

'More fair than black': Othellos on British radio

In 1933, as the BBC prepared to air its latest radio production of *Othello*, the critic and playwright Herbert Farjeon wrote an article for the *Radio Times* headlined: 'Othello was a black man'. In it he states that 'in most present-day stage versions of the play, this all-important point is blunted. The broadcast version will enable us, if not to see, at least to imagine Othello the colour Shakespeare first painted him'.¹ However, for almost another seven decades, imagining was all audiences *could* do, as a succession of white actors continued to play the role. Examining the part of Othello as played on BBC radio charts the changing attitudes as to who could, and should, play him. This paper will look at some of the key productions over the BBC's one-hundred-year history, reaction to them, and the changing attitudes to a character referred to in the text as 'more fair than black' (*Othello* 1.3.290).

Almost from the very beginning of the BBC's history, Shakespeare's works were an integral part of its output. Within three months, scenes from Shakespeare were being broadcast: within six, the first full-length play, *Twelfth Night*, aired in London.² At this point, the BBC was operating as a series of individual stations based in cities around the UK: within a year of *Twelfth Night*'s broadcast, at least thirty other productions of Shakespeare's plays had aired from Aberdeen to Cardiff. On the 360th anniversary of Shakespeare's birth, the Birmingham station produced the first BBC *Othello*.³ The eponymous hero was played by William Macready, grandson of the great Shakespearean actor of the same name.⁴ Although not as famous as his ancestor, he was widely regarded, with a publication in the following year stating that he and his wife Edna Godfrey Turner had a 'Shakespearean repertoire of over 300 scenes, which are given without the aid of the book', adding that 'they have indeed

¹ Herbert Farjeon, 'Othello was a black man', *Radio Times*, 6 October 1933, p. 9.

² John Drakakis, 'Introduction', in *British Radio Drama*, ed. by John Drakakis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 1-36 (pp. 2-3).

³ 'Shakespeare Birthday Performance of "Othello"', *Radio Times* 18 April 1924, p. 140.

⁴ 'Birmingham Dramatic Programmes', *Gloucester Citizen*, 25 April 1924, p. 5.

made broadcast drama the triumph it is'.⁵ The casting of a star actor in the role of Othello on radio was to set a pattern for decades to come.

It was eight years before *Othello* was performed again on the BBC. When it did return in 1932, Othello was played by Henry Ainley, an actor described as 'a prominent theatrical celebrity'.⁶ The producer, Val Gielgud, later wrote: 'I think it is fair to claim that during the early thirties the prestige of broadcast plays and playing rose by leaps and bounds. Henry Ainley played "Othello" to my brother John's "Iago"'.⁷ Peggy Ashcroft was also in the production as Desdemona. Val Gielgud was delighted to have secured Ainley: 'I was particularly proud to find myself working with an idol of my boyhood, the acknowledged possessor of the most beautiful voice in the English Theatre of the time.'⁸ However, the great theatre actor was not a natural on radio, mistakenly attempting to project his voice to the thousands of listeners. His performance left an indelible impression on Val Gielgud: 'the importance of reasonable proximity to the microphone was so lost upon Henry Ainley that it was necessary to station a couple of Effects boys, one at each elbow, to lead him back into position whenever he moved to address an imaginary auditorium'.⁹

Ainley returned to the part seven years later, although as this was at the beginning of the Second World War, the BBC was restricting drama productions to half an hour, to ensure there was enough air-time for other information and entertainment.¹⁰ Ainley had remained a big star, with the *Radio Times* writing that attracting him to the part was 'a remarkable achievement for wartime broadcasting'.¹¹ His vocal quality was also the great selling point. A review of the play in the *Manchester Guardian* stated that 'Mr Ainley gives the feeling which

⁵ 'Broadcasting and Drama', *The Wireless Constructor*, April 1925, pp. 508-10 (p. 510).

⁶ Brian McFarlane, *The Encyclopedia of British Film* (London: Methuen, 2003), p. 9.

⁷ Val Gielgud, *Years of the Locust* (London: Nicholson and Watson, 1947), p. 92.

⁸ Val Gielgud, *Years in a Mirror* (London: Bodley Head, 1965), p. 53.

⁹ Val Gielgud, *British Radio Drama 1922-1956* (London: George G. Harrap and Co., 1957) p. 123.

¹⁰ Gielgud, *British Radio Drama 1922-1956*, p. 97.

¹¹ 'Both Sides of the Microphone – Great Names', *Radio Times*, 17 November 1939, p. 5.

is not the case with most actors that it would be perfectly satisfactory to hear him alone simply reciting passages from the play.’¹² Grace Wyndham Goldie in *The Listener* commented that ‘in Mr Ainley’s splendid voice, even when it rages, [there is] a mellow richness which speaks an inner satisfaction and which continually denies the dark violence of Othello’s impulse to destroy’.¹³

Despite the wartime upheaval, an audio extract from the production has survived: the first recording in the BBC archives of a radio performance of *Othello*.¹⁴ The opening section is missing, with the audio beginning at Othello’s line: ‘It is the cause’ (*Othello* 5.2.1). Ainley’s delivery is melodramatic and declamatory, with much vibrato in his voice. It is also easy to picture the scene described by Gielgud that had occurred seven years earlier. Although Ainley is not overmodulated, which must be a tribute to the sound engineers, he is louder than any other actor in the production.¹⁵ It has the feel of a stage performance, and perhaps one that even in 1939 might have seemed rather old-fashioned. His delivery of ‘O, O, O!’ (*Othello* 5.2.205) is like a musical chromatic scale from high to low, three times in a row, each time covering almost an octave.¹⁶ The *Manchester Guardian* reviewer wrote of Ainley’s voice that it had ‘an extraordinary range of tone and is one of the most musical they [the audience] are ever likely to hear’.¹⁷ Even three decades later, Ainley’s performance was still remembered for his distinctive delivery:

‘If you listen to an example of that old-style musical rendering of Shakespeare—to a recording in 1939 of Henry Ainley as Othello, for example—there is a splendid light and shade, and you can hear how the metre and rhythm relate. But the words are

¹² ‘Review of Broadcasting: Mr Henry Ainley as Othello—A Scrapbook Revival’, *Manchester Guardian*, 6 December 1939, p. 8.

