

What Happened in America?:
Social and Behavioral Change in America and in *Othello*

For over three hundred years, William Shakespeare's plays have called many great actors and actresses to countless stages and screens throughout the world. In Hollywood alone, there have been 22 film and television versions of one of Shakespeare's greatest tragedies, *Othello, the Moor of Venice*, which was first performed on the Elizabethan stage in about 1603 (Westfall)*. The earliest American Hollywood version of *Othello* was a silent movie that showed in theaters in 1908 under the alternate title of *Jealousy* (imdb). The most recent Hollywood version was the loose adaptation titled *O* that translated Shakespeare into the youth culture set in a Southern high school in 2001 (imdb). Given the crucial role of race and racism in Shakespeare's *Othello*, two productions of the Hollywood movie version are particularly interesting: *The Tragedy of Othello: The Moor of Venice*, released in 1952, starring the great actor Orson Wells [sic], and *Othello*, released in 1995, starring a young Laurence Fishburne, who - like Wells - had a key role in the production of the film (imdb). Since both films, the 1952 Wells version and the 1995 Parker/Fishburne version, are generally faithful Hollywood versions of Shakespeare's classic play (imdb), there are not many substantial differences, technology aside, between the classic 1952 *Othello* and the 1995 *Othello*. One difference is that the Parker/Fishburne (1995) version "omitted quite a lot of the original text" (imdb), while the Wells (1952) version follows Shakespeare line by line and scene by scene (imdb). For the purposes of this paper, the really important difference - especially given the play's race theme - is that in 1952 Orson Wells starred as the character of Othello in blackface, while forty telling years later, in 1995, Laurence Fishburne was "the first African-American actor to play Othello on the silver screen"

* [Note added by JW: Here are the 11 countries that have produced film or television version of *Othello*: Germany (where the earliest film version of *Othello* was produced in 1907), France, Italy, Spain, The USSR, The United Kingdom, Canada, Belgium, Australia and the United States. This list was compiled from The International Movie Database online at <imdb.com> Limbacher (on reserve) may well offer a more comprehensive list.

(Stone). Assuming that Hollywood's silver screens are a mirror of America's social attitudes (Madden), the question must be asked: What happened in America between 1952 and 1995 that can explain the apparently greater racial tolerance reflected in the Parker/Fishburne version of Shakespeare's classic tragedy? The answer to this crucial social question, as I will explain, is that Jim Crow laws were abolished, segregation in public places was ended, students were no longer deprived of equal education and integrated marriages were no longer illegal.

The movie *The Tragedy of Othello: The Moor of Venice* was filmed in 1952. The movie was performed and produced by the great Orson Wells, who played the title role of Othello, the Moor. Mr. Wells seemed to be happy with his cast's performance, but not with their voices because he provided much of the voice-over for the dialogue of Roderigo, played by Michael MacLiammoir, and used a voice artist to dub the dialogue of Suzanne Cloutier, who played Desdemona (imdb). It took three years for Mr. Wells to complete his production because of a lack of funding (imdb). During the two financial breaks in production of *The Tragedy of Othello*, Mr. Wells starred in the films *The Third Man* and *The Prince of Foxes* to raise money for his Shakespearean film (imdb). The movie *Othello* was filmed 43 years after the classic Wells production and is itself an important moment in the history of *Othello* at the movies for the fact that its star, Laurence Fishburne, was the first African-American to perform the lead part of Othello in a major Hollywood production of Shakespeare's drama of the Moor (imdb.) The 1995 movie version of *Othello* could have starred the acclaimed African-American actor Sidney Poitier, but Fishburne was cast in the part (citation needed here). Laurence Fishburne never graduated from college, nor was he trained to perform such a dramatic part. Fishburne's magnificent performance as Othello the Moor has earned him substantial dramatic credibility and has established his status as a classic dramatic

actor. For his role in *Othello*, Fishburne was nominated for an Oscar for "Outstanding Lead Actor in a Motion Picture" and won the Image Award for 1995 (imdb).

Prior to Mr. Fishburne's portrayal of Othello, the lead part in Shakespeare's drama was performed in Hollywood - and presumably overseas - by Caucasian actors in blackface. The term blackface has been in existence since the late 1700's and was originally used in minstrel shows and circuses to indicate the painting of the human face and hands with a dark make-up to approximate a comic version of a Black performer. Al Jolsen is probably the most famous performer to have worked in blackface. Blackface was used in performance as an "indigenous form of American entertainment, consisting of comic skits, variety acts, dancing, and music usually performed by white people painted in blackface" (Wikipedia 1). Blackface also served as sort of a fool's mask, allowing performers to make fun of anything without offending their audiences. The Northern abolitionist's [sic] were afraid that audiences really did not know the hardships endured by slaves in 19th-century America because the popular minstrel shows portrayed the slaves everyday lives as happy and the slaves themselves a cheerful simpletons, always ready to sing and dance to please their masters (imdb). On positive point about the minstrel shows was that they gave African-American performers a legitimate opportunity to enter mainstream show business for the first time (citation needed through here). One of the first performers to legitimately enter show business in America was Thomas "Daddy" Rice, who invented the earliest of the stereotyped characters when he began to perform his notorious Jim Crow dance. Rice's dance became so popular that his character of Jim Crow would later give his name to the so-called Jim Crow segregation laws of the 1870's to 1960's.

