

“I HATE THE CHARACTER OF OTHELLO”:
AN INTERVIEW WITH HARRY LENNIX

March 25, 2021

Actor Harry Lennix (*The Matrix Reloaded*, *Zack Snyder’s Justice League*, *The Blacklist*) spoke to the “Shakespeare and the Common Good in Atlanta” class about his experience playing Aaron in Julie Taymor’s film *Titus* (1999). The interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

Most of us have seen all are part of the movie, and it’s in your bio that you did the play first with Julie Taymor. Can you talk about getting to the play, and then from the play to the movie?

I came to Aaron the Moor in a very circuitous way as I had never really paid much attention to *Titus Andronicus*, nor did anybody else that's in the academic community or the scholar community, because it was always considered Shakespeare's worst play. But that's not true. The fact of the matter is, there are many now who have reconsidered Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* and many people consider it his best.

So I read this play. I have an audition in 1992 to play Aaron the Moor after other more notable actors in New York had turned it down already. The part was offered to four or five guys that I came up with, and they said, “Nah, this is a very racist play. Aaron is the worst villain in Shakespeare history.” But I disagree. I don't think that Aaron is a villain. I think he's an antagonist. And that's different than being a protagonist. I don't think that there are any heroes in *Titus*, I don't think there are any heroes in life. I think that what we have are people who have agendas and intention, and who have loyalty and love. And it's sometimes that those agendas and intentions are completely different than the agenda and attention of somebody else. And we call those people antagonists. But you know, it's an amazingly rich play with people who are extremely intelligent.

And I have to tell you that [the play has one] of the best speeches I've ever read if you're Black and you want to talk about Black pride. It's Aaron the Moor's when he's defending his own progeny from this woman, Tamora, and he says, “Coal-black is better than another hue / In that it scorns to bear another hue; / For all the water in the ocean / Can never turn the swan’s black legs to white, / Although she lave them hourly in the flood.” A magnificent pride speech. Some people think it makes him a villain, and some people would even say [it makes him] the greatest villain in Shakespeare's canon. But I actually think that he is doing what he should be doing. And that is to say he's defending himself, his own. Now, is that the way to conduct modern civilization? Probably not. But do people still do it? Probably. [So, we may look at this play] from a kind of moralistic, pious position, but that has no place in drama, and it actually has no place in the human psyche or in human life. And so, I think this is Shakespeare's greatest play and greatest drama.

While reading this play in class, we went back and forth about what motivates Aaron at the beginning, especially when he shows up and he's so unlike anyone else in the play. We also talked about how every villain in a Shakespeare play is actually the hero of their play. They

move forward like they are the hero. So, what do you think Aaron's long game is at the beginning of the play?

Well, you know, it's interesting because the first time we see Aaron is in a triumph, a parade that the Romans would conduct on their defeated enemy, a kind of pageant of humiliation for the person who lost the conflict. And so, Aaron's first appearance is part of that triumph, and he is subjected to all of this stuff. People say all kinds of nasty things about him. But the first time we hear him speak, having witnessed the death of Mutius, and the death of Alarbus, and all these other people, he says, "Now, climbeth Tamora, Olympus top." And so he knows something that everybody else doesn't know, which is that he is the lover of Tamra, they've been getting it on for some time, before they were taken. And, and he sees an opportunity for himself to not only advance the Queen that he's been serving, for some time, but for himself. Because his loyalty is not to her, his loyalty is to himself, and then later to his son, his progeny. And so, he decides at that point that there's an opportunity here. And if [he] can just pretend to be all about her, and to be all about the Roman Empire, then there's something that [he] can do there for himself.

