ojs.uv.es/index.php/qdfed

Rebut: 29.04.2024. **Acceptat**: 16.07.2024

Per a citar aquest article: Fernández-Caparrós, Ana. 2024. "Lolita Chakrabarti's Palimpsestuous Re-vision of Ira Aldridge's Acting as Othello in *Red Velvet*". *Quaderns de Filologia: Estudis Literaris* XXIX: 141-158.

doi: 10.7203/qdfed.29.28666

Lolita Chakrabarti's Palimpsestuous Re-vision of Ira Aldridge's Acting as Othello in *Red Velvet*[*]

La revisió *palimpsestuosa* de l'actuació d'Ira Aldridge com Otel·lo en *Red Velvet*, de Lolita Chakrabarti

Ana Fernández-Caparrós
Universitat de València
ana.fernandez-caparros@uv.es

Abstract: Lolita Chakrabarti's debut as a playwright in *Red Velvet* shall be regarded as one of the most successful and sophisticated contemporary revisionary engagements with the history of both Victorian theatre and of Shakespearean theatrical performance. The play is a re-vision of the life of American actor Ira Aldridge (1807-1867), the first Black classical actor to achieve distinction as an interpreter of Shakespeare on the British and continental stage. It focuses on his short-lived debut at Theatre Royal Covent Garden in 1833 in the role of Othello. This article analyses the play's metatheatrical strategies and playful engagement with the self-enclosed and self-referential nature of theatrical meaning to propose a critical reading that underscores the play's overtly palimpsestic form and the complexities of its palimpsestuous intertextual engagements. It focuses, in particular, on its engagement with *Othello*'s interpretive traditions to imagine Aldridge's performance of the tragic hero as modern, unconventional and ahead of his time.
Keywords: palimpsest; *Red Velvet* (2012); Lolita Chakrabarti; British theatre history; *Othello*.

Resum: El debut de Lolita Chakrabarti com a dramaturga en *Red Velvet* és considerat com una de les revisions contemporànies més reeixides i sofisticades de la història tant del teatre victorià com de la representació teatral de Shakespeare. L'obra és una revisió de la vida de l'actor nord-americà Ira Aldridge (1807-1867), el primer actor clàssic negre que va aconseguir la distinció com a intèrpret de Shakespeare als escenaris britànics i continentals. L'obra se centra en el seu efímer debut al Theatre Royal Covent Garden el 1833 com *Otello*. Aquest article analitza les estratègies metateatrals de l'obra i el diàleg amb les pràctiques autoreferencials del significat teatral per a proposar una lectura crítica que subratlla la forma obertament palimpsèstica de l'obra i les complexitats dels seus tècniques intertextuals i palimpsestuoses. Se centra, en

[*] Research carried out for the writing of this article was sponsored by research project AICO/2021/225, funded by the Generalitat Valenciana at the Universitat de València.

particular, en el seu tractament de les tradicions interpretatives d'Otel·lo per a imaginar l'actuació d'Aldridge de l'heroi tràgic com a moderna, poc convencional i avançada al seu temps.
Paraules clau: palimpsest; *Red Velvet* (2012); Lolita Chakrabarti; història del teatre britànic; *Otel·lo*.

Ira: [...] That's the beauty of Shakespeare–he unnerves you.

Lolita Chakrabarti, *Red Velvet*

1. Introduction

Red Velvet had its world premiere at the Tricycle Theatre in London on October 11th, 2012, directed by Indhu Rubasingham. It was Lolita Chakrabarti's first authored play: a dramatic work that explores on the stage a sliver in the life and career of the American-born black actor Ira Aldridge, known in the nineteenth century as the "African Roscius". Aldridge was not the first African American professional performer of Shakespeare –an honour that goes to James Hewlett in 1821 (Newstock, 2021: 175)–, but he was the first black classic actor "to achieve great distinction as an interpreter of Shakespeare and the first American to do so" (Wells, 2015: 99), both in Great Britain and the European continent. As Chakrabarti has acknowledged, she acquired a good knowledge of British Victorian theatre history in her A-Level Theatre Studies syllabus, but she was never taught about Aldridge. Then she trained in the late 1980s as an actress at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA) in London, "arguably one of the best drama schools in the world, [and] still never once heard of the name of Ira Aldridge" (Chakrabarti, 2021: v). When she came across the name of the actor by chance a few years later, driven by her curiosity to know more about him, Chakrabarti embarked in a pre-Internet, fifteen-year research journey leading her to the writing of the play, including three years devoted to the research of Aldridge's life and thirty drafts of the play, written over seven years (Chicago Shakespeare Theatre, 2017). Aldridge had an odd but remarkable theatrical career but remained an obscure figure until quite recently. He was born in 1807 in New York City, attended the African Free School where he received classical education and, as a teenager, worked in the all-black African Grove Theatre. Ira aspired to become a professional actor but, aware that racial prejudice prevented the fulfilment of his ambition in the United States, in 1824, at the age of seventeen, he travelled to England with the hope of acting in non-segregated theatres. His transatlantic venture was indeed a successful one, for he had his London debut at

the Royalty Theatre in the East End in 1825 (Lindfors, 2006: 35). Thus started a long career "with performances given in an exceptionally wide range of conditions" (Wells, 2015: 101) for over forty years in London, across England, Scotland, Ireland and much of Eastern Europe, until he died while on tour in 1867, at the age of sixty, in Lodz, Poland, where he was honoured with a state funeral. He was an actor who was "knighted by the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen, presented with a First Class Gold Medal from His Majesty Frederick William IV, and given the Grand Cross of the Order of Leopold the Emperor Franz Joseph of Austria" (Chakrabarti, 2021: vi), among other endowments. Thus, Chakrabarti found it truly astounding at the end of her research that such an excelling thespian could have been forgotten for over a century and a half, his existence practically "erased from the archive of British theatre history" (Tronicke, 2022: 97).

