

Paul Robeson Again.

DRAMA
PLAYS

Now that "Othello" is drawing near—it is due at the Savoy on May 19—I feel I must stem the protest that is being made against Paul Robeson playing the Moor.

"Why do you say in the 'Daily Express' that you expect Robeson to play Othello with distinction?" demands Mrs. M. Truburn, from Brighton. "I should think Robeson modest enough to be wholly surprised at being asked. Othello was a Moor, a prince of blacks. Robeson is an Ethiopian."

"Salvini was a perfect aristocrat of a Moor. Can Robeson feel as Salvini felt the part? Never in the world! Salvini was Shakespeare. Although Robeson will be England's modern effort, the soul of the Moor aristocrat cannot be put into a man of Robeson's boyhood."

"I come from Boston. We are not against negroes, but we do not like them near us."

4 - MAY 1930

Racial Prejudice.

"I noticed to-day that you speak of the coloured question as if you wonder at the prejudice some people hold against the coloured races," writes a woman called Newton—I cannot decipher the Christian name—from Elgin-avenue.

SUN EYE

"Is it not an entirely personal outlook?"

"I am a fairly tolerant woman, believing in live-and-let-live, but I have invariably a feeling of nausea when in contact with a man or woman of the coloured race. I was watching 'Blackbirds' from a box at the Pavilion, and how I managed to keep smiling I don't know. There was no reason, for the show was clean and decent."

"I believe coloured people often have the same feelings where we are concerned."

"How, in that case, can two great races of different colours amalgamate happily?"

"I cannot stomach the idea of a coloured man playing opposite to a woman of my own race, and feel sure there are many who will share my views, though I bow to the fact that Paul Robeson is a great artist."

Give "Colour" a Chance!

No such feelings seem to have been aroused when, sixty-five years ago, Dame Madge Kendal played Desdemona to the Othello of Ira Aldridge, a negro Shakespearian tragedian. Dame Madge survived it.

There was no protest at Drury Lane when Paul Robeson kept that show going month after month, nor when he crowded the Albert Hall with his spirituals.

The racial problem is one of our own making. For reasons of personal profit our ancestors put thousands of negroes into slavery. We are now reaping the harvest of our forefathers' misdoings.

The American negro has made more strides in the last forty years than any race ever made before.

We must guide this new-born culture, and nurture it. Grave things may depend upon our present attitude.

If any mistake was made, it was when the original coloured companies were brought over to play in "The Rainbow" and "Dover-street to Dixie." Then I foresaw trouble—and said so.

Robeson is more entitled to consideration than those people were. He is a man of culture and a man of ideals, and he must be treated as such, and as the gentleman that he is, never mind what may be the colour of his skin.

7 - MAY 1930

WEDNESDAY, 7

REJECT

PAUL ROBESON
WOULD LIKE
TO PLAY HAMLET.

Irons
NEGRO ACTOR'S ROLE
IN SHAKESPEARE.

Paul Robeson, the negro actor who will play the leading part in "Othello," to be produced at the Savoy Theatre on May 19, is heartily rejoicing.

He will not require any make-up to appear as the Moor.

He smiled and showed his glorious ivory teeth when he discussed his new part with a "Daily Express" representative in a make-shift dressing-room after a rehearsal yesterday.

"I shall just wear a moustache, of course," said Mr. Robeson, "but otherwise I shall not need 'make-up'."

"That is why I feel that the part is three-quarters easier for me to play than for a white man who has to imagine the race conflict."

"I am not the first nigger to play Shakespeare on the English stage. There once came to London a negro called Ira Aldridge who played great parts with Dame Madge Kendal. His daughter is in this country now, and has helped me considerably."



Paul Robeson.

TERRIFIED AUDIENCE.

"I am told that Aldridge's Othello so terrified the audience that they used to be frightened, and jumped up and ran out of the theatre."

