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“Why couldn't Bert Williams play Othello?": The Denial of Self-Determination of a 'Nobody'

“Why couldn't Bert Williams Play Othello?” This seems like a preposterous question to anyone who knows Bert Williams only as the blackface comedian of the Ziegfeld follies or the laughably unfortunate Jonah Man character he established in his musicals with Walker. But Bert Williams had a great interest, both for himself and for Negro<sup>1</sup> performers everywhere, to break the barrier into serious roles.

Although Bert Williams was born in the West Indies and only of a quarter African descent, he struggled to define the Negro place in American performing arts. While the color of his skin consigned him to play only comedic roles in mainstream American theatre, his humble demeanor and civilized behavior made him acceptable to a mainstream white audience and show-biz entrepreneurs. Bert Williams's achievement of being the first Negro actor to appear in an all-white show, thus opening doors for actors to come after him, is often tempered by the fact that he appeared as a blackface comedian. Paradoxically, Williams advanced the cause of Negro theatre by perpetuating standard white images of the Negro race. However, Williams wanted to portray many different types of Negro characters, including dramatic roles, a concept that had been mostly unseen in the American theatre. As odd as it may seem, Bert Williams may have wanted to play Othello, but social perceptions of Negro performers limited his desire. As Krasner states: “Black theatre and performance at the time [1910-1927] was a struggle for self-determination and the right to gain acceptance in commercial venues as well as bolster

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper, terminology of black Americans of William's age, which was Negro. I consider this term is appropriate in this context since it is the term William's himself used, and it embodies his solidarity with African Americans, even though he himself was not African-American.

intellectual contributions to the arts. Black art arose from tensions existing between separatism and intergrationism, folk art and propaganda, high art and popular culture, improvisation and text, and autonomy and solidarity” (3). In his all-black musicals with Walker, Williams was able to give opportunities to Negro artists and provide a place for Negro artists to produce their independent work. In his work in the mainstream theatre, however, he could only modify his blackface character slightly from the audience’s expectations. Due to his success in the mainstream theatre, Bert Williams had to sacrifice his dreams of portraying all the humanity of the Negro race.

Bert Williams both sought to integrate his act into the mainstream theatre with the songs and acts of his blackface character as well as fulfill his desire to portray a three-dimensional character, not just a stereotype. Even in his performance as the blackface character subverted some of the conventions to show a hint of pathos, and a strong instinct for survival in the unjust world, that were typically absent from white comedians who performed in the blackface tradition (Douglas 329). The blackface role he traditionally portrayed was the Jonah Man: ““The Jonah Man represented the mournful and melancholy, quaint and philosophical, but exceedingly funny fellow, with the discouraged shoulders, the shambling gait and the stumbling dialect of the ignorant Southern Negro” (Isaacs 35). Due to his background, he approached the character as an outsider, a study in a different person: “I try to portray the shiftless darky to the fullest extent, his fun, his philosophy....There is nothing about this fellow I don’t know. I have studied him; his joys and sorrows...I must study his movements. I have to. *He is not in me*” (Smith 181, emphasis mine). Williams, then, approached the blackface character much in the same way, if with a different intention, as a white man would. Because of the limitations he faced because of his skin color, however, he sought to expand the possibilities of the character he represented. He

continues, “If I were free to do as I would like, I would give both sides of the shiftless darkey, the pathos as well as the fun...I’d like to take a character and build it up, giving both sides” (Smith 181). His was not only a personal goal, but a goal for the advancement of the Negro equality. Forbes quotes a clipping titled “Bert Williams a Real Optimist,” where he says “if I could interpret in the theatre that underlying tragedy of the race, I feel that we would be better known and better understood. Perhaps the time will come when that dream will come true. I will never cease to hope that it will” (225). Outside reviewers also recognized his stymied potential. The 1912 review of the *Chicago Record-Herald* notes: “if he put a shade more gravity into his acting, he would be pathetic; even tragical in an altogether legitimate way” (Rowland 91). The critic Heywood Broun further acknowledges the limitations placed on Williams due to the white audience’s self-congratulations for accepting his performance:

“There was only one restriction which limited him: since he was a negro, he must be a *funny* man...Somehow or other laughing at Bert Williams came to be tied up in people’s minds with liberalism, charity and the Thirteenth Amendment.” (Rowland 97)

The progress to tragic roles forever seemed outside of his grasp, both to himself and outside viewers. Williams acknowledged the limitations of his performance but considered gaining acceptance into the Broadway theatres the most important step for him to take. However, when the opportunity arose that would allow Bert Williams to portray a serious black man, he shied away.

In Bert Williams’s first biography, *Bert Williams, Son of Laughter*, David Belasco, the preeminent theatre artist of the day, writes of his meeting with Bert Williams. Belasco introduces himself to Williams: I have sent for you because you are ready for me” (Rowland 107). Belasco had a strong history of strenuously training stars for his own productions.

