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Ayanna Thompson

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Two Actors on Shakespeare, Race, and Performance: A Conversation between Harry J. Lennix and Laurence Fishburne

This conversation between Harry J. Lennix and Laurence Fishburne took place on July 19, 2008 in a café in Manhattan. Shakespeareans will recognize Lennix from Julie Taymor's *Titus* (2000) in which he played Aaron the Moor. Fishburne, of course, played Othello in Oliver Parker's 1995 film. As I was aware that Lennix and Fishburne have had previous conversations and debates about Shakespeare, race, and performance, I asked Lennix if he wouldn't mind having another conversation "on the record." He graciously agreed, met Fishburne in New York, and tape-recorded the conversation. Performance historians and theorists will find a wealth of material in this conversation because it moves through so many of the topics we debate: What are the "residual" effects of Shakespeare's language on one's world view? What is the difference between an "authentic" portrayal of a black man and a "facsimile" of one? How does a black actor "figure" a way "around" or "through" playing Othello with pride? What are the back stories black actors must invent to play Shakespearean roles? Moreover, there is a fascinating through-line within the conversation about the history of, relationships among, and advice passed between the black actors who have played Othello. Lennix says, "I mean, there's been so many," and he and Fishburne go on to mention Paul Robeson, Earle Hyman, Roscoe Lee Browne, William Marshall, Morgan Freeman, Keith David, Eammon Walker, and Chiwetel Ejiofor. Likewise, the conversations Lennix and Fishburne create between William Shakespeare and August Wilson warrant further examination and analysis.

The transcript of the conversation has been edited for length, continuity, and style.

—Ayanna Thompson

Laurence Fishburne: There's not that much that I do know about Shakespeare really. Although I appear to be scholarly and learned and all of these things, I'm really a self-taught guy. I love language, and, as an English speaker, the language of Shakespeare speaks to me because I'm

a monolingualist; I only speak one language properly. I speak all of the dialects of English, but I only speak English.

Harry Lennix: It's a fantastic and flexible language.

LF: It really is.

HL: And it is more inclusive, I find, than other languages. It's more permissive.

LF: So loving language, loving accents, all that stuff, and doing the only piece that I've done, which was *Othello* for film,¹ the thing that Kenneth Branagh said to me that really gave me the proper place to approach it all was that Shakespeare was a better poet than we will ever be actors.

HL: That's probably true, although I'm not sure that Richard Burbage would agree.

LF: Perhaps not, but what it did for me was it gave me a proper jumping off place as an actor. A place from which to approach the text, to approach the character, to approach the play. It gave me the proper perspective, and in that I mean I approached it with a kind of reverence and respect. The kind of respect that it deserves because it's so rich, it's so vast, it's so old, and it seems also to be so timeless.

HL: Yes, in many cases it is. Burbage, you know the famous story Olivier tells us, and it's all conjecture, but he reckons that one day Burbage, who was Shakespeare's leading tragedian, said "There's no part that you can write that I can't play," and the next day Shakespeare wrote *Othello*.

LF: Okay. Got it.

HL: And I would have to imagine that you know, as well as I since we have both played the part, that it is deceptive.² Although, I think you did a much better job: I don't want to sound falsely modest.

LF: Ah man. Bless you, bless you.

HL: It's a deceptive part. I was twenty-seven when I tried it. Chiwetel [Ejiofor] just did it; I don't know how old he is—he's got to be about thirty.³

LF: Yeah, Chewy just did it in London. I heard he got sparkling reviews. I heard he killed it. And Eammon Walker did it not too long ago in London as well.⁴

HL: What was the first time you became aware of Shakespeare? How old were you?

LF: I was seventeen, and for my graduation ceremony I spoke the "to be or not to be" soliloquy from *Hamlet*. You know, with the full-on dagger and everything. And I also do it in a film called *Willie & Phil*. It's a Paul Mazursky movie with Michael Ontkean and Ray Sharkey and Margot Kidder. And it's Paul Mazursky's adaptation of *Jules et Jim*, an

old French New Wave movie starring Oskar Werner. It's sort of a love triangle between two men and a woman. Paul Mazursky sort of took a shot at adapting this kind of story with these two men and this woman. And both of them have great affection for her, and she's kind of torn between the two of them. Michael Ontkean plays a guy who teaches in the New York City public school system. He has a class of misfits; I'm one of them. Robert Townsend is also in this scene. And he's teaching the class about Shakespeare—and their dealing with *Hamlet*—and he asks me what do I think Hamlet's problem is, and my character says, "Well, you know, he needs to get laid." A typical smart-ass, inner-city response. And then he says, "Explain further," and at one point I kind of launch into this soliloquy in ghetto-fabulous tones and rhythms, and it's wonderful and it's fun.

