

TNT BRITAIN

Othello

by W. Shakespeare

DIRECTOR'S NOTES
(BY PAUL STEBBINGS)



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*"My life and education both do learn me
How to respect you." (Desdemona)*

Director's Notes

Introduction

OTHELLO was written by Shakespeare at the height of his powers. Its profound analysis of the human condition is matched by its astonishing poetry and a clarity of plot that is often missing in his other major works.

Our own production explores the dark heart of the play. Too often the play is distorted by imposing themes and ideas that Shakespeare had never heard of – how for example, can this be a play about racism when Othello is the chief general of the most powerful nation in the Mediterranean?

Othello is an outsider and is the butt of cruel mockery for his colour from characters we (the audience) despise. But he is more an exotic outsider than a victim of prejudice. The ordinary soldiers are delighted that he is their governor and commander. So it is better to see this theme as simply one among many in the extraordinary play. How can it be set in, or the behaviour of its characters explained by, a barrack room culture when there were no standing armies until 100 years after Shakespeare's death? How can the play fascinate a modern audience if it is simply about a very evil man destroying love and trust? So what is OTHELLO about?



*"But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve
For daws to peck at: I am not what I am." (Iago, Act 1 Scene 1)*

Director's Notes

Sin and Religion

It is in my view not so much about evil as sin. These two things are different. Too many interpretations give all responsibility for the tragedy to Iago. It seems to me that Iago simply preys on the weakness and sin of those around him. Sin may be unfashionable today but it underpins Shakespeare's view of life. Sin is something Shakespeare would define as breaking the ten commandments but also as the Seven Deadly Sins (so tellingly dramatised by Marlowe in his *DR FAUSTUS*). In which case Othello's anger and pride, Roderigo's lust, Cassio's gluttony and sensual excess and even Desdemona's failure to honour and obey her father are all recognisable sins. Add to this the death wishes and suicide that haunt the end of the play and we see a catalogue of human frailty for Iago to exploit. Iago himself is part of long line of demonic characters that can be traced through the devils of the Medieval Mystery plays, through Richard the Third to Marlowe's Mephistopheles.

It is clear that Shakespeare's own theatrical education was within this world of Religious drama – all he could have seen while growing up in rural England. Iago is a type of devil, he calls repeatedly on Hell and demonic imagery, and – most significantly of all Shakespeare's villains he is the only one to be taken away to be tortured rather than killed. This is surely an image of Hell. So Iago is both a devil and a human – damned and damning. He is after Othello's soul and he gets it. Othello is doubled damned as a murderer and suicide. Shakespeare's other villains such as Macbeth or Richard the Third or even Edmund are after power and wealth. Not so Iago – he stands to gain nothing more than a purse or two from Roderigo – his motives for revenge are rather weak (does anyone believe that Othello slept with Emilia?) – revenge is not enough as a motivation – it may be there but it is not dominant, not enough to drive Iago to such extremes. Rather Iago revels in his role as devil, relishing the process of damning Othello, and caught in the dizzy whirl of plot and plan he loses all sight even of his own advantage – killing Desdemona, Roderigo and almost murdering Cassio because he cannot stop himself. None of which would work were he not surrounded by folly and human frailty.

Director's Notes

Lover, Soldier or Warrior?

Othello is, as he states, a soldier who knew nothing else than military life from the age of seven. He is a curious lover, unmarried at an age and rank where marriage would be expected. He falls for the very forward Desdemona and is amazed that she loves him for his bravery and suffering. He cannot believe his good fortune – so he does not. He declares he will die with happiness when she greets him in Cyprus because he cannot imagine this can continue. As his world unravels and suspicions mount he almost immediately abandons the image of himself as lover and becomes the soldier – this is his disaster.

His military qualities are of no use, manly decisiveness, trust in male comrades and violence itself are the worst tools with which to handle Iago's evil schemes. Not once does he repay the trust that love demands and talk openly to Desdemona about Iago's accusation. His imagery is all military and he kills himself recalling his killing of another warrior. The Venetian senate knows that Othello is no peace time governor and strip him of his command in Cyprus when the Turkish fleet is sunk by the storm. They are right. Othello is nothing without a war. Desdemona might soften this soldier – but does she want to? Is she not part of the military fantasy, does she not feed it? She insists on coming to the war zone with him, she is hailed as "my woman warrior" by Othello when he lands to take command. She involves herself in his military decisions (reinstating Cassio), she herself talks of death as something thrilling. When she should be helping her new husband to be the lover not the warrior she talks only of his business, which is none of her business – the reinstatement of the foolish drunken whore chasing Cassio as Othello's second in command. This folly links to the final theme which Shakespeare spins so skilfully into the web of the plot, that of man versus beast.

