

The Shakespeare Club of Stratford-upon-Avon

The 949th meeting of the Shakespeare Club of Stratford-upon-Avon was held on 8 November 2022 at the Methodist Hall. The speaker was Dr Jami Rogers, Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Warwick, whose subject was *Integrating Shakespeare, British Black and Asian Shakespeareans in Britain since 1930*. Dr Rogers has recently published a book on the subject and created the *British Black and Asian Shakespeare Performance Database* (bbashakespeare.warwick.ac.uk) the sources of the data to which she referred.

There had been black actors on the British stage before the mid-1960s, including Ira Aldridge and Paul Robeson, but it was in 1966 that what has become known as integrated Shakespeare began, with four performers of colour appearing in Shakespearean roles. One of these was Rudolph Walker who played Othello, still usually a white man's part. In the years that followed, it became normal to cast an African-Caribbean in the role.

A pattern of suitable, usually subservient, roles for black actors emerged. During the 1980s this seemed to improve, in 1984 nine performers of colour playing leading roles in seven productions, including Josette Simon as Rosaline in *Love's Labour's Lost*. In 1989 at the Royal Shakespeare Company four actors of colour broke the stereotype by playing leading roles such as Rudolph Walker playing Gower in *Pericles*.

By 2010 this steady progress stalled, with performers of colour placed into an increasingly narrow frame. The most popular plays to be integrated were *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Romeo and Juliet*. Black and Asian actors were more common in the lighter comedies rather than the prestigious tragedies.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission 2011 report noted systemic discrimination affecting African-Caribbean men at managerial level, mirrored by the small numbers of black actors playing the roles of Hamlet, Macbeth and King Lear.

Dr Rogers concluded that huge inequalities are still faced by performers of colour, but ended by describing a shining example of integration that gives hope for the future: a production of *Julius Caesar* at Bristol Old Vic in 1987.