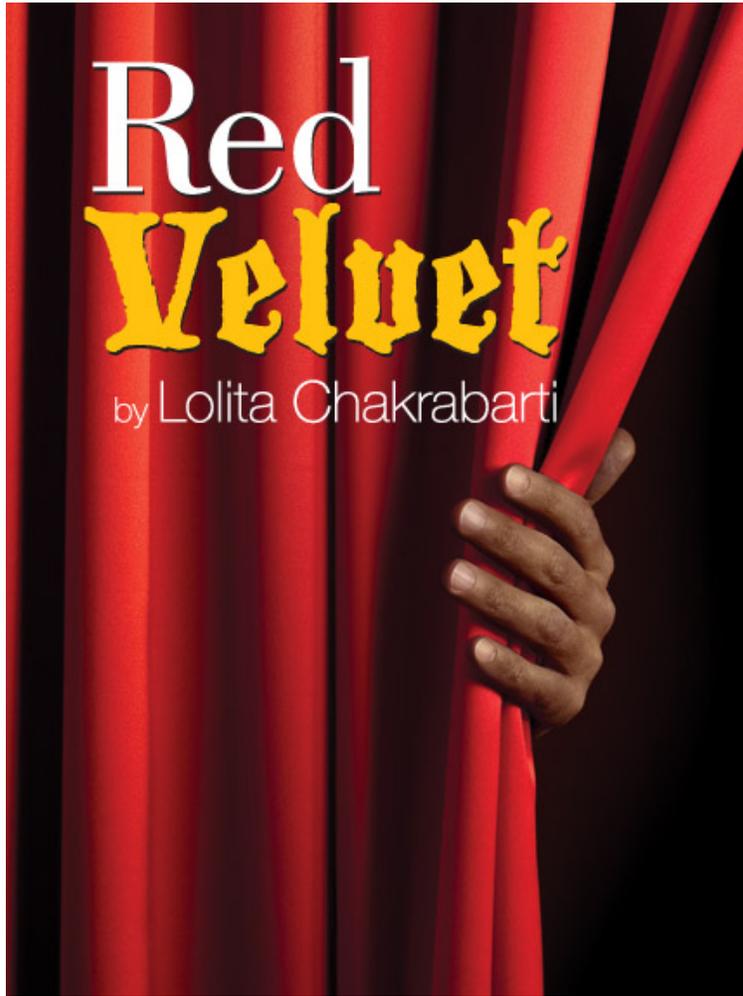


Jewel Theatre Audience Guide



directed by Bob Rumsby

by Susan Myer Sifton, Dramaturg
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ABOUT THE PLAY

I've written for years and years, but I guess it has competed with my acting, because acting is how I make my living and I love it, but writing gives you a blank sheet of paper and you can tell the stories.

—Lolita Chakrabarti

CHARACTERS (IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

Halina (Audrey Rumsby): Polish journalist

Terence/Bernard Warde (Jesse Caldwell): Terence is Ira Aldridge's English valet and dresser; Bernard is an English actor who enters at the top of Scene 2 with Betty and Henry

Ira Aldridge (Aldo Billingsley): African-American leading actor

Connie (Jennifer DeLane Bradford): Jamaican servant

Betty Lovell (Shannon Warrick): English actress

Henry Forrester (Teddy Spencer): English actor

Charles Kean (Jeremy Kahn): English actor and son of Edmund Kean

Ellen Tree (Jennifer Le Blanc): English leading actress

Pierre Laporte (Jeffrey (Geoff) Fiorito): French manager of Theatre Royal, Covent Garden, London, England

Margaret Aldridge (Cristina Anselmo): English wife of Ira Aldridge

I was aware of its development from its inception and believe Lolita Chakrabarti has written an important and exhilarating play which in its discussion of performance, politics, and race is as entertaining as it is illuminating.

—Kenneth Branagh

SYNOPSIS

Spoiler alert: The play in its entirety is summarized below. Please consider bypassing this section if you would rather not know the plot.

Note: Red Velvet is based on actual events.

The first scene of the play is set in a theater dressing room in Łódź, Poland on a late summer evening in 1867. Halina, a young journalist, has stealthily managed to find her way backstage to Ira Aldridge's dressing room so she can interview the famous actor. Aldridge is in Łódź at the end of his ninth—and what would become final—European tour, to perform *King Lear*. He hadn't been feeling well, so his valet and dresser, Terence, has cancelled all press meetings at his request.