HL: What do you now think about the "to be or not to be" speech, probably the most famous soliloquy in all of Shakespeare?

LF: Again, the language and the poetry of it, the imagery inside of it, all of these things are [pause] . . . This is a cat contemplating whether or not he should commit suicide or murder. And for an actor, the stakes can't get any higher, right?

HL: Right. No, that's about it, in terms of having an action to play. Although it's a very ironic one, because one of the actions, as he says, is self-slaughter, and the other option is to do nothing. "Are you going to do something or are you going to do nothing": that's it for much of the play.

LF: It's the inner monologue: it's his interior monologue given voice. It's fantastic.

HL: It is fantastic. I think Gary Cooper once famously said—someone gave him the play to read when he was between takes or whatever—and he said "this is a play about a guy who can't make up his mind," which is true.

LF: Beautiful. That's great. Fantastic.

HL: I want to talk about the way that Shakespeare has maybe impacted your life, and maybe I can talk about a couple of the ways it has affected me. As we were talking earlier, I am considering going back to get a Ph.D. in the comparative dramatic literature of August Wilson and William Shakespeare, primarily to focus on the archetypes in each of them: how it determines the world view or how it helps us at least assess the world view of Shakespeare or, in the modern case, of August Wilson. I think they were both sort of about the same age when they died—

LF: And they're both the same sign. They're both Taureans.

HL: Is that right? I didn't know that. Fascinating. And I know that you worked with August directly, as did I. Do you think that Shakespeare has in any way shaped the way you look at the world?

LF: Sure.

HL: It's almost impossible to separate it from high art.

LF: I understand the question. I will tell you that because I am an actor, because I am an English speaker, because the works of Shakespeare are so treasured, I think, in our culture, in the culture that we grew up in, that produced us, as Americans, this country was born out of this whole British colony thing, so there's a lot of that stuff that's residual for us, that's just in us anyway. So "the play's the thing." That already, as an actor, affects me, that affects my world view.

HL: This play that we're in called American life.

LF: What is the one about "a poor player / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage"? What is that one?

HL: Oh, that's from the Scottish play. That is a moment of extraordinary existentialism.

LF: "All the world's a stage / And all the men and women merely players"?

HL: That is *As You Like It*.

LF: Yes, so there's another one. What is the one about the lady protesting too much?

HL: "The lady doth protest too much, methinks." That's *Hamlet*.

LF: "Get thee to a nunnery"?

HL: That's from *Hamlet*.

LF: "Neither a borrower nor a lender be"?

HL: That's from *Hamlet*.

LF: Yes. It comes at us in these little fits and starts and these little bits and pieces. And you don't know exactly where they came from if you haven't read the plays. For example, I haven't read any of the plays except for *Othello* and *Hamlet*.

HL: But you've seen productions?

LF: I've seen productions. I just saw this *Lear*—

HL: Whose was it?

LF: Ian McKellen and the Royal Shakespeare Company.⁵ I saw your *Macbeth*.⁶ I watched a couple of them when I was preparing for *Othello*. I watched Raul Julia's *Othello*.⁷ I've seen Richard Burton's *Hamlet*.⁸ I've seen Olivier's *Othello*.⁹

HL: What did you think of it?

LF: You know, it's brilliant.

HL: You think so?

LF: I have mixed feelings about it. The first time I saw it was in California—it was probably about fifteen or sixteen years ago—and [I was watching] it on a black-and-white [television] screen. There he was, and I kept looking and looking. I called my friend Chi McBride. I called Chi, “Hey man, whatcha doing?” “Nothing.” “Who’s this brother on TV, man?” “I don’t know, man, I never seen this cat before. Who is this cat?” And after about ten minutes, I was like, “Oh wait, wait, wait, hold up—yo, that’s Olivier, man. That’s Olivier in blackface.” He was like “damn!”

