

OTHELLO TEACHERS' NOTES



Welcome to the Teachers' Notes for the Citizens Theatre production of **Othello**, October/November 2009. These notes are intended to offer you a way into our production and practical ideas for enabling English and Drama pupils to get the most from their visit to the Citizens Theatre.

These notes focus in part on the design concepts for the production. Philip Witcomb's costume and set designs will be available to download from the Citizens Theatre website from 21 October 2009.

Should you require any further information about our production of **Othello**, please contact Martin Travers, Head of Citizens Learning and TAG, on 0141 418 6243 or by e-mail on martin@citz.co.uk

1. SHAKESPEARE'S ONLY DOMESTIC TRAGEDY

"I was seduced by the idea of a 'domestic tragedy'. Having recently directed Hamlet, this was an opportunity to direct a play that takes place within a small world, a world that is not concerned with large social issues or war, but with petty, personal emotions and worries."
Guy Hollands, Director of *Othello*

The Royal Shakespeare Company offers us a definition of tragedy:

"Shakespeare's Tragedies take us on a journey: "they confront our greatest hopes and fears, our best and worst of actions...They expose the suffering we inflict and the suffering we bear".

It is easy to remember the dramatic outrages that take place, but what of the goodness in the play? For example, AC Bradley writes about Emilia:

"She is careless for her own life at the end...nothing in her life becomes her like the losing of it".

THE BEST AND WORST

Tableaux

Divide the class into groups of 3 or 4. Allocate a character to each group.

Each group should thought-storm the best and worst moments for this character.

The groups should then present their findings as tableaux*.

***TABLEAUX** (often referred to as still-images) are like photographs. They are created by actors freezing in a position, paying particular attention to levels, body language, positioning and facial expressions. A good way to explain tableaux to a class is to imagine that one has been watching a film and someone has pressed "pause" on the remote control. The resulting frozen image, lacking sound and movement, is effectively a tableau/still-image.

2. AN UNCLUTTERED PLAY: Set and Lighting Design

“Without a sub-plot, **Othello** is an uncluttered play. When I was directing Hamlet I found that we often attempted to resolve staging challenges by adding more pieces of set. It seemed to me to be more courageous to use less. I considered the Elizabethan theatre and thought of using a bare stage. Philip Witcomb and I began developing a design concept which employed as few pieces of set and furniture as possible.”

In our production many of the scenes will be defined by the lighting, designed by Kai Fischer, to create spaces on stage. There will be a lot of side-lighting used as many of the scenes take place at night. Act 3, Scene 3 will be the exception, however. This intense, long scene will take place at midday when it is really hot and bright.

There will be one abstract wall that will be moved around the stage to create spaces. The texture of this wall originally came from research sources but has evolved into an abstract feature.

The journey of the wall is generally an upstage one, beginning downstage to suggest the tight, controlled world of Venice and the war cabinet of the Duke. The wall will then travel upstage, opening up the world of Cyprus where the characters have more freedom, less purpose and much more time on their hands.” **Guy Hollands**

SET AND LIGHTING DESIGN

As a class, thought-storm the differences between Venice and Cyprus in **Othello**.

In groups, pupils should consider how these differences could be communicated through the use of theatre arts: set, lighting, props, sound and costume.

Groups should then present their ideas to the class, using drawings and perhaps even models to illustrate their plans.

3. A PLAY ABOUT RACISM?

Othello has gained a reputation as a play about racism and yet only four characters appear to comment on the difference between Desdemona and Othello in terms of the colour of their skin: Brabantio, Roderigo, Iago and Emilia (at the end of the play). Furthermore, we learn in the play that Brabantio “loved” Othello and “oft invited” him into his home. Iago and Othello were close comrades in the past before Iago was overlooked. Othello has risen through the ranks of the Venetian army and is highly respected. It is interesting to consider whether Venice and Cyprus are places where racism is a major issue.