Aldridge as Lear, Moscow, 1840

When he arrives, Ira is quite annoyed to find Halina in his dressing room and chides Terence for letting her sneak past him. He eventually consents to the interview, albeit grudgingly. It's clear that Ira is unwell; he tells Halina he is suffering from a chest cold. The interview goes well until Halina asks Ira about his performance as Othello at Covent Garden 34 years earlier. Ira skirts the subject but Halina continues to push for answers until the irate actor orders her out.

The next scene is a flashback to the Theatre Royal Covent Garden in London, England in April 1833. The air is filled with loud sounds of protest coming from nearby Trafalgar Square, where representatives from both sides of the issue of colonial slavery have been gathering while debates rage in Parliament. (England's Slavery Abolition Act of 1833, which would end slavery in the British West Indies, would receive Royal Assent on August 28.)

Henry Forrester, Betty Lovell and Bernard Warde, actors with roles in the current production of *Othello*, arrive at the theater. Connie, a servant, offers them tea and helps with Betty's coat, which was splattered with a flour bomb as she was making her way through the crowds of protesters.

The actors are anxious to learn news of Edmund Kean, who recently collapsed onstage while playing the titular role. Kean's fame is the major draw for audiences, and they fear that the theater will go dark without him.

Charles Kean, Edmund's son, enters with his fiancée, Ellen Tree. They are playing, respectively, Iago and Desdemona in the play. Charles' news about Edmund is grim: he is weak and won't be able to continue in the role.

Pierre Laporte, the theater manager, arrives to reassure the actors that the show will go on, as he has arranged for Ira Aldridge to replace Edmund. Aldridge has previously played Othello to rave reviews and packed houses in the English provinces, as well as Ireland and Scotland.

When Aldridge arrives, the cast is stunned to discover that he is black.

To date, no actors of color have played on London's patent West End stages. Covent Garden and Drury Lane were the only theaters at the time with exclusive rights granted directly from the Crown to perform spoken drama. (See pp. 8-9 of this document). Despite the tense atmosphere, Pierre begins to rehearse the scenes Aldridge requests.

Most of the actors accept the new Othello, while others are resistant. Charles, who is playing Iago, raises the strongest opposition. Laporte won't budge, and Charles storms out in a fury, leaving the company to perform that evening without him. Bernard Warde plays Iago in his stead.

Scene 3 is from that evening's performance of the play, showing a segment of Act II, Scene 5 of *Othello*, where Ira as Othello interrogates Ellen's Desdemona about the whereabouts of the handkerchief he gave her.

The next scene follows intermission. Ira is in his dressing room after the show, unhappy with his performance and tormenting himself over minute details. His wife Margaret enters and comforts him, talking about how deeply both she and the audience were moved by his performance, giving him a unanimous standing ovation. Ira tells her that his eight years of touring the provinces have finally paid off—now that he has made it to one of the most prestigious theaters in London, they will finally be able to settle down, buy a home, and have children.

Ellen Tree enters, congratulating Ira on his work. She asks if he'll go over the play's final scene with her in preparation for the following evening's performance. Margaret leaves Ira and Ellen to their rehearsal. When Ira and Ellen are finished, they conspire to ditch the post-show party in the green room and share a glass of port instead.⁶⁵

The green room the next evening is the setting for Scene 5. It's pre-performance, and all but Ira are present. Henry arrives with the day's newspapers, and the actors eagerly begin reading their reviews. The atmosphere quickly changes, as each review is filled with appalling critiques of Ira's performance the previous night. The reviews are viciously cruel, demeaning Ira for his race and insisting that his inferiority as a black man and the physical attributes of his ethnicity

inhibit his ability to play the role of Othello successfully. They call him a “black servant” and “a genuine nigger,” and say that he “pawed” Ellen. When Ira enters, the actors quickly scurry off. He is left alone with Connie, who tries in vain to keep the reviews from him. She attempts to soften the blow with wise insights she has gained from her experiences working for white people, but the scene ends as Ira reads the reviews with increasing horror and anguish.

Scene 6 takes place on the Covent Garden stage after the second performance of *Othello*. Pierre regretfully informs Ira that, because of the negative press, the theater board has decided that the production will be cancelled and the theater will go dark. Ira protests. He tries to engage Pierre to rally against the decision, reminding him of his innovative approach to theatre and his revolutionary ideals. He begs Pierre not to let the theater “go dark on my name”. Pierre responds by blaming Ira for the outcome by ignoring his advice and coming on too strong in the role. He cites bruises that Ira has purported given Ellen and, to Ira’s mounting revulsion, insinuates that something other than a rehearsal was going on between her and Ira in his dressing room after the first performance. Pierre tells Ira that he explained to the theater board that in the heat of the moment, Ira lost himself in the play and his “true nature surfaced”. At that debasing betrayal from someone he considered a friend, Ira finally reaches his boiling point and attacks Pierre.

