 18, 2016), <https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1979&dat=19821216&id=XYsxAAAAIIBAJ&sjid=LaoFAAAAIBAJ&pg=2805,819477&hl=en>.

title sets up a story of a man from Africa whose migration to a foreign land results in a tragic outcome. Historically, Venice was an active trade center connecting Europe to African and Asian cultural centers and a desirable destination for merchants and mercenaries, including North African Moors. In Shakespeare's time, those who had read Giraldi Cinthio's *Hecatommithi*, a collection of short stories which inspired Shakespeare's *Othello*,²⁵ would have had a feasible image of a Moorish character. However, most of Shakespeare's audiences in sixteenth century London would have had little if any personal experience with Moors, so they accepted Shakespeare's stage depiction of a Moor residing in Venetian society. Thus, to the audience, Othello the Moor is an alien surrounded by white Christian characters. While the white characters share the same religion and culture, Othello is not considered as one of them even though he converts to Christianity and accepts and adopts the ways of the Venetian culture. In this sense, Othello's name as seen in the full title of the play implies that he is the "Other" living in a foreign land, making him a diasporic individual separated from his homeland and his cultural roots.

In his film interpretation, Ted Lange subtly connects the story of Othello to the African-American diasporic experience to make the Moor more relatable to his audience. Even though Othello comes to Venice by choice, the outcome may hold comparison to the "forced migration from Africa" which "carried black people to the Americas."²⁶ African diaspora scholar VèVè A. Clark suggests that "Representations of African diaspora history and culture have assumed a binary formation – us and the Others – a residual construction surviving from the master-slave heritage."²⁷ Lange brings into focus the concept of Othello as the "Other" through some of his directorial choices in clothing, speaking style, and cultural references. His interpretation of Othello as a foreigner transplanted into a dissimilar culture contains innuendoes of the African American historical experience, including slavery, religious conversion, and a diasporic call to return to the forgotten cultural roots. For example, in Act 1, Scene 3 there is a reference

25 Glynne Wickham, *Early English Stages 1300 to 1660: Volume Four Requiem and an Epilogue* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 18.

26 Ira Berlin, "African Migration to Colonial America," *The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History* (Accessed September 15, 2016), <http://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-now/essays/African-immigration-colonial-america>.

27 VèVè A. Clark, "Developing Diaspora Literacy and Marasa Consciousness," *Theatre Survey* 50.1 (2009): 11.

to when Othello was a slave. In two of the most famous film performances, both Laurence Olivier and Orson Wells glide through Othello's declaration of "being taken by the insolent foe and sold to slavery."²⁸ However, Lange's speaking style punctuates the words "taken" and "slavery," which would meaningfully resonate with an audience that had absorbed the 1977 television mini-series *Roots* that "seemed to make a visceral connection to the African American experience – the nightmare of slavery and the great march to freedom."²⁹

Lange used his own experiences as a minority representative to form his interpretation of Othello. Born in 1948 in Oakland, California and growing up during the Civil Rights Movement (1954-1968), he was acutely aware of the difficulties and barriers facing African Americans. During our phone interview, Lange explained his viewpoint on Othello as a minority:

First of the all, all of the films I know at that time, regarding the character Othello, always showed white actors.³⁰ I did not know any black actors made a film about Othello. I wanted not only to have a black actor play Othello, but I wanted a point of view in the film be...came from a black perspective [...] Othello was a minority in the Venetian society. And American blacks, as I grew up, we were minority in the society. There is certain perspective that I've never seen in the films, you know, about Othello. And because the white actors playing do not have the sensitivity to illustrate not only just to be a soldier and general but to be minority in that particular society.³¹

As the director, Lange identified the similarities between Othello's society and his own society and interpreted Othello's problems in terms of twentieth century African American consciousness. His interpretation matches

28 William Shakespeare, *Othello*, ed. E. A. J. Honigmann (Waltonon Thames: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 2001), 1.3.,138-39.

