

Bright Sheng Dimmed

October 27, 2021

Resolved: pedagogic enthusiasm plus naivety about the likely reactions of the “safe space” brigade shouldn’t be a burning-at-the-stake kind of offense.

Or any kind of firing offense.

Bright Sheng, University of Michigan professor of composition and survivor of China’s Cultural Revolution, showed his class the 1965 movie “Othello,” which stars Laurence Olivier. Olivier was in blackface.



Laurence Olivier as Othello

Sheng has offered an abject apology, saying, in part, that “time has changed, and I made a mistake in showing the film, and I am very sorry.”

Sheng failed to give a trigger warning so that safe-space aficionados could either gird their loins or skip the class.

Uh oh.

As *Reason* magazine’s Robby Soave notes, Olivier’s use of blackface “was controversial even at the time.”

Given the sub-venial nature of the sin, what might any sane-but-offended student have done? Go up after class and say, “Gee, Professor Sheng, love your class, but shouldn’t you have made some preparatory comment about the blackface? Well, have a nice day.”

But no. It’s got to be a wailing reenactment of Edvard Munch’s painting *The Scream*, with rabid students (and others) demanding Sheng be booted. No attention to context, no proportionality, no common sense.

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Was the mob demanding his ouster appeased? No. The mob never is.

The professor has for now stopped teaching his class, and the university is “investigating.”

The investigation actually needed, alas, will not be done. What administrators mist discover is a backbone.

This is Common Sense. I’m Paul Jacob.