¹³ Wyndham Goldie, *The Listener*, 7 December 1939.

¹⁴ *Othello* (extract – act 5, scene 2), a.k.a. ‘Put Out The Light’, 2 December 1939 (unpublished, BBC Sound Archive).

¹⁵ Overmodulation is the distortion that occurs when a sound source is too loud for the receiving microphone.

¹⁶ *Othello* (extract), 1939, 0:12:52.

¹⁷ ‘Review of Broadcasting: Mr Henry Ainley as Othello’, *Manchester Guardian*, 6 December 1939.

dragged up and down the scale. It is too poetic by half: your senses are not so much seduced as raped, and you realise that no one ever spoke or felt like that in his life.¹⁸

G. Wilson Knight wrote in 1930 about 'The *Othello* Music', but was commenting on the poetry in the play which 'holds a rich music all its own'.¹⁹ Ainley takes the idea of music to a different level, turning some lines almost into opera.

Ainley's performance may also have affected other members of the cast, in particular Martita Hunt, who played Emilia. Hunt was an actor described as 'playing all kinds of commanding roles (if they weren't commanding when she got them, they certainly were when she'd done with them)'.²⁰ But in this production Hunt's performance veers away from commanding to simply melodramatic. She virtually screams at Othello 'thou art a devil' (*Othello* 5.2.142) and spits out 'ignorant as dirt' (*Othello*, 5.2.171, added emphasis).²¹ She shouts 'odious damned lie' (*Othello* 5.2.187, added emphasis) with vitriol, and her speech beginning 'Villainy, villainy, villainy!' (*Othello* 5.2.197) borders on the hysterical.²² However, despite the melodrama of the production, the moments of violence are almost hidden from the audience. Desdemona's death is completely silent.²³ Neither Ainley nor Hermione Hannen, who played his wife, make any noise, and there are no sound effects or music to give any indication that he has smothered her. When Hunt's Emilia is stabbed, she makes only a strange, quiet wail-cum-whimper.²⁴ And even Ainley makes no noise when Othello stabs himself. The reason for this is unclear, although it might have been because of concerns about taste and decency, particularly at a time when people were dying in conflict.

¹⁸ Noel Annan, 'How should Shakespeare be spoken?', *The Listener*, 5 October 1972, p. 435.

¹⁹ G. Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire* (London: Routledge 2001), p. 110.

²⁰ Brian McFarlane, *The Encyclopedia of British Film* (London: Methuen, 2003), p. 327.

²¹ *Othello* (extract), 1939, 0:09:25, 0:11:00.

²² *Othello* (extract), 1939, 0:11:54, 0:12:22.

²³ *Othello* (extract), 1939, 0:05:40.

²⁴ *Othello* (extract), 1939, 0:15:15.

Whatever the decision behind this, it is something that would change greatly in later productions.

Ainley was not the only actor to perform the role of Othello on BBC radio during the 1930s. Another star of the stage also took on the part. In 1933, Godfrey Tearle was described by the *Radio Times* as ‘one of the few modern actors with the physique and presence for Othello, a part that requires qualities not very popular on the stage today.’²⁵ A slightly strange description of an actor who was about to appear in a radio production, particularly as this was to be his first appearance on radio, although he had performed the role on stage as far back as 1921.²⁶ Just as Farjeon had previewed the play by extolling its suitability for radio, so a reviewer from *The Times*, also found it ‘preserved’ the ‘merits’ of the play, despite being ‘spoken by disembodied voices’.²⁷ The unnamed critic added that even if it had been ‘less well suited for wireless’ they would have welcomed it anyway, ‘for the opportunity it gave listeners to hear Mr Godfrey Tearle play the Moor’.²⁸ They praised Tearle’s voice for being ‘rich and resonant and without a touch of bombast’ although they admitted that he ‘remained high above the plane of pure realism’.²⁹ Meanwhile, weekly publication *The Era* described the production as an ‘enormous radio success’ while the *Hull Daily Mail* told readers of ‘Godfrey Tearle’s superb acting’.³⁰ Unfortunately, no audio of this production exists in the BBC archives, or of Tearle’s second performance as Othello for BBC radio fifteen years later.

²⁵ ‘Gifted Idol’, *Radio Times*, 29 September 1933, p. 734.

²⁶ ‘Mr Godfrey Tearle in “Othello”’, *Manchester Guardian*, 21 September 1933, p. 10; “Othello”, *Observer*, 24 April 1921, p. 11.

²⁷ ‘Broadcast Drama, Mr Godfrey Tearle as Othello’, *The Times*, 9 October 1933, p. 12.

²⁸ ‘Broadcast Drama’, *The Times*, 9 October 1933.

²⁹ ‘Broadcast Drama’, *The Times*, 9 October 1933.

³⁰ ‘Radio Drama Advances’, *The Era*, 11 October 1933, p. 3; “Julius Caesar”, Short excerpts by famous Shakespearean actors’, *Hull Daily Mail*, 27 October 1933, p. 16.

