



by William Shakespeare

Othello



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directions...

"This is the greatest of Shakespeare's love stories," Braham Murray, the director, observes. "It's the love of opposites, of black and white, of night and day, of sun and moon, of ying and yang." This fundamental starting point for his production at the Royal Exchange Theatre is movingly accentuated when, at the end of the play, the love is destroyed by Desdemona's murder and Othello grieves **"Methinks it now should be a huge eclipse / Of sun and moon, and th'affrighted globe / Should yawn at alteration."** ACT 5 SCENE 2



Braham Murray

Braham Murray has waited thirty years to direct this play ever since staging the musical rock version *Catch My Soul*. His passion for the play has never dwindled, so thirty years seems a long time to linger. He explains this as a matter of waiting to find the right cast. Just as a director might have a strong notion of who should play Hamlet and wait to find the right actor, the strength and complexity of the central characters in *Othello* demanded the same patience. As he observes, the project is made more difficult by needing to find two actors, not just one, of the right quality for the roles but who could also work together with empathy and creativity. The moment arrived in seeing Paterson Joseph in a production and knowing that he had found Othello. With excitement, he also recognised Iago in Andy Serkis. What was even more gratifying for the director was that Paterson and Andy knew one another and had worked together in the past; the essential chemistry between actors had already begun.

"Iago and Othello are one person," he observes. "They are the male psyche but where Othello moves upwards, Iago moves downwards." Othello celebrates his being in his love and union with Desdemona, Iago plummets into the misery of having Desdemona come between him and his friend Othello. Braham suggests that this strand in the play makes it particularly relevant for a modern audience. "This is a world where women have become more comfortable in recognising and adapting to the male elements in themselves whereas men are generally frightened of recognising or acknowledging femininity in themselves." Desdemona offers the opposites of intuition, of soul and emotional intelligence in contrast to Othello's rigid rationality and military preciseness.

Making the play relevant for us as a modern audience has led the director to place the play in a neutral time setting. The costume and stage designs are deliberately vague about the time of the action. He is convinced that the Royal Exchange Theatre is the best space to stage Shakespeare and he is intent on simplicity in the style of the production. "The play is about focusing on people. I don't want any intervention between the actors and the audience. The period is contemporary without being now. Everyone should recognise the people and not be able to distance themselves and think of Shakespeare as just history. I want immediacy without gimmickry. There should not be any sense of distance." As he observes, the design task is greatly helped by the fact that this is a military play and the line and cut of uniform, the bearing and poise of soldiers has its own sense of timelessness and the traditions have carried through with little radical change.



The close proximity of audience to actor in the Royal Exchange Theatre makes for a very direct relationship. The emotion and the events are not seen or felt at some distance and Braham sees this as essential to the experience of understanding the love story and the tragedy of the fact that it is destroyed by the world around the lovers. The love, Braham explains, is a threat to the male camaraderie and bonding that is so essential to a soldier's life. Iago is demoted in the pecking order of Othello's relationships and so, distraught, he sets out to destroy the cause of that pain - Desdemona.

There is a challenge in the play, too, for Desdemona and Emilia. Where Desdemona goes to her death almost without protest, Emilia turns on her love to protect herself. There is a question here of expectations of women's behaviours. We could see Desdemona as being inert in failing to defend herself but Braham suggests there is, in this, a quality of supreme love, of a love that is beyond any kind of retaliation. However, he also suggests that "love has a potential for evil, because it brings with it blindness".

The love story is central to Braham Murray's approach to directing this play. "You cannot tell this story without acknowledging Othello's colour and race, it is what makes him vulnerable. He is an outsider. But this is not what Shakespeare is writing about. The crux of this play is the love between opposites which is why Othello is black and Desdemona is white."

IAGO
A SERKIS. +
(PROTESTING JARK
INGRAM)

why not?

- Discuss why the director Braham Murray has had to wait so long to find the quality of the actors he wanted for the roles of Othello and Iago. If you have already seen the production, discuss what aspects of the acting styles of Paterson Joseph and Andy Serkis might have appealed to the director.
- Discuss the roles of the two women, Desdemona and Emilia, in the play and explore the way in which they handle the events that are constructed around them by the plotting of Iago and the involvement of other characters. Do you agree with the director's suggestions that true love is beyond retaliation but can also blind you to reality?
- Improvise a scene between Desdemona and Othello where Desdemona manages to convince Othello of her innocence. What different qualities will Desdemona have to show in her relationship with her husband? How might Othello respond to uncovering how stupid he has been in believing Iago? What might Othello now do having established the truth?

ideas, themes & prejudices...

