



# *Red Velvet*

by  
Lolita Chakrabarti

## Know-the-Show Audience Guide

researched and written by  
the Education Department of  
The Shakespeare Theatre  
of New Jersey





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# About the Playwright

## Lolita Chakrabarti



Lolita Chakrabarti.  
Photo by Alex Foreman

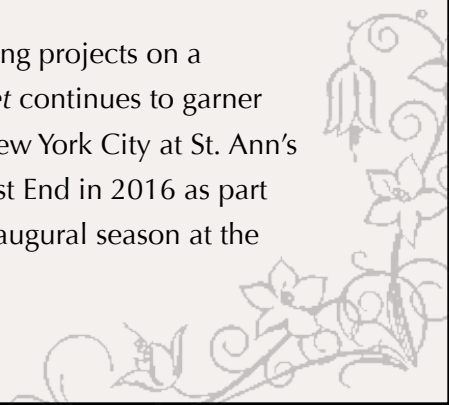
Lolita Chakrabarti was born on June 1st, 1969 in Yorkshire, England. Her first theatrical experience came at the age of thirteen, when she attended the Midland Arts Center's production of *The Walking Class*. Coincidentally, her future husband Adrian Lester, then fourteen years old, was in the show. Chakrabarti's love of theater led her to train at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts. Her theatrical acting career has spanned numerous theaters, including the Tricycle Theatre, Royal Court Theatre, the Young Vic, and

the Chichester Festival. Chakrabarti's acting credits also include roles on television shows such as *Beowulf: Return to the Shieldlands*, *My Mad Fat Diary*, and *Jekyll & Hyde*. In 2010, Chakrabarti and Lester, alongside designer and producer Rosa Maggiora, founded Lesata Productions. Their debut short film *Of Mary* won Best Short Film at the Pan African Film Festival; it also was also shown at film

festivals in Chicago, San Francisco, Toronto, Montreal, and London. Chakrabarti's first major writing credit was the 2006 BBC radio adaptation of Satyajit Ray's film *The Goddess*. In 2009, Chakrabarti wrote and performed in *Last Seen* at the Almeida Theatre in London. *Red Velvet*, which premiered in 2012 at the Tricycle Theatre, was Chakrabarti's breakout writing success.

Chakrabarti was first inspired to write about the life of Ira Aldridge in 1998 when Lester was involved in a reading about Aldridge. Drawn on by Aldridge's remarkable story, Chakrabarti researched, wrote, and rewrote *Red Velvet* over the course of nearly fifteen years. The play finally premiered in 2012 at London's Tricycle Theatre, directed by Indhu Rubasingham and starring Lester as Ira Aldridge. *Red Velvet* was nominated for the Olivier Awards, as well as Best New Play and London Newcomer of the Year through the Whatsonstage Awards in 2013. Chakrabarti also won Best New Playwright from both the Critic's Circle and the London Evening Standard. Lester won Best Actor in the Critic's Circle; he was also nominated for the Whatsonstage Award, Evening Standard Theatre Award, and the Olivier Award for his performance as Aldridge.

Currently, Chakrabarti is developing new writing projects on a commission for the Tricycle Theatre. *Red Velvet* continues to garner success; the play had its American debut in New York City at St. Ann's Warehouse in 2014, and appeared on the West End in 2016 as part of the Kenneth Branagh Theatre Company's inaugural season at the Garrick Theatre.





# The Life of *Ira Aldridge*

Ira Aldridge was an African-American stage actor who rose to international fame performing in Europe in the 19th century. He was born July 24th, 1807 in New York City to Reverend Daniel and Luranah Aldridge. At age thirteen, Aldridge attended the African Free School in New York City, an institution founded by the New York Manumission Society to provide an education to the children of slaves and free people of color in Manhattan. There, he studied astronomy, grammar, geography, mathematics, and writing. Aldridge was also introduced to the theater during this time; he would watch plays from the balcony of the upscale Park Theatre to which he had access only because he was running errands for the actor Henry Wallack. Aldridge began his own theatrical career in the early 1820s, performing with the African Company, an all-black theater company performing for predominantly black audiences, at the African Grove Theatre in NYC. His debut role was as Rolla in *Pizzaro*; he also played Shakespearean roles, including Romeo and Hamlet. Aldridge struggled to find success among mainstream American audiences, and in 1824, he traveled to England, with the help of Henry Wallack for whom he was now working as his dresser. Shortly after arriving in England, Aldridge met his first wife, an English woman named Margaret Gill.