In 1948 Tearle was appearing in *Othello* at the Stratford Memorial Theatre. At the end of the season, an abridged version of the play was broadcast in the Midlands region.³¹ This had been pre-recorded, still something of a novelty at this time, and was aired ‘at the same moment’ that the final stage performance was taking place.³² Roderick Mann reported that it was ‘timed to end as the curtain falls at Stratford. Listeners will then be taken over to the stage to hear a description of the scenes and speeches by leading members of the company’.³³ This must have been a technically tricky feat, especially for a regional station, but unfortunately there are no reviews to indicate how it was received. However, the theatre production was covered widely and this gives an indication of the performance Tearle is likely to have given on air, and it seems probable that it would have resonated with Ainley’s. Local newspaper, the *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, reported that ‘Godfrey Tearle agrees with Shaw that “Othello” is “pure melodrama”’, adding that his performance was ‘distinguished by dignity of poise, richness of voice and grandeur of expression’.³⁴ And Tearle’s vocal tone, like Ainley’s, is frequently referred to in reviews. *The Times* wrote:

A noble presence and a rich, resonant voice are Mr Tearle’s natural gifts [...] the great speeches that a Salvini would hurl out as though they were one with the music of the spheres; Mr Tearle tunes down his vocal magnificence to draw from them quieter harmonies which lie closer to dramatic meaning.³⁵

And the *Manchester Guardian* highlighted ‘that providential instrument his voice, schooled and perfected by years of experience and tradition.’³⁶ Even in his obituary five years later, the way Tearle sounded in this production was commented on: ‘he reminded a generation of playgoers who had forgotten how majestic and sonorous the verse could be without ever

³¹ ‘Farewell tributes to Sir Barry’, *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 1 November 1948, p. 3.

³² Roderick Mann, ‘Dinner party under water’, *Birmingham Gazette*, 29 October 1948, p. 2.

³³ Mann, *Birmingham Gazette*, 29 October 1948.

³⁴ ‘Godfrey Tearle’s Othello crowns Stratford season’, *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 31 July 1948, p. 2.

³⁵ ‘Stratford Festival “Othello”’, *The Times*, 2 August 1948, p. 6.

³⁶ “Othello” at Stratford’, *Manchester Guardian*, 2 August 1948, p. 3.

becoming artificial.’³⁷ In these early radio productions, voice and verse were considered the most important thing, rather than effective use of the medium or good story-telling. Othello had to sound beautiful, rather than reflect a particular character or ethnicity; a tendency that continued for some time.

Radio producers repeatedly raided the theatre for their Othellos. In 1949, Jack Hawkins, who would later go on to become a major British film star, took on the part. He had played Othello on stage two years earlier. If the reviews of that production are any indication as to how he might have played it on radio, he was quite unlike his predecessors. *The Stage* reported that ‘people who have become accustomed by some recent performances to thunderings in the major key may regard this as a too subdued rendering. But Mr Hawkins uncommonly touches the emotions’.³⁸ *The Tatler* was more forthright, complaining it ‘stops short of what is required’:³⁹

It stops short of the poetry [...] Without the music Othello’s passion appears to be constantly held in check, no matter how well an actor may suit the action to the word, and without the full swell of passion a spectacle which should thrill the nerves and shake the heart inevitably loses its force.⁴⁰

Although clearly not what critics had expected on stage, this lower-key style would have suited radio much better. However, the BBC quickly reverted to big performances and big voices.

In the Queen’s coronation year, 1953, Valentine Dyll was radio’s next Othello. He was already well known to audiences for telling ‘spine-tingling, sinister-voiced stories’ as the *Man in Black*.⁴¹ The point was not lost on Emery Pearce in the *Daily Herald* who told

³⁷ ‘Obituary: Sir Godfrey Tearle’, *Manchester Guardian*, 10 June 1953, p. 4.

³⁸ ‘London Theatres: The Picadilly’, *The Stage*, 3 April 1947, p. 7.

³⁹ Anthony Cookman, ‘At the Theatre’, *The Tatler*, 16 April 1947, pp. 68-9 (p. 68).

⁴⁰ Cookman, *The Tatler*, 16 April 1947.

⁴¹ Emery Pearce, ‘Margaret has warned Frankie...’, *Daily Herald*, 30 November 1953, p. 6.

readers ‘creepiness apart, he is a fine actor, and it is a quaint coincidence that the Man in Black will tonight start as the black Moor, Othello’.⁴² A review of the production stated:

The full majesty and power of “Othello” could hardly be expected to come over through sound alone. The marvel is that so much of it made an impact. [...] Valentine Dyall had nobility of voice as Othello, with range enough for both rage and pathos.⁴³

Again, no audio exists of this production. And three years later there was another production, this time starring the American actor Alfred Drake. The *Radio Times* pointed out that ‘although this will be his first major tragic role on radio’ he had more than two decades’ experience on stage playing characters including ‘Petruccio, Antony and Malvolio’.⁴⁴ A review of the production described ‘the bravura effect of the playing of Alfred Drake’.⁴⁵ In all these cases, from Macready through to Drake, the BBC seemed to be casting for vocal majesty, rather than radio acting technique, with the possible exception of Hawkins. And at no point does there seem to have been any consideration about the ethnicity of the character or whether it was appropriate for a white actor to play him.

By the 1970s it was still unlikely an audience would see a black actor playing Othello on stage. Paul Robeson had taken the part at the RSC in 1959.⁴⁶ But blacking-up remained the norm. In 1972, perhaps the most prestigious BBC radio production of the play, certainly the most repeated and listened to, was broadcast. And there was never a thought to cast a black actor. Producer John Tydeman said the colour of the actor playing the part ‘doesn’t come into it. It’s no problem on radio. Othello’s not actually black, he’s a Moor, an Arab type, a gypsy. The thing is that he’s different. It’s not about blackness or white.’⁴⁷ And so he

⁴² Pearce, *Daily Herald*, 30 November 1953.

⁴³ ‘On the air: “Othello”’, *The Stage*, 3 December 1953, p. 10.

⁴⁴ ‘Othello in Sound’, *Radio Times*, 24 February 1956 p. 1.