In exploring a play, particularly one written in quite another era from our own, we often come across points of view or ideas that are quite alien to how we see the world or the values that we hold. Sometimes this centres on issues of identity; of gender and of race. In much of our everyday life, we assume some level of equality between people, even if this is not always practiced with great sensitivity; there are still those occasions when we identify sexist and racist behaviour in the things that happen around us.

In considering Shakespeare's plays, there are critics who object to *The Taming of the Shrew* on the basis that Kate's feisty identity is eventually disciplined and owned by a man. Similarly, Shylock, the merchant from *The Merchant of Venice*, can feel like a stereotyped and uncomfortable representation of someone from a Jewish culture. From time to time, people have debated similar perspectives on *Othello* and the way in which black people might be seen or represented. However, we do need to be careful in making such judgements. A play that explores sexist or racist attitudes does not necessarily fall into the trap of agreeing with the points of view that the characters put across.

Certainly, the play *Othello* occasionally shows the Venetian men as being suspicious and prejudiced about the Moorish man they find in their midst. The bigotry ranges from obvious comments made by the men about Othello through to Iago's twisted plotting and devious manipulation of this man whom he feels betrayed by.

Early in the play we are confronted by descriptions and judgements that highlight how Othello confronts their perceptions of people and life in Venice. Roderigo parodies Othello's appearance by assuming that difference in appearance is worthy of a slight when he says **"What a full fortune does the thick lips owe..."** ACT 1 SCENE 1 For Iago, there is possibly a difficulty in accepting a sexual relationship between a black man and a white woman. However, as the director of the Royal Exchange production suggests, it is more that Iago is deeply hurt by the way in which his deep friendship with Othello is disrupted by the presence of Desdemona – the deep love between the man and the woman upsets the bond between the two men. It is a bond so strong that both Othello and Iago speak of their love for one another. Nonetheless, it is racism that becomes a weapon for the wounded Iago. Speaking to Brabantio, Iago jibes **"Even now, very now, an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe."** ACT 1 SCENE 1 Similarly, Roderigo cannot accept tenderness or love in the relationship between Othello and Desdemona and describes their physical contact as **"the gross clasps of a lascivious moor"**.

ACT 1 SCENE 1

The inability of some of the play's characters to accept the love between these two as something mutual and meaningful becomes a tangle of viciousness that leads to the tragedy of distrust and Desdemona's death. The love between Desdemona and Othello is described by Braham Murray, the director of this production, as the most important of Shakespeare's love matches. Yet Brabantio, on hearing the rumour of Desdemona's elopement, sees it as **"treason of the blood"** ACT 1 SCENE 1 The love between Othello and Desdemona seems to confront deep fears in those around them.



Later, in confronting Othello, Brabantio speaks of his daughter, Desdemona, as running **"from her guardage to the sooty bosom / Of such a thing as thou..."** ACT 1 SCENE 2 Here, Othello does not even qualify as human but as a thing. By contrast, Desdemona is a daughter he describes as a **"delicate youth"**. Brabantio is unable to accept that Desdemona has taken her course of action through love but because of **"foul charms...drugs or minerals..."** administered by Othello. He terms the events as being **"against all rules of nature"**, the result of practices of **"cunning hell"**. ACT 1 SCENE 2

The play sets up a vicious set of attitudes towards Othello but there are other characters such as the Duke of Venice who recognise this man's greatness. Othello is an accomplished military man, the governor of Cyprus and a poet. He is a man who perceives his place in the world as ordained by some higher order. His success and his presence provokes jealousy in others. Iago, with little integrity, warns Othello to **"...beware my Lord, of jealousy, / It is the green-ey'd Monster, which doth mock / The meat it feeds on..."**. ACT 3 SCENE 3

Jealousy colours many of the relationships within the play and feeds Othello's desperate sense of fury in imagining or believing Desdemona's betrayal of their love. Iago's jealousy consumes him and he manoeuvres to hurt the man whom he too loves and to remove the person he imagines to have come between their friendship. There is fear here too, fear of the disruption that the women (Desdemona and Emilia) bring to a society where men are the dominant voices. This is a military world where male bonding is intense and tangible. Some commentators on the play push this feature so far as to suggest that there is an element of homosexuality in Iago's agonised friendship with Othello.