HL: It’s stunning, isn’t it? It’s stunning, that aspect of the film.

LF: So, my feelings about it are mixed because there’s two things going on. He’s giving what is a really, really fine performance. He’s giving a fine performance that is informed by his time and the perceptions of his time about black men.

HL: It is actually an interesting thing that we’re discussing this in a way because the conference that I told you about, which was *Appropriating Shakespeare to an African-American Experience*,¹⁰ in this case it was appropriating an African-American experience to Shakespeare.

LF: That’s correct.

HL: And in doing so, you found it to be relatively convincing, or you just found it a very good facsimile?

LF: I thought that some of the physicality he had was absolutely authentic. However, the emotional through-line that he was playing was racist, in my view, because it was informed by the fact that Laurence Olivier was a man who lived in a time when racism was prevalent in the world. Not that racism has gone away from the world at this moment in time, but at that moment in time, in 1964 when they filmed it, Olivier was already a man in his middle years. He was a man who was the product of the British theatre blah, blah, blah. His attitudes, his thoughts, his perceptions of black men had to be informed by the larger society of the day.

HL: Although, would you fault Laurence Olivier or would you fault Shakespeare for writing the character in such a way that perhaps that is a part of it?

LF: No, I don’t fault them. This is just my observation. This is my take on it.

HL: Yes, I saw you do it; I thought you did a very fine job. I think, however, it is an impossible part to play. I had this conversation with Morgan Freeman, and his daughter was there, Morgana, and, boy, she just about bit my head off.

LF: Did she?

HL: She said, "well, my father did it."¹¹ And he said, "what are you guys talking about?" I said, "I was just telling your daughter it's impossible to play Othello properly if you're a black man." I told her, "If you're a *black man*."

LF: If you're a *man*.

HL: If you're a man and have any pride. It's an extraordinarily problematical character to play.

LF: Absolutely.

HL: Much of that is due, of course, to Shakespeare's ideas about what black people are: he certainly didn't know any black people.

LF: Of course, based on his time and what was going on in his time.

HL: Having said what I just said about the impossibility of playing him, what benefit is derived by playing it?

LF: For the actor himself, for the audience?

HL: For you. For the actor.

LF: For the actor, myself, I'll tell you why it was great for me, why I would love to do it again, why I do believe it is extremely challenging and it's challenging to that aspect of having pride in one's own race and one's people. Very, very difficult. Because he is a child. He goes from being this great general to being almost an infant. And that hurts. You can't get around it; it's in the text.

HL: Does it hurt as much as when you're doing other parts where racism is a big part of it?

LF: I don't necessarily think so. And again, I had to figure my way around it, or my way through it, a way to go through that journey. And I found a very simple solution for me. I want to set this up properly because I want to be understood. I want to be clear. I've heard all kinds of things, like the play is really Iago's play because he has more dialogue or more lines. I've heard that Othello is infantilized in the story, blah, blah, blah, and there's arguments for all of that. What I found in the text and what I found in terms of thinking about it logically, in terms of the kind of lives people must've had to live back then, and because when I did it I was not the traditional age—

HL: Right. You were much younger.

LF: I was thirty-four when I did it; traditional age is forty-five. So right now I'm at the traditional age. There is a thing that happens, that can happen to any man, at middle age, and that is, he can really just fall in love. He can fall in love. And again, back then, when the play was written, middle age was thirty.

HL: That's true. Certainly for the people of Venice.

LF: Middle-age was thirty, thirty-five. Which means that Desdemona really was probably somewhere between fifteen and eighteen. If you look at the history of man and the history of what goes on between men and women, young girls and older men fall in love all the time.

My solution to that huge problem is here's a guy who was taken and sold to slavery as a child: there is all this nautical language that Othello uses. If you look at the history of the Venetians, the Venetians were a great power because they controlled the waterways, and they were a great power because all of their military were mercenaries. No native Venetians were employed in the armed forces. They were all outsiders; they could be Florentines; they could be from anywhere else but Venice. The strategy behind that was to keep the real levers of power in the hands of Venetians. Whenever somebody climbed the ladder and ascended to a certain position, they could only get so far. So Othello could be a general in the navy. My thing was this guy was a pirate essentially. They'd go "oh, we've got a problem here," they'd dispatch him and his ships, and he would go. So that made sense to me because of all this nautical language that he uses. He talks about all these different bodies of water when describing his feelings.