⁴⁵ Maxwell Sweeney, ‘Radio Review’, *Irish Independent*, 3 March 1956, p. 11.

⁴⁶ ‘RSC Performances: Othello’, *Shakespeare Birthplace Trust* <https://collections.shakespeare.org.uk/search/rsc-performances/oth195904/search/play_title:Othello/page/1/view_as/grid> [Accessed 28 July 2021].

⁴⁷ John Tydeman, private phone conversation, 18 February 2020.

cast Paul Scofield in the part, someone he considered the best actor to do Shakespeare on radio ‘because of the remarkableness of his voice’.⁴⁸ Scofield had appeared in Tearle’s Stratford production in 1948 as Roderigo, and even then had made an impression with at least one reviewer: ‘I am not sure that Antony Quayle’s bluff Iago is altogether a success; I found myself wondering whether Paul Scofield would not have made a better and more truly distinguished job of the part.’⁴⁹ However, he had never played the title role. Ahead of the broadcast, he told Robert Ottaway:

I have undertaken Othello now because I feel I am ready to do it justice. It is a question of one’s maturity and experience. I was 39 when I first played Lear, who is an old man. The power the part needs can only be attained by a younger man. But Othello benefits from being played by an actor of the correct age. [...] the radio production has the entire text. I do feel that any problem presented by Shakespeare should be tackled, not shirked.⁵⁰

Like Tydeman, Scofield was not thinking about the character’s background and colour, but about experience. His claim to be the ‘correct age’ is also debatable: while there are references in the text to Othello being older than Desdemona, Scofield was 50 at the time of this recording. Later radio, and stage, Othellos were generally much younger.

Tydeman was delighted with his ‘magnificent cast’, which included Nicol Williamson as Iago.⁵¹ But once they were assembled, he had a problem: ‘When we had the read-through, I thought “Oh, god”. They sounded very alike [Scofield and Williamson]. Same timbre. Paul said “I can drop my voice and Moor it up a bit”’.⁵² Listening to the opening scene of the play between Iago and Roderigo it would be easy to mistake Williamson’s voice for Scofield’s. When Scofield appears, his accent is inconsistent. Often it is difficult to be sure where

⁴⁸ Tydeman, private phone conversation, 18 February 2020.

⁴⁹ “‘Othello’ at Stratford”, *Manchester Guardian*, 2 August 1948.

⁵⁰ Paul Scofield quoted in Robert Ottaway, “I have undertaken Othello now because I feel I am ready to do it justice”, *Radio Times*, 9 November 1972, p. 3.

⁵¹ Tydeman, private phone conversation, 18 February 2020.

⁵² Tydeman, private phone conversation, 18 February 2020.

Othello is supposed to be from. At other times the accent seems to be white South African, a sort of Afrikaans voice, such as when he delivers ‘I ran it though, even from my boyish days’ (*Othello* 1.3.131).⁵³ He also delivers his lines in quite a sing-song fashion, for example when he says ‘Most potent, grave, and reverend signors’ (*Othello* 1.3.76).⁵⁴ In this speech his voice covers an octave-and-a-half and fluctuates greatly. In many ways his delivery is not unlike that of the only earlier recording to exist, that of Ainley, in its musical style, although Ainley does not affect an accent. However, Scofield’s delivery of Othello’s ‘O, O, O!’ (*Othello* 5.2.205) is different.⁵⁵ The first two are delivered relatively quietly, with a suggestion of puzzlement, while the third takes inspiration from Emilia’s line in the text, ‘lay thee down and roar’, starting quietly but developing into a near-scream.

Reviewers had slightly mixed feelings about the production. Gillian Reynolds wrote that it ‘measures the heartbeats of the play most exactly and to stunning effect.’⁵⁶ Whereas David Wade, writing about Scofield’s later *The Tempest* remembered that:

There has always been something as it were impromptu, chancy about Mr Scofield’s Shakespearean performances on radio: in his *Othello*, even his *Macbeth*, there was a faint throw-away quality to the speaking as if he had read the lines for the first time and were wondering what they might mean—curious yet in both cases effective.⁵⁷

However, the BBC had no concerns. Most productions get one repeat, some get two. This had three, with the last being in 1988, almost sixteen years after its initial airing. It was also one of the first four plays the BBC released on audio cassette.⁵⁸ The next production was not until the new millennium and the producer of that, Jeremy Mortimer, says Tydeman’s tenure as

⁵³ *Othello*, BBC Radio 3, 12 November 1972
<<https://learningonscreen.ac.uk/ondemand/index.php/prog/RT3A618D?bcast=119210276>> [Accessed 23 July 2021] 0:20:22.

⁵⁴ *Othello*, 1972, 0:17:35.

⁵⁵ *Othello*, 1972, 2:48:30.

⁵⁶ Gillian Reynolds, ‘The Sound of Silence’, *Guardian*, 11 November 1972, p. 10.

⁵⁷ David Wade, , ‘Aural experiences’, *The Times*, 30 March 1974, p. 10.

⁵⁸ James Green, ‘Taping up nicely’, *The Stage*, 22 September 1988, p. 18.

head of radio drama until 1994 may have been a factor, adding that ‘it was quite hard to come up with another idea for an *Othello*’.⁵⁹ There were also commercial considerations:

BBC Enterprises, which became BBC Worldwide, kept on reissuing those cassettes or CDs and it was so irritating because just when you thought somebody might have forgotten them, they got reissued, and that was, kind of, ‘you can’t do another one because they’re selling these ones’.⁶⁰

And while 1988 may seem late for the BBC to continue to repeat a production where *Othello* was played by a white actor, it was only five years after the BBC Television Shakespeare production of the play, which featured Anthony Hopkins in the role, although Hopkins’ casting was not without controversy. Peter Plouviez, the General Secretary of actors’ union Equity, wrote to *The Independent* in 1990 describing what he understood to have happened:

The BBC had said that it was obliged to cast a black actor, for without one it could not sell the programme to America. The BBC went on to say that in its view there were no black actors in Britain capable of playing the part. [...] Despite the fact that, only days before, the BBC had been maintaining that the part could only be played by a black actor, it then cast Anthony Hopkins.⁶¹

It seems likely that radio producers and executives may also have believed there were few suitable actors in the 1980s and 1990s, as Mortimer says that even when he came to cast his production ‘there was a feeling that the field of possible *Othellos* was not huge’.⁶² However, in 2001 BBC radio finally did broadcast a production of the play with a black actor in the title role.

