

# Honolulu Theatre for Youth's Rap *Othello*

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## Abstract

This review of Honolulu Theatre for Youth's rap *Othello* considers the production in the broader cultural effort to integrate high and popular culture. It studies in particular how rap offers a new, inverted version of "blackface" by reworking the racial, and racist, dynamic of earlier minstrel Shakespeare parodies. More specifically with regard to the production, the review considers how the adaptation tapped into the outsiderliness associated with the alternative discourse of urban youth, not only to reconfigure Shakespeare in a fresh way but also to reassert the cultural power of rap.

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*Othello*, adapted by Y York in collaboration with BullDog on raps. *Honolulu Theater For Youth*. Tenney Theatre, Honolulu, Hawaii. February 25, 2006. *Director*, Tony Pisculli. *Set*, Alfredo Lista Garma. *Lighting*, Dan Anteau. *Costumes*, Nara Cardenas. *Sound*, Mathias Maas. *Performed by* Charles Kupahu Timtim (Othello), BullDog (Iago), Elizabeth Wolfe (Desdemona), and Reb Allen (Cassio). *Recorded version* (for clips): Tenney Theatre, Honolulu, Hawaii, 2002. *Director*, Mark Lutwak. *Music*, DJ Jedi. With Charles Kupahu Timtim (Othello), BullDog (Iago), Nara Springer (Desdemona), and Jonathan Clarke Sybert (Cassio).

"You can lead a student to Shakespeare, but you cannot make him quote": so wrote a student in response to a survey about his previous experiences with Shakespeare in perhaps the most challenging of classroom settings: a prison (Bates 2003, 161). If the setting was unusual, the response was not, and it echoed similar sentiments and experiences from more traditional classrooms. As early as 1914, Ellen FitzGerald, a teacher writing in *The English Journal* lamented that for students "in the grammar grades" (i.e., up to junior high school), Shakespeare had become "tedium itself" (FitzGerald 1914, 345). In fact, even teachers, she acknowledged, experienced "the burden of this toilsome march through the plays" (346). By 1979, little seems to have changed; the journalist Gerald Nachman was surely echoing the experiences of several generations of secondary school students in America when he noted that in the schools, "Shakespeare becomes theatrical spinach: He's good for you. If you digest enough of his plays, you'll grow up big and strong intellectually like teacher" (1979). The comments above are linked by more than a distaste for Shakespeare, however; they are part of a narrative of discovery (both reported or hoped for) in which the initial resistance to Shakespeare is overcome. In the prison example, the inmates experienced a sea-change, leading one of them to declare, "I dig this Shakespeare stuff" (Bates 2003, 158). Another is reported to have said, using metaphors of ingestion that are curiously widespread in talking about Shakespeare, "We would rather eat the bread of this knowledge than the chicken in the cafeteria" (155). Again, these declarations of enthusiasm are echoed in any number of similar narratives about teaching Shakespeare in schools. Such narratives thus naturally contain strategies for overcoming the veritable gag reflex to the force-feeding of Shakespeare that is pervasive in educational systems.

It would be safe to say that one dominant trend in the past century for making Shakespeare more palatable to students has been to make Shakespeare their contemporary and to stress his continuing cultural relevance, and as a corollary, his capacity to reflect what Marcia Williams, the author of (brilliant) comic book adaptations of Shakespeare for children, calls their "preoccupations" (2003, 33). In fact, the prison teaching venture began as a conscious "test" of the "limits of Shakespeare's alleged 'universality'" (Bates 2003, 152) — his capacity, that is, to be relevant culturally and personally to even such hardened students. And Shakespeare seems to have passed with flying colors, at least as judged by a student remark about Shakespeare: "Maybe he ain't no different from what is going on in my own life!" (Bates 162). Perhaps the most revealing part of the prison experiment, however, was that the students were not deemed to be at the very outer limit only by virtue of being inmates. As the narrative made clear by casually dropping nuggets of biographical information and using fictionalized names such as "Juan" and "Antwon," many of the students came from ethnically mixed inner cities and had been affiliated with gangs. I mention this not

to suggest biases in the writer, but to highlight the pervasive perception, and depressing social reality, that race is tangled up in America not only with incarceration rates, but also educational performance. Indeed, it is not unusual to see in accounts of classroom experiences the implicit assumption that teaching Shakespeare undergoes another test of limits when simply students, and not inmates, from the inner city are involved. If they can learn Shakespeare, then anyone can. A representative triumphant remark from this setting is "Yo! A hit! A very palpable hit!" — an exclamation that is reported in, and that forms the subtitle of, an account of a Folger Library program in Washington, D.C. that was itself a palpable hit (O'Brien 1993, 40). In its union of Shakespeare's language with hip-hop argot, it suggests that a form of integration that brings the sensibility of the street to Shakespeare is possible. This form of integration, it further suggests, is not a one-way street: it is not only that Shakespeare lifts up inner city kids; it's equally that the spirit of hip-hop can breathe life into something as musty as Shakespeare.