"This is my first Shakespeare play I hope some time to act Macbeth and Shylock and finally King Lear, but no Hamlet."

"The rhythm of Shakespeare has come easily to me, for it is just pure music. Some of the words have been easier for me to learn to pronounce than they would have been for many Americans, for there is a similarity between English words as they are spoken by the English and by the American negro."

Robeson, a Coal-Black Othello.

Paul Robeson will look magnificent as the Moor in "Othello" to-morrow.

"I now feel the part," he told me. "Three times before this I have left the stage. Now I feel I must stop in it for good. Indeed, Eugene O'Neill is rewriting 'The Hairy Ape,' making him a negro for me. Then I shall do that here. I have other plans. Besides, I am doing 'The Emperor Jones' on the talkies.

"I think I have got my accent right now for Shakespeare; otherwise I should have done it with a dialect."

We discussed the prejudice against a black man playing with a white Desdemona, talking quite frankly, as Robeson and I always discuss such problems which influence so many minds. He quoted from the text to prove that Othello was black, not brown, how some of the lines almost sound like the modern sneer, "Look at that damn nigger."

18 MAY 1930

Kean's Nice Brown Man.

"Shakespeare meant Othello for a negro," said Robeson. "When Kean decided to make him brown, and Coleridge, as a critic, backed him up, it was because the British were just then scouring the African continent and making slaves. So Shakespeare's negro could not be a negro any longer. They could not show as a persecuted race the people they were enslaving.

"It was just the same when I was at the university, and white southerners heard how I could answer all the questions. They said, 'We don't believe it; a nigger like that couldn't exist!' They still talk like that. They don't believe that I exist. When they hear what I do they merely say, 'There's no nigger like that!'"

BUN. EXP

The Dramatist Knew.

"Shakespeare wrote down the racial problem. If you play Othello as belonging practically to the same race as the whites, then there is no real problem. Besides, if so, the action starts too quickly. Shakespeare wrote to move you. It is wonderful how he saw our racial problem, even in those days, when really there was not one.

"People are wrong when they say: 'Think of Shakespeare's intellect.' It is Shakespeare the dramatist, the man of action, that you see everywhere in his plays. I think only a black man could act Othello. He feels it. It is the cry of his race, the protest of his people.

"It becomes more real, anyway, than if you know it is a white actor who has just put a little brown upon his face."

VIVID ACTING
AS THE TERRIBLE
MOOR.
20 MAY 1930
KISSING SCENE.
Drama Shakespeare
COLOURED AUDIENCE
IN THE STALLS.

The Play: "Othello."

Theatre: Savoy.

PAUL ROBESON destroyed last night the foolish idea accepted for many years that Iago is the better part in "Othello."

He triumphed as a negro Moor, black, swarthy, muscular, a real man of deep colour. Now and then there was a slight dialect, as Paul himself called it.

"My suvices," he said in an opening scene, but all the rest was magnificent elocution.

A wonderful audience cheered Robeson's triumph. Coloured people sat dotted about the house.

Mrs. Paul Robeson sat in the third row of the stalls, next to Hugh Walpole. Famous players were there by the dozen. One editor walked out after the third act, saying he did not like being near coloured people; but otherwise there was no murmur that I heard.

Robeson's art conquered everything. Why should a black actor be allowed to kiss a white actress? I had heard a few people say beforehand.

There was no protest of that kind in the theatre. Five or six times before



PAUL ROBESON in the title role and Peggy Ashcroft as Desdemona, in a scene in "Othello."

the last scene Robeson kissed Peggy Ashcroft full on the lips, and three times when she was lying in bed, just before he murdered her.

It was in the part, and that was that.

Sybil Thorndike, most experienced Shakespearian of them all, gave a perfect performance an Emelia in the last act.

One or two of the small parts were very capably played, but Maurice Brown, although he improved as the evening went, was very nervous at the start, especially when the scene-moving became noisy; but even at his best he was dominated by the towering figure of Robeson, who, visualising in his mind the subjection of his people, made of the part of Othello first a

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MAGNIFICENT RAGE.