Ray Fearon was no stranger to *Othello*: he had played the role for the RSC in 1999.

Robert Gore-Langton reported that this had been ‘the third time he’d played the part, first at

⁵⁹ Jeremy Mortimer, private Zoom conversation, 7 April 2021.

⁶⁰ Mortimer, private Zoom conversation, 7 April 2021.

⁶¹ Peter Plouviez, ‘Letter: Casting *Othello*’, *Independent*, 3 August 1990, p. 16.

⁶² Mortimer, private Zoom conversation, 7 April 2021.

drama school and then at the Liverpool Everyman at 24'.⁶³ Fearon's experience with the role was part of the appeal for Mortimer: 'I cast him really because he'd done it at the RSC and I knew that he really knew the text'.⁶⁴ But Fearon was not the immediate choice. Mortimer says that there were 'only half a dozen people who could possibly be considered' and that he auditioned actors for the part.⁶⁵ And it was not a foregone conclusion that on this occasion Othello would be played by a black actor. Mortimer says he 'went through a kind of period of really doubting whether Othello was a black African or whether he was, as it were, Moorish, and whether, actually, he was from the near east.'⁶⁶ However, he says he was happy with his eventual choice.

Fearon's stage performance had not been greeted with great enthusiasm. Michael Billington in the *Guardian* gave the production three stars, adding that 'although Fearon is a perfectly capable Othello, he lacks seniority and weight'.⁶⁷ *The Times* did not award a rating, although the reviewer described Fearon as 'youthful' adding that 'he compensates for his lack of weight and authority with an unusually touching performance'.⁶⁸ Michael Coveney in the *Daily Mail* gave it just two stars.⁶⁹ But he also pointed out that Scofield, who was being honoured with a 'luncheon' in Stratford during the week the show opened, 'was a mediocre Othello, so there is no particular shame attached to Ray Fearon, a well-spoken 31-year-old, failing to scale the heights'.⁷⁰ Coveney's preference in an Othello was for 'a much more baritone, awe-inspiring vocal rush. And we haven't had all that, frankly, since Laurence

⁶³ Robert Gore-Langton, 'Black: Could Olivier play Othello today?', *The Times T2*, 9 February 2004, pp. 16-17 (p.16).

⁶⁴ Mortimer, private Zoom conversation, 7 April 2021.

⁶⁵ Mortimer, private Zoom conversation, 7 April 2021.

⁶⁶ Mortimer, private Zoom conversation, 7 April 2021.

⁶⁷ Michael Billington, 'Military classic', *Guardian*, 22 April 1999, p. 18.

⁶⁸ 'Curtain Call – Othello', *The Times – Metro supplement*, 8-14 May 1999, p. 37.

⁶⁹ Michael Coveney, 'Bad guys finish first', *Daily Mail*, 23 April 1999, p. 49.

⁷⁰ Coveney, *Daily Mail*, 23 April 1999.

Olivier's blacked-up musical savage more than 30 years ago.'⁷¹ However, not everyone agreed. Five years later Gore-Langton wrote:

It's not as though the 20th-century history of white actors in the role has been one long parade of delirious hits. [...] The whole romantic English tradition of blacked-up, barnstorming Othellos — from Edmund Kean to Donald Sinden — finally died with Michael Gambon in Scarborough in 1990.⁷²

In comparing Fearon and Scofield, Coveney could not have known he was writing about two actors who would play consecutive Othellos for BBC radio, although the radio audience was reminded of Fearon's predecessor by the *Radio Times* ahead of the broadcast. Peter Barnard wrote that this would be 'the first production of *Othello* to be staged for Radio 3 since Paul Scofield memorably played the role in 1972'.⁷³ It seems expectations for Fearon were not high.

Playing Othello had been a personal issue for Fearon. He told Gore-Langton:

At drama school I wrote a thesis on integrated casting at the National, RSC and the Royal Court [...] Nobody black had played a title role in Shakespeare at any one of those places. This was in 1991! I loved Shakespeare and I said to myself, these people have got to let me have a go at these parts.⁷⁴

It seems particularly fitting, then, that he was the first black actor to play the role on BBC radio.⁷⁵ Reviews of Fearon's stage performance repeatedly reference his youth, and age was a factor in Mortimer's casting decision. Like Scofield, he believed in casting someone of the 'right age', but for Mortimer this was not an actor in their fifties. He says: 'I had this question

⁷¹ Coveney, *Daily Mail*, 23 April 1999.

⁷² Gore-Langton, *The Times T2*, 9 February 2004, p.16.

⁷³ Peter Barnard, 'Othello', *Radio Times*, 27 September 2001, p. 140.

⁷⁴ Gore-Langton, *The Times T2*, 9 February 2004, pp. 16-17.