More opportunities for acting work also followed. In 1825, Aldridge played the lead role of Oroonoko in *The Revolt of Surinam* at the Royal Coburg Theatre, a performance which earned him great acclaim from audiences, if not from critics. Aldridge went on to perform at theaters all throughout the British Isles. His repertoire continued to expand and included roles in *The Slaves*, *The Castle Spectre*, *The Padlock*, as well

as Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* and *Othello*. His work earned him the title the "African Roscius," after Roman actor Quintus Roscius Gallus. In 1833, Aldridge got the chance to play Othello at the Theatre Royal Covent Garden, replacing the renowned actor Edmund Kean, who had collapsed on stage days earlier during a performance. Once more, Aldridge proved to be a hit with audiences, but the critical response to the production was fairly brutal, and the show closed after only four performances.

After his hasty expulsion from the London stage, Aldridge returned to the provincial theaters, where he continued to make a name for himself as a distinguished tragedian. Beginning in 1852, Aldridge toured extensively throughout Europe, performing in countries such as Prussia, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Hungary, and Poland. In addition to his Othello, Aldridge was well-known for playing Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*, as well as the title roles in *Richard III* and *King Lear*; all of which he performed in whiteface. Following the death of his wife Margaret in 1864, Aldridge married his mistress, opera singer Amanda von Brandt, with whom he already had four children. Aldridge continued to act until his death at age sixty on August 7th, 1867 while on tour in Łódź, Poland. Though Aldridge's legacy has diminished in modern times, he remains the only African-American to be honored by the Royal Shakespeare Company with a plaque outside the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre at Stratford-upon-Avon. The play *Red Velvet* has stirred up new interest in the ground-breaking and important American artist.



"A Moor" by James Northcote, depicting Ira Aldridge as Othello, ca. 1826.



# Red Velvet

## *A Short Synopsis*

**Please note: Below is a full summary of the play. If you prefer not to spoil to plot, consider skipping this section.**

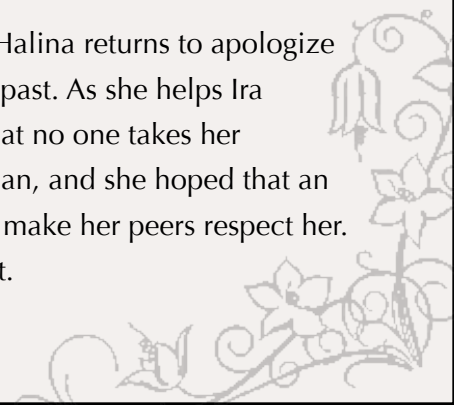
The play opens in a theater dressing room in the town of Łódź, Poland in the year 1867. A young female journalist, Halina, has tricked a stage hand into letting her into the room so she can meet the famous actor Ira Aldridge, who has come to Łódź to perform *King Lear*, in hopes of securing an interview. While Ira is at first displeased by her unanticipated presence in his dressing room, he agrees to grant her an interview. The interview seems to go well, until Halina brings up the topic of Ira's performance as Othello at Covent Garden, over thirty years earlier. She refuses to drop the subject, and Ira throws her out.

The next scene flashes back to the Theatre Royal at Covent Garden in London, in the year 1833. Amidst loud anti-slavery protests outside the theater, the actors of the company anxiously await news about Edmund Kean, the renowned actor starring in their current production of *Othello*, who collapsed onstage during a performance and is feared to be dying. Pierre, the theater manager, assures them that even though they have lost their Othello, the theatre will not go dark. He has arranged for Ira Aldridge, an actor who has previously played Othello to rave reviews, to replace Kean in the title role. When Ira arrives, however, the cast is stunned to discover that he is black. Pierre begins rehearsal, but tensions among the company run high; while some of the actors come

to accept the new Othello, others, including Edmund Kean's son Charles, are appalled by the prospect. Eventually, Charles storms out in anger, leaving the company to perform that evening without him.

Following the show, Ira agonizes over every detail of his performance. His wife, Margaret, comes down to his dressing room to offer him encouragement. Ira promises her that their lives will improve now that he has made it as actor in London; at last, they will be able to settle down, buy a home, and have children. Ellen Tree, the actress playing Desdemona, enters and congratulates Ira on his work. She requests that they rehearse the play's final scene, so that she is prepared for the next performance. Ira and Ellen rehearse, and then share a glass of port in Ira's dressing room. The next morning, the company eagerly reads the day's newspapers, but find them filled with disparaging reviews of the previous night's performance, which all focus on Ira's race. In the wake of the negative press, Pierre regretfully informs Ira that the theatre board has decided that Ira must step down and, even worse, that the theater will now go dark.