*"I kissed thee ere I killed thee: no way but this,
Killing myself, to die upon a kiss." (Othello, Act 5 Scene 2)*

Director's Notes

Conclusion

The characters constantly deny their humanity, human sexuality becomes disgusting and bestial from the start – the beast with two backs or the black ram tupping the white ewe – later Othello constantly refers to Toad like sexuality – a horrible image of reptilian slime. How can Desdemona's passion for Othello survive such degradation? And it is not just love that suffers but the whole moral universe is turned upside down when humans are reduced to animals – the poetry dances between images of hell and vile animals. A modern audience sees in this a denial of humanity but in Shakespeare's time it was also a clear statement of damnation – since an animal has no soul.

In this, Emilia is a key counterbalance. Yes, she makes a foolish decision to take Desdemona's handkerchief and not tell her mistress of the deed. But this is a failing for love – forgivable behaviour for a dutiful wife who wishes to rekindle her husbands (clearly lost) affection. After this failing her gradual ascent to heroism is deeply moving. She redeems humanity and affirms its superiority to the beast. None of this analysis denies the humanity of the magnetic characters who inhabit the play. Iago, Othello and Desdemona all have free will and make choices – usually terrible choices.

OTHELLO highlights and exposes those terrible moments when evil is offered and accepted. What the production proposes is that these moments of fatal choice are part of a cycle of temptation, sin and damnation.



Quiz for students can be found in our website:
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Director's Notes

Ideas for OTHELLO 2020

Since writing the director's notes from 2010 that I attach, I have worked continuously on Shakespeare's plays. So, I have some new ideas. One point is to wonder why Iago has more lines than any other character in Shakespeare? (A good pub quiz winner that one).

It is not enough to say that he needs to enable the plot. My suggestion is that Iago is a mirror image of Hamlet, he is trying to understand the world and act upon that understanding. The difference being that he does so not to rectify evil (revenge) but to expose evil by manifesting it. This is where we go back to the idea of the Vice from late medieval theatre. A Vice is different from a Devil, because a Devil is outside of us trying to tempt us, but a Vice is part of us. Jealousy is one of the cardinal seven deadly sins. Iago both is jealousy and grows jealousy in others (hence the gardening images). One of the most curious and important examples of this is his idea that the Moor has had sex with Emilia, his wife – obviously nonsense but something with which he wants to lash himself, to give him imagined motives for jealousy. Of course, he is right to be jealous of Cassio. Iago is overlooked, but again we have no indication of the virtues that might make him deserve Cassio's position.

Iago's plot is suicidal, it collapses if almost anyone does anything other than he intends or hopes. If the men trusted Emilia or Desdemona the plot would fail. So, Iago is like Hamlet "Taking arms against a sea of troubles, and by opposing end them". Iago is building a house of cards, one breath and it collapses, and he revels in the intricacy and elegance of this fragile design while never truly believing it will come off successfully.



Director's Notes

Ideas for OTHELLO 2020

But what possible concrete success will Iago have? There is no suggestion that he will be given charge of Cyprus even when Ludovico arrives, nor does Othello ever mention that his trust in “honest Iago” will result in promotion. Besides, with Othello’s suicide (which is a probable result of his plan) loses him the one senior figure who can promote him. So, he stands neither to gain Desdemona (as Richard III gains Lady Anne) nor to gain more wealth than he has already managed to extract from Roderigo. So, the only possible motive for Iago’s grand conspiracy is the conspiracy itself, the virtuoso way in which he builds his house of cards. This must have a meaning and in finding that meaning, we find why Shakespeare gave Iago so many lines.

Cassio and Roderigo can also be viewed as frail humans subject to Vice, Roderigo hardly feels as if he lusts after Desdemona, I think his deadly sin is to covet her. He seems to want her simply because he cannot have her. This is the mirror image of jealousy but different as it is about an object – he objectifies Desdemona, denies her humanity. This is what Emilia complains about, the treatment of women as less than human not just less than equal.

Male bonding is big problem in the play. Cassio by contrast has light and shade, his sin is drunkenness, but he is aware of his vice, tries to control it but is no match for the diabolic Iago who preys on his and Roderigo’s vices. Cassio does trust women, but he is also foolish, “unmanned by folly”, he is the one male that is comfortable in female company (Bianca and Desdemona) but he fails to understand what the other males will make of this. But this has redeeming features and Shakespeare redeems him.

Emilia meanwhile sees but is not heard. She, the most sensible person in the play, the one with the least vices, omits a theft that ends in murder. Not just Desdemona’s but her own.