Belasco had taken an interest and trained for the stage Mrs. Leslie Carter and Blanche Bates, as well as David Warfield, who he turned into a complex Jewish character, showing both humor and pathos, in Simon Levi. Williams was excited by the possibility and looked up to Belasco's example: "I want sometime to do a whole piece,' he said, 'to interpret one of my race as sympathetically as Mr. Warfield did the Jew in *The Auctioneer*" (Forbes 225). Belasco seemed primed to add the complexity to the Negro that he had given to the Jew, as he explains:

Many years ago my attention chanced to be directed to an account of the career of Ira Aldrich, the once famous negro actor who performed in 'Othello' and other classic tragedies. In my constant quest for novelties, I found myself wondering whether I might not discover and develop a negro player competent to portray great tragic characters before a modern audience.

Upon mature consideration, however, the chances for success of such a player came to seem very dubious. But it presently occurred to me that a genuine negro comedian of high class, properly directed and placed before the public in the right way, would become immensely popular and successful. (Rowland xii-xiii)

At this point, Bert Williams could have achieved his goals of displaying the pathos of the Negro. Bert accepted but after more consideration declined:

"At first he was overjoyed and he immediately consented. But as we went further and further into the project, he became more and more fearful that he would be unable to perform what I had planned for him and would fail to fulfill my expectations. At last, overcome by diffidence and modesty, he came to me and begged to be released" (Rowland xiii).

Thus, in the early 1910s Bert Williams's backed out of the opportunity to achieve his dream of crossing over to dramatic roles. Despite other efforts, he would never return to a serious role. Williams's inability to cross what I call the Othello barrier, the ability to be taken seriously (but nonthreatening) as a black man performing with white actors, was hampered by his personal aversion to controversy, the working style of Belasco, and societal views on black performance.

The traditional explanations of Williams's decision to reject Belasco revolve around his aversion to the trouble that may arise from breaking his contract with Erlanger who had taken a risk on him. When he met with Belasco, he had recently signed a three year contract with Erlanger with the Follies. This was the first time a Negro had been offered a contract with a white company. Due to Bert's anxieties about breaking the color barrier, the contract stipulated that he never tour the South and never appear onstage with a white woman (Douglas 328).

Bert's friends advised that he talk to both parties, assuming that "If these men with whom you have a contract, love the great art of the theatre as they certainly must, doing so many big things in their own way for that institution, then they will be glad to see you doing the better and greater things which you can do under the guidance and direction of Belasco" (Rowland 108). Bert, however, appears never to have had the discussion, but simply backed away from the contract, as they assume, because he didn't want to cause trouble like that he had been experiencing with the drawn-out lawsuit with Comstock, a previous employer (Rowland 109, Smith 136). Williams never commented on this occasion, and only Belasco's preface to Williams's posthumous biography ever explained, however incompletely, what happened between them (Rowland 109). Belasco's preface, however, seems to indicate in the language "further and further into the project" that he and Williams *had* worked together for a short amount of time, in any case more than the single meeting described in his biography. Further, Belasco cites not contract anxieties,

but fear “that he would be unable to perform what I had planned for him and would fail to fulfill my expectations” (Rowland xiii). History, like Williams, is silent on this stage of training and work, but in this training, several factors may have inhibited Williams success. The following sections entertain possibilities of what may have happened had Williams worked with Belasco and what cultural perceptions may have afflicted this controversy-adverse actor.

Despite Belasco’s prominent position in mainstream theatre, his training methods and artistic sensibilities seem at odds with Williams goals of revealing the pathos of the Negro. Belasco, himself a short, Jewish man, made a career, “exteriorizing Otherness onstage [as] a means of working upon, gaining control over, and purifying racialized and feminized passion. He could thereby signal self- as well as theatrical mastery on a grand public scale” (Marra 217-8). According to Marra, Belasco exorcised his own insecurities and sensibilities through the training of people representative of non-white male America. In his work with actress Mrs. Leslie Carter, “he sought a purportedly purifying mastery over his actress’s passions by drilling her in techniques for reproducing her displays of emotional and sexual incontinence on demand in repeated performances” (Marra 179). This intensive manipulation and subservience demanded at Belasco’s hands, may have put extensive strain on Bert Williams’s struggle to express his own voice.