Braham Murray, who directed **Othello** at the Royal Exchange Theatre in Manchester, suggests:

“You cannot tell the 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... 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.”ⁱⁱⁱ”

A MARRIAGE MADE IN HEAVEN?

A Hello! Exclusive

Divide the class into groups. Explain that they are going to take on the role of reporters from Hello!, the celebrity magazine that specialises in covering the lavish weddings of the rich and famous. What would Hello! make of the marriage of Othello and Desdemona?

1. Study the Text

Pupils should first of all explore the play for information about the marriage and make notes on the following:

- how Othello and Desdemona fell in love
- the events of their wedding day
- the disturbance of their wedding night
- their suitability for each other

2. Speculate

Pupils should also speculate on ideas not outlined in the play:

- what do you imagine the wedding ceremony was like?
- who might have been present at the wedding?
- how likely is it that their marriage will succeed?

3. Hotseat* the characters

Working as a class or in smaller groups, pupils should put the characters from the play in the hotseat to find out their views about Othello and Desdemona’s marriage. Pupils should be reminded that characters do not always tell the truth when being hotseated. Special attention should be paid to how Iago might behave in an interview like this!

3. A PLAY ABOUT RACISM? continued

4. Present Your Findings

Pupils should then present their report as a televised report or a magazine article, creating images or tableaux (see above) to illustrate the report.

***HOTSEATING** involves questioning a character to find out more about him/her and his/her thoughts on the events of a play. The class/groups should sit in a semi-circle facing a single chair, which becomes the "hotseat". A volunteer is given a character to play and sits in the hotseat as that character. The "audience" then asks questions to encourage the character to speak their mind. The volunteer must use their knowledge of the play to answer the questions but can improvise if they are unsure of an answer.

Please note: Some characters will not always tell the truth – there is no obligation to be honest in the hotseat and the audience should be aware of this!

4. BLOW ON BLOW Is Iago the Protagonist?

“Iago delivers blow on blow, never allowing his victim to recover from the confusion of the first shock.^{iv}”

“There is painful tension – the conflict advances without pause and with accelerating speed to the catastrophe.”^v”

A FAR CRY FROM HAMLET’S PROCRASTINATION

Track Iago’s Action

Pupils should chart the action of Iago’s meddling by writing down what he does in each scene. Notice how involved Iago is throughout the whole play.

DISCUSS: How far is Iago in control of what happens in the play?

DISCUSS: Should Shakespeare have called this play **Iago**? Why/why not?

“With hindsight, I would prefer to have used the full title of the play: **The Tragedy of Othello, The Moor of Venice**. This would have emphasised that the play is about Othello - the challenge is to make sure it *is* about Othello. His is the dynamic story, he is most changed by the events of the play. Iago doesn’t change significantly in the course of the play.” **Guy Hollands**

OTHELLO’S DOWNFALL

Who is to Blame?

As an approach to the play in rehearsal, the actors were asked to look at how each character contributes to Othello’s decline, in order to ensure Othello is kept at the heart of the play.

Try the same exercise.

Also consider: What responsibility must Othello take for his actions? What are the weaknesses of his character?

5. GULLIBLE FOOLS OR A CONSUMMATE LIAR?

“If Iago is played as an obvious villain, Othello and the other characters are reduced to credulous fools, whereas Shakespeare...was concerned with the difficulty of distinguishing between appearance and reality, with the impossibility of detecting an absolute hypocrite.^{vi}”

“This evil is almost irresistible, aided at every step by fortunate accidents and the innocent mistakes of its victims.^{vii}”

“The skill of Iago was extraordinary but so was his good fortune.^{viii}”

IAGO IN THE JUDGEMENT CHAIR

How is Iago seen by others early on in the play?

Place a chair in the centre of the room to signify Iago. Volunteers should select a character from the play and consider what this character thinks of Iago. Each character should place themselves in relation to the chair, for example, Emilia who has a difficult relationship with her husband but seems to love him, may stand quite close to Iago.