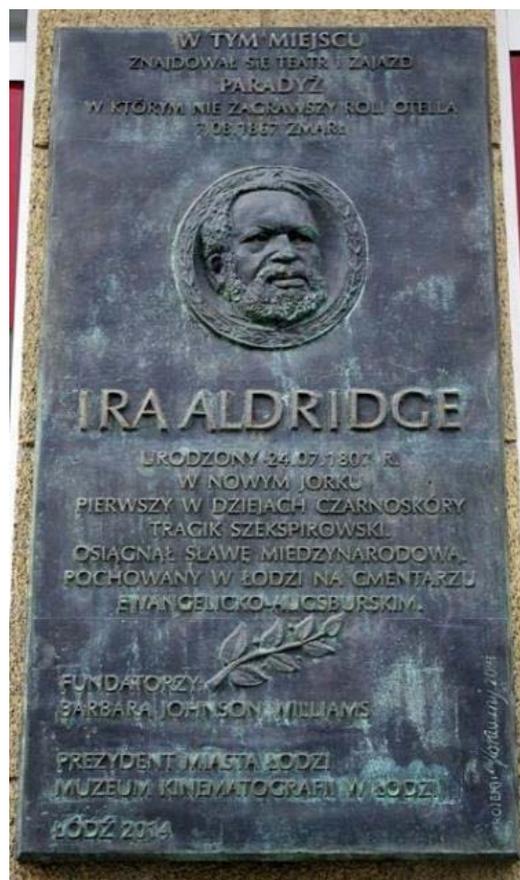
The final scene of the play returns us to Ira’s dressing room in Łódź in 1867. Halina has come back to apologize to Ira, explaining that she hoped an interview with such a world-renown actor would give her respect among her all-male colleagues, who refuse to take her seriously because she’s a woman. She helps Ira to get into his costume as Lear. As he whitewashes his face and dons a white wig and beard, he has visions of the past, as the ghosts of Charles, Bernard, Henry, Connie, Ellen and Pierre visit him.

London is a limited pocket of work. Same faces ... same buildings ... same critics writing the same things. There's an indolence amongst those who have everything on their doorstep. So I chose to tour Europe – because one finds there is a thirst and one is invited to offer a glass of water. I've played Rybínsk and once you've done that it's hard to ... to settle ... for London.

—Ira Aldridge, Scene 1, *Red Velvet*

SETTING

Scenes 1 and 7 take place backstage in a dressing room of the Paradyz Theatre in Łódź, Poland during the late summer of 1867. At that time, it was a German-language theater with the Hotel zum Paradies attached to it. Both were owned by August Hentschel, who also directed the theater. A house is now located at 175 Piotrkowska Street, the site of the former hotel. It bears a plaque honoring Aldridge, seen below.



The rest of the play, Scenes 2 through 6, take place at the Theatre Royal Covent Garden, Bow Street, London, England in April 1833. Commonly referred to as Covent Garden Theatre, or simply Covent Garden, it was the second construction at the site in central London, which was then in a neighborhood of taverns and public houses. The original construction in 1732 was an opera house, which a fire destroyed on September 20, 1808.

Rebuilding began in December 1808, and the second Theatre Royal Covent Garden opened on September 18, 1809 with a performance of *Macbeth*. A fire destroyed it in March 1856, and a third theater was erected on the site.



Interior view of Covent Garden Theatre, painted by Thomas Rowlandson and A.C. Pugin, ca. 1811

Until 1843, Covent Garden and the Theatre Royal Drury Lane were alone among the theaters of London with the distinction of deriving their rights to present theatrical entertainments not from licenses issued by the Lord Chamberlain or the local authority, but by direct grant from the Crown. These rights were originally conferred by Charles II in 1662 to Thomas

Killigrew and Sir William Davenant, giving them each the right to build a theater in London or Westminster and to establish and manage a company of actors to perform in it. All other companies performing in London and Westminster were then suppressed. However, an ever-growing number of new and smaller theaters licensed by the Lord Chamberlain continued to spring up.