So that means that he hasn't really had a lot of contact with the feminine. So he hits dry land, he's become the general, he's got this rank, it's great. This girl, he goes and sees her old man, and she catches his eye, and he falls in love with her for the first time in his life. He falls in love and all of his defenses now are gone. And that's how I solved the problem for myself. Because if he's in love, then it's the first time he's in love. And he falls hard, hard, hard for a creature who he *knows* won't hurt him. He *knows* she won't hurt him. Then he falls in love with her because she's a fucking perfect innocent. How could she fucking hurt him? She couldn't possibly hurt him. She couldn't possibly—not a bone in her body. She loved him because he totally regaled her with all these crazy stories and she thought, "Oh my God! You're just wonderful!" And nobody *ever* told him that he was just wonderful. Do you know what I mean?

HL: I do—I think I know quite what you mean.

LF: That's how I was able to surrender to what's in the text.

HL: I saw that. I think it was Irène Jacob who played Desdemona—she is a very pretty girl, of course—and I thought that that relationship that you two had was very palpable and visceral in a lot of ways, which I thought was quite appropriate. What I thought you were going to say was that you found a way to play his malady, that is, his epilepsy. I've seen a lot of *Othellos*; your epilepsy was fantastic.

LF: Thank you.

HL: But that leads me to a larger question and that is this: if one does not have an inherent love or trust of one's self, can one fall in love with someone else?

LF: Yeah.

HL: You think that that's possible? Or is it obsession? Is it something else? A fetish?

LF: Yes, to whatever extent you can fall in love. There are degrees of all of that. This is stuff that we know about now, after years of human development and psychoanalysis and psychotherapy and emotional therapy. We know self-love and all that now. How do we apply that to this question in this dramatic piece? Does he love himself? Well, yes, there are parts of himself that I think he does love: the warrior aspect of himself, which bought him his freedom, and made him a man among men. These were men who at sea were probably fucking each other as well, and they cried at the drop of a hat, they fought—they were much more, I think, passionate and expressive than even we are today. There is certainly an amount of self-love, but what's great about what happens dramatically is that the seed of self-doubt is planted, and it begins to grow and become this horrible thing, which dramatically is great to play.

But just to get back to where you were at with the epilepsy thing, that's the other component that I tried to use. So I took the guy as a pirate; he's a fucking killer; he's good at it, leader of men, organized, passionate, argh! I had these other two things going on that you may find interesting. My feeling was that he was born in Spain and he was born around the time when the Moors were at the end of their rule in Spain and the Christians were coming back. He was Muslim. Because what the Muslims did when they took over, what the Moors did when they came to Spain was they gave the Christians and Jews a choice, that if they would convert to Islam, they would get a tax break. And a lot of people did that, but they lived in harmony and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. Towards the end of it, the Christians came in—my back story was that his family [was there when] the Christians came in and said, "You've got to go. We're tired of you guys. You got to get out of here." And his father went, "No, no! We'll convert to Catholicism!" And the Christians were like, "Fuck you. We don't want you. We're going to sell your kid." So they did that. And then when he escaped from slavery, he came back to his Muslim people. And they were like, "Where you been?" And he said, "Oh, a terrible thing happened to me! My father and [family] converted to Christianity!" "You let them convert you? Get the fuck out of here!" And they threw him out

again. And that's when he went out and he got with the Venetians and became a pirate. And he made a decision to stay with the Christian thing because it was easier. It was just easier because he was hanging out with Christian cats, commanding them, and they were okay.

So that's two. The other thing is he's in love. His defenses just crumble. In studying epilepsy, the first time I ever saw an epileptic fit, it was many, many years ago. I was a teenager. I had been in a movie, and I went to a party and there was a young man at the party. He was epileptic. He was obviously gay, and when he met me he was obviously smitten with me. And ten minutes after he met me, Harry, he went into a grand mal. He was so excited he went into a grand mal. So that first one that I had was when I'm sitting there with her, and she's trying to be all nice to me. And he has the little one because what he feels is too much.