When his rage came it was magnificent.

He threw himself on the floor in apoplexy, and it was a real fall. His jealousy was terrible to see. I have not seen such rages on the stage since Grasso, the Sicilian, acted the same part to the horror of Beerbehm Tree.

He looked wonderful, first in green, then in plum colour, and then in a white dressing-gown. Always you saw the great strength. Shakespeare's lines have never been uttered with more force or with a greater sonorosity.

Peggy Ashcroft, the young actress chosen for the part by Mr. and Mrs. Paul Robeson, was very beautiful, and, for one so new to her business, very intelligent. But it was Paul Robeson's evening.

Right at the end the company applauded him when he made the speech for all of them.

"You do not know how proud I am to play this part in London," he said.

Robeson has a right indeed to be proud of playing it as he played it last night.

H. S.

20 MAY 1930
TIMES.

Entertainments

SAVOY THEATRE

Plays

"OTHELLO"

By WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Duke of Venice	..	..	LAWRENCE D'ORSAY
Brabantio	..	..	CONWAY DIXON
Gratiano	..	..	JOHN GARSIDE
Lodovico	..	..	PHILIP DESBOROUGH
Othello	..	..	PAUL ROBESON
Cassio	..	..	MAX MONTESOLE
Iago	..	..	MAURICE BROWNE
Roderigo	..	..	RALPH RICHARDSON
Montano	..	..	VERNON FORTESCUE
Clown	..	..	HORACE SEQUEIRA
Desdemona	..	..	PEGGY ASHCROFT
Emilia	..	..	SYBIL THORNDIKE
Bianca	..	..	NAOMI LUDOLF

Not to fail as Othello an actor must thrill our nerves, shake our hearts. Criticism coming to this play rightly disdains the borderline case lying, it cannot exactly tell where, between goodness and badness, and need not pretend to be grateful for a performance that is only in some respects admirable. Mr. Paul Robeson, standing plainly on the right side of the borderline, teaches us anew that Othello on the stage means something more to us than Macbeth, Hamlet, or Lear. His history, as it shapes itself before our eyes, is more painfully exciting and terrible than theirs. The reason may be that our minds are all the while glued to the centre of a field of consciousness which rather contracts than expands as the play proceeds; or it may be that the tragedy, for all its profundity, can be identified more easily than any other of the great tragedies with everyday life and so tents us to the quick. Undeniably Mr. Robeson plays thrillingly upon the nerves and knocks at the heart. His performance is blemished here and there but nowhere seriously flawed by an occasional dulling of his generally fine sense of the theatre, but we follow it with increasing pity and fear, sympathy and repulsion, hope and dread.

This Othello has the two attributes without which the character would seem to be no more than that of "a black man in a passion"—tranquil dignity and a melancholy infinitely sad. It is a sadness that never lifts from the stage while Mr. Robeson is upon it; it grows as the tempest of fury, scorn, and hatred draws to its full, possessing our minds and giving a kind of noble plainness to the tragedy. Mr. Robeson's interpretation may not accord in every detail with our own, but it is consistent with itself, it produces an Othello pulsating with life, and so makes its way with us, irresistibly. Some of the more disputable points of difference might perhaps be ascribed to the not very judicious abbreviation of the text for this production which sacrifices many beautiful lines. In spite of the abbreviations, Mr. Robeson contrives to bring out the truth of Othello's own account of himself as one not easily jealous, but, being wrought upon, perplexed in the extreme. He is wholly happy in his suggestions of complete trust in his friend Iago, and his slowness to take fire allows him to blaze with almost unexpected fury when the proper time arrives.

