

Alessandra Bassey*

Brown, Never Black: *Othello* on the Nazi Stage¹

Abstract: This paper examines the ways in which *Othello* was represented on the Nazi stage. Included in the theatre analyses are *Othello* productions in Frankfurt in 1935, in Berlin in 1939 and 1944, and in pre-occupation Vienna in 1935. New archival material has been sourced from archives in the aforementioned locations, in order to give detailed insights into the representation of *Othello* on stage, with a special focus on the makeup that was used on the actors who were playing the titular role. The aim of these analyses is not only to establish what *Othello* looked like on the Nazi and pre-Nazi stage, but also to examine the Nazis' relationship with Shakespeare's *Othello* within the wider context of their relationship with the Black people who lived in Nazi Germany at the time. In addition, the following pages offer insights into pre-Nazi, Weimar productions of *Othello* in order to create a more complex and comparative understanding of Nazi *Othello* productions and the wider theatrical context within which they were produced. In the end, we find out, based on existing evidence, why *Othello* was brown, and never Black.

Keywords: *Othello*, Nazi Germany, Nazi Shakespeare, Blackface, Race, Representation, Shakespeare Production, Global Shakespeare, German Shakespeare, Theatre History.

While people of African descent are often assumed to have been absent from German society before and during the Nazi period, *Othello*, arguably Shakespeare's most famous Black character, thrived on the Nazi stage. In much the same way that Germany's Black population has been left out of recent historical accounts, Shakespeare's Black general has been largely overlooked by theatre critics. The German-Polish historian and Auschwitz survivor Joseph Wulf's assumption that *Othello* must have been banned on racist grounds is, for example, fairly representative of current scholarship on the topic of Shakespeare's *Othello* in Nazi Germany (280). In spite of this, the number of productions of the play under the Nazi regime suggest that far from disappearing from the theatre repertoires of the time, *Othello* remained

* King's College London.

¹ All German citations have been translated into English, all translations are mine.

prominent, ranking among the top ten most performed Shakespeare plays of the Nazi period. According to Thomas Eicher, *Othello* ranked as the tenth most performed Shakespeare play between 1933 and 1945, whereas it was the ninth most performed play between 1929 and 1933 (302). *The Merchant of Venice*, in comparison, sank from being the third most performed play between 1929 and 1933, to the ninth position between 1933 and 1945 (Eicher 302). So, even though its popularity experienced a slight decrease in 1933/34 (which already started during the years 1931/32 and 1932/33), and with the exception of 1934/35 (in which there were no *Othello* productions) (Eicher 310), *Othello* remained an often-produced play (Bonnell 167).

The question that this, for some, rather surprising fact about *Othello*'s popularity on Nazi stages raises is the question of the representation of the Black general himself. What did Othello look like on Nazi-controlled stages? Was he portrayed by a white actor in the kind of blackface that we would associate with minstrel shows, or did the actors wear a lighter shade of brown instead? Was he portrayed (as was the case during the Weimar period) as a great "Negro chief" or the "modern conductor of an all-Black Jazz band" (Stahl 625)? Or was he made into a caricature version of what Germans at the time perceived as 'African'?

The following pages will examine the ways in which *Othello* was presented under one of the most infamous racist regimes in recent history, with a special focus on the make-up used on actors in three different productions of *Othello* in Nazi Germany, starting in 1935 in Frankfurt, then looking at a 1939 Berlin version and a 1944 version of the play in the same city. In addition, Raul Aslan's 1935 rendition of Shakespeare's *Othello* at the "Burgtheater" in pre-annexation Vienna will also form part of the analysis. Previously ignored archival materials for the four respective productions have been sourced from archives in Vienna, Frankfurt and Berlin. The following analyses will show that the Nazis' relationship with Shakespeare's *Othello* (and by extension, the Black people who lived in Germany at the time) was far too complex to easily and unproblematically compartmentalise. The following pages will also offer insights into pre-Nazi productions of the play, representations of *Othello* on stage, and reactions to them in the press, in order to create a more comparative understanding, not just of Nazi *Othello* productions as such, but of the wider theatrical context within which they were produced.

In order to fully understand the Nazis' view of *Othello*, one must first gain an understanding of the context in which the play was produced, especially in relation to Germany's colonial past, the treatment of Black people in Germany just after the First World War and the social and political repercussions of having to concede German territory to foreign occupiers, who had among their ranks, a large contingent of Black African soldiers.

