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The Last Othello

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One-act play script. In 1943, when Paul Robeson led an all-star cast of Othello, including Uta Hagen and Jose Ferrer, to conclude the longest running Shakespeare ever to grace the Broadway stage, one reviewer from Variety wrote: “No white man will ever be able to play Othello again.” In a way it was both prophecy and condemnation.

Paul Robeson did not play Othello again until 1960 at Stratford on Avon. By then, he was over sixty, faced with a young director (Tony Richardson) who knew nothing of the dynamics of greatness and a leading lady who played the role of Desdemona like a scullery maid. As a point of bittersweet irony, Robeson—Promethean actor, singer, philosopher, All-American athlete, the first truly meaningful black activist of the 20th Century and one of the greatest forces for political change in American history —had been blacklisted as an entertainer and placed under a travel ban by his own native United States (from 1952 to 1956). Finally in 1959, he had come again to the European stage bloody but unbowed, a refugee from the physical toll taken by his own ideals.

Uta Hagen, his co-star in the original Shakespeare production— his lover, his friend and his political consigliore—has just come off her own personal purgatory that included nearly ten years on the HUAC blacklist.

It is now 1960, and Robeson, set with a leading lady who is not his equal and a cast of future acting legends, approaches the last nights of his performance with a sense of fatalism and an awareness of the irony of his situation: the overblown accolades he is now receiving for what are now shards of his once dynamic tour de force as the greatest Othello of all time.

All this seems to pale in view of the woman who has just now come into his dressing room the night before one of his last performances—when Uta Hagen reenters his life for one last time. Together they share their recollections of that era when they were the toasts of Broadway, when they were masters of the universe, and all their dreams were summer.

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