Mr. Robeson plays in the grand style

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Mr. Robeson plays in the grand style
those scenes which will yield their full
effect to no other style. His intervention
in Cassio's drunken brawl puts the great
man plainly before us. Nothing could be
nobler than his address to the Senate.
Then, again, Mr. Robeson's voice is rich
and resonant, and though apt to falter
upon a vowel sound able to delight the ear
with the exquisite music that runs
through even the casual phrases that
Shakespeare's supreme poet utters. Mr.
Robeson is a negro, and thus revives the
stage tradition that held down to the time
of Edmund Kean of a coal-black Othello.
This accident of colour affects the charac-
ter of Othello less than that of Desde-
mona, for it brings home to us with how
much daring the young girl chose a black
hero. Miss Peggy Ashcroft, who plays the
part, seems a little hard, a little less inter-
esting than Desdemona should be.

Miss Sybil Thorndike spares no realism
in her study of Emilia, and the passionate
outburst when the significance of the
handkerchief strikes the essentially dull
mind of the woman plays its proper place
in the tragic close. Mr. Maurice Browne
is the smooth, insinuating, persuasive,
ostensibly honest Iago indispensable for
the work if Othello is not to show for a
mere fool. But sometimes in the earlier
scenes he seems a shade too confident of
the success of intrigues but that moment
set afoot; there is here a kind of stale-
ness, which is the more conspicuous by
the freshness of Mr. Robeson.

There are some simple, tasteful settings
and the costumes designed by Mr. Sher-
ingham fit pleasantly into the general
scheme.

21 MAY 1930

WEDNESDAY,

HANNEN

Drama AT
Shakespearean

21 MAY 1930

PAUL ROBESON'S first night as Othello was an extraordinary affair.

Semi-celebrities poured in by the dozen. Half the unemployed stars were in the stalls. The vestibule was decorated by Epstein's bust of Robeson, and you also saw old playbills announcing "The African Roscius"—the negro who played Othello in London nearly a century ago. One of them showed how "Othello" was followed by a sensational feat on the flying wire. This seemed to have given Maurice Browne's producer an idea, for a strange dance is introduced into the new "Othello," one in which two young women jump about, for reasons I have not yet understood.

Robeson was being congratulated everywhere yesterday upon his own personal triumph. Oh! but how dark the stage was, and how dull the play seemed, except when Robeson was dominating the stage.

Black and White Problem.

Paul's own feelings about playing Othello must have been mixed. After he began rehearsals he became conscious of the prejudice against a black man acting with a white woman.

I received complaints . . .

"It was Paul Robeson's air of aloofness that made such an appeal to me at the Albert Hall," wrote one woman. "An isolated figure giving out the sorrows of his race through his marvelous voice and personality. As Othello, he would have to make love—and touch—a white woman.

"We all know that if a white woman marries a coloured man she renounces her God and country, and is held in contempt by all her husband's relatives."

Al! I can suggest to this woman is that she stops away.

How They Found Desdemona.

Paul Robeson and his wife had one of their little arguments.

The only thing I had found them disagreeing about, hitherto, was Marcus Garvey, the negro spell-binder, who was in London not long ago. Paul believes in him. His wife does not.

It was when they saw "Jew Süß," however, that the other argument began. When they came out Mrs. Robeson said, "Now, don't agree with me this time. I hope you do not think what I thought."

"I thought that Peggy Ashcroft ought to play Desdemona," said Paul.

"That is what I thought," said his wife, "but I hoped you would not see it." That was how Peggy was chosen.

Drama Shakespeare

21 MAY 1930

5. MAY 21, 1930.

NEGRO'S TRIUMPH AS OTHELLO.

TERRIBLE RAGE OF PAUL ROBESON.

KISSING SCENE.

The Play: "Othello."
Theatre: Savoy.

Paul Robeson has destroyed the foolish idea accepted for many years that Iago is the better part in "Othello."

He triumphed on Monday night as a negro Moor, black, swarthy, muscular, a real man of deep colour. Now and then there was a slight dialect, as Paul himself called it.