29 Marcia Gillespie, Rosa Johnson Butler, and Richard A. Long, *Maya Angelou: a glorious celebration* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 111.

30 Even the film *Otello* (1986), which is an operatic adaptation of Shakespeare's play, features Plácido Domingo "wearing more or less conventional theatrical blackface." Vincent Canby, "Film: Plácido Domingo in Zeffirelli's 'Otello'," *New York Times* (accessed September 18, 2016), <http://www.nytimes.com/1986/09/12/movies/film-placido-domingo-in-zeffirelli-s-otello.html>.

31 The quote is from my phone interiew with Ted Lange on December 4, 2007. In one sentence Lange changes verbs mid-sentence from be to came.

with the aspect of “a notion of the unique voice of color” of the Critical Race Theory in that “because of their different histories and experiences with oppression, black, American Indian, Asian, and Latino/a writers and thinkers may be able to communicate to their white counterparts matters that the whites are unlikely to know.”³²

Lange’s casting choices added a sense of familiarity for African Americans. Besides himself as Othello, Lange cast two other black actors in traditionally white parts, Hawthorne James as Iago³³ and Dawn Comer Jefferson as Emilia. This allowed him to add “subtleties in a black life style they’ll recognize that white audiences wouldn’t,” such as social problems associated with interracial dating and marriage from a black perspective. For example, Lange explained, “Black women will understand when they see a black man with a white woman, and black men will understand about two black men dealing with a white woman.”³⁴ An ethnic and women’s studies paper from 1995, “Racial Attitudes of Black Students during the Regan Era,” gives insight into the meaning of Lange’s statements.

Black women as compared with Black men may tend to feel more threatened by the phenomenon of interracial marriage. Their image of an interracial couple tend [*sic*] to be one of a Black husband and a White wife. Thus, many may see themselves as competitors with White women for “desirable” Black men. For them, interracial marriages represent a threat to their chances of finding eligible Black men [...] Black men with White wives tend to have higher status jobs, greater incomes, and more education than Black men with Black wives.³⁵

Lange explained that “when you cast for color, you make a point about something. My ‘Othello’ makes a point, because I’ve cast both Othello and

32 Richard Delgado, and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 10.

33 Hawthorne James also appeared in Hollywood films, such as *The Color Purple* (1985), *Speed* (1994), and *Seven* (1995). Ted Lange was ahead of his time in his casting choice. It was not until 2015 that the Royal Shakespeare Company cast a black actor as Iago.

34 Janice Arkatov, “Ted Lange Charting New Waters With ‘Othello’,” *Los Angeles Times* (Accessed March 15, 2016), http://articles.latimes.com/1988-10-07/entertainment/ca-3629_1_ted-lange.

35 Luke S. Tripp, “Racial Attitudes of Black Students during the Reagan Era,” *Ethnic and Women’s Studies Working Papers*, Paper 4 (1995) (Accessed September 19, 2016), http://repository.stcloudstate.edu/ews_wps/4.

Iago as black. So you have two black men functioning in a predominantly white society.”³⁶ According to Lange, “the idea was to add an additional element of racial tension to that already present in the play. Othello trusts Iago because he is black, but Iago considers Othello a rival for the same reason.”³⁷ In this context, Iago is not a twisted character but rather ruthlessly overambitious, and according to Lange “Iago himself was in love with Desdemona.”³⁸ This statement might refer more to Iago’s desire for a higher status than to any feelings of love for Desdemona because Lange shows Iago’s relationship with his black wife as loving and playful, yet subordinate to his desire for power.

The idea for a black Iago may have come from Lange’s friend and fellow actor J.D. Hall who played a black Iago at the Globe Theatre in Los Angeles in 1979. Hall noted that “a lot of black people don’t relate to Shakespeare because they can’t get past the language” and that having a black Iago “made a sensibility that black people could lock into.”³⁹ According to Hall, Shakespeare’s *Othello* is in tune with black society. In a broadcast interview, he described the relationship between Othello and Iago in terms of a modern African American societal structure.