HL: I love that. That's a great idea. In a broader scope, Shakespeare's really got, as far as I can identify at the moment, three Moorish characters: Aaron, who is in *Titus*, The Prince of Morocco, who comes in *Merchant*, and Othello. I think it may have been Harold Bloom or somebody who once said, "If anti-Semitism was a non-starter for me, I wouldn't have anything to read." Do you think that that's the case with Shakespeare? Do you think that he by nature is a racist? Is that a problem for you? Do you think that there are other plays that you would like to do of his? For example, I think that you would be a great Coriolanus.

LF: Thank you. Roscoe Lee Browne said that I should do Coriolanus. My oldest, dearest friend in the world has been saying for years that I should do the Scottish play. And when I saw *Lear* this last time, I thought, "I can do that." Look, the world was racist at that time. As it is now. So he doesn't get a pass.

HL: But it doesn't particularly bother you?

LF: No, it doesn't bother me. No, I don't have any expectation that Shakespeare should not be racist or anything like that. I don't need his approval or anyone else's approval to approach any of the work if I want to approach it.

HL: Would you ever consider yourself somehow precluded from doing any?

LF: No, I wouldn't. I would have no trouble approaching Petruchio in *Taming of the Shrew*. I would have no problem approaching that. I think about all the appropriations of Shakespeare in a modern context; in terms of people trying to contextualize it for a present time, which sometimes makes me crazy and I just think, "That's dumb."

HL: But that's a play that is considered extraordinarily sexist.

LF: No. Well, let me ask you this. Let's talk about this, because the last thing I read was an adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice*. Isn't that an anti-Semitic play?

HL: Without question. You would have to say, though, that Shakespeare has a duality. He's ambivalent about it because Jessica, who is also Jewish, is treated rather lovingly. But Shylock is treated appallingly, abysmally. And I don't know if this is because I'm a black guy—but I've always understood that Shylock was right. He's right. I mean, he's right. And I got into this with Ayanna Thompson when I did the interview [with her],¹² when she was talking about him as a comedic character. He was supposed to be a buffoon; he wasn't a tragic character. There is no question that it's anti-Semitic.

LF: I think, with respect to Aaron, certainly Othello, Shylock, Kate he was expressing the attitudes of the day through the play. And by setting these characters, by presenting us with these characters, and trying to illuminate what their struggles were going to be, what their struggles are, what it is to be a Jew, what it is to be a black man, he was doing as much as he could understand. If we think the best of him, I think that's what he was attempting to do. And I think he does it fairly well: I mean, that whole diatribe, that whole fucking tirade that Aaron has, the one that you did so beautifully with the child in your arms?¹³ That whole fucking thing? I mean, come on. That's the righteous fucking indignation and hatefulness and just the fucking, "I am sick and I'm not taking this shit anymore. And if you all really like to know what I'd like to do with y'all? This is what you all need to know." That's brilliant shit.

HL: It's curious, having to do that and also having done *Othello*. Some of those characters—not that Othello's bad, but if you look at Iago, Aaron the Moor, Richard III. Iago never says why. . . . Aaron never says why. We can assume that he knows why, but he never says why.

LF: And this is the beauty of what it is. This is his genius as a dramatist: he doesn't give you the why. He gives you enough. Well, in these particular instances, he doesn't give you the why because these are complex characters, these are complex human beings, and sometimes you don't always know why somebody does what they do.

HL: But you need to know it as the actor.

LF: Well yes, and so there is your job. I think that in the context of the text he gives you enough information for you to make and create for yourself as the actor something that works for you. And that's why I gave you the example of all the things that I tried to use, because those are just things in the text. Roscoe Lee Browne used to tell me that Othello

didn't speak the same language that everybody else in Venice spoke, because he's always saying, "What?" And for him that worked.¹⁴ For me it didn't because when you look at his language, his language is much more flowery and poetic than anybody else's in the play.

HL: It's much more formal, yeah.

LF: His language is *much* more beautiful than everybody else's in the play. So that tells me no, he speaks better than everybody else because he's been out, he's been everywhere. He came from Andalusia, but for Roscoe it was, "What?"