Each character should in turn introduce themselves to the audience and then state his/her opinion about Iago, either to the audience or to “Iago” himself.

How have these opinions changed by the end?

This exercise should be repeated after Iago’s crimes have been made clear. Although some of the selected characters may be dead by this time, volunteers should consider how their opinion of him has changed.

6. “WILL YOU, I PRAY, DEMAND THAT DEMI-DEVIL WHY HE HATH THUS ENSNARED MY SOUL AND BODY?” (Othello: Act V, Scene 2, line 298-299)

Coleridge called Iago’s soliloquies “motive-hunting”. How much reliable evidence do these speeches provide for Iago’s motives?

IAGO ON TRIAL

1. Pupils should work in four groups: two defence and two prosecution. The groups should gather evidence for their case against or in defence of Iago.

Prosecution

The prosecution groups should study Iago’s soliloquies, searching for evidence of possible motives for his actions, such as his ambition, sense of pride/self-esteem, philosophy of how men should act, his desires etc. They should consider his actions in the final scene.

Defence

The defence teams should consider the actions of the other characters as well as studying Iago’s conversations with Roderigo. They may well not be able to plead for Iago’s innocence but they should aim to mitigate his sentence!

2. When this evidence has been gathered by the two groups, a small number of volunteers should be selected to present the evidence. The rest of the class should act as jury and should ultimately decide the fate of Iago.

NO FINAL SPEECH FOR IAGO?

In the final scene of the play, Iago declares:

“Demand me nothing; what you know, you know:
From this time forth I never will speak word.”
(Act 5, Sc. 2, lines 300-301)

DISCUSS: Why do you think Shakespeare decided not to give Iago a final speech?

Writing in Role

Pupils should write a final soliloquy for Iago at the end of the play, to be spoken in prison where he is tortured before his trial. What might be his final words to the audience?

Pupils should then present their ideas to the rest of the class.

DISCUSS: What difference do these speeches make to our perception of Iago?

7. THE CHARACTERS THROUGH COSTUME

“Ours is a modern dress production, but there are no laptops or mobile phones. The military uniforms have been based on a range of sources as we didn’t want to place the action in any recognisable contemporary conflict.”

Guy Hollands

The following interpretations of characters have influenced the design process. The costume design sketches will be available on the Citizens Theatre website from 21 October.

OTHELLO

Othello is a highly respected General who appears to be indispensable to the Venetian army. With this comes a real sense of self-confidence at the start of the play. However, this assurance may mask insecurities. He is an older man and there is some sense that he has reached his peak and has nowhere else to go. Although he lacks emotional maturity, his age shows in his deteriorating health, of which the fit he has in Act 3 Scene 3 is possibly a symptom. This has perhaps led to Othello desiring a change in lifestyle - after a brutalised, difficult and lonely life he chooses to marry.

IAGO

Iago’s costume suggests his battle-hardened history. He has been a “squaddie”, who has worked his way up through the ranks.

CASSIO

Cassio is a genuine gentleman, likeable and well-meaning. He is somewhat self-pitying but ambitious. He is a charmer and is well-versed in social etiquette.

DESDEMONA

Desdemona is a society girl who has lived a wealthy and perhaps cosseted life. Her upbringing appears to have been positive and supportive. When she travels to Cyprus she is going to a war zone and her costume design was informed by images such as those of Princess Diana engaged in her anti-landmine work. Desdemona has the confidence that comes with wealth but her lack of knowledge about the real world (she is often thought to be naïve) may make her vulnerable.

EMILIA

Emilia is the wife of a high-ranking officer and yet she is instructed to help look after Desdemona. She is down-trodden and controlled. She is distrustful of men and has developed strong opinions about the way women are treated. However, she appears to deeply love Iago, her abusive husband, and wants to please him, only finding her real strength when it is too late.

