

Poetry and Justice

Paul Robeson (1898-1976)

‘Shakespeare, the genius that he was, seemed to foreshadow and understand many of the problems that have since arisen in our world, perhaps were present then.’



Paul Robeson as Othello, Stratford (1959)

The African-American Paul Robeson – singer, actor, sportsman, lawyer and a tireless activist for human rights (and the son of a former slave) – used film and theatre to challenge oppression. For him, Othello was at the heart of this struggle. He played it in 1930 (London), 1943 (New York and US tour) and in 1959 (Stratford).

Robeson was one of the first to understand Shakespeare in political terms and to use Othello to speak about the history of imperialism and the problems of racial prejudice in the modern world.

‘Othello comes from a different culture... He comes from a culture as great as Venice... He kills not in hate but in honour.’



Paul Robeson



Paul Robeson

‘First I would say that here is a part that has dignity for the Negro actor. Often we don’t get those opportunities.’

‘One of the most memorable events in the history of the theatre... There has never been and never will be a finer rendition.’
(New York World-Telegram)

‘Othello in the Venice of that time was in practically the same position as a coloured man in America today.’

‘The rage - that rage he feels is maddening... and night after night out there on the stage I remember...’

‘It wasn’t just the act of infidelity, it was the destruction of himself as a human being, of his human dignity... I related to that indignity - not to myself personally but to my whole people... Othello represented a whole culture to my mind.’

‘It is a tragedy of racial conflict. Shakespeare presents a noble figure, a man of singleness of purpose... with a mind as direct as a straight line.’

Robeson kept campaigning. During the Stratford season he addressed one of the first CND rallies, spoke from Paris to Moscow – and in London he worked with the New British communities.

He remains an inspiration.

Robeson; ‘Othello has taken away from me all kinds of fears, all sense of limitation, and all racial prejudice. Othello has opened to me new and wider fields; in a word, Othello has made me free.’