The First World War, the Aftermath, and the Repercussions for Black People in Germany

Before the end of the First World War, one of the greatest fears among German soldiers was to be captured by their Black opponents, particularly the Senegalese troops, who were known as “tirailleurs Sénégalais”, and who fought for the French with their infamous “coupe-coupe” (Olusoga 181). This weapon was essentially a machete originally used to cut down the thick vegetation in West Africa (Olusoga 181). Their skilful fighting techniques and their use of the “coupe-coupe” in hand-to-hand combat made the Senegalese soldiers fierce and feared enemies. The German war-propaganda machine used this traditional African weapon to create the ultimate emblem of the supposed uncontrollable savagery, barbarism, and inhumanity of African soldiers in the collective German consciousness (Olusoga 181-182).

The fear of the Black soldiers and the indignation of being subjected to the supposedly inferior race of Black people were mainly expressed in gendered and sexual terms. The inevitable relations between the African soldiers and the white German women led to a double-sided discourse, in which the German women were either seen as the victims of the “dark beasts”, or as whores, who willingly betrayed their fatherland, their race, and their people. Similarly, the fact that some white women would have voluntarily entered into sexual relationships with these African soldiers appeared to have been neither accepted nor understood by German society. The African man was, therefore, characterised as “infectious, instinctual, uncivilised, and—most notably—irresistible, insatiable, and uncontrollable” (Campt 54).

Before the ravaging stereotype of the brutal Black rapist spread across Germany, the African subjects in the German colonies were often associated with the myth of the “loyal Askari”—African soldiers, who willingly and happily submitted to their colonisers and who valiantly fought for the protection of the fatherland and the propagation of its political and economic interests (Lewerenz 3: 46).² This myth of the loyal African soldier represented the imperial world order, a time during which the white man was still at the top of the racial hierarchy, during which the “good coloniser” watched over his colonial subjects, and during which sexual relations between the races were limited to white males and Black females, with the white women at a safe distance. The stereotype of the Black rapist and occupier essentially subverted

² However, as David Olusoga and Casper W. Erichsen show in their book *The Kaiser's Holocaust*, the African people in the German colonies fiercely fought against German troops and for their freedom and independence, see: Olusoga, David, and Casper W. Erichsen, *The Kaiser's Holocaust. Germany's Forgotten Genocide*, London: Faber and Faber Limited, 2010.

these imperial and colonial tropes and instilled instead, a great degree of anxiety within German society. While the offspring of the white colonisers and the African women was largely kept away from the eyes of the German press and families, Negrophobia, German Nationalism and the ideal of social and racial apartheid was continuously challenged by the gradual appearance of the mixed race offspring of German women and Black occupying soldiers, who would later be called the “Rhineland bastards”(Olusoga and Erichsen 306). How to address and eventually solve the issue of these Black Germans was established in the immediate post-war period but would later on flourish under Hitler’s regime. Eugen Fischer and his research, in which he conducted experiments on 310 mixed-race children from Southwest Africa in order to determine their racial “quality”, for example, would become a prominent agent under Nazism for the establishment of the policies towards the so called “Rhineland bastards” (Lusane 50).

In hindsight, and given the aforementioned negative stereotypes with which Black people were associated at the time, it becomes clear that though the military prowess of Shakespeare’s general was never in question, and perhaps because of it, his Blackness, especially within the Nazi German context, would always be questioned.

Black People in Nazi Germany

While the general situation of Black people in Germany was marked by discrimination, insecurity and hate, some sources state that it was sometimes also a paradoxical situation, as the Black presence in Germany was seen by the regime as a potentially useful tool for international affairs. The leaders of the Third Reich were nursing the dream of re-establishing Germany’s colonies, consequently rebuilding Germany’s imperial power and ensuring the expansion of the Reich and of “Lebensraum” for the “Aryan” race.³ Because of the regime’s attempt to maintain “favourable” diplomatic relations with the outside world, it was internally agreed that Black people in Germany should not be too openly abused, without a veneer of legality to justify what were already brutal policies (Oguntoye and Opitz and Schultz 56). So, at least during the early years, the regime tried to maintain a façade of “tolerance” towards its Black

³ This idea of creating new ‘Lebensraum’ in Africa for the German people was not new, as already Heinrich Göring and other Germans ventured to Africa in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century to conquer land for the expanding German nation. Hermann Göring followed in his father’s footsteps by supporting the expansion of the Reich towards the East of Europe in the hopes of gaining suitable “Lebensraum”.