The existing archival material on Aldridge's life and theatrical career –including biographies, letters, portraits, and reviews of his performances– is, as a matter of fact, abundant, both in English and in Russian. It was not, however, until the mid-twentieth century that there was a first attempt to bring him out of the shadows with the biography *Ira Aldridge: The Negro Tragedian* (1958), co-authored by Herbert Marshall and Mildred Stock. Nevertheless, the simultaneous and unconnected launchings of Professor Bern Lindfors's four-volume series of exhaustive biographies published by Rochester University Press between 2011 and 2015, and the premiere of the play written by Chakrabarti –for whom Marshall and Stock's biography of Aldridge was a main source– were momentous and particularly significant for the recent canonisation of the tragedian.

Red Velvet's commercial success and critical acclaim, I want to argue, might be related to the play's intense metatheatricality and invocation of a series of metahistorical and metafictional conjunctions that relate the Victorian stage era with the contemporary scene; and, not to a lesser extent, to its intertextual engagement with its embedded text, namely, William Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice* (ca. 1603) and self-contained allusions to Shakespearean performance history. The academic scholarship published in the past decade (Duncan, 2015; Greenstreet, 2017; Eriks Cline, 2020; Tronicke, 2022) has analysed *Red Velvet*'s neo-Victorian revisionist intertwining of the histories of Shakespearean and Victorian performance from different angles, underscoring its construction of both a progressive fictional Aldridge and a progressive Othello (Duncan, 2015); the play's impact as a powerful cultural intervention aimed at enacting a contemporary rehabilitation of "a

lost black theatre history" (Greenstreet, 2017); and stressing the relevance of its revisionist techniques for the representation of Ira Aldridge's blackness (Eriks Cline, 2020). However, more critical pressure needs to be placed on the highly intertextual nature of this dramatic text and with its engagement with the interpretive traditions of *Othello* from a contemporary perspective. As Kenneth Branagh claims in his short "Introduction to the Modern Classics Edition" of the play, "there seem to be many plays folded organically into the whole" (Branagh, 2021: xvi), including a compelling period drama, a comedy of manners, a hero's journey and a story of pioneering. *Red Velvet* looks initially as a deceptively simple play, short and minimalistic. But within its theatrical Russian-doll structure, this imaginative re-staging of a neglected episode in British theatrical history, i. e. the fleeting and failed debut of the first black actor to perform in the role of Othello at Covent Garden, reverberates critically into many directions, turning it into a complex theatrical artefact. It might first be regarded as a powerful "re-vision", as understood by American poet and essayist Adrienne Rich, that is, an "act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" (Rich, 1979: 35)[1]. But Marlene Tronicke even goes further by suggesting that the play "marks an intervention in processes of remembering and forgetting by re-positioning Ira Aldridge in the annals of Victorian drama" (Tronicke, 2022: 97).

In order to understand *how* this is achieved by the playwright, I want to propose a critical reading of *Red Velvet* as an overtly palimpsestic and palimpsestuous theatrical text. Dillon describes the differences between these two adjectives by suggesting that while *palimpsestic* "refers to the process of layering that produces a palimpsest, 'palimpsestuous' describes the structure with which one is presented as a result of that process" (Dillon 2005: 245), thus describing the complex (textual) relationality embodied in the palimpsest. The concept of the palimpsest, I will contend, perfectly describes, firstly, *Red Velvet*'s multi-layered formal structure as a dramatic text. Secondly, as Dillon argues, the palimpsest "represents history as colonialism, the past as a series of oppressions and displacements, the struggle and vying for territory and

[1] Rich's conceptualization of the term *re-vision* was overtly and radically feminist in its impulse. In the case of Chakrabarti, the re-vision of Aldridge's career may not have been born as an overtly feminist creative endeavor but, as pointed by Duncan (2015), the contemporary alignment in the play of Ira's blackness with the modern and progressive is achieved through his intersectional alliances in the script (Ira is the only character to share significant dialogue with African Caribbean maid Connie and he also sympathizes with the anti-imperialist subordination of young Polish reporter Halina).

existence" (Dillon, 2005: 254). In this light, the palimpsestic vision of the play is one that shows an account of how a colonial reality was established as the normative one. On the other hand, because as a palimpsest it "features colonized and colonizer's discourses as interlocking, but also because it embodies the potential for future reinscriptions... for shifts in the balances of power and force" (Dillon, 2005: 255), the play's inherent revisionist, post-colonial impulse achieves its goal of making audiences see with fresh eyes a subaltern historical figure that had been effaced from collective memory. Thirdly, the palimpsest likewise illuminates the process of audience reception of the play, in which the memory of other works resonates through repetition and variation. As Eriks-Cline contends, from "its retrospective frame narrative to the 'play-within the play' scenes, the play asks contemporary audiences to watch Shakespeare, *Othello*, and Aldridge's black performance both through their own eyes and through the imagined, reconstructed eyes of nineteenth-century spectators" (Eriks Cline, 2020: 2). Finally, the reception of the palimpsest is closely connected with Marvin Carlson's theories of the "embodied memory of theatre" (Carlson, 2001: 4) in *The Haunted Stage*, that is, the idea that any new play and present experience of a performance is always ghosted by the individual and collective memory of previous ones. Given *Red Velvet*'s metatheatrical and intertextual engagements with performance history and cultural memory, it is clear that it overtly endorses, plays with, plays out and eventually *enacts* –either deliberately or intuitively– the "*ghosting*" (Carlson, 2001: 7; his emphasis) that Carlson sees as a defining feature of the theatrical experience.