Further, Belasco was no great advocate of racial equality, if anything, he was attracted to black for their exoticism and reputation for natural, raw emotions. Of note, he claims to have had the idea for putting a Negro on stage as part of his “quest for novelties.” He did not see his work in revolutionary terms. Belasco himself had appeared in blackface in his earlier career as an actor. In 1926 he featured a black woman as the lead in the sensational *Lulu Belle* when he made the claim, “The Negro has within his brain a physic something that makes him susceptible

to emotional urge- Fate has decreed that I should know the Negro of our modern days-that I should know him and his psychology intimately. And that contact has brought me to this conclusion -the theater of tomorrow must reckon with a new force- the race of Ham" (Grant 21). Belasco's claims his understanding of the Negro as a master overseeing a resource for theatrical exploitation. He also perpetuated Negro stereotypes in his 1901 production of *Du Barry* with the introduction of her black dwarf servant, Zamore, who alternately serves as a footstool and catches bonbons in his mouth like a trained seal (Marra 230, 233). On top of the perpetuation of the convention that equates blackness and comedy, Zamore "racializes the spectacle. His lower evolutionary stature signals the degeneracy of so much indolence and expenditure emanating from Du Barry's body" (Marra 229). Williams's natural demeanor of gentleness and civility defied these expectations of the sexualized savagery of the Negro race. Belasco's attraction to Williams seems to have rested on the "novelty" of his exoticism, but Williams attraction to tragic roles seems to have rested on his humanity.

Audiences in general were not accepting of a Negro's humanity, as evidenced by attitudes toward the role of Othello, a role which a black actor "had every right to play" (Hill 98). Othello serves as a quintessential example of the anxieties surrounding integrated casts in performance, and, indeed, was one of the first roles where black actors had to act with white actors. The Othello barrier, initially crossed by Ira Aldrige in the 1860s in Europe, and later by Paul Robeson in England in 1930 and America in 1943, is the same barrier to black actors in the rest of the American theatre at the time.<sup>2</sup> A snapshot of these views arises in 1916.

In 1916, cities around the globe celebrated the tercentenary of Shakespeare's death, and this gave rise to ample productions of Shakespeare's plays and publications about Shakespeare.

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<sup>2</sup> Edward Sterling Wright did an all-Negro version of Othello and received praise from Herbert Beerbohm Tree and Critics in Philadelphia, New York, and Boston, but it did not address the issue of miscegenation that dogged traditional productions of Othello. For more info, see Errol Hill, *Shakespeare in Sable*, p 95-97.

A *New York Times* special supplement, dated March 12, 1916, voices concerns of the audience's lack of appreciation for Shakespeare, noting, "he had been dead 275 years a quarter of a century ago; since then the span has doubled, trebled." Although this sets the tone for the rapidly-changing world, it reprints John Quincy Adams's ultra-conservative thoughts on *Othello* in an article subtitled "In His Day They Gave Lear a 'Happy Ending' -- He Was Severe on Desdemona."<sup>3</sup> His labeling his views on Desdemona "severe" raises a question to their validity, but it does not contextualize the statement any further. "On the stage," Adams argues, "her fondling with Othello is disgusting. Who, in real life, would have her for a sister, daughter, or wife?" He further concludes: "The great moral lesson of the tragedy of Othello is, that black and white blood cannot be intermingled in marriage without a gross outrage upon the law of Nature; and that, in such violation, Nature will vindicate her laws." The printing the traditional view of *Othello* can reinforce currently held beliefs, or pose it as the antiquated views of the past. However, since the article is printed without commentary to the purpose, it may be said to stand at face value and the interpretations allowed to vary among constituencies. However, the basis remains that these thoughts were still expressed and distributed in 1916. Williams's worries over such thoughts appear in his contract negotiations of 1910 that prevent him from appearing with white women or from touring in the South. Perhaps he never forgot the injuries his partner, George Walker, sustained during the race riots of 1900 and the crowd shouting 'get Ernest Hogan and Williams and Walker, and Cole and Johnson'" (Patterson 230, quoting Allan Morrison). As a black actor near white women, he took extreme precautions to avoid controversy and violence.

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<sup>3</sup> John Quincy Adams, it may be noted, successfully defended the *Amistad* Africans, and was considered a great anti-slavery spokesperson.

Further, the casting of a black man as Othello, or any serious role, would still play to a white audience who would be mostly unaccepting of him in such a role. Charles Gilpin, the man who successfully broke the tragedy barrier as the Emperor Jones, comments about Othello in the *St. Louis Star*:

I have been asked time and again to play Othello, but have always refused. It would be nothing but a stunt to satisfy curiosity, to see whether by any chance a negro could play the part of a Moor better than a white man. There would be no real dramatic value to the experiment, and it would mean nothing to me artistically. What it actually would do is ruin my career. Imagine a negro playing Othello to a white woman's Desdemona in America!" (Krasner 190)

Such a consideration is ludicrous in the climate of America at the time, and the racism he references is so ingrained that it needs no explanation. When Gilpin does play a serious role, Brutus Jones, he exposes himself to criticism from the Negro community for pandering to views of Negroes as exotic savages (Johnson 171). Similarly, before Paul Robeson broke the Othello barrier, he appeared in *All God's Chillun's Got Wings* opposite Margaret Whycherly in 1924 where she, in her madness, kisses and fondles his hand after she has gone mad. The most violent review (from a Hearst publication) commented, "It is hard to imagine a more nauseating and inflammable situation, and in many communities the failure of the audience to scrap the play and mutilate the players would be regarded as a token of public anemia" (Johnson 194). Whatever steps Williams could take toward appearing with white actors in a serious role would have been severely hampered by the audience's expectations and prejudices in performance. He could always fulfill their desires to laugh at him, but he could not fulfill his own desire to make them weep for him.