And, I have to tell you, as an American, you know, there's this idea that we have an obligation to become the best that we can be that that, that we have a right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of our happiness. I think that one of the most American speeches I've ever read is when Aaron says "I will be bright, and shine in pearl and gold / To wait upon this new-made emperess. / To wait, said I? To wanton with this queen, / This goddess, this Semiramis, this nymph, / This siren that will charm Rome's Saturnine." He says, 'I'm not here to serve her. I'm here to actually use her for my own benefit.' Which I think is the most rational decision anybody can make, in any situation, in spite of whatever kind of Christian ethos or Buddhist ethos [that we might have], that we are to dissolve ourselves in service of some higher good. The western concept that the society should serve the individual is what Aaron is thinking about even before we have the United States idea. There's the idea that the purpose of government is to serve the private citizen, that that is always better than the private citizen serving a kind of government. Because if all of us as private citizens is serving some common good, [government] becomes a monster state. Thus, the purpose of government is to make sure that the individual gets everything that it has coming to him or her. And so, I think that Aaron recognizes that in that moment. And he goes about trying to prove it, and he does, frankly, a pretty good job of it.

Were there any roles or characters that you brought to the role of Aaron in the film? Was there any kind of inspiration from elsewhere that you took when playing Aaron?

I have a ready-made answer in some ways, and so far in that I played Othello. I played Othello when I was 27 years old in Chicago. I'm pretty sure I sucked. I was too young to be any good at it. But I hate the character. I'm going to say it again: I hate the character of Othello. He's so insecure. He's so not proud of his ownership of his race and his experiences. He talks about it, but he doesn't seem to be proud about it. I guess my model to draw from was Othello [because he] has the almost antithetical idea about what it is to be a proud, if you will, outsider. The other. And so, there are two opposite sides of the pole. Aaron who's proud of it, and Othello who says things like 'I am not nice to look at.' The prince of Morocco [from *The Merchant of Venice*] says something about being in the sun too long—forgive the fact that I've been in the sun for too long. But I love the fact that Aaron is like, 'hey, and I'm the man around here. And of course, this

woman and the rest of them look at me a certain way.’ Insofar as the Queen of Goths goes, she has the hots for this guy [Aaron]. And he knows this.

Elizabethans fetishized the outsider. Shakespeare in his sonnets talks about the Dark Lady, and it talks about this woman that we believe to be an Italian woman who is married to a courtier of the Elizabethan court. But he was fascinated by this person. We talked about that as being a fetish, sometimes. And so, I drew upon those other models because Shakespeare's Aaron the Moor is the first of those Moors. And then comes [the Moroccan prince in] *The Merchant of Venice*, and then comes, I believe, *Othello*. All of this stuff is very interesting academically, but in so far as the models that he had, why did Shakespeare go from a very proud black man to an apologetic black man to an even more apologetic one? And that makes me very interested.

But when I think about playing the part, I certainly went to the Black Civil Rights era, I went to the Black Pride movement. As early as the turn of the century, you had movements in America such as the United Negro Improvement Association by Marcus Garvey where they were proud to be Black men. They didn't say negro, they didn't say colored, they said Black. And they had movements that said things like, ‘I am a man.’ They had movements that said, ‘black and proud.’ So, I went to that. And I guess the second model that I used was somebody like the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, Marcus Garvey (who started the UNIA), Paul Robeson, people who were proud of it, and who embraced it. And so, I looked at Aaron the Moor as a model from that mold. And I really did my best to bring that to light.

Are there some things that you have taken out of the Shakespeare roles that you have played that you then place in modern characters today?

The best training that you're going to have is Shakespeare. I'm so glad you asked this question because I think of [performing Shakespeare] as a kind of calling, a vocation. But I believe that there's a philosophy and almost a kind of theology to Shakespeare. If you can decode it, if you can take this language, which seems dense, sometimes it seems like it's beyond our understanding...but if you can decode Shakespeare, you can decode anything. If you can play against Michael Jordan, you can play against anybody. If you can play chess with Bobby Fischer, you can play with anybody. If you can play Bach, or Mozart, you can play any kind of music. A lot of the songs that we hear that are popular today were really based on modern classical, if you will, versions of music, and [classical] created the rules. And I think Shakespeare did the same thing. He was not the first dramatist, but he was certainly the greatest in the English language. If you can break [Shakespeare's language] down, if you can apply those techniques of Shakespeare...and if you can decode that pattern as poetry, and then play with it, if you can play every scale in every key, if you can do the diatonic and chromatic and all of these things, if you can do that, you can do anything. Anything!