Integration of this kind is not, of course, without its problems and anxieties. There is in all this more than a hint, for example, of the pastoral in William Empson's sense of the term (1974, 3-23, esp. 14); in the way that pastoral reinforces the hierarchical distinction between the court and country even as it celebrates the country, the accommodation of hip hop by high culture can end up emphasizing the distance between high and low, and indeed, by extension, white and minority. However, attempts at such integration highlight, in a highly focused way, a broader cultural effort in the teaching and adapting of Shakespeare to bring together a number of often antithetical elements: elite and popular culture; adult wisdom and youthful experience; and even the twin Horatian objectives for literature (filtered for educators mostly through Matthew Arnold) of instruction and pleasure. Indeed, one might say that a successful instance of integration puts Arnold to antithetical uses. On the one hand, it maintains his vision of high culture — "a study of perfection" (Arnold 1965, 91) that enables "intellectual deliverance" (Arnold 1960, 5) from the anarchy of modernity; on the other hand, it adapts Arnold's notion of the past communicating with the present to make Shakespeare a contemporary who gives voice to, and is steeped in, precisely the anarchy that Arnold deplored.

It is no wonder, then, that so many stage adaptations of Shakespeare for younger audiences feature rap. Rap certainly offers an adapter the alluring prospect of instant street credibility. But an "ad(r)aptation," to borrow a term from Richard Burt (2002, 209), also proceeds from the premise that the characters as well as the audience share something of the oppositional energy and outsiderly status of urban youths. This holds true whether or not the cast or the intended audience is ethnically mixed. In the way that consumers of rap are overwhelmingly white and suburban, rap on the Shakespearean stage for younger audiences is decidedly not confined to the inner city. (In fact,

in the above Folger program that proved a palpable hit, participants included white students from rural and suburban areas.) What rap offers, as much for the audience as the performer, is an inverted version of "blackface." It reworks the dynamic seen, for example, in nineteenth-century minstrel or "Ethiopian" burlesques of Shakespeare (such as *Hamlet the Dainty* [Griffin ca. 1880] and *Dar's De Money* [Williams ca. 1870]) in which "high" content is travestied by white performers in blackface who rely on racist caricatures; this form of blackface works to "reinforce," as Douglas Lanier has noted, "the image of blacks and black culture as irredeemably 'low'" and thus also to "undermine African American aspirations to cultural legitimacy" (2005, 4-5). Rap offers the performer a new form of blackface that, first, trades on and thus attempts to legitimize the alternative discourse of urban youth, and second, makes the claim that an interactive cultural exchange across time with the classics can fend off the danger of their growing inert. At the same time, the presence of rap casts the audience as chosen cultural outsiders to whom and in whose language Shakespeare comes to speak. In the context of a performance for youth, "blackface" provides a revisionary idiom that acknowledges a student's resistance to Shakespeare while enabling unexpected engagement.

This brings us to a 2006 performance of *Othello* by the Honolulu Theatre for Youth (HTY), a professional company with a fifty-year history that performs a variety of dramas for younger audiences in Hawaii. The *Othello* was an adaptation by Y York (Y is her actual given name) that cut the play down to sixty minutes and four characters (Iago, Othello, Desdemona and Cassio), but that retained a great deal of Shakespeare's language. Its defining feature, as might be guessed, was a series of eight raps distributed among the characters, including Desdemona. Because of their dramatic importance, I will focus exclusively on the raps, though other features of the adaptation (like York's skill in assimilating invented dialogue with Shakespeare's text) deserve attention. As I proceed in this review, I will refer to and provide links to clips from an earlier production (2002) of the same adaptation that was staged by a different director and that featured a slightly different cast (same Iago and Othello, but different Desdemona and Cassio). As happens with plays in production, some of the language, especially in the raps, went through changes. Notwithstanding all the interesting differences, the two are sufficiently similar that I will treat them as one continuous performance, noting differences only when significant.