The grants to Killigrew and Davenant established a dual monopoly of theatrical rights which, although frequently skirted in varying degrees, nevertheless survived as a powerful element in the history of London theatre until the Theatres Act of 1843 was passed. The Act ended the monopoly but did not otherwise affect the rights conferred by the patents, which continue to be exercised to the present day.

In Scene 2, Charles Kean cites the royal patents as justification for barring Ira Aldridge from leading the company at Covent Garden, even though that position would go to the leading actor in the current play. He demeans the work Ira has done to this point, inferring its inferiority to his own body of work, telling him "This theater has a royal patent to present quality spoken drama. Not burletta, not curiosities but drama. That is our task and as such, I am best equipped to lead this company".



The Second Covent Garden Theatre of 1809

Aldridge was on stage in London precisely when the issue of colonial slavery was being debated. It is not surprising that his presence would stir controversy.

—Bernth Lindfors, Ira Aldridge at Covent Garden, April 1833

TIME

The stage directions following Scene 1 read:

The sound of protesters, chanting, shouting. Coach and horses trying to get through. Police trying to keep order. Chaos. As the lights fade, hundreds of voices grow louder and louder. A distant 'Rule Britannia! Britannia Rule the waves!' The sound of skirmishes become violent, screams, shouts

The cacophony leads into Scene 2, which takes place in Covent Garden, London, in 1833, 34 years earlier than Scene 1. Aldridge would appear as Othello at the Theatre Royal Covent Garden for two performances in April of that year. The anti-abolitionist movement had come to a head and was dominating the consciousness of the public and of Parliament.

England's Slavery Abolition Act of 1833, an act of Parliament that abolished slavery in most British colonies, received Royal Assent on August 28, 1833, and took effect on August 1, 1834. Slavery on English soil was unsupported in English law but it remained legal in most of the British Empire until the Slavery Abolition Act. The aim of the Act was to dismantle the large-scale plantation slavery that existed in Britain's tropical colonies, where the enslaved population was usually larger than that of the white colonists.

The protesters were the abolitionists and their opponents, who argued that freeing the slaves would have a deleterious effect on Britain's economy, which was in flux at the time. A new system of international commerce had emerged, and Great Britain's slaveholding Caribbean colonies—which were focused largely on sugar production—were losing their struggle to compete with larger plantation economies such as those of Cuba and Brazil. The majority of those sold into slavery worked on

plantations in the European colonies of the Caribbean and the Americas. These plantations produced sugar and tobacco meant for consumption back in Europe. Anti-abolitionists argued that slavery's contributions to the country's economy led to the rise of consumerism in Britain. Notwithstanding, people began to campaign against slavery for humanitarian reasons. The movement began to grow towards the end of the eighteenth century and soon threatened those who had financial interests in the plantations that used slaves. Because trading was so profitable, a pro-slavery West Indian lobby emerged to defend the West Indies slave trade. It included plantation owners, merchants, ship owners and bankers—many of the wealthiest men in the United Kingdom—each of whom had some degree of economic interest in the slave trade. They also saw abolition as a threat to Great Britain's status as a major world power, hence the singing of "Rule Britannia" by the protesters.

From the mid-18th century, much of the British population, including many religious groups, had been speaking out about the horrors of the Atlantic slave trade and plantation life. Still, they did not have political support for their demands for abolition until the last decade of the 18th century. Up to that time, the majority of Parliament opposed abolition on economic grounds, swayed by the contention of those with vested interests that the British economy prospered from the slave trade: Individuals, businesses and ports all generated finance and tax revenue. Members of Parliament and the pro-slavery movement predicted insurgency from abolitionists. They cited the slave rebellion in St. Domingue as well as the French Revolution. Britons were concerned that things could go the same way as they did in France, which led to fears about national security. Anti-abolitionists conducted a powerful campaign, using propaganda to exploit these fears to counter the Abolitionists.

The dialogue among the actors in Scene 2 reflects the prevailing positions on both sides of the controversy. They discuss a powerful abolitionist tactic: the boycotting of sugar and cotton from the slaveholding colonies in favor of other sources (where the goods may be less expensive anyway). Humanitarianism is growing, but so are changes in the global economy, which are in turn impacting public

perception. International commerce, with its inherent competition (Betty says that “East Indian cotton’s on the up, cheaper too”), as well as a changing world economy, contributed significantly to the abolition of slavery. British taxpayers realized that slavery flourished because of subsidies they paid to West Indian planters. This was no longer supportable in the changing economic and social order of the country.