He puts a white guy in the lieutenant’s place between him and his boy Iago. This is something that happens in business and stuff all the time. [...] We seen that before. There’s the, here’s the black guy, he gets a white wife, he gets up here in structure and now he leaves his boy behind. You know, instead of bringing him on and making him second he puts somebody between them. You control him so he don’t get to where I am.⁴⁰

Halls’ explanation matches well with the way Lange introduces the relationship between Othello and Iago. The opening scene of the film shows Othello and his white wife at the altar. After focusing on the couple’s brightly lit faces, the camera pans to a dark hole in the wall containing

36 Arkatov.

37 Sharon Bernstein, “Lange’s ‘Othello’ Challenges the Purists: Movies: Former ‘Love Boat’ bartender struggles to find U.S. distribution for his version of the tragedy,” *Los Angeles Times* (Accessed May 6, 2016), http://articles.latimes.com/1990-03-10/entertainment/ca-1884_1_love-boat.

38 Arkatov.

39 Hemsley.

40 Hemsley.

Iago's face, which is distorted with disapproval. As Iago complains about Othello's choice of his second-in-command using Shakespeare's words, the visual effect shows that Othello has chosen a white man over a black man. Thus, Othello's white wife and white second-in-command are put between the two black men. This distancing threatens Iago's ambitions.

The interplay between the two men is fraught with subtle power shifts. Lange uses changing perspectives of height to show the shifts. As a general, Othello is more powerful in terms of authority. However, when Othello and Iago stand together in a scene, Iago often appears taller and more massive than Othello, revealing an image of unbalanced power. Othello seems less dominant because of the difference in height and body size. The imbalance symbolizes that Othello, though powerful and high ranking, is capable of being influenced and manipulated by the words of Iago, his subordinate. As they walk together down the stairs in Act 3, Scene 3, Iago is on a higher step when Othello is accepting his suggestions but their places reverse with Othello on a higher step when he challenges Iago's ideas.

At another point, Lange exaggerates the unbalanced image with a costume choice by depicting Othello as barefoot and Iago as wearing high heeled boots, making the already tall actor seem even taller. To accentuate the effect of height and power, Iago places both hands on Othello's left shoulder giving a towering impression of control. This stance is visually stimulating and intensifies the malevolent power of the words Iago is pouring into Othello's ear.⁴¹ Lange underscores this action with a sustained synthesized sound often used in horror films to indicate the presence of evil.

Lange also develops an African diasporic identity for Othello and Iago through certain directorial choices, such as costume, sound effects, and acting style. Othello's afro hairstyle and dashiki tunic indicate his African heritage, where the large Christian cross that hangs on a long chain around his neck marks his desire to be a part of the new culture. Othello's dress in the opening scene presents the dual metaphor of a desire for whiteness connected to his new culture and of a persistent beckoning of his North African Islamic roots. He is dressed in a white tunic and pants and a Moorish style turban. His costume denotes both his African heritage and his mind mesmerized by whiteness. E. A. J. Honigmann points out that presenting

41 "Black Independent Cinema Now: Othello," *The 1990 AFI Los Angeles Film Festival Program book* (Los Angeles: Mc Taggart/Wolk Inc., 1990), 69, in Folder 9, Box 2, Ted Lange Collection, Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee Theatre Research Institute, The Ohio State University.