In the Royal Exchange production, the director Braham Murray sees Shakespeare's play as exploring many of these issues. However, much more centrally, he observes that this is a play crucially and absolutely about love. It is the love of opposites, of black and white, of night and day, of sun and moon. It is a marriage of great opposites, a love of great passion that cannot survive because the society around Othello and Desdemona cannot accept or come to terms with the union and so the destruction of the lovers and the love is inevitable.

why not ?

- Discuss the themes and issues that arise in the play and, in particular, if you have seen the play at the Royal Exchange Theatre, think about the way in which the production treats the relationships between the men and between the men and women. Do these issues still have relevance in our society today? Do we still encounter suspicions about difference in people based on race? Do male friendships sometimes have a sense of being exclusive and more important than the relationships between men and women?
- As a group, improvise a scene from your own social world where jealousy prompts people to manipulate situations to sow doubt in others' minds, to undermine trust and affection or, even, to break up a relationship or a group of friends.
- Write a letter from Iago to Othello where he tries to honestly explain his feelings and why he is behaving in the way he does. Try to shape this letter so that the ideas and explanations are in keeping with his character. Before beginning the letter you might like to make a quick list of Iago's qualities. What does he mean when he says "In following him (Othello), I follow but myself. / Heaven is my judge, not I for love and duty, / But seeming to, for my peculiar end....I am not what I am." ACT 1 SCENE 1



looking for a murderer

Paterson Joseph



"Oh where do I begin? By finding the murderer in me!" Paterson Joseph laughs.

"Actually, that's quite serious. That's a central part of the

task for me as an actor playing Othello. I have to search for that capability to be jealous. The whole point of Othello's existence is that his love for Desdemona is out of the ordinary. It is a higher love. So when he believes in the betrayal his disappointment is unbalanced. That's where his rage come from."

The question then is, how does Paterson make the connection between himself and find behaviours that might lend themselves to shaping the man he is playing? "I suppose," he says, "it is that I can be quite rigid. I have a set of beliefs, a mindset of how the world ought to be. Then when the world isn't like that I am disappointed or angry. That's not unlike the way Othello invests his life in loving Desdemona. She is his world and when that relationship seems to have crumbled, so too does his world."

Paterson expands on the idea of the rigidity or the way in which using a structure to shape your thinking can make you inflexible or vulnerable, "There is a problem when you are legalistic and expect laws to shape the world. You can't then cope with things that are irrational or intuitive. Emotional responses quite often undermine laws. Rules rule out being able to improvise or be creative. Othello finds himself in that situation."

Asked whether there are other aspects of himself that he can find in Othello, he observes, "There's a bit of immaturity in me...a sort of incompleteness and that's about not quite trusting the sensitive or the intuitive or the feminine in me...Othello is very caught up in a male world that is rigid and exists by rules. He's honourable, though, and as a soldier he's not so much a war-monger as a peacemaker. Yes he kills, but he kills for what he believes to be the greater good."

When Paterson begins to work on a role he follows a pattern of intensive reading of the script, taking note of what the character says and does and everything that is said about him. The two questions that persistently arise for him are "what sort of person does that?" and "what would I do in that position?". The essential task for him as an actor is to move himself into a position where he is not demonstrating the character but that "...it comes out of me, I think his thoughts".

There's a particular challenge for this aspect of his work as an actor when he plays in the Royal Exchange Theatre. "I love this space but you have to understand that it is not a small space but

it is an intimate space. The task is to hit the rafters without bombarding the audience sitting very close to you. I think it's one of the most liberating theatres for any actor to work in."

Paterson expands his thoughts about the theatre to include the company who work here; he has little time for actors who see themselves as stars or a different species. "I really like the company here. Everyone involved in making theatre whether they are technical, administrators, actors or whatever, rub shoulders and speak to one another. You get a really strong sense of everyone working together rather than there being any hierarchy and the actors being tucked away as something precious."



The last time Paterson Joseph appeared at the Royal Exchange Theatre it was to play Tshembe Matoseh in *Les Blancs*. This was a play that examined the relationships between black and white people in colonial Africa. Here he is again and in a play that also explores some aspects of race and colour. Musing on this he said, "I never wanted to play Othello. I always thought Iago was a more interesting villain. And I always resisted. Whenever people said I ought to play Othello, I wondered why they didn't ask me whether I'd like to play Hamlet. I was wrong. Arrogant even."