When Aldridge appeared as Othello at Covent Garden in April 1833, no other black performer had been seen on the stage of a patent theater in London in the early nineteenth century. As Bernth Lindfors says in the quote at the top of this section, it is not surprising that his presence would stir controversy, occurring as it did when the issue of colonial slavery was at its most heated.

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

Ira Aldridge's presence in 19th century British theatre must have been political. I wrote Red Velvet because I wanted to explore the complexity of that. I also wanted to explore personal fulfillment in the theatre (which is never guaranteed), disillusionment, friendship, loyalty and betrayal. That's what Red Velvet is about.
—Lolita Chakrabarti

LOLITA CHAKRABARTI

Lolita Chakrabarti came to playwriting later in her extensive, award-winning career as a stage and screen actor.



She was born in June 1969 in Kingston upon Hull—usually abbreviated as Hull—in Yorkshire, England to Bengali Hindu parents from India. She grew up in Birmingham, where her father practiced as an orthopedic surgeon at Selly Oak Hospital.

Chakrabarti was thirteen when she first attended theatre during a school trip to the Midlands Art Centre in her home town of Birmingham. She saw *The Walking Class*, performed by the Birmingham Youth Theatre. For her homework she had to write a review. Adrian Lester, then fourteen, was in the cast. She recalls thinking he was quite good and

giving him a favorable review. Lester would go on to achieve great success in the industry like several other British actors, directors, and producers, including Nicolas Tennant, Andrew Tiernan and Lorna Laidlaw, who started at the Birmingham Youth Theatre. He would also marry Chakrabarti in 1997 and have two daughters, Lila, 16, and Jasmine, 13, with her. Along with Rosa Maggiora and Lester, Lolita runs Lesata Productions www.lesataproductions.co.uk Their short film won Best Short Narrative at the 2012 Pan-African Film Festival in Los Angeles. They are currently in development with their first feature.



Adrian Lester and Lolita Chakrabarti

Chakrabarti graduated from the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA) in 1990. Her theatre acting credits include *The Great Game*, *Afghanistan* for The Tricycle, *Last Seen - Joy* for the Almeida, *Free Outgoing* for the Royal Court and *John Gabriel Borkman* for the Donmar Warehouse. Her acting screen credits include *The Casual Vacancy*, *Jekyll and Hyde*, *My Mad Fat Diary*, *Season 3*, *Vera*, *Outnumbered*, *Hustle*, *Extras Christmas Special*, *Holby City*, *Silent Witness*, *Amnesia*, *William and Mary*, *Fortysomething*, *Bodies*, and *Forgiven*.

As respected as she is as an actor on the London stage, Chakrabarti is now best known in the US for *Red Velvet*. Her debut play as a writer, it

was awarded the *Evening Standard* Charles Wintour Award for Most Promising Playwright 2012; Critics Circle Award for Most Promising Playwright 2012; AWA Award for Arts and Culture 2013; *WhatsOnStage* nominations for London Newcomer of the Year and Best New Play 2012; and Olivier Award nomination of Outstanding Achievement in an Affiliate Theatre 2012). *Red Velvet* premiered at the Tricycle Theatre, London in 2012 where it returned in 2014 before transferring to St. Ann's Warehouse, New York. It has since been seen across the US and in the UK, including at the San Jose Youth Shakespeare at The Historic Hoover Theatre in San Jose from August 12 through August 14, 2016, directed by Bob Rumsby, who directs this production for Jewel.

Chakrabarti's other writing credits include a five-part adaptation of *The Goddess* for Woman's Hour on BBC Radio 4, *Faith, Hope and Blue Charity*, also on BBC Radio 4 and *Last Seen - Joy* for Slung Low and the Almeida.

ABOUT IRA ALDRIDGE

By the time of his death in 1867, Ira Aldridge was not only the first important black actor, but also the most visible black man in Europe in the middle of the nineteenth century".—Bernth Lindfors

In his dressing room in the Paradyz Theatre in Łódź, Poland, a young female journalist imposes upon actor Ira Aldridge, who is preparing to play King Lear as the last stop in a rigorous European tour. It is 1867, and the aging actor is in failing health but allows the journalist to interview him. When she questions why he never returned to the London stage after a two-night engagement in Covent Garden 34 years earlier, he is forced to confront a watershed moment in his long, eminent career.