There's a guy who I know named Peter Francis James—great Shakespearean actor from New York, originally born in Chicago in Lake Forrest—who says that he applies the John Barton method of Shakespearean performance. There's a book by Barton called *Playing Shakespeare*. John Barton, Trevor Nunn, all these people work at the Royal Shakespeare Company. They give you rules that you can apply to any literature in theatre and film and whatever. So, if you're looking at a script and it is formatted in a certain way: if you apply these rules, if you find the

rhythm, if you find the code, if you find the secret, you can play anything. And most of it, it turns out, is that you know it so well that you can forget. Most of it so designed that you're throwing away most of it all the time. You're just passing through those things so that you can get to points of connection of ideas. Really what we're talking about is the conveying of one idea from one person to another person. That's it. That's really it. You can do that through language. You can do that through action. You can do that through intention. That is, what' in your heart and in your mind that can never be really expressed outside of what you're thinking, but somehow, through some process, is conveyed. And so, I think those are really the only two tools that an actor has: the actor's voice in the actor's body. And through gesture, and through articulation, and expression, through nuance, all of these things. But if you apply the rules that you can learn about, anyone can be a great actor. But you have to learn them. You can't just wish them into being. You have to practice. You have to watch and study. You have to copy and mimic and imitate to the point where you can't stand to do it anymore. You have to play your scales on the piano.

What do you think would be a good way to approach texts you're reading and performing for the first time?

That is a great question. Every actor, particularly when they're facing a challenging role, asks the same question. I don't care how many years you've been doing it. How do I approach this part? How do I get in? Where's the key to the lock of this character, really? And so, and that can be 1000 answers. What it could be depends on many things. But I would suggest that the first time that you read a script, you just read the script. What's the story? What are we saying? What are we talking about? Before you start thinking, "how am I going to attack it? How am I going to approach it? How can I decode it?" Before that, what is the story that I'm listening to, that I'm reading, that I'm going to undertake? What is one of the components in telling that story successfully? And so just read it. Just read the damn thing before you start figuring it out.

A detective goes into a crime scene, and he's got to look at the scene. He's gonna say, "okay, well, there's some dirty laundry over here. There's a spot of blood over there. The television is on. There is a drink with an ice cube in it over there." So, the murder—now he starts to unpack and starts to work backward. And that's what we should do as actors. We start to work backwards. So, this is the story. Okay. Within that story that we're telling, it's a comedy. It's a drama. It's a mystery. It's a romantic comedy. So, this is a romantic comedy about two people who fall in love on a roller coaster. We know we got a roller coaster. Now we know that I'm on the roller coaster with Sally. And so, then you start working backwards. Am I going to be funny? Or am I going to be romantic? Okay, so now am I going to be romantic or funny, or both? Or a little bit of this in this moment, and a little bit this in this moment? Well, what can I do?

Some of that will depend on the other actor. Some of that will depend on the director or the costuming. It's an extremely collaborative form that we're in when we actually go into taking a role, and you have to be processing that all the time. But all of that evidence is there. And so, you actually are going to be processing evidence until the cameras are rolling. At which point you're actually delivering your summation for that. So, I would say the first thing to do, before you put yourself into a box that you have to climb out of, is just read the story. Is this something you want to do? Is this something that you can do? And that's a real question. Am I capable of doing

Hamlet the Royal Shakespeare Company or something on Thursday night? And that's either possible or not. If it's possible, then yes. So now you get to work if it's impossible, you can still get to work and see how far you can get in that process. That's how we process it. So, don't put that burden on yourself. Just read the script the first time. Learn the material the first time.

The great Gary Cooper once said—and this is something Laurence Olivier would refer to—he was doing *Hamlet*, and he said, “this is a play about a guy that can't make up his mind.” And that's true. He asks the very basic question, “To be, or not to be, that is the question: / Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer / The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, / Or to take arms against a sea of troubles / And by opposing end them. To die—to sleep, / No more.” These are basic questions that Shakespeare is asking that any human, whether 400 years ago or today, can apprehend and play. It doesn't have to be real for you. That's why we're actors. We're not living these things. We're just representing those things for an audience or spectator to apprehend. So, my suggestion is to first receive it. Consume it as just the story. Then think about what that story is, and after that, think about how you are going to attack it. But there is a way in. There is always an approach to it.