⁷⁵ There had been two black television Othellos: the RSC production with Willard White was shown in 1990 and Colin McFarlane voiced Othello for the *Animated Tales* in 1994.

in my mind about Othello's age and I sort of wanted a young Othello but he shouldn't sound young. [I wanted him] to have the right authority.'⁷⁶

The casting of Othello was not the only thing that Mortimer did differently. Barnard points out that he 'set the play in the mid-20th century, Othello plays jazz records to Desdemona and news of the destruction of the Turkish fleet is broadcast on Radio Cyprus'.⁷⁷ Barnard also describes the production as 'likely to be controversial among traditionalists'.⁷⁸ Radio critics did not review the broadcast, but four years later Andrew Dickson singled it out as one of his recommended audio productions of the play:

'Ray Fearon provided one of the most memorable of recent Othellos at the RSC. On tape he is less vocally resonant than some [...] but nevertheless manages to deliver an interpretation of the role which is both intelligent and terrifyingly sad [...] Fearon's hero is young and virile, but comes to pieces with almost startling ease: listening to the bleached-out monotone of his voice in the latter stages of the play you sense that his revenge will be terrible and unstoppable – that of a man who has confronted his devils and will not return.'⁷⁹

Fearon's Othello is calm and controlled. There is no attempt at vocal gymnastics or musical delivery. Instead, Fearon is clear and allows the text to speak for itself without exaggeration. His delivery of 'Most potent, grave, and reverend signors' is controlled.⁸⁰ He presents a man who is a quietly successful commander, with no need to overstate his power. He maintains this when Iago first introduces the idea of jealousy. Rather than being dismissive of Iago, he is confident in himself and his marriage (*Othello* 3.3.181).⁸¹ However, by the time Iago leaves him, his tone has changed; there is now an edge to Fearon's voice and when Desdemona enters there is a hint of irritation subtle enough for the audience to pick up on,

⁷⁶ Mortimer, private Zoom conversation, 7 April 2021.

⁷⁷ Barnard, *Radio Times*, 27 September 2001.

⁷⁸ Barnard, *Radio Times*, 27 September 2001.

⁷⁹ Andrew Dickson, *The Rough Guide to Shakespeare* (London: Rough Guides, 2005), p. 271.

⁸⁰ *Othello*, BBC Radio 3, 30 September 2001

<<https://learningonscreen.ac.uk/ondemand/index.php/prog/00148EA5?bcast=411815>> [Accessed 23 July 2021] 0:18:20.

⁸¹ *Othello*, 2001, 1:23:52.

but for his wife to plausibly be unaware (*Othello* 3.3.291-2).⁸² Even when he is about to kill her, he remains reasonably calm: he sounds genuine while delivering ‘makes me call what I intend to do / A murder, which I thought a sacrifice’ (*Othello* 5.2.69-70).⁸³ In the moment before he carries out the killing he does sound angry and shouts a little. Afterwards he whispers ‘My wife, my wife!’ (*Othello* 3.3.106) in a delivery surprisingly close to that of Henry Ainley.⁸⁴ But where Ainley’s voice then escalates with anger as he reaches ‘I have no wife’, Fearon remains quiet and is near to tears. Fearon was not only the first black actor to play Othello on BBC radio, but also the first to give a truly audio-based performance, using the intimacy of the medium to the advantage of the character.

In an interview at the time of the RSC production, Fearon told Nicci Gerrard: ‘Othello says, “I am black.” You can’t get round that. He’s black in a world of white people, insecure, other, paranoid. Only his blackness makes sense of the play.’⁸⁵ Just like Farjeon nearly seventy years earlier, Fearon was very aware of the references to colour in *Othello*. And the following two BBC radio productions also cast black Othellos, importing both from the theatre. In 2008 Chiwetel Ejiofor, who had put ‘himself into the front rank of modern Othellos’ at the Donmar Warehouse, played the part for BBC Radio 3.⁸⁶ Michael Billington’s review of the theatre performance highlighted that ‘what Ejiofor gives us, unfashionably, is Othello’s word-music. In his talk of “the spirit-stirring drum, th’ ear-piercing fife” he relishes the Moor’s self-conscious rhetoric’.⁸⁷ And two years later Lenny Henry, in his first Shakespearean role, performed it on BBC Radio 4. In both cases the casts were imported wholesale from their respective theatres. Michael Grandage had directed the Donmar

⁸² *Othello*, 2001, 1:30:38.

⁸³ *Othello*, 2001, 2:43:39.

⁸⁴ *Othello*, 2001, 2:45:59; *Othello* (extract), 1939, 0:06:53.

⁸⁵ Ray Fearon in Nicci Gerrard, ‘Shakespeare and love’, *Observer*, 25 April 1999, p. 34.

⁸⁶ Michael Billington, ‘Othello - Donmar Warehouse, London’, *The Guardian*, 5 December 2007 <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2007/dec/05/theatre.shakespeare>> [Accessed 23 July 2021].

⁸⁷ Billington, *The Guardian*, 5 December 2007.

production and according to the *Radio Times* was ‘a huge fan of radio drama’.⁸⁸ So when he was approached, he happily agreed to the transfer. BBC producers tweaked the script to make sure that the production would not ‘flounder’ when it moved from ‘stage to studio’.⁸⁹ The magazine’s radio editor, Jane Anderson, concluded that those involved ‘should feel immensely proud of this drama. It is produced, acted and directed both wisely and well’.⁹⁰ And Stephanie Billen in the *Observer* described the play as ‘probably the most powerful production on radio this week’.⁹¹

Lenny Henry had come to *Othello* via a radio documentary. Director Barrie Rutter later told the *Independent*: ‘At the end of a two-hour session directing Lenny Henry doing Othello’s last speech for his BBC Radio 4 programme *Lenny and Will*, he asked me if he’d passed the audition’.⁹² Henry was not being entirely serious, but the experience got the pair thinking, and Henry went on to play Othello for Rutter’s company, Northern Broadsides. Henry won the London Evening Standard theatre award for best newcomer for his performance, as well as general acclaim, with theatre reviewer Lynne Walker writing that ‘his voice carries and, while his timing is sometimes still a little shaky, his verse-speaking can sing’.⁹³ Rutter also thought Henry had ‘a marvellous resonant voice’ for the part.⁹⁴ Having originated through a radio programme, it was only natural that the production should find its way back onto the medium. Celine Bijleveld in the *Guardian* suggested the radio production was ‘your chance to find out why’ the stage version had been so successful. She added: ‘For those unsure about Henry in the role, listening to him (as opposed to watching him) does allow you to put some distance between the Shakespearian character and his

⁸⁸ Jane Anderson, ‘Does Shakespeare ever work on the radio?’, *Radio Times*, 1 May 2008, p. 118.

