

Shakespeare Club of Stratford-upon-Avon

The 924th meeting of the Shakespeare Club took place on Tuesday 12 March 2019. The speaker was Tony Howard, Professor of English and Comparative Literature Studies at the University of Warwick. His subject was "Paul Robeson's Othello: 1930-1959". The meeting was chaired by Susan Brock.

Professor Howard noted that by a happy coincidence it was 60 years to the day, 12 March 1959, since Paul Robeson arrived in Stratford to begin rehearsals for Othello. The audience for his talk included several people who had seen the production.

When Paul Robeson arrived in Stratford he had previously played Othello in productions at the Savoy Theatre in London in 1930 and on US tour in 1943-5.

No other actor has been associated so profoundly with a Shakespeare part as Robeson was with Othello. The character's progress in the play paralleled Robeson's public role as an African American and the three productions charted twentieth century developments in race relations.

Professor Howard examined the three productions in turn. In 1930 Robeson was already a star, and conscious of being the first person of colour to perform Othello in the twentieth century. He played Othello as racially insecure, a colonial arrival at a sophisticated court, as he was himself. His awkwardness was unintentionally reinforced by poor staging forcing Robeson to perform some scenes with his back to the audience. Nevertheless the production was successful and a US transfer was meant to follow.

After many delays the opportunity arose for a new production in 1943, during World War 2. Robeson was by now a different man, and this time his Othello dominated the stage in the face of visible racism and a fascist Iago. The world was changing and the production was declared a "national victory for progress", confirming Robeson's belief that the play was far more than just entertainment.

When he came to the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre in 1959 Robeson was in his 60s. Othello was now an older man, a heroic figure weakening and surrounded by youth and reality, just as he was himself. Robeson gave a totally committed performance that audiences responded to enthusiastically. He felt it was the climax of his career. Robeson was an idealist who had been trying to find his way home, and found it in Stratford.

Professor Howard ended his presentation with a clip from 1943 of Paul Robeson speaking about his admiration for Shakespeare, a fitting end to an absorbing evening.

The meeting closed at 9.15.