William Shakespeare's *Othello* also has moral, racial segregation as the subject matter of the play. The action takes place in the late sixteenth century during wars between Venice and Turkey. A Venetian senator's daughter named Desdemona is seduced by the great and noble adventures of the great Moorish, or Arabian, warrior named Othello. Desdemona falls in love with Othello and marries him against her father's wishes, in large part, because Othello is Black, a man of color, and Desdemona white. Iago, Othello's lieutenant, or military assistant, pretends to befriend Othello in order to manipulate him for his own personal gain and revenge. Iago's manipulation develops the plot into revenge, jealousy, betrayal and deceit, leading, finally, to the destruction of a great warrior and his beloved bride, as well as to the threat of civic order and security. Shakespeare uses the character of Brabantio, Desdemona's father, to signal the racial theme of his play when speaking of Desdemona's love and elopement with Othello he offers exclaimed amazement that she could: ". . . fall in love with what fear'd to look on! . . . Against all rules of nature . . ." (Shakespeare 12-13: JW: NOTICE a publication that included line numbers would be cited differently here). Even though Othello is a great warrior, Brabantio cannot understand or bear the fact that his daughter would marry some of a different race. In the three hundred years since Shakespeare wrote *Othello*, social attitudes toward interracial integration and marriage (called miscegenation) did not change. Brabantio's racist attitude was the norm. So what happened in America to change societies [sic] view of racial segregation from the making of Wells *Othello* in 1952 and the making of Parker/Fishburne's *Othello* in 1995?

One event that transpired in America since Shakespeare's time was the creation of the Jim Crow laws, which were established in the 1880's and remained in effect until

the 1950's. The Jim Crow laws required African-Americans and Caucasian Americans to be segregated. This accounts for Mr. Wells' performance in blackface because Othello was a man of color, and African-Americans and Caucasian Americans were not allowed to be on stage together in 1952 (citation needed). Society did not accept interracial mingling of any kind. The segregationist laws required such things as railways and streetcars, public waiting rooms, restaurants, boardinghouses, theaters and public parks to be segregated; separate schools, hospitals and other public institutions usually of inferior quality were designed for Blacks (Infoplease). If these were the views of America in the 1950's, then I would imagine that seeing an interracial couple like Othello and Desdemona on the screen might really have stirred things up in the movie industry. The silver screen was a way of escape from the realities of everyday living, and seeing a mixed couple on the big screen was not something pleasant for people of the fifties to see. They could not tolerate the challenge to their social order. In fact, there was great opposition to interracial mixing at the time, and that is precisely what Othello and Desdemona do in Shakespeare's play. They went across the boundaries and married, which was terrifically taboo both in the play and in America of the 19652, when laws specifically required African-Americans and Caucasian Americans to live separately.

It was not until 1954 that the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education in Topeka, Kansas*, declared separate facilities by race to be unconstitutional. The decision in *Brown v. Board* unleashed massive lawsuits in the South (citation needed through here). There were mass sit-ins and boycotts. The people of color in America did not want to be suppressed any longer. Change did not come easily,

however, and many lives were lost because of ignorance. Southern whites often responded with violence, and federal troops were called in to preserve law and order, to protect blacks, particularly in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1957, in Oxford, Mississippi in 1962, and in Selma, Alabama in 1965 (Sykes). Each case had to do with African-American students wanting a better education and wanting better than what was at the time being offered to them under segregation. The Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Act of 1965 and the Fair Housing Act of 1968 contributed to ending legal sanctions and the segregationist Jim Crow laws (citation needed here). Current law states that African-Americans and Caucasian Americans have the freedom to integrate in any and every area of everyday life, which they have done without hesitation. They are free to join lives and make themselves as one. The ending of the Jim Crow era helped to integrate the races so that all people of all colors could treat each other as equals. All citizens of the United States of America now have the right to a better education and should have the right to live peacefully. Most important, they have the right to vote for the person they feel [sic] will best represent them. These were some of the events in America that could account for the social and behavioral change.

Once the Jim Crow laws were abolished, African-Americans and Caucasian Americans were forced to use separate services. There was still anxiety amongst some Southern Caucasians and African-Americans because they were now forced to interact. For some, this led to romance. If an African-American and Caucasian couple became romantically involved, it was very dangerous in the fifties; physical harm was threatened against them, along with intimidation and foul name-calling. As one historian reports: "White men looked at protecting their white women from black men. And black women

looked at white women taking the few good black men left way" (Herman). This was a time when there was a lot of opposition, not only from society but also according to the law. In the late 1800's, after the Civil War and during Reconstruction, anti-miscegenation laws were put into effect to prohibit Black and White couples from living together (citation needed here). If they chose to ignore the law, they could be charged with adultery or fornication, which were punishable by jail. In 1967, this law was challenged. Chief Justice Earl Warren legalized interracial marriages nationwide and struck down the laws of sixteen states, mostly in the South, that forbade interracial marriage (Randall). In Shakespeare's *Othello*, the beautiful Desdemona and the warrior Othello could have been imprisoned for their passion and love by the Duke of Venice, had the American anti-miscegenation laws in effect in some states in 1952 applied in the play. But in the 1995 version of *Othello*, as a result of the changing of the laws toward interracial marriage, we are taught to appreciate persons from different walks of life. We are taught not to judge people by their color, but by what's inside. The act of interacting with one another is an event in America that can account for the sociological and behavioral changes in America.

In the fifty-two years from the making of *The Tragedy of Othello: The Moor of Venice* to the making of *Othello*, the American people have learned to look at people, not by their color, but by what's inside them. We have fought to change unfair laws that had been on the books since the 1880's. These laws were reflective of attitudes during the Civil War and Reconstruction periods, times when we were at war against ourselves, fighting for freedom for a group of people that were being terribly repressed [sic]. As our nation grew, the laws needed to change in order to reflect changes for the

better in society. We no longer wanted to be divided because of the color of our skins; we wanted to be treated as equals, and we demanded the right to better education for all. When it came to matters of the heart, we no longer had to worry about being jailed for love. These were some of the events that could account for the sociological and behavioral changes in America.

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