⁸⁹ Anderson, *Radio Times*, 1 May 2008.

⁹⁰ Anderson, *Radio Times*, 1 May 2008.

⁹¹ Stephanie Billen, ‘Radio Choice: Drama on 3, Othello’, *Observer TV and Radio*, 4 May 2008, p. 5.

⁹² Barrie Rutter, ‘The day I cast Lenny as Othello’, *Independent Extra*, 8 September 2009, p. 14.

⁹³ Lynne Walker, ‘Henry shines as a stand-up tragedian with star quality’, *Independent*, 19 February 2009, p. 20.

⁹⁴ Rutter, *Independent Extra*, 8 September 2009.

previous comic incarnations'.⁹⁵ Both Ejiofor and Henry were praised for their vocal delivery, and reviewers seemed to have forgotten that only a decade earlier it had been unusual for a black actor to play the role on a major UK stage, let alone on the radio. It was now assumed that Othello could only be played by someone of African or Caribbean heritage. However, on radio at least, the next decade would see this change.

In 2020, Emma Harding's production of *Othello* finally decided to examine the idea that Mortimer had been considering twenty years previously, and academics had posited even earlier: that Othello might not be black at all.⁹⁶ Harding picked an actor of Arab heritage, Khalid Abdalla, to play Othello: the first time this had happened on the BBC. This is also a rare occurrence in the theatre: none of the UK's major Shakespeare companies (RSC, Shakespeare's Globe or National Theatre) have yet chosen to cast in this way. The idea that the word 'Moor' could refer to an Arab was articulated immediately before the broadcast in a short introduction from Birmingham City University's Islam Issa: 'A Moor could have been any person with darker skin or who wasn't Christian, but it was a religiously loaded often derogatory term that usually referred to Mahometans.'⁹⁷ Issa goes on to suggest that Othello 'converted to Christianity' and 'adopts a militantly Christian tone to overcompensate for his otherness'.⁹⁸ Othello's possible Islamic background is suggested in this production during the drinking scene in act two, scene three. Lucy Popescu describes it as 'reminiscent of raucous male bonding down the pub; one knows it will end in trouble.'⁹⁹ Instead of the two songs

⁹⁵ Celine Bijleveld, *Guardian*, 5 March 2010 <<https://advance.lexis.com/api/permalink/c126308a-91f1-430e-befd-6470ac7643a3/?context=1519360&federationidp=VJX3C459626>> [Accessed 30 July 2021]

⁹⁶ See Ferial J. Ghazoul, 'The Arabization of Othello', *Comparative Literature*, 50.1 (1998), 1-31 (p. 1); Walter Cohen, 'Othello [introduction]', in *The Norton Shakespeare*, 3rd edn, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt and others (London: W. W. Norton, 2016) pp. 2073-9 (p. 2073).

⁹⁷ Islam Issa, 'Introduction', in *Othello*, BBC Radio 3, 19 April 2020 <<https://learningonscreen.ac.uk/ondemand/index.php/prog/15E01903?bcast=131740325>> [Accessed 28 June 2021].

⁹⁸ Issa, 'Introduction', in *Othello*, BBC Radio 3, 19 April 2020.

⁹⁹ Lucy Popescu, 'Radio: Bold Bard without stage distraction', *Camden New Journal*, 16 April, 2020 <<http://camdennewjournal.com/article/radio-bold-bard-without-stage-distraction>> [accessed 21 May 2021].

sung by Iago in Shakespeare's text, a single, modern song, sung by a rowdy group of men is inserted:

(singing to the tune of 'My Old Man's a Dustman')

Ali Khan's a Muslim

He wears a Muslim's cap

His father wears a burka *(singing continues, indistinct)*¹⁰⁰

Reviewer Maryam Philpott states that 'Harding was keen to explore how the play's concept of "otherness" [...] links to what may once have been a Muslim faith'.¹⁰¹ By inserting this scene, Harding suggests that not just Iago, but the majority of Othello's soldiers have no real respect for him, increasing the 'otherness' already present in the text as well as situating it in a twenty-first century world many people will recognise.

Harding also cuts most of the references to Othello's colour. 'Black', or variants of it, appear eleven times in Shakespeare's text but Harding cuts it to only four. Among those that are removed are the Duke's suggestion that Othello is 'far more fair than black', and Othello's assertions 'Haply for I am black' and 'As Dian's visage, is now begrimed and black / As mine own face', as well as 'sooty bosom' (*Othello* 1.3.290, 3.3.267, 3.3.392-3, 1.2.71). In Harding's production, it might be suggested she is substituting Islam for 'blackness', something particularly pertinent in a radio production where the colour of Othello's skin cannot be seen. Writing in 2016, Ayanna Thompson suggests that 'recently, black actors have expressed a belief that Othello is not actually about race'.¹⁰² Harding's reinterpretation of the

¹⁰⁰ *Othello*, BBC Radio 3, 19 April 2020

<<https://learningonscreen.ac.uk/ondemand/index.php/prog/15E01903?bcast=131740325>> [Accessed 28 June 2021] 0:37:59.

¹⁰¹ Maryam Philpott, 'Othello – Drama on 3', *Cultural Capital*, 27 April 2020

<<https://maryamphilpottblog.wordpress.com/tag/khalid-abdalla/>> [accessed 21 May 2021].