Othello in a turban is an error because Othello is very proud to be a Christian and the turban is a symbol of the Muslim faith similar to how the cross is a symbol of Christianity.⁴²

Thus, as a recent convert to Christianity, Othello would not wear a turban during his church wedding. However, Lange's interpretation assumes a different nature. Othello, though newly converted, did not totally accept the trappings of Christianity because his African roots remained as an undertone in his life. In Act 3, Scene 3, Othello is barefooted and wears a long dark brown coat and extremely baggy pants gathered tightly at the ankle, and Iago wears Western style clothing with black knee-high boots. The contrasting effect marks Othello as foreign. He appears even more foreign in Act 4, Scene 1 wearing only a knee-length black tunic. The Christian cross necklace has been replaced by a metal medallion, resembling a Moorish geometric pattern. In both the opening and final scenes, Othello and Desdemona are dressed in white. In the final scene, Othello's white knee-length tunic reveals and emphasizes the bareness of his legs and feet.

In various scenes, Lange adds sound effects related to omens of disaster common to superstitious beliefs.⁴³ For people unfamiliar with the play's plot, a hooting owl, tolling bell, and barking dog would hint at the inevitability of Othello's fate. Othello reacting to symbols of superstition signals his leaning toward non-Christian beliefs. Voodoo or hoodoo is a religion that originated in Africa and developed in the Caribbean and southern United States in association with the African diasporic experience. In American filmology, voodoo is most often associated with horror movies, which according to Joseph M. Murphy "reflects mass America's real horror of independent black power."⁴⁴ Lange's casting of a black actor allows for the idea of Iago using the power of voodoo to destabilize the white dominance in Othello's life.⁴⁵

Lange employs voodoo references in several scenes where Iago manipulates Othello toward dark thoughts about the two people who stand between

42 Honigmann's Introduction to *Othello*, 17, 22-23.

43 As commentary on the editing process, the sound effects Lange used were of low quality.

44 Joseph M. Murphy, *Working the Spirit: Ceremonies of the African Diaspora* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 20.

45 In the 1970s "members of the Black Power movement engaged in a form of identity politics that offered an alternative to Eurocentric ideas of civilization and progress" and "hoodoo became a symbol of African American resistance to white culture." Jeffrey E. Anderson, *Conjure in African American Society* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 20.

them. In Act 3, Scene 3, after rotating his body and circling his hands in an incantation motion, Othello places his dagger on the ground. The scene is underscored with the sound of African drums, which increase in intensity. To use the strength of voodoo, Othello takes off his Christian cross and places it next to the dagger, declaring that he will put away his new religion and cultural values using Shakespeare's words: "Look here, Iago, All my fond love thus do I blow to heaven: 'Tis gone! Arise, black vengeance, from the hollow hell."⁴⁶ In a ritualistic manner, Othello cuts his palm with the dagger and declares a blood curse on his wife, showing that he was never entirely converted to Christianity and is returning to his African roots. Iago offers his palm and Othello uses the blade again.⁴⁷ They clasp hands mixing their blood in unity. Othello uses their mixed blood to make a blood-covenant thumbprint on each of their foreheads.⁴⁸

Originally Lange planned to have Othello "make a blood cross"⁴⁹ but changed to a blood thumbprint. In an email, Lange explained that he made the change because he did "not want to make Christian audiences uncomfortable."⁵⁰ Visually, the blood on their hands and foreheads shows that they have a blood bond, sharing the same blood from the same African heritage. The voodoo theme continues in Act 4, Scene 1. Iago's appearance is altered by the addition of a black dashiki and long leather gloves. Othello, barefoot and dressed in only a belted knee-length black tunic, is tortured by ghostly visions and scenes of Desdemona kissing him then kissing Cassio plus quick flashes of scenes from his married life. He falls unconscious in a writhing trance exposing the geometric metal medallion that is hanging around his neck on a leather cord.

Lange's directorial choices were designed to make the play more understandable and relatable to a minority audience, in particular to African

46 Shakespeare, *Othello*, 2001, 3.3.448-50.

47 Palm cutting and clasped hands were included in the 1995 film starring Laurence Fishburne. Palm cutting, clasped hands, and touching of foreheads were included in the 1999 Royal Shakespeare Theater production by Richard McCabe; however in that production Iago was the one who initiated the ritual. See Richard McCabe, "Iago in *Othello*," in *Players of Shakespeare*, ed. Robert Smallwood, vol. 5 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 206.