Othello is an amazing character. You have this man who is calm in the face of danger, who has the ability despite his being an outsider to become a general and then a governor. He is a diplomat, a soldier, a warrior and a poet. And then he becomes a beast. That's some challenge."

why not?

- Choose your own role from the play and make a list of the things they do and say that give us clues about their character. Try and establish what parts of yourself can make links or help you to feel the way that the character does.
- Work with a partner on a dialogue from *Othello* and identify the feelings and thoughts behind each line. What is the difference in performance between demonstrating and having it "come from you" that Paterson describes?
- Discuss why it is that some groups of people or occupations become celebrities and are treated differently. Why do you think Paterson dislikes this aspect of being an actor?

if music be the food of love...

Whilst we know that in the time of the playwright's life, Shakespeare's plays were accompanied by music, we have no idea what it sounded like. This is largely because the musicians were rarely able to use notation and so no records were kept. This is both disappointing for our historical knowledge and liberating for modern productions. Composers and musicians working on a contemporary production are not constrained by any loyalty to a sense of the past. Moreover, of course, Shakespeare's plays may be set in any period across time and in any place and this should influence the style of music that accompanies the play.

This production of *Othello* is set in no particular period although it keeps to a Mediterranean setting. Chris Monks has been working on the music for two songs within the play. His starting point was to go back to listening to his vast collection of world music, to embed the sounds of the Mediterranean folk and classical music in his head.

However, as Chris says, "I can't just go away and write the music. I am part of a team. Just like the designers of costumes, set and lighting, I need to be in sympathy with the style and thrust of the production. I can't just go away and do my own thing... it has to be in sympathy with the overall feel of the piece."

Chris is also adamant that the music ought to be a performance and part of the theatricality that the audience shares. "I hate musicians being closed in a pit or a box and being divorced from the action...I want them to be there as part of the action." This sometimes means a challenge for him as the composer because not only has he to find musicians who are happy to work in the musical idiom of the production, they have to be happy to be part of the production. "I have recently been working on a play that really demanded a gypsy band...you have no idea how difficult it is to find people who have this style of music in their repertoire," he observes.

Setting the two songs to music also means needing to work closely with the actors who have to sing them. "There's no point working theoretically. If the actor cannot sing it or feels uncomfortable, it just won't work. If the director doesn't like the flavour of the piece, it just won't be used. The director needs to hear what's happening in my head...I'll always play bits of demo tapes so they agree before I start working."

There's also the crucial need to go back to the text. There are often clues written in by the playwright that trigger a composer's thinking. In considering Desdemona's song in Act 4 Scene 3, Chris noted that she had remembered her childhood maid, Barbary, singing these words. The name Barbary seemed to Chris to signal a North African woman; it felt quite possible that a wealthy Venetian family in the times of the Venetian Empire might employ someone from abroad to service them. A specific style of music came to mind and North African sounds began to travel through the composer's head.

Taking the melodies and working with the actress became the next task. As Chris said, "It's like trying on the costume. Does it fit, is the style right? It has to fit perfectly and it has to have resonance for the person involved." The accompaniment written, the project is not over. In the context of the scene as the play goes through rehearsal, there might be changes to be made. The text of the play is not enough – the composer has to work with the actual production.

"I'll still be here for the previews," says Chris Monks. There is a tangible sense of the composer being totally part of a team and looking for the highest standards for the music and this moment of theatre.

*The poor soul sat sighing by a sycamore tree,
Sing all a green willow:
Her hand on her bosom, her head on her knee,
Sing willow, willow, willow:
The fresh streams ran by her, and murmur'd her moans;
Sing willow, willow, willow;
Her salt tears fell from her, and soften'd the stones;
Sing willow, willow, willow;
Let nobody balme him, his scorn I approve.
I call'd my love false love; but what said he then?
Sing willow, willow, willow:
If I court mo women, you'll couch with mo men!*

Desdemona's song ACT 4 SCENE 3

why not?