The memory in the United Kingdom of its acting traditions is outstanding. Chakrabarti's re-vision of Aldridge's appearance at Covent Garden thus raises questions about the process of construction of a national cultural memory and why the actor's career in the British Isles was for a long time neglected. Chakrabarti's play, I will contend, illuminates the actor's achievements but it also presents a flawed dramatic character driven by his *hubris* and his precociously modern reading of *Othello*.

2. Re-membering the ghostly traces of a forgotten past

Ever since Thomas de Quincey published in 1845 his essay "The Palimpsest" and marked the beginning of a consistent process of metaphorization of the term from the mid-nineteenth century, the concept has acquired a significant relevance in current critical discourse (Dillon, 2005) –perhaps reaching its

highest level of sophistication in Gerard Genette's seminal and influential volume in open structuralism *Palimpsestes* (1982), translated into English in 1997. The *Oxford English Dictionary* describes a palimpsest as a "parchment or other writing surface on which the original text has been effaced or partially erased, and then overwritten by another; a manuscript in which later writing has been superimposed on earlier (effaced) writing"; and, in extended use, as something likened to such a writing surface: "a multilayered record" (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 2023). The definition describes the texts created from the seventh to the fifteenth century in the scriptorium of the great monastic institutions as a means to recycle vellum. But as Sarah Dillon argues, the definition of the *OED* omits, or does not fully convey, the most peculiar fact about palimpsests, of interest to future generations: the fact that "although the first writing on the vellum seemed to have been eradicated after treatment, it was often imperfectly erased. Its ghostly trace then reappeared in the following centuries as the iron in the remaining ink reacted with the oxygen in the air, producing a reddish-brown oxide" (2005: 244). In the process of erasing and rewriting, it is thus the "ghostly trace" that is of utmost importance as part of the textual layering that appears in the palimpsest.

The opening scene of *Red Velvet* can already be seen as aesthetically constructed to showcase a "ghostly trace" of a forgotten theatrical past that now re-emerges from behind the scenes. The action is set in a theatre dressing room in Lodz in 1867, just prior to Aldridge's passing. Although the room is described as being opulent, "all gilt and velvet" (Chakrabarti, 2021: 5), it is dark and it is raining outside. The setting is at once theatrical and ghostly: two youngsters speaking in German, a man and woman, are hiding there, looking for a chance to meet Ira Aldridge. Halina, who is a young Polish journalist, eventually achieves her purpose and manages with her basic notions of English to interview the ageing actor, who reluctantly agrees to answer a few questions about his career as he prepares for his performance of King Lear in the homonymous Shakespeare tragedy. In the acting edition of the play, he is described as "[g]rand, impatient, ferocious and unwell" (Chakrabarti, 2014: 5)[2]. After some tense, small talk –and before the ambitious yet inexperienced Halina can ask any significant question– the character of Aldridge, disregard-

[2] Paratextual character descriptions that appear in the Samuel French edition of the play (2014) are omitted in the revised editions published by Methuen Drama (2014, 2021). The citations in this article all refer to the last revised edition of the script in 2021, which shows no major changes in the primary text.

ing his interlocutor, delivers a short monologue that acts as a self-presentation of sorts:

> **Ira** You smell that? Been fifty years but I'm still there. Craning my scrawny neck as far as I can, peering at the stage over the bars. Joshua, a few years older than me, holding me back in case I fall. Under a spell at the back of the gods, a sea of red below filled with expectations of greatness...
>
> [...]
>
> Something about velvet – a deep promise of what's to come, the sweat of others embedded in the pile. A crushed map of who was here folded in (Chakrabarti, 2021: 14).

This speech about the art of theatre, as penned by Chakrabarti for her fictional character, highlights and fashions Aldridge as an "astonishing example of tenacity and talent" (Chakrabarti, 2021: vii). But it also has the power to concisely and poetically evoke what theatre scholars such as Marvin Carlson (2001), Elin Diamond (1995) and others have theorised in the past three decades: the notion that the appeal of theatrical success, that deep promise of what is to come –symbolised by the luxurious softness of the red fabric normally used for the stage curtain and seating upholstery– is always conditioned and dependent on the "sweat of others embedded in the pile". In a highly collaborative art, these *others* can be fellow actors and actresses in the crew, technicians, managers and, most importantly, the living –and thus sweating– collective of bodies that make up an audience. As significantly, however, the velvety surfaces of the theatrical space are also metaphorically envisioned as a crushed map hiding "who was here folded in", underscoring then the decisive relevance of previous interpreters, previous directors and time and again recited texts. As Marvin Carlson argues, all theatre "is a cultural activity deeply involved with memory and haunted by repetition" (Carlson, 2001: 11).