population; this way, a few Black people were, from time to time, given special opportunities, which would otherwise have been unavailable or illegal in accordance with the Nuremberg Race Laws. These exceptions meant that a select few mixed-race Germans were sometimes offered a high-profile position or role (Pommerin 66). In order to grasp the often contradictory policies towards Black people in Nazi Germany, it is important to differentiate between the treatment(s) meted out to the various kinds of Black people who lived or stayed in Germany after 1933. While a captured Black American soldier could be brutally killed, and the mixed-race children forcibly sterilised or deported, African students, workers, teachers, or diplomats were initially more or less ignored and left alone, but their presence would later on become untenable; and Africans from the diaspora (mostly from France, England or America), who were usually entertainers, musicians, journalists, or students were “embraced” (Lusane 96). The treatment and position of these Black entertainers, however, was a double edged sword. On the one hand, the regime used Black performers for their own gain, which was to create state-controlled “Black art”; and on the other hand, these positions paradoxically provided a kind of sanctuary for the performers, as their usefulness to the regime allowed a degree of security for them. In the aftermath of the Nazi regime, many survivors had to live with the difficult fact that they used their positions for safety, while perpetuating ideologies that were meant to exterminate their own people, and, by means of their Blackness, further the regime’s racist cause (Lusane 179, 181).

While there are stark contradictions in the treatment of Black people in Germany, racism was nevertheless prevalent in the Reich. What these contradictions show is that Nazism, its ideologies and policies, were not uniform or static; on the contrary, they evolved over time and proved adaptable to the needs of the regime and the corresponding political climate. “There was no one overall policy, but there was one overall objective” (Lusane 97)—the creation of a “pure German racial state”, in which Jews, Blacks, Gypsies, and any other “non-Aryans” did not have a place. It is within this historical and socio-political context that any assessment of *Othello* productions, the representation and performance of its protagonist, and its reception in Nazi Germany must be placed.

De-Blacking Othello

Discussions around Othello’s appearance were prevalent during the Nazi period, and to some extent, already shortly before. Those discussions were, almost unfailingly, accompanied by fervent efforts to distance Othello from his Black, African heritage. In 1938, for example, G.R. Bienel published an article in the *Wiener Neueste Nachrichten* newspaper titled “Othello war kein Mohr. Ein

kleiner Irrtum Shakespeares” (“Othello was not a Moor. Shakespeare’s small mistake”). In it, Bienel explained how Shakespeare used a novella first published in 1566 (as part of Cinthio’s *Hecatommithi*) as the basis for his *Othello*, and how he supposedly took the title too literally. The idea was that Shakespeare must have mistaken the original subtitle “Un Capitano Moro” to mean that the captain, Othello, must have been Black since he was a Moor. Bienel blames this on Shakespeare’s lack of contextual knowledge of the fact that this epithet “il moro” may have been used to refer to a person with tanned skin, as the original story was based in Cyprus (Bienel 12). Bienel continued to explain that “moro” was a phrase commonly used to describe someone’s skin complexion rather than someone’s race or ethnicity. As such, according to Bienel, Shakespeare may have *mistakenly* created a Black Othello, because he assumed, albeit wrongly, that the epithet “il moro” identified the race of the original character, rather than his complexion (Bienel 12). It is impossible not to read these comments as deeply influenced by racist ideology. Bienel implies that Shakespeare’s Othello was in fact a European, a Cypriot, with a dark complexion. While having a tanned character on stage was already much more acceptable than having a Black man be seen in front of the audiences, Bienel’s attempt to rid Othello of his Black African heritage altogether shows that he tried to make the play even more suitable for its production in Nazi Germany, as nothing would beat the appeal of a European general, who valiantly fights for his country, but falls for the treachery of his opponent because of his love for a woman. Othello could, in other words, be turned into a warning tale for German men and soldiers, not to let their passions or women lead them astray and away from their duties.

Chiming into the discourse surrounding Othello’s heritage and skin colour, Nazi-contemporary and Shakespeare-translator Hans Rothe argued that in Shakespeare’s time the term “Moor” was referring to a Berber, an Arab, not a “negro”, and, according to Rothe, when referring to a “negro”, one would have used the term “Black-a-Moor” (“Schwarzer Maure”) (Rothe 310). He claimed that only Iago actually talks about the Blackness of Othello, but that Shakespeare was talking about a Berber, an Arab, not a “negro”. Rothe illustrated his argument with a personal anecdote, stating that when he studied in Edinburgh, Scottish students would call Indian students “Blackies”, and that Othello was obviously no “Blackie” on the Elizabethan stage, but a Berber, and that Iago’s racist insults based on Othello’s skin colour would only gain more importance through this obvious paradox of Othello not even being Black (Rothe 310-311). He explained this theory by stating that historically, Othello could not have been Black, because a “negro” would and could never have dared to be in the company of senators and dukes, that he could never have climbed up to the rank of “condottiere”, let alone imagine to court or marry Desdemona (Rothe 311). Rothe added that:

[A]s a negro, the Prince of Morocco could also not have dared to court Portia, as an Arab, he was free to do so. Elizabethan society knew almost nothing about negroes, [as] they were on the same level as wild animals. (311)

Again, Rothe's argument is historically flawed, since Black people were indeed present and known to have held different positions across different levels of society in Tudor and Jacobean England. John Blanke, for example, was the Trumpeter of King Henry VIII; Cattelena of Almondsbury lived independently as a single woman in England; and Reasonable Blackman, was a silk weaver in England (Kaufmann 3). Rothe's arguments are thus based on the common misconceptions that there were no Black people that were recognised as citizens in Elizabethan England, and that Shakespeare could not have conceived Othello as a successful Black general. What he forgot, or perhaps, ignored was the fact that "[n]ot all slaves were African", and not all Africans were slaves (Kaufmann 3). In effect, Rothe was reinforcing a biased, anachronistic and fundamentally racist approach to the play.

The often-debated meaning and racial implication of the term "Moor" has helped many performers and critics alike to justify their choice to portray Othello as a light-skinned man, basing their choice on the argument that "Moor" did not always explicitly refer to Black African in the general colloquialisms of Elizabethan England and afterwards. While the meaning and implications of the term "Moor" may have changed, there is an agreement among scholars nowadays that in Shakespeare's time, performances of "Moors" meant performances of Black men, meaning that Shakespeare's Othello was a Black man, or rather, a Black man played by a white man (Thompson 32).⁴ This debate about Othello's heritage and skin colour was fully appropriated by the racial politics of the Nazi regime, since it allowed for a lighter-skinned Othello, permitting the continuous uninterrupted flow of *Othello* productions on stage, in spite of the assumptions one might have had to the contrary.⁵ If it was assumed

⁴ More contemporary approaches to Othello can be found here: Bassi, Shaul, 'Barefoot to Palestine: The Failed Meetings between Shylock and Othello', in *Visions of Venice in Shakespeare*, ed. by Laura Tosi and Shaul Bassi, Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2011, pp. 231-250; Cowhig, Ruth, 'Actors, Black and Tawny, in the Role of Othello – and Their Critics.', in *Theatre Research International*, 4, March 1979, pp. 133-146; Kaul, Mythili, 'Background: Black or Tawny? Stage Representations of Othello from 1604 to the Present.' in *Othello: New Essays by Black Writers*, ed. by Mythili Kaul, Howard University Press, 1997, pp. 1-19: <http://search.ebscohost.com.proxy-remote.galib.uga.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mzh&AN=1997024665&site=eds-live>; Okri, Ben, 'Leaping out of Shakespeare's Terror: Five Meditations on Othello', in *A Way of Being Free*, London: Phoenix, 1997; Quarshie, Hugh, 'Playing Othello', in *Discovering Literature: Shakespeare and Renaissance Writers*, 2015.

⁵ For more information about the relationship of prominent German figures, such as political theorist Carl Schmitt, with Othello and his blackness before and during the

that Othello was not a veritable Black man, but rather, a brown man of North-African origins, for example, there would have been no need to put an actor in the demeaning and stereotyping blackface make-up that was prevalent during the 19th and 20th century to “portray” Black people’s appearance. Whereas the mere portrayal of Othello as a light-skinned North-African may not be inherently racist, it is the reasoning behind that representation and the reactions of the press (and/or the audience), that uncover racist prejudice and stereotyping, making this representation and staging of Othello problematic and racist.

Othello on the Nazi Stage

The notorious Nazi ideologue Alfred Rosenberg claimed that people of North African descent could potentially be classified as “Aryans” (Rosenberg 26). In his theory, he focuses on the Berber and Kabyle peoples. Rosenberg claimed that:

The light-skinned and often blue-eyed Berber were not influenced by the later Vandal conquests, but by the ancient Atlantic-Nordic human waves (conquests, settlements). The hunter-Kabyle, for example, are still largely of impeccable Nordic origin (blonde Berbers make out 10% in the region of Constantine, they are even more numerous in Djebel Scheschor). (26)

According to Rosenberg, then, some North Africans could thus still be classified as “Aryans” or at least as heirs to the “Aryan” or Nordic race. This “scientific” claim laid to the supposedly lighter-skinned inhabitants of North Africa emphasizes the exclusion of the continent’s sub-Saharan, Black African population. Nazi-contemporary reviewer Frank Vogl stated that