- Imagine quite a different setting and period of time for *Othello* and find your own style of music for the setting of Desdemona's song. Keep notes of all your initial thoughts and ideas and then offer a detailed account of what music you might use and the effect that you would want to create for your audience.
- Look closely at the script of *Othello* and plan how you might use music to add atmosphere or a sense of drama to particular scenes. Keep notes about where you would use music and what style the music might take.
- As a group choose a scene from *Othello* to act out. When you feel you have the style and mood that is right for the scene, find recorded music that fits your intentions. Try acting out your scene with the accompanying music for the moments where you feel it is relevant. What effect does it have on the quality of your scene?

reviewing the action...

Theatre audiences and theatre companies alike often rely on press coverage and reviews to arouse interest and inform people about the style and quality of a production. As Peter Brook, the theatre practitioner, observes, it is often the case that people bring to the theatre a preconception of what a play ought to be like in production. In so doing they miss the excitement of what is actually on the stage and find only disappointment in their mind's eye of how the play ought to have been.

Theatre reviews can often reveal just this frame of mind – the expressed opinions reflect the writer's beliefs and interests rather than being open to considering a new point of view or a different approach to staging.

The character of Othello seems to be particularly prone to preconceptions. As Braham Murray, the director of this production observes, there seem to be two points of view as to how this man is realised on the stage – on the one hand there is an idea that he ought to be sophisticated and distinguished and on the other that Othello ought to be a wild and animal-like individual. There are, of course, both strands in this character. He is a masculine, ice cold and controlled man who never slips to anger until his armour is pierced by jealousy. And then he becomes insane.

why not ?

- Discuss the excerpts of reviews on this page. How much do they tell you about the production? Are they useful in informing you about the quality of the production or aspects of acting and staging?
- Compare and consider the reviews for this production of *Othello*. How much do you agree with what the writers have written? Are there strong similarities or differences between the reviews? Do you think that the reviews offer the reader and audience a good picture of the production?
- Write your own review of this production of *Othello*. Use a particular aspect of the production as your central theme for your discussion. For example you might consider how the lighting enhanced the action and give specific examples where you describe both the action on stage and the way that the lighting created mood or constructed an effect.

Paul Robeson / Peggy Ashcroft Production 1930

Paul Robeson plays opposite Peggy Ashcroft in the London production. They kiss and embrace several times. "People objecting to my kissing Miss Ashcroft," he said, "must realise that she is supposed to be my wife... They certainly wouldn't stand in America for the kissing and for the scene in which I use Miss Ashcroft roughly. I wouldn't care to play those scenes in some parts of the United States. The audience might become very dangerous."

The Daily Home News May 1930

Orson Welles Production 1951

The set produced some pretty effects but the device of drop scenes with a curtain half-drawn was not effective, while the noise of preparations going forward behind the shrouded half of the stage was thoroughly distracting.

Theatre World December 1951

Jude Kelly production with Patrick Stewart as Othello 1995-6

What makes this "Othello" such a winning production, however, does not have nearly as much to do with the fearless daring of director Jude Kelly's mission as it does with the succulent dramatic instincts of a few of its main actors, most notably Mr. Stewart, under Ms. Kelly's spirited direction. Stewart's Othello is a brilliant study in how to combine majestic force with sensitive beauty, a multi-octave range of emotions and postures that he plays with the aplomb of a concert violinist, using his unusual vocal power to sweep us along...

Richard Gist Towson University November 1998

Asylum Theatre Company production at the Riverside Studios London 1999

Richard Benn's diminutive, shaven-headed Moor is by and large a cool customer. He occasionally explodes, most notably on "Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore", but his growing jealousy seems to fill his veins with ice rather than fire; not only is he quite composed throughout his murder of Desdemona, but his humiliation of her before the visiting magnificoes seems a moment of deliberate sadism rather than blind fury...

Financial Times February 1999

RSC Production 1999 - 2000

Othellos, like policemen, seem to get younger and younger. In Michael Attenborough's extremely fresh and involving new mainstage production, set in the early 20th century, the Moor of Venice is played by a bearded, shaven-headed Ray Fearon. He is an actor who, only a couple of seasons back, made a big impression with his charismatic Romeo. And therein lies the rub... the painful impact of the play is blunted if you level the age gap between Othello and Desdemona...

The Independent January 2000

In an ideal world Iago's envy finds its foil in Othello's jealousy: they should... be two interdependent figures. But, although Ray Fearon is a perfectly capable Othello, he lacks seniority and weight...

The Guardian January 2000

This production of Othello is designed by Johanna Bryant. Johanna's sketches appear throughout this pack and are reproduced with her kind permission.

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