On March 15, 1833, while playing Othello to his son Charles' Iago, Edmund Kean, an eminent leading actor of his time, collapses on the stage of the Theatre Royal Covent Garden in London. The theater manager, Pierre Laporte, asks his dear friend, Ira Aldridge, who is 26 at the time, to assume Edmund's role. For the last nine years, Aldridge has been touring the provinces of Great Britain, performing leading roles to full houses and high critical acclaim. His appearance in a legitimate West End theater will be the first of his career. It will also be the first for an actor of color.

It is a time of civil unrest in England. A ferocious debate between pro- and anti-slavery factions is about to explode as Parliament gathers the necessary votes to abolish slavery in all British colonies. In the midst of this dissension, Aldridge's performance is given three unanimous, enthusiastic standing ovations. However, his fellow cast members are divided about his playing the role, and critics ignore the quality of his performance. Instead, they mount a vicious, racially motivated attack against him. The ensuing bad publicity closes the show after two performances. Barred from fulfilling his engagement and betrayed by Pierre, Ira must reevaluate the direction of his career.

This provides the story of *Red Velvet*.

Thirty-three people are honored with plaques at the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon, but only one of them, Ira Aldridge, is an African-American. Thanks in great part to Lolita Chakrabarti's meticulously researched play, Ira Aldridge's life and immense contribution to theatre history are now being brought to light and celebrated. Although he was the first black theater manager in the UK and the first black actor to achieve worldwide renown for his Shakespearean roles, he is considered to have been largely ignored by history.

Aldridge was asked to take the post of manager of the Coventry Theatre on February 23, 1828, after impressing the people of the city with his acting during a tour there. When accepting the job, he announced that he "desires only to be judged by his actions and relies on that discrimination and generosity which appreciates endeavor and rewards effort". His wording is eerily similar to that of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in his speech at the March on Washington 135 years later. He spoke then of his desire that his children "will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character".

When Ira began acting in England in 1824 and touring its provinces, the debate over slavery was in full swing. Aldridge added his voice to the cause of abolition by speaking directly to audiences about the injustice of racism and evils of slavery following his stage performances. There had been little interest in abolition in Coventry, but Ira changed that. His season for the Coventry Theatre used melodrama, music and Shakespeare to challenge racist stereotypes. When he left, a crowd of people, influenced by what he had said and done, went to the county hall and petitioned Parliament for the abolition of slavery.

He acted in plays that were pro-abolition and sang and spoke against slavery after his shows. His performances across Europe helped shatter the myth of white supremacy. Many people would come to his performances out of curiosity for the self-named "Negro Tragedian" who dared to perform iconic and revered Shakespearean roles heretofore done only by white men. They left impressed not only by his phenomenal talent, but by his resilience, perseverance and courage. When he began

to tour other countries he still spoke his lines in the original English in which they had been written. Despite the language barrier, audiences were greatly moved by him. His performances conveyed a shared understanding of the human condition that transcended language. Andrea Chalupa, author, screenwriter and co-host of the podcast “Gaslit Nation,” observed that Aldridge’s life tells “a story of why visibility matters, empathy matters, and injustice anywhere is injustice everywhere”.

Many people who suffered oppression, especially those in Eastern Europe, identified with him. As Marshall and Stock write in *Ira Aldridge, The Negro Tragedian*, originally published in 1958, “The attempts to Russify Poland, and the suppression of the revolts against Tsarism, only served to intensify the striving for national cultural expression and to stimulate support for all struggle for freedom. Ira Aldridge represented that struggle, merely by being a Negro working on an equal basis with white colleagues. In addition, as we know, in his interpretations he brought out not only the personal tragedy of Othello, or Shylock, but the social implications as well, and this would be appreciated not only by the Poles, but by the large Jewish community of Łódź”.

Lolita Chakrabarti has written a timeline of Ira’s life and the historical events that surrounded it. I have edited it for those entries most relevant to the text of the play, added some of my own entries, and reprinted it with permission of Samuel French's *Breaking Character Magazine* as a separate document, an addendum to this Guide.



Russian lithograph of Aldridge as Othello

RESOURCES

Ira Aldridge: Performing Shakespeare in Europe, 1852-1855 (Rochester Studies in African History and the Diaspora) by Bernth Lindfors. Kindle Edition. University of Rochester Press, New York, December 15, 2013.

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“The work of Ira Aldridge rediscovered 190 years on is evidence of his battle with prejudice” contributed by Shakespeare’s Globe. *Medium*, Sep 18, 2017



Aldridge in Łódź, Poland, August 1867