[...] it has been asserted often enough that it would be misunderstanding to depict Othello as too dark-skinned or with hair that is too curly, [that he was obviously] a Berber, with skin that was not much darker than that of a Southern Italian and a phenotype [that differed greatly to that of] a negro. (5)

In the context of determining Othello’s racial and ethnic origins, and thus the shade of his skin, the makeup used to adjust Othello’s appearance on stage became particularly significant. Photographs of the 1935 production of *Othello*,

Nazi period, see: Höfele, Andreas, *No Hamlets*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, p. 25ff. For an in-depth look at Thomas Mann’s relationship with Shakespeare’s characters more generally, and with Othello in particular see: Döring, Tobias, Fernie, Ewans, eds., *Thomas Mann and Shakespeare: Something Rich and Strange*, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015, p. 113-133.

which was directed by Ernst Relchke, with Hermann Schomberg as Othello, show him wearing tanned make-up; not the ridiculing blackface that one would have seen on actors in minstrel shows, but a medium brown or bronze tan. His hair was wavy, borderline curly, and of a brown shade. Schomberg's Othello was wearing a light-coloured uniform that seemed to have some Arabic or Middle-Eastern influences, with a flowing, loose fitting overcoat on his shoulders. In an article in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, Othello is described as

an imposing general, wearing a white uniform, he is not a Black negro [...], but a light-brown cultivated Moor, a magnificent face, which one does not associate with African wildness or wilderness.

Hermann Schomberg's Othello was generally described as a "brownish", noble Arab, (F. Th. *Neueste Zeitung*) "a Moor, indeed an African, but not a Negro" (*General Anzeiger*) with a superior, calm, and collected countenance—at least until Iago's poisonous scheme first influenced him.

When Ewald Balsler played Othello at the "Deutsches Theater" in Berlin in 1939, Karl Heinz Ruppel described him as a "noble Berber, with dark-brown hair and tanned skin", with the "proud demeanour of a great warrior and hero, who we can believe is a descendant of royalty" (Ruppel 47). So again, it becomes clear that the actor playing Othello was indeed not wearing out-and-out blackface, instead, the make-up worn by Ewald Balsler was meant to demonstrate Othello's "otherness" without the added insult of ridicule and racist stereotyping that accompanies the usages of blackface. Most newspaper reviews from the archive of the Academy of Arts in Berlin follow the general trend of describing Balsler's Othello as a "royal, princely" Moor, stating that he was in no way a "gnashing, eye-rolling, raging [...] negro" (Wanderscheck). Wilhelm Westecker described Balsler's Othello as

[...] a superior, disciplined, noble thinking Moor, who, nevertheless, possess[ed] the ability to degenerate into unbridled passions once his mistrust has been awakened, but even then, he [was] never a [...] negro.

Wilhelm Hortmann explained that this Othello was the Nazi-version of the embodiment of a proud, manly, noble Moor, who was sure of his rank and his worth as a general, making him an ideal and easy target for Iago's perfidious malignity (151).

A similarly grave-looking, proud and imposing general was played by Paul Hartmann at the "Staatstheater" in Berlin in 1944 under the direction of Karlheinz Stroux. The production premiered in February, only six months away from the final closure of the theatres due to the Nazi's impending military capitulation. Paul Hartmann was the president of the Reich Theatre Chamber

and well known for his success in young, male, lead heroic roles. Paul Fechter described Hartmann's Othello as the embodiment of the "son of the desert", a man only marginally darker than the Venetians themselves, and "not the Black African" (quoted in Bonnell 174).

While Schomberg, Balser, and Hartmann all sported bronzed complexions, photographs from the archive of the "Theatermuseum" in Vienna show Raoul Aslan, under the direction of Hermann Röbbeling, as a much darker Othello, sporting a significantly darker shade of make-up. Performing at the "Burgtheater", Aslan was wearing a long, flowing white kaftan, with prayer beads hanging from his waist band, and a turban on his head. Although Aslan's Othello wore much darker make-up, the fact that he was portrayed as a brown Arab meant that blackface was, yet again, not used.

The focus on Othello's racial and ethnic identity, as well as the lighter shade of make-up used on actors portraying the character during the Nazi period, differed from the approach to and portrayal of Othello's appearance during the Weimar Republic.

Pre-Nazi *Othello* Productions

While the reviews that were written and printed during the Nazi period spent, as we have seen, much time debating, excusing, and describing Othello's skin tone, heritage, race or ethnicity, pre-Nazi reviews of the play's production differ in style and focus. Weimar production reviews tend to focus on the description and analysis of the productions' general set-up, their interpretations of Shakespeare's play, the stage design, the choices of actors, the lighting, etc. rather than Othello's appearance and the make-up used on the actor.