Ira's ghostly metatheatrical speech at the beginning of *Red Velvet* also serves, however, as an ironic prologue of what is to come in the next scene, when, prompted by Halina's insistent and seemingly impertinent question of why he has not acted at Covent Garden since the early 1830s, the action of the play flashes back to the London stage. This opening scene sets the retrospective narrative frame of a memory play, a formal technique that underscores the revisionary engagement of this theatrical text. In a long analepsis, the five central scenes of *Red Velvet* (Scenes Two to Seven) imaginatively envision and restage Aldridge's memories of his two-night debut in 1833 at Theatre Royal

Covent Garden, the only Legitimate Theatre at the time, together with Drury Lane, licensed to perform straight drama before the Theatres Regulation Act of 1843. The final scene of the play returns to the 1867 theatrical time of the initial scene. As important as this double-layered temporal narrative frame containing a long remembrance is, however, Chakrabarti's choice of a definite, single episode of Aldridge's long and cosmopolitan career that, when restaged and reproduced in great detail, as if expanded and seen through a magnifying lens, gets to be "re-membered". I use this term as African American playwright Suzan-Lori Parks defines it in her 1995 influential essay "Possession": that is, as a technique that, when aligned with the staging of historical events, through their happening on stage, make them "ripe for inclusion in the canon of history" and turn theatre into "an incubator for the creation of historical events" (Parks, 1995: 5). Why this necessity to re-member, as an action related also (following the etymology, meanings and uses of the term *member*) to recomposing parts or limbs, or reinstating the relevance of a member, that is, a person *belonging* to a group? On the one hand, that a twist of fate made Aldridge perform at Covent Garden to replace Edmund Kean, who had collapsed on the stage a few days before, while playing Othello, is well known in the history of Shakespearean performance. Renaissance scholars such as Professor Joyce MacDonald already claimed thirty years ago that Aldridge's version of Othello marked a critical moment "in the history of the play's staging of race and racial difference" (MacDonald, 1994: 231). In fact, in spite of Edmund Kean's revision of a previous tradition of blackface with his "tawny" Othello, the role still emphasized "the status of blackness as an imaginative product of white cultures", and thus, as "a black man performing the role of a black man, Aldridge forged a new link between signs and meanings" (MacDonald, 1994: 232). Concurrently, however, Aldridge's name was nonetheless overlooked, or neglected, in the two-volume *The Annals of Covent Garden Theatre from 1732 to 1897* by Henry Saxe Wyndham, published in 1906 at the end of the Victorian period. After the two evenings in which Aldridge had his debut, the theatre went dark for the first time in its history and the French Pierre Laporte soon dropped the reins of his short and unfortunate management. The fact that Aldridge's performance as Othello should be disregarded in Saxe Wyndham's volume can arguably be understood: his was, admittedly, too short-lived a run and the 1830s were generally regarded as a "decade of disastrous managements" (Booth, 1991: 42) before Charles Macready assumed the tenancy of the theatre a month after Queen Victoria came to the throne. On the other hand, as Bernth Lindfors claims, Aldridge was an

itinerant player fulfilling mainly short-term engagements and he "was never under contract to a major metropolitan theater for more than a few weeks at a time, so he made no long-lasting impact on audiences in London, Dublin, Edinburgh, Berlin, Stockholm, Prague, Vienna, Budapest, Constantinople, Warsaw, St. Petersburg, Moscow" (Lindfors, 2007: 1). As a luminary, his biographer suggests, "he was more a comet than a fixed star" (Lindfors, 2007: 1).

It is to this bright, brief, shiny appearance, this erased and ghostly trace of a theatrical past, that Chakrabarti pays attention. Covent Garden was a theatre in which "a single performance could make or mar an unknown actor's reputation" (Lindfors, 2011: 261) and while invitation to perform was a sign of professional recognition, it was no guarantee of success. But the choice of these two single evenings when a black actor performed as Othello before a shocked audience becomes the perfect means to interweave a private failure with a collective, historical failure exposing British historical racism and London audiences' theatrical conservatism. Scene Two of Chakrabarti's play is particularly relevant to understand the historical, social and specific circumstances within the theatrical culture of nineteenth-century London that prevented Aldridge's success. Aldridge's debut took place, precisely, when the British Parliament "was engaged in the debates that culminated in the passage on 31 of July 1833 of a bill emancipating British-owned slaves in the West Indies" (MacDonald, 1994: 232). Chakrabarti uses sound cues to connect Ira's appearance with this key historical event in the transition from the 1867 present of the first scene to the fictional Aldridge's memoried past of 1833 of the second one. Thus, when the lights fade, sounds of hundreds of voices of protesters chanting, shouting are heard, together with "*A distant 'Rule Britannia! Rule the waves!'*": towards the end, "*the sounds of skirmishes become violent, screams, shouts*" (Chakrabarti, 2021: 20). The invisible clamour of social protest is, however, left offstage. As the action of the play then moves to the stage of Covent Garden in Scene Two, the character of actor Henry Forester identifies the particular historical moment *Red Velvet* re-members as "a crossroads... a point of absolute, unequivocal change" (Chakrabarti, 2021: 23). As the action unfolds within the safe, comfortable, and luxurious theatrical space enclosed by the softness of red velvet curtains while it is "absolutely mad out there" (Chakrabarti, 2021: 22), the initial shock caused by the unexpected onstage appearance of the character of Ira Aldridge is first made meaningful in relation to the racial tensions derived by this historical moment of change. When the manager Pierre Laporte announces that Charles, who plays Iago, will not replace his ailing father and informs the company