The play jumps forward once again to 1867. Halina returns to apologize to Ira, who is now lost in his memories of the past. As she helps Ira prepare to perform as Lear, Halina explains that no one takes her seriously as a journalist because she is a woman, and she hoped that an interview with the famous Ira Aldridge would make her peers respect her. Lights fade as Ira faces the shadows of his past.





# Portrayals of Race in Shakespeare

The Renaissance saw not only an expansion of art and culture in England, but also an expansion of geographical knowledge. As the boundaries of what was considered the known world began to expand through increased exploration, the English were exposed to more non-white and non-Christian cultures in Africa and the Middle East. One such ethnic group was the Moors, a name which refers to peoples of North African Muslim descent. Unable to reconcile the cultural and racial differences, the English cast these peoples as the “other” in popular imagination. Non-white cultures became, therefore, a racial foil against which the English could assert their superiority. For English culture to be the worthier, the “other” must be made the baser. Moors, in particular, were frequently portrayed as lascivious, temperamental, and vindictive. The art and literature of the time echoed these views; even Shakespeare would not have been exempt from such sentiments.

Shakespeare’s portrayal of Moors did, however, become more nuanced as his work progressed. The wicked Moor, Aaron, seen in *Titus Andronicus*, one of Shakespeare’s earliest works, is the epitome of negative perceptions of Moors. He is cunning, brutal, and boastful of his crimes. It is he who drives much of play’s violent action forward. Although Aaron is an intentionally unsympathetic character, he is still somewhat humanized by his need to protect his illegitimate son. By the time Shakespeare was writing *Othello* in 1603, his views of race allowed for a more complex title character. Othello possesses the

honor and virtue necessary to rise to power in Venetian society, and he is a skilled soldier and orator. He recognizes that he is racially different from those around him, but does not believe he is in any way inferior. In addition, while Aaron inspired evil in others, the crimes Othello commits are encouraged by an outside force: his ensign, Iago. The progression in characterization from Aaron to Othello demonstrates a notable shift in the representation for characters of color in Shakespeare’s work.



Ira Aldridge as Othello,  
ca. 1833.



Illustration of Ira Aldridge as Aaron  
the Moor from *Titus Andronicus*,  
ca. 1852.

# Who's Who *in the Play*

CASIMIR - a German stage hand

HALINA WOZNIAK – a young and ambitious Polish journalist

TERENCE – Ira's English valet and dresser

IRA ALDRIDGE – the first black man to play the title role in *The Tragedy of Othello* in London

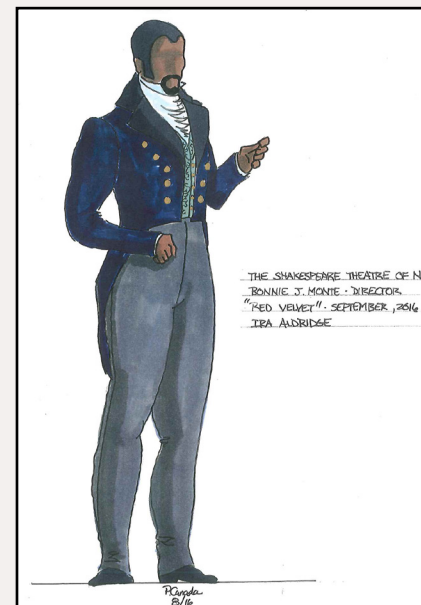
CONNIE – a Jamaican servant at Covent Garden

BETTY LOVELL – a self-absorbed English actress

HENRY FORESTER – a young, progressive English actor

BERNARD WARDE - an older, conservative English actor

CHARLES KEAN – Son of the famous actor Edmund Kean; fiancé to Ellen Tree; also an actor and playing Iago in *Othello*



Costume renderings by Paul Canada for Ira Aldridge and Ellen Tree in the 2016 STNJ production of *Red Velvet*.