"My suvices," he said in an opening scene, but all the rest was magnificent elocution.

A wonderful audience cheered Robeson's triumph. Coloured people sat dotted about the house.

Mrs. Paul Robeson sat in the third row of the stalls, next to Hugh Walpole. Famous players were there by the dozen. One editor walked out after the third act, saying he did not like being near coloured people; but otherwise there was no murmur that I heard.

Robeson's art conquered everything. "Why should a black actor be allowed to kiss a white actress?" I had heard a few people say beforehand.

There was no protest of that kind in the theatre. Five or six times before the last scene Robeson kissed Peggy Ashcroft full on the lips, and three times when she was lying in bed, just before he murdered her.

It was in the part, and that was that.

TOWERING FIGURE.

One or two of the small parts were very capably played, but Maurice Browne, although he improved as the evening went on, was very nervous at the start, especially when the scene-moving became noisy; but even at his best he was dominated by the towering figure of Robeson, who, visualising in his mind the subjection of his people, made of the part of Othello first a humility, then a dominance, then a suspicion.

When his rage came it was magnificent.

He threw himself on the floor in apoplexy, and it was a real fall. His jealousy was terrible to see. I have not seen such rages on the stage since Grasso, the Sicilian, acted the same part to the horror of Beerbohm Tree.

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H.S.

The Theatre

Star Parts Without Stars

["MAGDA." BY HERMANN SUDERMANN. AT THE NEW THEATRE.—"GHOSTS." BY HENRIK IBSEN. AT THE ARTS THEATRE CLUB.—"OTHELLO." AT THE SAVOY.]

FOR some obscure reason, the theatrical managers appear at the moment to have fallen into a passion of revivalism. They are bent upon giving us a series of plays (nineteenth century or earlier) which contain star parts for great actors and actresses. The star parts are there, twinkling visibly in brilliance and bigness, out of the bulk of the plays; but where are the great actors and actresses? It is not unkind, it is merely the statement of a very obvious fact, to remark that they do not exist.

Then why reproduce the plays—unless they happen to be good ones? Is it in the topsy-turvy biological hope that the organ may create the need, and so the thing or person; that the presentation of star parts may in time tempt a genuine star into existence, or (more plausibly) that by constantly playing big parts small actresses may become great ones? In that case, the period of expectancy may be long and painful. One wishes the players would practise in private; emerging in the West End night sky only when their genius is in full blaze.

Take Sudermann's *Magda* for example.

It is a dreary provincial tragedy, based on its period's low obsession about respectability and honour as identifiable (in women) with chastity; and about twenty years ago the late Mr. A. B. Walkley was already writing that his receptivity in regard to it had reached "saturation point." Well may he have felt exhausted! Under polyglot titles, as *Heimat* or *Magda* or *Casa Paterna*, Sudermann's "masterpiece" had been played all over the world at the demand of leading ladies who were then unrestrained by producers, and who saw in it the part of their lives. Of these I have seen a German actress whose name I cannot remember, Mrs. Patrick Campbell who improved in this part as the years went by, Sarah Bernhardt who made very little of it, Miss Gladys Cooper who did as well as could be expected, and Eleanora Duse who achieved in it one of the greatest triumphs of her career.

"We wish we had never seen Mr. Kean" wrote Hazlitt, after seeing somebody else in one of Kean's parts. Perhaps I ought to wish that I had never seen Eleanora Duse. I tried to forget her before facing Miss Ffrangçon-Davies. Impossible! Duse swept Sarah Bernhardt out of recollection in this part; Miss Ffrangçon-Davies can only make us regret Duse; and the memory is all the more poignant in that Magda's part permits, according to the text, a word or two of Italian which solicits recollection; so that, behind the living woman, stands the shadow of the dead one. Let us not demand impossibilities. I do not expect the latest leading lady, who has never yet given us any reason for believing that she is a great tragic actress, to wither Magda's wretched lover with hatred and scorn indescribable, as Duse did. I do not ask her to give, like Duse, an extraordinary sense of personal dignity and independence; as of a woman who, against innumerable obstacles, has conquered the world and her own soul, and who is able to

say "I am I" with such pride as to convince us that this self-assertion justifies all her turbid experience.