HL: Did you ever know Earle Hyman?

LF: Um-hmm.

HL: There's some sort of a statue or something of him in Norway.¹⁵ And I know that Keith David did Othello.¹⁶ I mean, there's been so many.

LF: William Marshall did it.¹⁷ Keith David did it.

HL: I guess many people continue to do it. I never want to do it again, but that's just me. I think I would love for someone to convince me to do it. I would love for someone to say, "I got it, Harry."

LF: I got it, Harry.

HL: Oh great, you'll direct it.

LF: Just use what I just gave you. Just be in love. If you just be in love, then you're just in love. And if you're in love, you do stupid shit.

HL: That's true.

LF: You fall in love deep enough, you will kill a bitch about it. Think about it. But all this dismemberment of women, this mistreatment of women, this really horrible, horrible mistreatment of women is all traceable back to the extraction of the feminine principle from the God concept. All of this shit can go straight back to when the big three—Christendom, Islam, and Judaism—all took the feminine principle out of the God concept and made it the Holy Ghost. That's when women became the niggers of the world.

HL: I was talking earlier about August Wilson; do you think that he could be accused of anything like that? You just did *Fences* not long ago.¹⁸

LF: I wouldn't accuse him of anything other than trying to accurately portray the people that came out of the Hill, in his imagination.¹⁹ I can't accuse him of anything other than trying to accurately depict the people he decided to write about.

HL: But you've heard those complaints from women that he's sexist or misogynistic.

LF: I haven't heard those, but I can understand how actresses and women might have that point of view, absolutely. I can totally see their point of view.

HL: When we're looking at texts that are a couple or, in this case, four centuries old, do we do greater service to consider what the playwright intended? Even if we completely disagree with it, even if science and philosophy and the world view that we live under now belies everything that that person says, should we still try to be true to that, or should we try to find the deepest possible truth as we understand it?

LF: Well I think, considering whatever the playwright's intentions are is important. And depending upon whether or not you agree with it—the test is if you don't agree with it—how do you apply yourself to it? How do you surrender to it?

HL: Good question.

LF: That's what I really think. I think it's important to deal with what the playwright's intention is. And if you can surrender to it, great! If you can't, you can't.

HL: Do you ever find yourself in that position? You have a recognized, great author, even in a movie that you've done, whether alive or dead, and you're just like, "Get the fuck out of here with that! I don't believe this line." But you have to say the line?

LF: Well, not with a play. Not with a play. When I'm working on movies and stuff, if the line doesn't make sense then I don't say it. I change it. What I don't do is change the writer's intention. I never change the writer's intention. I might change the line for the sake of it coming out like the character would really say it. I think a lot of times—particularly if you go back thirty years ago when writers were writing for actors of color—they weren't writing fully realized, full characters for the most part. If you're the day-player guy and you're doing some small little part, they're not writing [for you]. I do what I need to do to make it authentic, because they weren't writing authentic people. They were writing what their idea of urban street tough was. And as things have gotten better and have changed, for example, I would say, in your case, the work that you did on the show with Geena Davis. . .

HL: *Commander in Chief*.²⁰

LF: On *Commander*, the work that you did on that. The conversations that we had where you were like, "Oh no. I'm not. I can't"

HL: "I'm not doing that."

LF: You were well within your rights. However, you were given a character to play that we had not seen before. We had not seen a man of color moving through the halls of power in this way. That was important, I think, to see.

HL: I think so, right.

LF: And what's more important is that you recognized it, and you recognized when you needed to stay the course and take a stand about how you were going to play this man. And that was important. But with a play, you're dealing with a playwright and playwright intention and all of that and playwright's language and all of that, and I like to be respectful of the playwright and just try to do the best you can.

HL: Let me ask you a question: have you played a character that you disliked?

LF: No.

HL: No?

LF: No.

HL: Olivier once said that you have to always find something—

LF: Always find something that you like. My thing is I have to figure out how to love them. Now, I love Ike [Turner].²¹ The only way I could play Ike is if I found a way to love him. I loved that nigger, man. Because I found out how. You know why? Because Ike made the first rock and roll record ever. It's called "Rocket 88": one of the first rock and roll records ever. I love rock and roll.