In the case of the 1921 production at the "Staatliches Schauspielhaus" in Berlin, which was directed by Leopold Jessner, and in which Fritz Kortner starred as Othello, Kortner's achievements as an actor, his representation of Othello's character, his passions, and his behaviour seem to have been of far greater interest to the press than long elaborations on the hue of Kortner's makeup. It is possible to read an entire review of the 1921 production without coming any closer to picturing Othello's appearance at the time. Othello's skin tone and / or ethnicity are simply circumvented and not explicitly discussed in most reviews. In addition, since Kortner was not sporting the typical minstrel show blackface, it seemed to have been clear to the audience that they were not dealing with an actual Black character on stage. This circumvention of a discussion of Othello's origin was, however, not present in Paul Fechter's review of the 1921 rendition of the play. Quite early on, Fechter stated that Kortner's Othello was "not Black, but brown, not a Moor, but a North African"

(“Maure”) (Fechter 2).⁶ Apparently, Fechter perceived the differentiation between Othello being viewed as a North-African, brown man, rather than as a Black African of Sub-Saharan descent, to be of importance. Looking closer at his review, it becomes clear why he would stress Othello’s origins and why he would remain a successful journalist even under Hitler’s regime. The discourse and language employed in his review of the 1921 *Othello* production foreshadows the ones used to describe, represent, and justify Othello’s presence on the Nazi stage. Othello was seen as a gentle, childlike man who has found happiness and solace in his love for Desdemona but only until he loses his temper and gives into his feelings of jealousy—which is when the very heritage that had been denied or circumvented is morphed into the reason for his irrational behaviour. Another reviewer, namely Alfred Klaar, likened Kortner’s Othello to a younger man, who let an “erotic” smile over his “slightly darkened face”, which may have reminded one too much of the “naïve embarrassment of a negro-boy” (*Vossische Zeitung*). This comment points towards Klaar’s belief that Othello was indeed darker than the Europeans and that he should not be represented as a “negro”, but that Kortner may have played into the latter a bit too much.

The interest in Othello’s heritage intensified in the reviews of the 1932 production of *Othello*, which was also directed by Leopold Jessner at the “Staatliches Schauspielhaus”, and in which Werner Krauss played Iago, with Heinrich George as Othello. Monty Jacobs wrote a review and stated that

[...] in Kortner’s place stands Heinrich George, not a North African, but a Moor according to the phantasies of Shakespeare, and, to be candid, a Black man. (*Vossische Zeitung*)

This remark about Heinrich George playing Othello as a Black man comes, of course, as somewhat of a surprise, especially in the context of previous productions and the socio-political context of 1932. Jacobs continued to describe Othello as a

Black man, who can indeed be a general [...]. But, he is mostly a nature-boy from the jungle, an embarrassed and smiling man, a big child. (*Vossische Zeitung*)

While Jacobs described him as a real Black man, pictures of George as Othello do not seem to support this description. George’s hair is wavy, borderline curly,

⁶ I have translated ‘Maure’ to North African, because technically ‘Maure’ and ‘Mohr’ translate to ‘Moor’ in English, but Fechter meant a North African, a Berber by ‘Maure’, since ‘Mohr’ was specific to someone with black skin and of sub-Saharan origins.

much like Erich Engel's hairdo in 1939. George's skin is tanned and not even as deep and earthy as Kortner's make-up in 1921 (who was likened to a North African, rather than a sub-Saharan African). Alfred Kerr's review of the production sheds light on this apparent discrepancy in descriptions further down in the text, as he elaborated on Othello's behaviour on stage, and not just his appearance. Kerr likened George's Othello to the "King [...] of Bithynia", alluding to Othello's royal lineage, but also referring to Othello as someone "straight from Togo", clearly referencing stereotypes of supposedly wild, uncivilised Africans, who stand in opposition to someone of royal and noble descent (549-551). He continued stating that it seemed to have become customary for the latest Othellos of the time to almost "climb on palm trees", to "swing from branch to branch. With throaty howling", but that a real Othello should be represented as an "almost handsome, Europeanised person [...] without a nose ring" (549-551). Kerr's description thus illuminates why it seemed to have been so obvious and easy to admit for Jacobs that Othello was indeed a Black African, since only Black Africans could be seen as behaving in such an unruly, animal-like manner.