These things, no doubt, are miracles reserved for genius. But surely it is not too much to ask an actress to realize that Magda is a great, or at any rate a famous, woman; not a saucy or plaintive chit who has been out for a spree one night and is now home for a scolding. And there are lighter passages well within the new Magda's range of which she seems to make nothing. For instance, the scene with "little sister" Marie, who tells Magda about her engagement. "What is his name?" Here, again, one can only remember Duse's exquisitely ironical tenderness in echoing "Max, Max, Max?"—as though to suggest: "What a marvel that a Lieutenant in Germany should be so beautifully christened!" For the rest, Miss Ffrangçon-Davies is small, shrinking, shrill and pathetic—*éplorée*: and none of this belongs to Magda; though some of it suits Norah of *The Doll's House*, and in that part the actress succeeded well enough.

Miss Thorndike has, of course, much greater experience than Miss Ffrangçon-Davies. She has recently given us an adequate performance, without offence in it, of Mrs. Alving in *Ghosts*. I believe that she saw Duse in this part and is perhaps influenced by her in the deliberate quietness of her early scenes. She even underplays it a little. When the incredible Pastor Manders discovers a likeness between Oswald and his dead but not respectable father, Mrs. Alving may permit herself a convulsive movement—a start of repulsion and fear. For the last thing she wants to believe is that Oswald is his father's son. And Duse thrilled us by her shudder of protest against this recognition. Miss Thorndike does nothing about it. But she plays the horribly pathological last scene with fine restraint, and I am only sorry that she makes up as a faded blonde. I prefer a grey-haired Mrs. Alving. But this play, too—this medical tract—might be given a rest. Ibsen had lost his temper when he wrote it and it bears traces of angry exaggeration and of evidence cooked to enforce a lesson.

Meanwhile, Shakespeare, they tell us, ought never to rest—stars or none. On our present system he is frequently forgotten; but it so happens that we have had, or are soon to have, a troop of Hamlets, Mr. Ainley's, Mr. Gielgud's, and, next, a celebrated German rendering. Let us wait for the German! There appears, while we wait, Mr. Paul Robeson as Othello—one who is not compelled "conscientiously to black himself all over," since nature has done the colouring.

Mr. Robeson, as all who saw him in *Emperor Jones* will admit, is a very remarkable actor.

Let us recall Thomas Fuller's phrase, and speak of "the image of God carved in ebony." So this Othello presents himself to the eye. To the ear he sounds deep tones which make a sort of music. But unluckily Mr. Robeson's articulation in poetic speech is not perfectly clear for separate syllables. And, in general, criticism of his performance must admit that he misses the *romantic* aspect of Othello, minimizing such famous passages as "it is the cause," the final speech with its far-off references, the lines naming "the Pontic Sea"—all that suggests the background of peril and adventure encountered that appeal in the Moor to our imagination, as they appealed to Desdemona's. The scenes of awakening and their convulsive jealousy he plays better; but, alas! it is not enough; behind these bodily tortures one must feel the agonized, noble mind. And all through there is a sort of reluctant abasement—a kind of inferiority complex—lurking in this Othello, who is not helped, one must add, by the polite, dapper, inexplicable Iago of Mr. Maurice Browne—to whom we owe this production. The best acting comes from Miss Peggy Ashcroft—a mild, very English Desdemona—and from Miss Sybil Thorndike—a fine, vigorous Emilia, the best I remember to have seen. As usual with poor Shakespeare in the West End, vastly significant passages are cut from the text, in favour of totally unnecessary diversions in the way of dancing, trumpeting, decoration and noisy changes of scene.

RICHARD JENNINGS.