48 Ted Lange, ["Scrapbook of *Othello*"] in Folder 1, Box 14, *Ted Lange Collection*, Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee Theatre Research Institute, The Ohio State University.

49 Ted Lange, "Scrapbook," [178.]

50 The quote is from Ted Lange's email reply answering my question about this change.

Americans. The film was previewed in New York to a black audience and according to Lange “they gave it a standing ovation.”⁵¹

Acceptance and Distribution Difficulties

Ted Lange faced major hurdles in attracting interest on his film for various reasons. First, many Americans closely associated him with his cruise ship bartender character on television. The *Los Angeles Times* reported that “there are people who will never see him beyond ‘The Love Boat’.” Unfortunately, this stereotyping attitude conflicted with Lange’s desire to make a film that would make Shakespeare accessible to a non-traditional audience. He explained, “I wanted to reach all the people who had seen ‘Love Boat’ and have them come see Isaac do ‘Othello’ [...] I wanted to reach black people by making it accessible. I wanted to reach people who had never see Shakespeare.”⁵²

Second, the filming style seems to be more suited to television than to a cinema screen. Sharon Bernstein noted in a review that the film’s “camera shots and editing style give the film the comparatively flat and immediate look of television, and the music changes with each scene, building like music in a television soap opera to new climaxes every few moments.” Bernstein’s evaluation accurately describes the visual and musical quality of the film, but her comment about the music changing in every scene is too broad. Lange had directed television show episodes since 1983 and thought the filming style would “make the movie accessible and interesting.” However, the domestic film distributors thought the style made the film look “amaturish and slow.” Bernstein also pointed out that “the film differs from most productions of ‘Othello’ in terms of pacing and language. The actors sound like they are performing American-style television, not traditional Shakespeare.”⁵³ Bernstein might have been referring to Lange’s slow and distinct delivery of Shakespeare’s original dialogue with a speech pattern that contained traces of the intonation and stress patterns of African American English (AAE) or that most of the actors used Standard American English (SAE) pronunciation.⁵⁴

51 Bernstein.

52 Quotes from Bernstein.

53 Quotes from Bernstein.

54 Hawthorne James was the only actor to use Received Pronunciation (RP).

Third, no domestic distributor was interested in Lange's *Othello*.⁵⁵ This was a major problem because if a film cannot attract "a distributor – a company that signs on to promote a movie and place it in theaters – the film has virtually no chance of being shown to mainstream audiences." According to the *Los Angeles Times*, some of the disinterested distributors admitted "privately that despite Lange's enthusiasm, the film, which was shot in 11 days, just isn't very good" and that it did not have "good actors or good production values." The use of the word privately intimates that they did not express their thoughts directly to Lange. His reaction was "If somebody said, 'We don't like it because it's boring,' I'd say fine, I'll recut it, [...] But nobody will say what's wrong. I went to Goldwyn and they said they don't do Shakespeare. Then they came out with 'Henry V'."⁵⁶ This incongruity in comments from the distributors and film studio suggests the possibility of stereotyping assumptions about a black director in relation to Shakespeare, since during the same time period film studios were producing and distributing films portraying contemporary African American situations that were directed by African Americans, such as *Harlem Nights* (1989), *Do the Right Thing* (1989), and *Boyz N the Hood* (1990).