In Jacobs' review of the 1932 production another rather subtle remark about the production deserves our attention in the context of the extreme and racist Africanisation of Othello towards the end of the Weimar period and just before the Nazi era. Jacobs stated that over the course of the evening, with rising tension and heat on stage, George's darkening makeup, came dangerously close to staining or rubbing off on his white garment (*Vossische Zeitung*). This subtle remark about the dark make-up marking the white garment and potentially exposing George's white skin underneath could be seen as uncovering a subconscious prejudice or thought about the juxtaposition between George's behaviour as Othello, who has been turned into a wild "Negro chief" (Stahl 625), and George's behaviour as a white man. Only a Black African could be permitted to be seen to behave in such wild and raging ways on stage, which is why reviewers such as Jacobs and Kerr were so open about admitting that this Othello was portrayed as a Black man, and not a brown North African (who could still be associated with, at least, a degree of civilisation). Ironically, Alfred Kerr (who was of Jewish heritage and who went into exile in 1933) and Jacobs seemed to have the same expectation and vision of Othello's representation as the Nazis themselves.

Conclusion

We might ask why the Nazis went to such great lengths not to portray Othello as a dark-skinned Black man, and why they refrained from putting the Othello actors in blackface, especially considering the fact that a number of productions

across Europe had already come to terms with Othello's Blackness, centuries before. For one, admitting that Shakespeare, who was one of the most revered playwrights in Nazi Germany, made a Sub-Saharan African man (someone who would have qualified as "Untermensch", as "subhuman") into the protagonist of a play was unthinkable; within the scope of Nazi ideologies, Othello's valiance and noble characteristics could not be combined with the images of the supposedly barbaric and primitive Africans. Adolf Hitler himself stated that Black people needed to be pitied for ostensibly being such lowly creatures (quoted in Lusane 95), rather than be revered by Germans. As we have seen, the Nazis respected and admired the soldierly attributes of Othello, and, considering the prevalent, racist stereotypes of Black African people (largely established and reinforced in the immediate post-war period at the beginning of the 20th century), letting Othello be a Black African was impossible. What is more is that the Berbers (which they fought so hard to associate Othello with), were, according to Nazi eugenics, distant relatives of the "Aryan race", so if Othello's Africanness was indeed acknowledged, there was no need to associate him with sub-Saharan peoples. Lastly, and maybe ironically, having a brown Othello on stage would have been a much more tangible image to the 1930s and 1940s German audience. After all, during and after the post-war occupation period, especially in the Rhineland region, many mixed-race Germans suddenly appeared. They were, of course, the offspring of white German women and Black soldiers, and subsequently became the target of extermination and forced sterilisation campaigns shortly after Hitler's rise to power. These mixed-race people were Germans, who claimed a place in their country, and thus posed a threat to the "Reinigung" (cleaning) of the Aryan society. Thus, I would suggest that having a commonly known image of a light-skinned man of African descent "defiling" and killing the white woman on stage would have been much more effective propaganda than having a dark-skinned Black man play the same role, as they posed a much lesser threat to white German society in the 1930s.

In short, the Nazis were sure that Othello was brown, never Black. He may have been an Arab, or a Berber, but he was never a Black, sub-Saharan African. The fictional character Othello was as much used for the propagation of the regime's racist ideologies as were the Black people that were forced to perform in human circuses and shows at the time. While Othello may have had the advantage of being a fictional character, Black people did not benefit from such privilege in real life. On the contrary, they endured cruel and demeaning treatments at the hands of the Nazis. As such, while Othello was allowed and celebrated on stage, Black people in real life were persecuted and humiliated in ways that were reminiscent of the Kaiser's Holocaust of the early 1900s, which was the attempt by German colonial forces to obliterate the Herero and Nama peoples in modern day Namibia. In fact, the popular success of *Othello* should serve as a reminder of the perfidy with which the regime operated, because just

like it used *Othello* for its propaganda, it used some Black people for political, cultural and propagandistic purposes, while the majority of the Black population suffered unimaginable humiliations, persecution, and eventual attempts at extermination.