HL: Do you regard any of the characters—I know right now you're playing Thurgood Marshall, a fantastically seminal character.²² You were nominated for a Tony award. I didn't see everything, but I think you should have won.

LF: Thanks, man.

HL: You talked about Ike Turner, and of course you played Troy Maxson, Sterling Johnson.²³ Do you consider any of these characters by nature Shakespearean? Do you ever think about that sort of thing?

LF: Troy is certainly Shakespearean, I think. I mean, fucking fighting with death, wrasslin' with death.

HL: Is that *Lear*-like to you?

LF: Definitely, *Lear*-like. Yeah, he's definitely Lear. He feels like Lear to me. I guess some people might think of Ike as being kind of Shakespearean because he was just such a manipulator.

HL: A master manipulator.

LF: Yeah, he's kind of like Richard. And Thurgood, he's in a category by himself, man.

HL: Well, there were a number of guys like that back then. I agree with you, I think that he is in a category by himself, but if you consider that around the same time you had Thurgood Marshall; you had Adam Clayton Powell—

LF: You played him brilliantly.²⁴

HL: Thank you. You had a number of men who were supermen—Paul Robeson. You had these amazingly accomplished people at a time.

LF: Well, I think that those people have shown up when we need them. Those people showed up when we needed them.

HL: Do the people need Shakespeare now? Do the people need August Wilson now?

LF: I would think that we will always need Shakespeare because, again, like I started out saying, he's a better poet than we will ever be actors. I mean, my God! Some of that language, man, some of those phrases. "Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind; / And therefore is winged Cupid painted blind." That kind of delicious language is, I think, always good. And August? Yeah, I mean, I do! I need him! Sometimes I just need to say things like, "That's what the problem is now. All them niggers wanna do is have a rally."²⁵ Sometimes you just need to say, "That boy aint got good sense."²⁶ You know what I mean?

HL: Yeah, "That's the Sterling boy bringing that stuff in here. Something wrong with that boy. That boy ain't right."²⁷

Notes

¹*Othello*, 1995.

²Lennix played *Othello* in 1992.

³*Othello*, 2007.

⁴*Othello*, 2001.

⁵*King Lear*, 2007–2008.

⁶*Macbeth*, 2007.

⁷*Othello*, 1979.

⁸*Hamlet*, 1964.

⁹*Othello*, 1965.

¹⁰The Symposium organized by Scott Newstok at Rhodes College was, "Shakespeare in Color: A Symposium on *Macbeth* and African-American Performances and Appropriations."

¹¹*Othello*, 1982.

¹²Harry Lennix appeared with Ayanna Thompson at Arizona State University for a public forum called, "Acting While Black: A Conversation with Harry Lennix." A video of the conversation is online: <http://www.asu.edu/clas/english/video/index.html#theory>.

¹³*Titus*, 2000.

¹⁴Roscoe Lee Browne was the understudy for *Othello* in the NYSF 1958 production.

¹⁵Earle Hyman first performed *Othello* in 1953, and he first performed *Othello* in Norway in 1963 in Norwegian (March 1963 in Bergen, Norway).

¹⁶David was the understudy for Raul Julia in the 1979 NYSF production. He played the title role in 2001.

¹⁷Although Marshall played Othello several times onstage, he is most known for the 1981 filmed version.

¹⁸*Fences*, 2006.

¹⁹Fishburne is referring to the Hill District in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Wilson set almost all of his plays on the Hill, which was once considered to be the cultural center of African-American life in Pittsburgh.

²⁰Lennix played Jim Gardner, the Chief of Staff, on ABC's television show *Commander in Chief* from September 2005–June 2006.

²¹Laurence Fishburne played Ike Turner in the 1993 film *What's Love Got to Do With It*.

²²*Thurgood*, 2008.

²³Troy Maxson is the lead character in August Wilson's *Fences* (which Fishburne played in 2006), and Sterling Johnson is one of the leading characters in Wilson's *Two Trains Running*. Fishburne won a Tony Award for his portrayal of Sterling on Broadway in 1992.

²⁴*Keep the Faith, Baby*, 2002.

²⁵Wilson 2.2, p.85.

²⁶Wilson 1.2, p. 27.

²⁷Wilson 2.2, p. 85.

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