that Ira Aldridge will step in that night, the new actor's eventual entrance is followed by an "*open mouthed silence*" (Chakrabarti, 2021: 32) –which counterpoints, but is also intimately connected with the previous public offstage clamour. The dramatic force of Chakrabarti's script relies on its envisioning of the diverse embodied, visceral reactions of the different actors and actresses towards Aldridge's blackness, charismatic presence and graciousness, echoing the first onstage impressions created by the "noble Moor" (III, iv, 26) in the Shakespearean tragedy. As Eriks-Cline aptly notes, in her dramatization, the two characters that know that Aldridge is black, "circle around the issue of his race" before he is actually seen by everyone, but the initial onstage responses among a fully white cast "happen in the space between clauses, the silences of shock, and the need to look twice to grasp a full meaning" (Eriks Cline, 2020: 2)[3].

It is undeniable that the script and stage action of *Red Velvet* underscore how "Aldridge's raced body exceeded accepted nineteenth-century forms of black representation" (Greenstreet, 2017: 40). And yet, as Scene Two progresses, it is also clear that the impact of Aldridge's appearance and charisma, as conceived by Chakrabarti, are likewise articulated and explored as presenting *a moment of theatrical transition*, represented by the overpowering absence of Edmund Kean and Ira Aldridge's bewildering appearance as his replacement. In this regard, this scene acknowledges the relevance of a reception phenomenon that has been given little critical attention: the haunted body of the performer (Carlson, 2003: 10), that is, the notion that even in death "actors' roles tend to stay with them. They gather in the memory of audiences, like ghosts, as each new interpretation of a role sustains or upsets expectations derived from the previous ones" (Roach, 1996: 78). The nineteenth century was an age of "great star actors, each of whom had a considerable audience following and each of whom easily overshadowed his fellows" (Booth, 1991: 99). Edmund Kean, like Aldridge, an actor of humble origins "who plodded his poverty-stricken way around the provincial theatre before he burst upon London as Shylock in 1814" (Booth, 1991: 99), was certainly one of these stars and "probably the premier Othello in the early nineteenth century" (Pechter,

[3] In the first scene of *Othello* Roderigo refers to the Moor as "the thick-lips" (I.i.62) whereas Iago further stresses an already racist discourse with sexually charged and offensive reference to the Moor as "an old black ram" tupping a "white ewe" (I.i.85-86). His description of interracial copulation associated with bestiality is "appalling in its graphic specificity" (Pechter, 1999: 32), but Othello's deferred appearance and eloquent discourse in the second and third scenes challenge the initial expectations created by the villain and the gulled gentleman.

1999: 12). In an intensely palimpsestic text, Chakrabarti had fittingly embedded earlier in the scene a newspaper's citation within dramatic dialogue to provide contemporary audiences with essential contextual information about the relevance of Kean's accident within the English theatrical milieu. This occurs when Bernard Warde reads the heading, "On Friday last Edmund Kean collapsed on the stage marking the end of an era" (Chakrabarti, 2021: 24), lamenting that it felt like an unhappy obituary because the actor was still recovering. Within a stage haunted by the still latent memory of Edmund Kean's performance of Othello, whose shadow looms large, the fictional Aldridge must negotiate his own interpretation of the Shakespearean tragic hero either in accordance with the established tradition, represented at the moment by Kean, or against it. Marvin Carlson suggests that whenever an actor undertakes an established role "this almost always involves a negotiation on the part of both audience and actor between two ghostly backgrounds, that of the previous incarnation or incarnations of this role and that of the previous work of this new actor" (Carlson, 2003: 96-97). In Chakrabarti's postmodern anachronistic re-vision, the black actor, who had already performed extensively in the provincial circuit but would have been unknown to the audience of Covent Garden, is fashioned as an actor ahead of his time, who likes "chance. Possibility... to listen and respond" (Chakrabarti, 2021: 37). And, ironically, the Aldridge of *Red Velvet* also rewrites canonical performance in palimpsestic fashion, almost effacing his predecessors, Edmund Kean and Charles Kemble's unique styles of acting. As I will further argue in the following section, by focusing on these particular theatrical nights at Covent Garden, Chakrabarti underscores how his interpretive approach was very much complicated by the acting text at hand, which becomes the embedded "play-within-the-play" in *Red Velvet*: *Othello*.

3. "That's the beauty of Shakespeare –he unnerves you": *Red Velvet*'s engagement with *Othello*'s interpretive traditions

Adrian Lester, the renowned British actor who played the role of Ira Aldridge in *Red Velvet* in its premiere at the Tricycle Theatre, was also coincidentally engaged to play the role of Othello at the Royal National Theatre of London in a production directed by Nicholas Hytner, which opened the year after, on April 16th, 2013, at the Olivier Theatre. In an essay exploring his performance perspective, he explains:

> One of the most compelling elements of this tragedy is the inexorable speed with which Othello moves from being possibly the noblest character ever created by Shakespeare to a character who, consumed by jealousy and pain, carries out one of the most brutal and violent murders seen in one of his plays. The major problem any production has, whatever its setting, is getting the audience to believe Othello's journey from one state of mind to the other (Lester, 2021: 223).