ELLEN TREE – a talented and perceptive English actress playing Desdemona in *Othello*; friend to Ira and fiancé to Charles

PIERRE LAPORTE – French manager of the Theatre Royal and friend to Ira

MARGARET ALDRIDGE – an English woman; wife to Ira



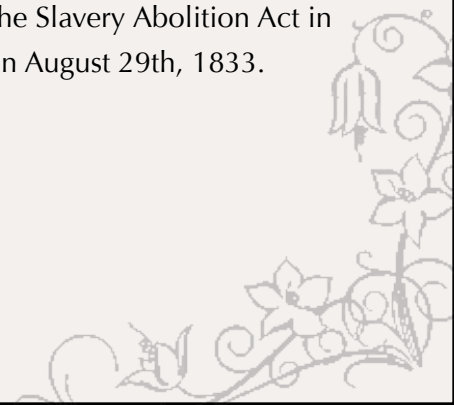
# The British Empire's *Abolition of Slavery*

The British Empire during the 18th century was a vast territory which spanned the globe and included holdings in Asia, Africa, and the Americas. The trade of enslaved peoples from Africa to plantations in the West Indies was a key component of the Empire. However, as cultural and economic reforms began to take root in Great Britain, opposition to the slave trade began to grow.

Abolitionist sentiments steadily gained momentum in Britain during the 1770s. In 1771, a decision in the case *Somerset v. Stewart* by the Court of the King's Bench in England found that slavery was neither established by statute nor supported by common law in England and Wales. The decision, while monumental, did not, however, end slavery in the British Empire. In the early 1780s, religious groups, such as the Quakers, were at the forefront of the abolition movement; activist groups raised the political profile of their cause by distributing anti-slavery petitions and pamphlets. These efforts were spearheaded by prominent Quaker leaders, such as John Woolman and Anthony Benezet. In 1787, the movement to abolish slavery gained significant ground with the foundation of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade, which called for the gradual abolition of slavery in the British Empire. Notable members of the Society included abolitionists Thomas Clarkson and Granville Sharp. The Society began its first mass petition drive in 1788, which resulted in the collection of between 60,000 and 100,000 signatures. Women, who were largely excluded

from political life, also became part of the movement by boycotting the sugar produced on slave plantations in the British West Indies. Although the petitions and boycotts prompted members of Parliament, including famed politician and abolitionist William Wilberforce, to introduce various anti-slavery measures in the following years, all were defeated.

Over the course of time, the influence of the abolitionists continued to grow, and in 1807, parliament passed the Slave Trade Act, which put a stop to the trading of slaves throughout the British Empire. However, the Act did not free those already enslaved, and the prohibition of the slave trade did little to improve the quality of life of slaves in the West Indies. This led to the founding of the Anti-Slavery Society in 1823. This new Society called for improvement of slave conditions, as well as the gradual emancipation of slaves. Between 1828 and 1830, the Anti-Slavery Society sent over 5,000 petitions calling for the emancipation of slaves to Parliament. Impatient with the gradual approach of the Anti-Slavery Society, some members of the group broke off and formed the Agency Committee, which promoted the immediate abolition of slavery, in 1832. Their efforts led to the introduction of The Slavery Abolition Act in Parliament, and the bill was passed into law on August 29th, 1833.







# Acting Styles in the 19th Century

Actors in the early 19th century favored more presentational acting styles than those which can be seen on stages today. During this period, three chief schools of acting influenced the performers of the time: the classical, or “teapot,” style, the romantic style, and the domestic style. Actors employing the “teapot” style would deliver their lines while standing in a dramatic pose, often with one arm placed on the hip and the other extended outwards. One notable practitioner of “teapot” acting was John Phillip Kemble, whose imposing stature and stoic declamation was well-suited to the classical style. In contrast to the daunting Kemble, actors such as Edmund Kean developed their own style of acting, which became known as the romantic style. This style of performance was far more active than the classical style, and emphasized movement and action. Actors of the romantic school of acting were also known for breaking up the monotony of blank verse lines, in favor of a more naturalistic delivery; actor was George Frederick Cooke, for example, was famous for writing out his verse lines in prose form. Finally, there was the domestic school of acting, of which actor William Macready was a proponent. In his performances, Macready was said to have combined elements of the classical and romantic schools, to create a more naturalistic style of acting. The domestic style also greatly influenced the actors of melodrama, a popular theatrical genre of the time.



Edmund Kean  
as Richard III,  
by J.J. Hall



*The Royal Family*  
at Covent Garden  
Theatre, engraving,  
published in London  
11 August 1804  
Victoria and Albert  
Museum, London.



# References *Found in the Play*



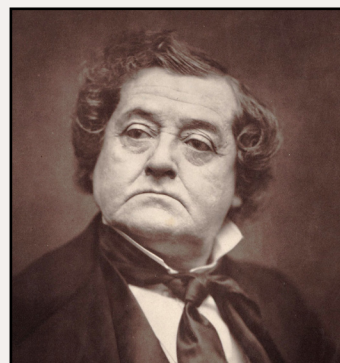
**KAROL SCHEIBLER** (1820-1881) was a German industrialist who made a name for himself manufacturing textiles in Poland. Also an astute businessman, Scheibler's factories netted him enormous profits and helped to usher in a new era of industry in Łódź, Poland.