WORKS CITED

- ‘Othello war kein N[**]er. Zur Shakespeare Aufführung im Schauspielhaus’, *General-Anzeiger*, Frankfurt am Main, 1935: n.p.
- ‘Zeitbilder’, *Vossische Zeitung* [year unknown]: 4.
- Bienel, G.R., ‘Othello war kein Mohr. Ein kleiner Irrtum Shakespeares’, *Wiener Neueste Nachrichten*, Wien, 1938: n.p.
- Bonnell, Andrew G., ‘Shylock and Othello under the Nazis’, *German Life and Letters*, 63, 2010: 166-178 <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0483.2010.01490.x>
- Camp, Tina, *Other Germans. Black Germans and the Politics of Race, Gender, and Memory in the Third Reich*, The University of Michigan Press, 2004.
- C.K., ‘Frankfurter Schauspielhaus. “Othello” von Shakespeare’, *Frankfurter Zeitung*, Frankfurt am Main, 1935: n.p.
- Eicher, Thomas, ‘Spielplanstrukturen 1929-1944’, in *Theater im ‘Dritten Reich’: Theaterpolitik, Spielplanstruktur, NS-Dramatik*, eds. Henning Rischbieter, Thomas Eicher, and Barbara Panse, Kallmeyersche Verlagsbuchhandlung GmbH, 2000: 279-488.
- F. Th., ‘“Othello” im Frankfurter Schauspielhaus.’, *Neueste Zeitung*, Frankfurt am Main, 1935: n.p.
- Fechter, Paul, ‘Shakespeare: “Othello” im Staatstheater’, *Vossische Zeitung*, 12 Nov. 1921: 2.
- Fechter, Paul, ‘Shakespeares Othello Staatliches Schauspielhaus’, 29 Feb. 1944, [unprovenanced clipping *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*?], in *Kritikensammlung Wahn*, quoted in Bonnell, Andrew G., ‘Shylock and Othello under the Nazis’, *German Life and Letters*, 63, 2010: 166-178 <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0483.2010.01490.x>
- Goll, Ivan, ‘The Negroes Are Conquering Europe’, in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, eds. Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg, Berkeley, London: University of California Press, 2015.
- Hortmann, Wilhelm, *Shakespeare on the German Stage: The Twentieth Century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Jacobs, Monty, ‘Othello. Staatliches Schauspielhaus’, *Vossische Zeitung*, 20 Jan. 1932: n.p.
- Kaufmann, Miranda, *Black Tudors. The Untold Story*, London: Oneworld Publications, 2017.
- Kerr, Alfred, *Mit Schleuder und Harfe. Theaterkritiken aus drei Jahrzehnten*, ed. Hugo Fetting, Berlin: Severin & Siedler, 1982.
- Klaar, Alfred, ‘“Othello” in der Neuinszenierung Leopold Jessners’, *Vossische Zeitung*, 13 Nov. 1921: n.p.

- Lewerenz, Susann, 'Die Deutsche Afrika-Schau (1935-1940)', in *Afrika und Europa. Koloniale und Postkoloniale Begegnungen. Africa and Europe. Colonial and Postcolonial Encounters*, eds. Marianne Berghaus-Gerst and Reinhard Klein-Arendt, Vol 3. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2006.
- Lusane, Clarence, *Hitler's Black Victims*, London: Routledge, 2003.
- Oguntoye, Katharina, May Opitz, and Dagmar Schultz, eds., *Farbe Bekennen. Afro-Deutsche Frauen auf den Spuren ihrer Geschichte*, Berlin: Orlanda Frauenverlag, 1986.
- Olusoga, David, and Capser W. Erichsen, *The Kaiser's Holocaust. Germany's Forgotten Genocide*, London: Faber and Faber Limited, 2010.
- Pommerin, Reiner, *Sterilisierung der Rheinlandbastarde – Das Schicksal einer farbigen Minderheit 1918-1937*, Düsseldorf: Droste, 1979.
- Rosenberg, Alfred, *Der Mythos des 21. Jahrhunderts. Eine Wertung der seelisch-geistigen Gestaltenkämpfe unserer Zeit*, München: Hoheneichen-Verlag, 1934.
- Ruppel, K.H., *Berliner Schauspiel. Dramaturgische Betrachtungen 1936 bis 1942*, Berlin / Vienna, 1943.
- Schorsch, Hugo, 'Abessinien in Wien', *Wiener Bilder*, Wien, 27 Oct. 1935: 3.
- Shakespeare, William, *Othello*, ed. E.A.J. Honigmann, Revised, London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2016.
- Stahl, E.L., *Shakespeare und das Deutsche Theater*, Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1947.
- Thompson, Ayanna, 'Introduction', in *Othello*, ed. E.A.J. Honigmann, London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2016: 1-114.
- Vogl, Frank, 'Berliner Theater / "Othello" im Deutschen Theater – Ein Stück von Theo Lingen im Staatstheater', *Wiener Neueste Nachrichten*, 1939: 5.
- Wanderscheck, Hermann, 'Shakespeares "Othello" Deutsches Theater, Berlin', [Unknown Provenance], 1939: n.p.
- Westecker, Wilhelm, 'Tragödie des Fremdseins. "Othello" im Deutschen Theater', *Berliner Börsenzeitung*, 1939: n.p.