Ever since the earliest recorded performance of William Shakespeare's *The Tragedy* of *Othello, The Moor of Venice*, dating from November 1st, 1604, "the play's strongly direct appeal to an audience's emotions [...] continues more or less unbroken to our own day" (Pechter, 1999: 11). *Othello* might be, in fact, the most disturbing and upsetting of the Shakespearean tragedies, and the one that has historically produced the most intense level of audience engagement, eliciting for centuries a recurrent reaction whereby the emotional overinvolvement seems to have erased often the line separating the performer and the part: that is, Othello, and the actor playing Othello. Even in the past decade, black actors such as Adrian Lester and Hugh Quarshie (2016), who played the role in the Royal Shakespeare Company's 2015 production directed by Iqbal Khan, did publicly express their misgivings about playing a role that has the potential risk of reinforcing racist attitudes towards black people. The way the play touches on gender, racial and intercultural conflict, together with its peculiar power "to haunt us as an uncanny projection, from the past, of our conflicted present" (Greenberg, 1994: 1) are precisely what have granted it its current political relevance. In the second edition of the Norton Critical Edition of the play (2017), Edward Pechter claims that *Othello* "has become our play... replacing *King Lear* in the way *Lear* replaced *Hamlet* as the play that speaks most directly to current interests" (Pechter, 2017: x). Within a war and military context, the play focuses on marriage "as a domestic relationship where the most intimately private experiences are shaped by the pressures of society and political power" (Pechter, 2017: x). So strong are these pressures exerted by the Venetian society that the verbal abuse and physical violence against women heard and seen throughout the play culminate with the outrageous witnessing of Othello's smothering of Desdemona and Iago's stabbing of Emilia in Act V, Scene II. None of this violence, however, is ever seen in *Red Velvet*. In it, Chakrabarti embeds only a few excerpts from the Shakespearean text: a few verses from Othello's arrival to Cyprus in the second act; and a longer excerpt from the "handkerchief scene" in Act III, Scene 4, which becomes Scene Three of *Red Velvet*. This is the only scene

where we, as twenty-first-century spectators, get to re-envision the (infamous) performance of Ira Aldridge as Othello and Miss Ellen Tree as Desdemona that took place on April 10th, 1833, at Covent Garden. Why choose to re-stage these particular scenes and not others? Chakrabarti's selected intertextual engagement with her play-within-the-play is a means to re-member the actor shining on the stage while presenting his historically recorded innovations as a performer; and, also, arguably, a means to construct a complex palimpsestuous vision that hints at the fact that Aldridge might have brought to the nineteenth-century stage something else, beyond his blackness, causing great distress amongst the London critics and audiences: too passionate and intense an acting and too modern an understanding of the theatrical beauty of Shakespeare's play as profoundly unnerving.

Edward Pechter confirms that during the nineteenth century, "when Shakespearean commentary began to coalesce into something like a systematic discipline, the play's capacity to generate intense anxiety tends to center on the issue of race" (Pechter, 1999: 14), responding thus to the increased racial self-consciousness of the nineteenth-century thought. If racial difference was tamed by excluding or subjugating actors of colour, the innuendos in the play likewise tended to be evaded and concealed on the stage. The analysis of nineteenth-century stage practice reflects the ambivalence of a culture trying to control a text that it was eager to experience but that also morally disapproved (Pechter, 2017: 193-208). Based on historical descriptions of Aldridge's wilder and less tamed performances than those of his British fellow actors, Chakrabarti constructs an Aldridge unwilling to repress the "real" Shakespeare. The second part of Scene Two of *Red Velvet* focuses, after Aldridge's unexpected arrival, on the impromptu rehearsal before that evening's performance, presenting an obvious contrast between Ira's expressive passion and the "'teapot' school of acting" (Chakrabarti, 2021: 38). This style of acting was associated mainly to John Philip Kemble and was so called because the actor "assumed a statuesque pose, one hand on the hip, the other stretched like the spout of a teapot" (Pechter, 2017: 202) while adopting theatrical airs and gestures. *Red Velvet* comically renders this style by having several actors acting pompously, especially Charles Kean, and re-imagines a perplexed Aldridge as having the boldness, if not the arrogance, to suggest "trying" (Chakrabarti, 2021: 37) something else, especially with Miss Ellen Tree, who plays Desdemona. Because her acting is at first charismatic, but she does not look at Ira in the eyes, the actor not only suggests that she should look at him but also, when they rehearse their reunion in Cyprus as newly-wed Othello and Desdemona later

on, "*Ira takes Ellen hands in his and kisses them*" (Chakrabarti, 2021: 41). This unexpected and radical gesture of intimacy is followed in *Red Velvet* by a "*collective intake of breath as the other actors look to Charles*" (Chakrabarti, 2021: 41), stage directions indicate. Chakrabarti's construction of Ira in *Red Velvet* as an actor advocating "spontaneity" (Chakrabarti, 2021: 41) and a "domestic" style of acting much ahead of his time is, I believe, a deliberate use of anachronism exploited, to a great extent, to comic relief. More relevant for the purposes of this article is, however, what lies beneath the comic surface of this staged battle of traditional and innovative theatrical styles: Ira's insistence that his search for truth in his acting comes from a (close) reading and understanding of Shakespeare's text and his intuition that, "if the passion isn't simmering between us, they'll [the audience] feel nothing at all" (Chakrabarti, 2021: 40), as he suggests to Ellen in rehearsal.