**THE GARRICK CLUB** (founded 1831) was an exclusive club for gentlemen located in London's West End. Named after eighteenth century actor David Garrick, the club was founded to promote the patronage of the arts, especially theater, and was a place where actors and members of British high society could convene.



**SARAH BAARTMAN** (1789-1815) was a woman of the South African Khoikhoi tribe. In 1810, she came to the attention of a British ship's doctor named William Dunlap, who believed that Baartman's large posterior would make her an object

of fascination for European audiences. She was then taken back to London and displayed as a freak, under the title the "Hottentot Venus," on Piccadilly Circus.



**FRÉDÉRIK LEMAÎTRE** (1800-1876) was a French actor and playwright whose career began in Paris in the 1820s. In 1836, he famously portrayed the then recently-deceased Edmund Kean in a biographical play entitled *Kean* by Alexandre Dumas; Lemaître was said to have lost himself so completely in the role, that he began to drink to excess, much like Kean himself had done.



**JOSEPH GRIMALDI** (1778-1837) was a famous English performer during the Regency era. Grimaldi is credited with expanding the role of the clown in the traditional *pantomimes*, where he became major force at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, and Covent Garden. His

performances were so memorable that eventually his iconic make-up, catch phrases and bits were adopted by other artists, and the role of clown eventually became known as the "Joey". His work is still seen echoed in the work of many clowns today.





# Commentary & Criticism

## THE PLAYWRIGHT ON IRA ALDRIDGE:

“He stood for talent outweighing restrictions of class and race. Someone who refused to accept the cards he was dealt and who reflected the infinite possibilities of an open and fair society.”

Lolita Chakrabarti,  
*Breaking Character Magazine* (2015)

## ON THE POWER OF THEATRE:

“While writing *Red Velvet*, I consciously created a world where the historical dilemmas mirrored the dilemmas of today. I did this because I believe history repeats itself and as we edge forwards we are encumbered by old ideals [...] Theatre is about telling stories that engage, challenge and move.”

Lolita Chakrabarti,  
*Breaking Character Magazine* (2015)

## ON LEADERSHIP IN THEATRE:

“I used to think it was a gentleman’s club ... every single building was run by a man, but that has shifted ... there has been a shift of leadership so diversity has come in.”

Lolita Chakrabarti,  
*The Independent* (2016)

## RED VELVET AND RACE:

“Chakrabarti’s writing is funny and fiery, as the play shoots down fatuous arguments about the ‘artistry’ of playing ‘different’ as racist and elitist [...] a fig leaf for those who are fearful of change.”

Tom Wicker, *TimeOut London* (2016)

## RED VELVET AND HISTORY:

“*Red Velvet* moves beyond a surefire theater-history-buff demographic to make a potent case for how things have and haven’t changed over the centuries.”

David C. Nichols, *The LA Times* (2016)

## THE TIMING OF RED VELVET ON STAGE:

“As the diversity debate sparked by this year’s Oscars shortlist rages and people scrutinise the ignoble (and continuing) history of white actors cast in non-white roles, this revival of Lolita Chakrabarti’s *Red Velvet* – based on real events – comes at just the right moment.”

Tom Wicker, *TimeOut London* (2016)

## ON ALDRIDGE’S FIRE:

“You are also conscious of the sources of the heat that Aldridge gives off in performance. It is compounded of the ego that is an expected part of blazing genius, but also of the anger and frustration of a supremely gifted man who, like Othello, has been repeatedly thwarted because his skin is the color it is.”

Ben Brantley, *The New York Times* (2014)