As the artistic director Eric Johnson and the playwright both told me in an interview (2006), HTY staged this show, not for any young audience, but a specifically Hawaiian young audience. This meant, for one, that they expected a multiethnic cast and an audience that would understand the racial tensions in the play in Hawaiian terms. More specifically, the actor cast as Othello (Charles Kupahu Timtim) in both the 2002 and 2006 production was Native Hawaiian, whose ethnicity was very visibly highlighted in the earlier production by Polynesian tattoo markings on

his face. As a result, though references to Othello's blackness were almost entirely removed from the text (no "black ram" [Shakespeare 2005, 1.1.91], or "Haply for I am black" [Shakespeare 2005, 3.3.294]), and though eliminating Brabantio and Roderigo also meant that the hostile racializing of the Othello-Desdemona relationship was removed, Othello's outsiderliness was still palpable. (Native Hawaiians, it should be noted, are very much outsiders in socio-economic terms; as a group, Native Hawaiians have the lowest mean income and suffer the highest rate of poverty in Hawaii.) That is to say, the vulnerability and rage that Othello experienced were subtly, but visibly, inflected by the actor's ethnicity and came through most forcefully in his raps. But it was not only Othello for whom this was true. Iago was played by an Asian actor (BullDog), which meant that in the production that I saw live, which cast white actors as both Desdemona and Cassio, Iago was partly linked to Othello as an outsider. Being rather short and stocky, moreover, he did not have the most prepossessing of physical features. However, he had the actorly skill and stage presence to use his body to create a highly conflicted persona whose drama was deeply engaging: on the one hand, especially in his outward dealings with others, he often displayed a loser's sheepishness that masked a deep bitterness; on the other hand, as he stage-managed his plots, he moved and packed his words with the vitality and focused rage that came from deep pain and harbored grievances. Once again, his particular combination of vulnerability and rage came through most engagingly in his raps. The clip below shows an early rap (loosely based on Shakespeare 2005, 1.3.387-408 and 2.1.286-312) in which Iago releases his anger in the following refrain:

As for me — I hate the moor to infinity  
                   He's not for me a divinity — you're kidding me  
                           He's a devil 'twixt me and supremacy — it's killing me  
                                   The rage is filling me — Action! What will it be  
   For me — I hate Othello to infinity.

*(A film clip is available in the HTML version of this document.)* This, too, was a version of "blackface," in which he used the aggression associated with rap to articulate his pent-up rage for action.

If Iago assumed control of the stage action with his raps early in the play, Desdemona, in her one rap in the show, became the play's emotional center. In one of her most effective maneuvers, Y York created a monologue for Desdemona that incorporated Othello's speech before the Senate about the course of their wooing (1.3.142-84). With the lyrical plangencies of the verse transferred to Desdemona's voice, what is in Othello's voice an eloquent fable became a dreamy, giddy, and even hypnotic love poem. The following clip comes directly after Desdemona recounts the "disastrous chances" and "moving accidents" of her courtship with Othello: *(A film clip is available in the*

*HTML version of this document.*) I must confess that this Desdemona (Nara Springer) was a more versatile and powerful performer than the Desdemona I saw live (Elizabeth Wolfe). Wolfe didn't quite catch the tremulous anticipation that brought innocence and a burgeoning sexual power together in Springer's performance. A part of this had to do simply with ability, but I think the fact that Springer is also a native Hawaiian contributes an element of vulnerability to her performance. Indeed, if Desdemona became the emotional center of the play with this rap (even in the live version), it was partly by virtue of the open vulnerability she displayed — the complete submission to love, repeated in the refrain of "I loved him," that was at once buoyant, lyrical, gutsy, and informed by the steady urgency of the beat. Put another way, the confluence of lyrical confession and a rap beat gave a unique color to Desdemona's vulnerability and set the melodic beat associated with her rap as the emotional undersong of the play.

Indeed, versions of "I loved him," sometimes accompanied by the same melodic beat, would recur at key moments in the play. In the rap that followed, Iago confessed his love for Desdemona in lines that revealed his vulnerability, but that also reeked of his grotesque sexual envy. It is as if, into the jolting and demonic line, "Now I do love her too" (Shakespeare 2005, 2.1.291) in Shakespeare's original play, Iago had integrated the pathos of Roderigo's comically pathetic romantic aspirations:

I love the lady in equal measure  
As I hate the man who mounts her for pleasure  
Cause I loved her, truly love her.