Almost in Shakespearean fashion, *Red Velvet*'s stage action seems to be inspired by the pyramid-structure of five-act tragedies and the climactic performance of Ira as Othello and Ellen as Desdemona in Scene Three, trying out a more naturalistic style of acting, followed by a "falling action" in which the excitement after the opening night is soon forgotten. When, in Scene Five, the actors in the company read the scurrilously racist reviews that followed the actor's debut, some of which are reproduced verbatim from *The Atheneum*, *The Spectator* and *The Times*, they seem to be decisive in Pierre Laporte's decision to cancel the run on its third night. There is no doubt that Chakrabarti's re-vision overtly links the actor's personal failure to the collective failure of a white society culturally unprepared to accept the actor's difference. This forces contemporary audiences to address Urvashi Chakravarti's question on "who gets to play Shakespeare in Britain, and why?" (Chakravarti, 2021: 190) as well as to confront the fact that, as Ayanna Thompson contends, while we believe Shakespeare to be for everyone, all too often it was used as a gatekeeper. Thus, *Red Velvet* "invites us to ponder what Shakespearean glass ceilings have been handed down to us from previous generations" (Thompson, 2021: xii).

The existing criticism on *Red Velvet* has engaged mostly with its racial agenda, but to conclude my analysis of the palimpsestuous strategies of Chakrabarti's play I want to contend that its foregrounding of Ira's defence that the performance of the relationship between Othello and Desdemona had to be touching, credible and palpably sensuous for there to be any sense of tragic loss, adds yet another significant layer of interpretation. In yet another ironic and anachronistic gesture, a century before the school of practical criticism

and the New Cristicism revolutionised and elevated the study of English literature with their resolve that critical attention must be placed on "the words on the page", Chakrabarti has the character of Ira insist since rehearsals start, and on several occasions, that his acting approach is a response to his (attentive) reading: "It's all in the play" (Chakrabarti, 2021: 40). Before the opening night, Pierre Laporte cautiously warns the actor that it is important to play carefully at the beginning: "One step at a time. You're always the lion. You roar and give everything... but they need a bit more of the... kid gloves" (Chakrabarti, 2021: 51), to which Ira's response is: "Have you read the play, Pierre?" (Chakrabarti, 2021: 51). Then, in the final scene at Covent Garden (Scene Six), when the manager eventually informs the actor that the board has put pressure to cancel the performance, Laporte reminds him that he had advised him to play his role gently and instead he "played harder and fiercer" (Chakrabarti, 2021: 83) than he had ever seen him. Again, Ira stubbornly defends his approach on a truthful understanding of the text:

> **Ira** He loses his mind, brutally murders his wife. It's one of the most violent scenes Shakespeare ever wrote, in an auditorium that requires scale. It's not gentle...
>
> **Pierre** You're not listening....
>
> **Ira** It's what jealousy does.
>
> **Pierre** It was too strong...too intimate.
>
> **Ira** It's called acting (Chakrabarti, 2021: 83).

Red Velvet clearly foregrounds Ira's unacceptable boldness in fully erasing an interpretive tradition that had so far systematically repressed the bewildering violence of the Shakespearean text and the abrupt transformation of its protagonist to rewrite it, in palimpsestic fashion, by superimposing a performance that was at once too strong and too intimate for nineteenth-century social standards of behaviour. Disregarding his blackness, then, there lies the actor's fatal flaw as envisioned by Chakrabarti, a *hubris* that only Pierre, however, is able to separate from the actor's racial profile. If *Red Velvet* is a play that re-fashions Ira Aldridge as "innately modern" and "egalitarian" (Duncan, 2015: 239) it does also re-fashion him as a modern *reader*. It is certainly relevant and ironic that perhaps the most valuable insights into the Shakespearean text emerge at the margins, in a casual conversation between the only two people of colour on the stage, Ira and Connie. Ira is, in fact, the only character to share significant dialogue with the African Caribbean maid, when he is

deliberately left alone on the stage to confront in utter loneliness the backlash of his performance. Asked by Ira what she thought of the performance, Connie's "commonsense" question "Why you kill your wife on the back of such careless talk?" (Chakrabarti, 2021: 80), which identifies role and actor, does not only identify what is at the core of the play's dramatic irony but also why it is so upsetting: "It's common sense tho', sir, marryin' into that worl's a mistake. Can't trust no one... Everybody smilin' like them friend but... I fin' mo' often than not, people mostly have two face, don't you think? An' when you show'em a weak spot them rub it" (Chakrabarti, 2021: 80). As Thompson argues, Chakrabarti's inclusion of Connie's reception serves to highlight how Aldridge's naturalistic rendition of Othello "only shows the two-faced whites 'a weak spot' that they cannot, and do not, resist rubbing in Aldridge's face" (Thompson, 2021: xiii). At that moment, however, Ira is not concerned with race, but with the beauty of the theatre and its unique potential, he confesses to Connie, for "getting under your skin" (Chakrabarti, 2021: 80). This modern vision of what theatre could do, beyond entertaining an audience, and which does not comply with nineteenth-century theatrical fashion, further underscores why Chakrabarti's text shall be understood as palimpsestuous, that is, as embodying complex textual relationalities. In its palimpsestic engagement with *Othello* the play underscores the latter's textual transcendence, and in accepting the disturbing violence and dark ambiguities of the play, *Red Velvet* also points, from a contemporary perspective, to the urgent need to keep grappling with them on the stage.

Bibliography

Booth, Michael R. 1991. *Theatre in the Victorian Age*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

Carlson, Marvin. 2001. *The Haunted Stage*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.