¹⁰² Ayanna Thompson, 'Introduction', in *Othello* by William Shakespeare, ed. by E. A. J. Honigmann (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2016), pp. 1-116 (p. 90).

text along lines of religion rather than race would seem to fit with twenty-first century ideas of reframing the play in other ways.

Harding also changes the ethnicity of Desdemona. Shakespeare's text repeatedly refers to the character as 'fair' and notoriously as a 'white ewe' being tupped by a 'black ram' (*Othello* 1.1.88-9).¹⁰³ By casting Cassie Layton, a woman of colour, in the part of a character almost always played by a pale-skinned, blonde actor on stage, Harding is reversing decades of casting in this play: instead of a white man playing a black character, a woman of colour is playing a white character. However, as Layton is not a star-name actor, unless the audience had seen her previous stage or screen work, it is unlikely that they would have been aware of this fact. Just as reviewers had commented about Lenny Henry that not being able to see him meant listeners were less likely to expect him to break into his comic persona, so radio can enable an actor of any heritage to play a part without their appearance being a significant factor in their casting, although until the last two or three decades, little use has been made of this opportunity.

Harding's textual changes and direction of her actors also affect character. Desdemona's murder is particularly brutal. Lasting almost a full minute without words, there are sounds of her struggling, choking, gasping and slapping Othello.¹⁰⁴ Harding says that she 'wanted the murder to feel completely devastating' and 'hear the full horror' of what was happening to Desdemona.¹⁰⁵ She says that to do this, she had 'one of the most upsetting studios' she had ever experienced:¹⁰⁶

We had Khalid and Cassie on the floor with pillows. I discussed how we were going to do it with the actors and they wanted to do it, kind of, for real. We practised a way

¹⁰³ For references to Desdemona being 'fair', see *Othello* 1.1.124, 1.2.67, 1.3.125.

¹⁰⁴ *Othello*, 2020, 1:47:37.

¹⁰⁵ Emma Harding, private Zoom conversation, 27 May 2021.

¹⁰⁶ Harding, private Zoom conversation, 27 May 2021.

of doing it so that it wasn't really going to hurt her, he wasn't pressing very hard, and we recorded the sound through the pillow of that happening.¹⁰⁷

After Desdemona's death, Harding chooses not to have her revive, removing her final lines. The character no longer takes responsibility for her own death nor absolves Othello ('who hath done this deed? / Nobody. I myself' (*Othello* 5.2.132-3)). Othello's line: 'For nought I did in hate, but all in honour' (*Othello* 5.2.301) is also cut. In doing so, Harding ensures that Othello has no excuse for what he has done and alongside the brutality of the killing, presents a much less sympathetic character than is usually heard on radio or seen on stage.

The presentation of the character of Othello on BBC radio over the last hundred years charts the changing attitudes both on air and beyond to the portrayal of Shakespeare's Moor of Venice. For most of the twentieth century, the only actors deemed fit to play him were white: race was not considered important, despite early twentieth century critics and academics arguing that Othello was definitely black.¹⁰⁸ It would be easy to suggest that radio facilitated the perpetuation of white actors playing the role as it is not a visual medium: Farjeon suggests that the 'difficulty' of Othello's colour 'does not arise in broadcasting'.¹⁰⁹ But there is nothing to suggest that producers gave the issue any thought at all. Their preference was for established, mature leading actors from the theatre, and as these were almost always white, it is no surprise that radio's Othellos were too.

Radio seems to have been particularly keen on actors with a sonorous or musical vocal quality. Producer Felix Felton points out that on radio actors cannot fall back on the tricks of the theatre; make-up, costume and gesture, putting more emphasis on voice.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ Harding, private Zoom conversation, 27 May 2021.

¹⁰⁸ See A.C. Bradley, *Shakespearean tragedy: lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth* (London: Macmillan, 1904; repr. 1950), p. 198; Harley Granville-Barker, *Prefaces to Shakespeare, Volume II* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1947; repr. 1978), pp. 148-9.

¹⁰⁹ Farjeon, *Radio Times*, 6 October 1933.

¹¹⁰ Felix Felton, *The Radio Play: its techniques and possibilities* (London: Sylvan Press, 1949), p. 129.

However, he also acknowledges that acting for radio is not playing to ‘a massed audience stretching back into the recesses of a vast auditorium, but to millions of individual listeners, each so close that he could touch them’.¹¹¹ As such, it requires a subtler acting style for a convincing performance. This fact seems to have been missed by many of his colleagues, who repeatedly chose actors who appeared to be broadcasting to the back row of the stalls. As such, they may have delivered the verse beautifully, but did not engage listeners in the characters.

It was not until the new millennium that attitudes as to who could play Othello and how they should play him began to change, with the casting of BBC radio’s first black actor in the role. And while Fearon, Ejiofor and Henry were not stalwarts of the Shakespearean theatre, all three had played the role on stage prior to their radio appearances, suggesting producers remained unwilling to take risks with actors unfamiliar with the part. It is only with Abdalla that casting has reached beyond those who have already been successful on stage as Othello, or who even have a back catalogue of Shakespearean lead roles, to establish their credibility.¹¹² Of the eleven actors to play Othello on BBC radio, seven were white; historically he has been played by men ‘more fair than black’. However, the prevailing desire for old, white men with musical voices seems to have finally been eradicated: at least for the part of Othello. So far no actor of colour has played an English king, or almost any other leading male Shakespearean role, on radio.¹¹³ So there is still some way to go before radio fully embraces the opportunities of diverse casting.

¹¹¹ Felton, p. 12.

¹¹² Although Abdalla had performed in *The Duchess of Malfi* and *Tamburlaine the Great* on stage, Othello was his first Shakespearean role.

¹¹³ David Harewood is perhaps the only exception, having played Antony in the 2002 production of *Antony and Cleopatra*.

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