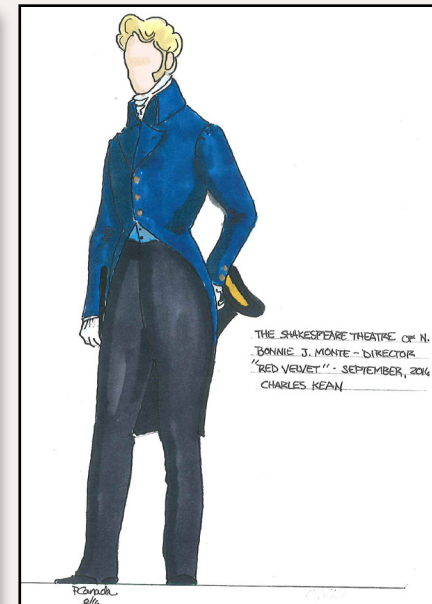
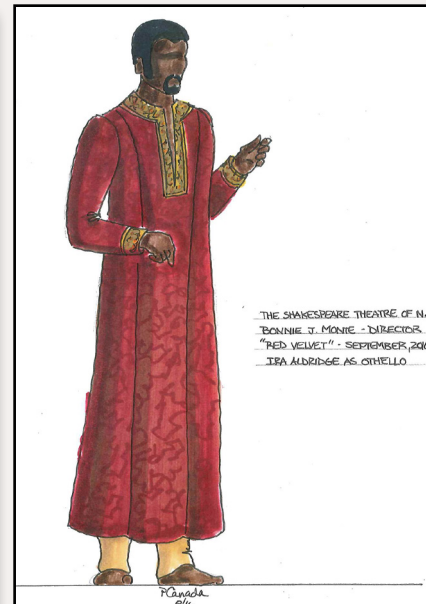
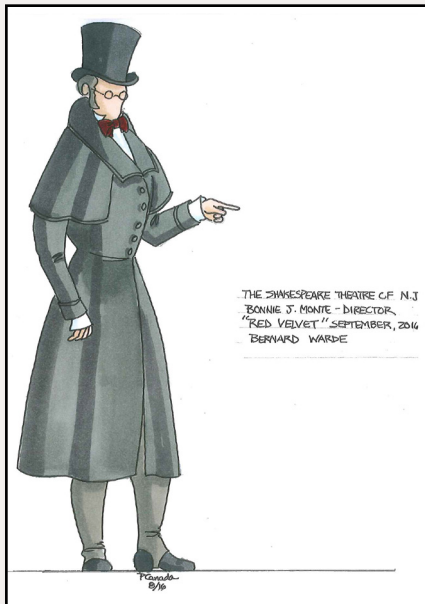


# In This Production

Scenic model depicting the scenic design by Bethany Wampol for the 2016 STNJ production of *Red Velvet*.



Costume renderings for the 2016 STNJ production of *Red Velvet* by Paul Canada. From Left: Bernard, Pierre, Ira as "Othello", and Charles.





## Explore Online

Learn more about Ira Aldridge and his influence in African American history

<http://www.blackpast.org/aah/aldridge-ira-1807-1867>

Read PBS's essays on race and religion in Shakespeare  
[http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/masterpiece/othello/tg\\_race.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/masterpiece/othello/tg_race.html)

Read an interview with Lolita Chakrabarti on her acting and writing experience

<https://www.thestage.co.uk/features/interviews/2016/lolita-chakrabarti-acting-is-my-first-love-and-writing-fits-around-it/>

Explore the British abolitionist campaign and other nonviolent actions  
<http://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/content/british-citizens-campaign-abolition-slave-trade-1787-1807>

Follow the British Anti-Slavery movement  
[http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/empire\\_seapower/antislavery\\_01.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/empire_seapower/antislavery_01.shtml)





# Sources & Further Reading

“Adrian Lester on Ira Aldridge: ‘He was a pioneer for black actors’” by Kate Kellaway

*Black Face, Maligned Race: The Representation of Blacks in English Drama from Shakespeare to Southerne* by Anthony Gerard Barthelemy

“Channeling a Breaker of Barriers: Remembering Ira Aldridge, a 19th-Century Black Actor” by Roslyn Sulcas

*Colorblind Shakespeare: New Perspectives on Race and Performance* edited by Ayanna Thompson

“Finding Ira Aldridge” by Lolita Chakrabarti

“Ira Aldridge at Covent Garden, April 1833” by Bernth Lindfors

*Ira Aldridge: The African Roscius* by Bernth Lindfors

*Ira Aldridge: The Vagabond Years* by Bernth Lindfors

“ ‘Mislike Me Not for My Complexion...’: Ira Aldridge in White Face” by Bernth Lindfors

“Players and Painted Stage: Nineteenth Century Acting” by Alan S. Downer

“Representation of Race in Four Shakespearean Plays: *Titus Andronicus, Othello, Antony and Cleopatra, The Merchant of Venice*” by Uddalak Dutta

*Shakespeare in Sable: A History of Black Shakespearean Actors* by Erroll Hill

*Speak of Me As I Am: The Story of Ira Aldridge* by Owen Mortimer