Chakrabarti, Lolita. 2014. *Red Velvet*. London: Samuel French.

Chakrabarti, Lolita. 2021. *Red Velvet* (2nd ed.). London: Methuen Drama, Modern Classics Series.

Chakravarty, Urvashi. 2021. What Is the History of Actors of Color Performing in Shakespeare in the UK? In Thompson, Ayanna (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Race*. Cambridge UP, 190-207.

Chicago Shakespeare Theatre. 2017. A Conversation with Playwright Lolita Chakrabarti. *Chicago Shakespeare Theatre on Navy Pier*, 6th of December. https://www.chicagoshakes.com/education/teaching_resources/teacher_handbooks/red_velvet/lolita_chakrabarti_conversation

Diamond, Elin. 1995. Introduction. In *Writing Performances*. London: Routledge.
Dillon, Sarah. 2005. Reinscribing De Quincey's palimpsest: the significance of the palimpsest in contemporary literary and cultural studies. *Textual Practice* 19:3: 243-263.
Duncan, Sophie. 2015. A Progressive *Othello*: Modern Blackness in Chakrabarti's *Red Velvet* (2012). In Morosetti, Tiziana (ed.) *Staging the Other in Nineteenth-Century British Drama*. Bern: Peter Lang, 227-253.
Eriks Cline, Lauren. 2020. Reviewing Ira Aldridge: *Red Velvet* and Revisionist Narrative. *Borrowers and Lenders: The Journal of Shakespeare and Appropriation* 13.1: 1-18.
Genette, Gerard. 1997. *Palimpsests*. Translation by Channa Newman & Claude Dubinsky. Lincoln/London: University of Nebraska Press.
Greenberg, Mitchell. 1994. Shakespeare's *Othello* and the "Problem" of Anxiety. *Canonical States, Canonical Stages: Oedipus, Othering, and SeventeenthCentury Drama*. Minneapolis/London: University Minnesota Press, 1-32.
Greenstreet, Hannah. 2017. Historical Authenticity: Performing Victorian Blackness in *Red Velvet* by Lolita Chakrabarti and *An Octoroon* by Branden Jacobs-Jenkins. *Platform* 11, 'Authenticity', 34-52.
Lester, Adrian. 2021. *Othello*: A Performance Perspective. In Thompson, Ayanna (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Race*. Cambridge UP, 223-236.
Lindfors, Bernth. 2006. Ira Aldridge's London Debut. *Theatre Notebook* 60.1: 30-44.
Lindfors, Bernth (ed.). 2007. *Ira Aldridge, the African Roscius*. Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press.
Lindfors, Bernth. 2011. *Ira Aldridge: the early years, 1807-1833*. Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press.
MacDonald, Joyce Green. 1994. Acting Black: "Othello," "Othello" Burlesques, and the Performance of Blackness. *Theatre Journal* 46. 2: 231-249.
Marshall, Herbert & Stock, Mildred. 1958. *Ira Aldridge: The Negro Tragedian*.
Newstock, Scott. 2021. How to think like Ira Aldridge. In Thompson, Ayanna (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Race*. Cambridge UP, 175-189.
Othello. 2013. *National Theatre Archive*. http://catalogue.nationaltheatre.org.uk/CalmView/Record.aspx?src=CalmView.Performance&id=PERF8745[Accessed 20/2/2024].
Oxford English Dictionary, s. v. Palimpsest (*n.* & *adj.*). July 2023. https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/2483889634 [Accessed 26/2/2024].
Oxford English Dictionary, s. v. member (n. & adj.), March 2024, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/6473950189
Parks, Suzan-Lori. 1995. Possession. *The America Play and Other Works*. New York: Theatre Communications Group.
Pechter, Edward. 1999. *Othello and Interpretive Traditions*. University of Iowa Press.
Pechter, Edward (ed.). 2017. *Othello*: *Second Norton critical edition*. W. W. Norton.
Quarshie, Hugh. 2016. Playing *Othello*. *Discovering Literature: Shakespeare & Renaissance*. *British Library* [Accessed 12/3/2020]. (Link currently unavailable due to the British Library cyber-attack in October 2023).

Rich, Adrienne. 1979. When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision (1971). In *On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978*. New York: W. W. Norton.

Saxe Wyndham, Henry. 1906. *The Annals of Covent Garden Theatre from 1732 to 1897. Vol II*. [S.l.]: Chatto & Windus.

Shakespeare & Beyond. 2022. Q&A: Lolita Chakrabarti – The "Red Velvet" playwright on 19th-century Black actor Ira Aldridge. *Folger Shakespeare Library*. 21 June, https://www.folger.edu/blogs/shakespeare-and-beyond/red-velvet-ira-aldridge-lolita-chakrabarti/

Shakespeare, William. 2017. *Othello*. Edition by Edward Pechter (2nd Norton Critical Edition). W. W. Norton.

Thompson, Ayanna. [2014] 2021. Introduction. In Chakrabarti, Lolita *Red Velvet* (2nd ed.). Methuen Drama.

Tronicke, Marlene. 2021. A "Natural Tint": *Red Velvet* and the Archive of Black Victorian Theatre. In Espinoza Garrido, Felipe; Tronicke, Marlena & Wacker, Julian (eds.) *Black Neo-Victoriana*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 97-119.

Wells, Stanley. 2015. *Great Shakespeare Authors: Burbage to Branagh*. Oxford UP.