*(A film clip is available in the HTML version of this document.)* It was in the end more telling that Iago returned to his true theme — "What to do?" — indicating that a rage for action and revenge ultimately drove him; nonetheless, the rap revealed also that Iago was as much caught in the web of Desdemona's love as she was in his web of treachery.

Of course, the character who was most deeply caught in Desdemona's love still remained Othello. Significantly, York did not give Othello any raps until he fell into jealousy. His first was an adapted version of "Why did I marry?" (Shakespeare 2005, 3.3.273), which included as a refrain the question, "Who's to blame?" In the following clip, one can see what was the defining characteristic of Othello in this adaptation — something an adolescent would recognize, but recoil from because it hit too close to home: a vulnerability that expressed itself in obtuseness. Though he engages in a degree of self-reflection as he ponders the question "Who's to blame?" Othello eventually places the blame squarely on Desdemona: *(A film clip is available in the HTML version of this document.)*

Othello was very much a character burdened by the weight of his own collapse. But this collapse also suggested something else — that Othello was an outsider through and through: as a warrior, he was an outsider to the intimacies of love; as someone called the "hot-blooded thick-

lips," an outcast in his deepest fears; as a gullible dupe, an outsider to security. In the following clip, Othello has fallen into his epileptic fit, which in the live version was rapped as a duet, with Iago and Othello variously sharing the spasmodic line, "Lie with her? Lie on her?" (Shakespeare 2005, 4.1.44): *(A film clip is available in the HTML version of this document.)* Othello can be a wretched play to watch, becoming ever more painful as Othello is reduced to the state of an animal, yelping and writhing in pain even as he abuses Desdemona with progressively greater fury and blindness. Certainly this version was painful to watch, especially with a relatively young Othello, whose somewhat rough acting skills actually reinforced his character's unhinged pain.

The play's final rap, a version of the "It is the cause" speech (Shakespeare 2005, 5.2.1-22) that Othello utters before killing Desdemona, was the culminating rap in that it brought together many of the refrains and melodic beats that were woven throughout the play. Othello continually repeated "She is the cause" and "She is to blame," thus answering for and by himself his earlier question, "Who's to blame?" If in giving such an answer, he revealed how debilitated he had become because of his sexual jealousy and warrior mentality, his abiding love and vulnerability also surfaced in the counter-refrain of "I loved her," backed by the melodic beat of Desdemona's theme: *(A film clip is available in the HTML version of this document.)*

The 2006 production ended with a blackout on the "tragic loading of this bed" (Shakespeare 2005, 5.2.414), but the recorded version ends with a slow, elegiac break dance by Cassio to Desdemona's theme, which I include below because it would have been a fitting ending to the live version I saw as well: *(A film clip is available in the HTML version of this document.)* It's hard to imagine that break dancing to a rap beat could be so elegiac, but the dance captures with exquisite precision the central emotion and sensibility of the adaptation. It has a power that comes from an alternate, adversarial culture, but that power, precisely because it is of that culture, contains within it a fragile and melancholy beauty. The dance is, in this respect, an emblem of the entire production.

Seen from their dramaturgical function in the adaptation, the raps in the HTY *Othello* were very much like arias in mature classical opera; though they were set pieces that offered individual characters the opportunity to display their emotions in their largest shape, they were also integrated very well into the narrative and thus advanced the story effectively. Looking more broadly, the raps were the heart of the adaptation in that they embodied the larger cultural effort that theaters for youth engage in to integrate high artistic greatness with popular culture. Significantly, the raps were also the parts of the adaptation that departed most freely from Shakespeare's original and in which Y York collaborated the most closely with her cast (principally BullDog, who is a musician in his own right). The raps, quite simply, offered the most direct access for the audience into the adapted play. Of course, given how common the use of rap has become in Shakespeare adaptations

for younger audiences, it would be understandable if one felt the urge to roll one's eyes on hearing of yet another version. One would also be forgiven if he or she merely looked on with skeptical bemusement, as Bill Cosby's Dr. Huxtable did with his characteristic dead-pan look as he watched his Shakespeare-challenged son Theo rap a speech from *Julius Caesar* in the 1986 "Shakespeare" episode of "The Cosby Show" (1986). However, rap led the HTY audience to Shakespeare, and far from gagging, they relished the offering with deep enthusiasm.



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