What is all the more ironic is that Williams did appear onstage in *Othello* with a white woman, but it was in a travesty of the play for the 1916 *Follies*. At this point, he had reached a certain amount of fame and acceptance that he could appear on stage with a white woman, but he still remained in his role as the unfortunate Jonah Man. The *New York Times* review recalls, “You should see the scene from ‘*Othello*’ with Bert Williams not to be outdone by any Frank Tinney as the Moor. He chokes his Desdemona (who has been flirting with one Vernon Cassia) till he is tired and then beats her with a sledgehammer, but it only irritates her. This is the only amusing moment in the Shakespeare revue.” In this brief skit, as in so many others, and his life in general, he overcomes a barrier only to be frustrated at endurance of his opponent. The true travesty is not the parody of *Othello*, but the limitation of Williams to only comedic roles.

The prejudice that led to this limitation prevented his other dreams as well. His film studio, founded 1914, attempted to “break the boycott against employing colored artists,” but it never found success since he could not assure distribution due resistance of white audiences, a silent boycott, and even a race riot in Brooklyn that took exception to his production (Patterson 230). He employed many artists in his musicals with Walker, including a young Charles Gilpin, whom he later envied. He also sought to inspire other black artists to join the cause of greater autonomy in the theatre. Smith quotes Williams’s 1909 appeal to the black community that addresses the lack of serious roles for black artists, pleading ‘Let some Shakespeare arise and write a drama; the story of the Negro to rise from meniality and servility to a position of independence, portraying the difficulties that seem almost insurmountable, keeping always in mind a certain omnipresent prejudice against him....Let us have a Negro drama such as Shakespeare might have written to help him out. And let us raise a Negro Booth to interpret it’ (134). But this dream of self-definition was not to materialize within his lifetime.

The last mention of his attempts to cross over into serious roles appears in two episodes at the end of his life. The first, he found a script, perhaps Mary Hoyt Wilborg's *Taboo*, that he treasured like a bible. His wife claimed, 'He hoped that it might do for him what 'The Emperor Jones' did for Mr. Gilpin' (Smith 209). But this, too, has faded from further mention. The other instance was in a play he penned and planned to take to Belasco, called *Bawndy*. The name is a contraction of Bert Williams's initials and his most famous song *Nobody*. This script does not survive, but the pathos inherent of the song "Nobody" fits the tragedy of Williams's struggle to achieve success outside of the pigeonhole where he found his fame: "When life seems full of clouds and rain / And I am full of nothin' and pain /Who soothes my thumping, bumping brain, uummm? / Nobody!" Left as an outsider to the actor's union, the mainstream audiences, and even several Negro critics that objected to him playing in theatres that denied Negro audience members, he had no place. Contrary to the end of "Nobody", "And until I get somethin' from somebody, sometime, / I don't intend to do nothin' for nobody, no time!" Bert Williams did, in fact, do much for several somebodies, even though few people were willing to do somethin' for him.

Bert Williams opened the door for generations of artists who were to come after him, but he had to bear the sacrifice of his own artistic desires for the ability to work within mainstream, white Broadway. Williams was a master of his craft, a natural study of character and well-trained pantomimist. He amused audiences with clean, unforced humor and opened the door for actors that did not have his name solely for comedy. His story is the quintessential case of a dream deferred. Sagging like a heavy load, his own dream appears to have weighed down on his shoulders and forced him to shuffle his feet. The contrast of his talent and opportunities led W.C. Fields to remark, "Bert Williams was the funniest man I ever saw and the saddest man I

ever knew. I often wonder whether other people sensed what I did in him—that deep undercurrent of pathos” (Rowland 128). Williams undercurrent of pathos never received the full attention it deserved, but his sacrifice was not without merit. Booker T. Washington pays him the highest compliment for advancing the race: “Bert Williams has done more for the race than I have. He has smiled his way into people’s hearts. I have been obliged to fight my way” (Rowland 112). His gentleness, affability, and cultivation made him the ideal person to smile his way into the mainstream white theatre, but once there, his fight to express himself as he wished could only be laughed away.

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