Fourth, some of Lange's directorial choices, discussed previously, were not in line with the traditional mainstream productions of Shakespeare at that time. Lange explained, "I think the people to whom it's off-putting are the people who are already Shakespeare fans. They want it the old way." In contrast, Lange said he "wanted to challenge the purists by not making *Othello* 6-foot-2 with a basso profundo voice."⁵⁷ Shakespeare's plays are known as canonical works in English literature and often regarded as highbrow culture. In *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*, Lawrence Levine points out that Shakespeare's works were enjoyed by lowbrow working class audiences as well as elite highbrow theatergoers until they became a cultural marker for upper-class audiences and university scholars in the late 1800s. By the 1980s a strong hierarchical divide had developed between highbrow and lowbrow in American culture.⁵⁸

55 The film was distributed in Bulgaria by the Intercontinental Releasing Corporation.

56 Quotes from Bernstein.

57 Quotes from Bernstein.

58 Lawrence W Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1988). Levine explains the intermixed class of the audience until the late 1800s in Chapter 1, "William Shakespeare in America"; the establishment of barricaded

Most racial minority groups, including African Americans, were considered as lowbrow.

Kim Felicia Hall, Professor of Africana Studies at Barnard College, illustrates an example of an exclusionary attitude about the domain of Shakespeare that sets up an “Other” identity for African Americans. In a transcript for the Folger Shakespeare Library, she tells the story of an African American woman who was considering “a dissertation on Shakespeare and was told that was not for her, that she should not be paying attention to Shakespeare, and the implication was both that it was too difficult for her, and also not part of her cultural property.”⁵⁹ Hall adds, “To say that African Americans are not allowed to interpret Shakespeare kind of excludes them from that realm of value.”⁶⁰

Even Paul Robeson who has been called “the most notable Othello of the twentieth century”⁶¹ could not fully participate. Lange’s preparatory research at the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington found that in the 1943 Broadway production of *Othello* “Robeson had to stand a certain distance (from Desdemona). At that time, a black man couldn’t get close to a white woman.” With this historical example of bigotry in mind, Lange decided to boldly portray the relationship more realistically. He explained, “Here, we’re *real* close. It’s a very loving relationship, particularly in the first three acts.”⁶² To express the couples’ loving joy, Lange staged a ballet dream sequence of a bride and groom in front of the church alter performed by two other actors adept at ballet. He intercut glimpses of the actress playing Desdemona and himself actively caressing in the wedding-night bed. Lange’s joyous interpretation is the polar opposite of Orson Welles’ film (1952) that emphasizes the element of tragedy throughout the film, even by showing Othello’s funeral procession underscored with an ominous dirge as the opening scene.⁶³

In the 1980s interracial couples were not accepted by many people in

highbrow culture in Chapter 2, “The Sacralization of Culture”; and tension between “highbrow” and “lowbrow” in Chapter 3, “Order, Hierarchy, and Culture.”

59 Kim Felicia Hall, “Barriers to Shakespeare Study,” *Shakespeare in America*, Folger Shakespeare Library (Accessed January 13, 2015), www.shakespeareinamericanlife.org/transcripts/hall1.cfm.

60 Hall, “Barriers to Shakespeare Study.”

61 “Paul Robeson as Othello,” *American Treasures of the Library of Congress* (Accessed January 30, 2015), <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/treasures/tri203.html>.

62 Quotes from Arkatov.

63 Orson Welles, William Shakespeare, and Micheál MacLiammóir, *Othello*, [s.l.]: Passworld srl, 2004.

the society. So it is difficult to determine if the lack of interest in Lange's interpretation of Othello's marriage was due to an attitude of racism or of a violation of Shakespearian tradition. The answer is probably a combination of both, which could be added to the reasons that distributors chose not to consider this film. Eventually, Lange's determination to make the film led him to finance it himself. He "sold his house and some investments to raise money for the project" and "sank nearly \$1 million of his own money into a film production of the classic play." According to an executive of the Intercontinental Releasing Corporation who had tried to help Lange find a domestic distributor, many black films at that time "never got distributed" and some were "distributed only to blacks through showings at museums and schools."⁶⁴

Available to All or Belongs to All?

In the first two-thirds of the twentieth century, many African American actors and musical artists, who were denied acknowledgment at home, turned to Europe for recognition. Similarly, Ted Lange turned to Bulgaria to receive international distribution for his film.⁶⁵ This distribution path led to the film being included in a 2012 article about Shakespeare on film on the website of SBS, a national public television network in Australia. The author of the article described Lange's film as "I haven't seen it (has anyone?), but just knowing it exists is a reminder that Shakespeare is available to all."⁶⁶ On first reading, the statement sounds positive. Upon closer consideration, the comment seems to have an undercurrent of unconscious discriminatory limitations. Available to all does not necessarily mean belongs to all.

Kim Hall's lecture, "Othello was my Grandfather: Shakespeare in the African Diaspora," at the Folger Shakespeare Library in 2016 addressed this issue. Hall stated that "people of color, but particularly black people, are not free to love Shakespeare. Our relationship to Shakespeare is frequently managed, I dare say policed, both by those who love him and those who

64 Quotes from Bernstein.

65 Bernstein.

66 Craig Mathieson, "Shakespeare on Film," *sbs.com* (Accessed May 20, 2016), www.sbs.com.au/movies/article/2012/03/07/shakespeare-film.

see him as an agent of cultural domain.”⁶⁷ In the lecture she then connected Shakespeare to the African American experience. Maya Angelou also felt that Shakespeare belongs to African Americans. She once said, “I know that William Shakespeare was a black woman,”⁶⁸ meaning that Shakespeare’s works have an affinity with the African American experience.

Ted Lange sees Shakespeare’s works as having an affinity for all people and that each minority point of view has something positive to offer.

Whether you’re Latino, whether you’re Asian, whether you’re Black, you show you can culturally put into the mix something so that the people have something to relate to and get it; because basically it really comes down to the universality and the humanistic quality of men and women. Cause that’s what we are really saying, that we are all human, but culturally we have these certain things that go on; but you know, uh, people die, people get murdered in all cultures. I mean there are certain things that are humanistic that are prevalent in, it doesn’t matter what the culture is, doesn’t matter what the religion is, doesn’t matter what the race is. And so what you do is you find the literature like Shakespeare which is very strong, humanistically speaking. He was really the first one to do that, cause they did a lot of black parts during that time in the 1600s with stereotypes. So they were slaves, they were other things. The thing that made Shakespeare last is that *Othello*... we find the humanistic quality of *Othello*. That was the genius of Shakespeare.⁶⁹

Lange’s thoughts support the cultural universality of Shakespeare that makes his works belong to all cultures, all ethnic or racial groups within a culture, and to all times because of the strong humanistic content. Thus Shakespeare belongs to all. With this belief Shakespeare should also be available to all. In his interpretation of *Othello*, Ted Lange explored new theater practices based on an African American point of view in order to reach a non-traditional audience and make Shakespeare more available to

67 Kim Hall, “Othello was my Grandfather: Shakespeare in the African Diaspora”, Shakespeare Anniversary Lecture Series, Folger Shakespeare Library, June 27, 2016 (Accessed September 20, 2016), <https://soundcloud.com/folgersshakespearelibrary/shakespeare-anniversary-lecture-series-kim-hall>.

68 Ayanna Thompson, *Passing Strange: Shakespeare, Race, and Contemporary America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 47.

69 Hemsley.

them so they could identify with the humanistic content. His attempt, however, was severely restricted due to the prevailing racist social attitudes, which resulted in an inability to secure mainstream distribution of the film. Lange, as an actor and director, was subjected to a typecasting-like stereotype that did not associate African Americans with Shakespeare. This attitude has had a long term effect in that the film continues to be virtually unknown and that Ted Lange has not been generally recognized as a dramatic and Shakespearean actor. Even though the film exists now only as a few VHS tapes in a university library and in a box in Lange's garage,⁷⁰ Ted Lange's *Othello* remains historically important as one of the first American films that supports the universal ownership of Shakespeare through applying a minority point of view.

70 Hemsley.