RODERIGO

Roderigo (along with Bianca) is the nearest the play comes to comic relief: a wealthy, love-sick young man who is hopelessly in love with Desdemona. He is easily manipulated by Iago and indeed loses all his personal fortune to him.

THE DUKE

The Duke is played by a young actor and is a practical, strategic, bright, liberal leader of the powerful city of Venice. This production imagines him as having more of a military than a governmental role.

BRABANTIO

In contrast to the Duke, Brabantio is much older and is reaching the end of his influence as a Senator. He could be seen as being “over the hill” since it appears that the war council at the start of the play has overlooked him. He is roused from his bed by Iago and Roderigo and therefore is still wearing his pyjamas at the war council. This further undermines him in the eyes of Venetian society.

BIANCA

Bianca’s role in the play is largely to advance the plot. She is a likeable and genuine character with whom Cassio seems to be comfortable. Iago says that she is a prostitute, but what other evidence is there in the play for this assertion?

OTHELLO

Paterson Joseph who played Othello in the Royal Exchange Theatre Company's production explains the difficulty of showing Othello's transformation:

"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.^{ix}"

SPEAKING THEIR THOUGHTS

In order to create a truthful performance, an actor must fully understand the thoughts of his/her character. Act 3 Scene 3 is the lengthy, pivotal scene in which Othello goes from being happily married to deciding to murder both Desdemona and Cassio.

Pupils should work in groups of 4 and be given an extract from Act 3 Scene 3 between Iago and Othello.

Two people should play Iago and Othello and speak the lines as written in the play. The other two actors should voice the inner thoughts of Othello and Iago.

Pupils should consider what the men really thinking – what is Iago doing as the scene goes on and how is Othello reacting to this provocation? The inner thoughts should be expressed after each character speaks.

DESDEMONA

Desdemona is traditionally portrayed as an innocent, naïve young woman. However, our production presents a more self-confident Desdemona, who expects to be more involved in the world around her.

IMPROVISATION

Why does she marry in secret?

This is one of the unanswered questions of the play that must be answered by actors in rehearsal.

Pupils should work in groups of 3, playing Desdemona, Othello and Brabantio. Explore the following scenarios through improvisation:

1. Improvise a scene where Othello has been invited round to Brabantio's house to tell the stories of his past. At some point, Othello proposes to Desdemona in secret – how does this happen? Why do they decide not to tell Brabantio?
2. What might have happened if Desdemona had told Brabantio of her engagement and asked for his blessing? What would be Brabantio's concerns?
3. What might have happened if Othello had asked permission from Brabantio to marry Desdemona before he asked her? Would Brabantio have voiced his concerns to Othello?

EMILIA

“Emilia is a fascinating character – I wish Shakespeare had given us more of Iago and Emilia together.” Guy Hollands

Another key question is this: why does Emilia steal the handkerchief?

DISCUSS: Our production keeps the handkerchief as Othello’s love-token. In a contemporary production, what might be a more suitable love-token to use?

EMILIA’S SOLILIOQUIES

Writing in Role

1. Emilia has a short soliloquy in Act 3 Scene 3 (lines 287-296) in which she explains that she will give the handkerchief to Iago. She intriguingly states:

“What he will do with it, heaven knows, not I:
I nothing, but to please his fantasy.”

DISCUSS: What do you think Emilia means by this? How should the actor deliver this line?

Ask for volunteers to try this line in different ways, e.g. meekly, sarcastically etc. Which delivery is most truthful to what we know of Emilia?

In small groups, pupils should try extending Emilia’s soliloquy. What does she really mean?

2. Read the exchange that follows, between Emilia and Iago. Emilia is strong and yet she does not seem to suspect Iago of any wrong doing (see Act 5, Scene 2, lines 173: “I know thou didst not: thou’rt not such a villain.”)

What might Emilia be thinking therefore when she is sent away by Iago (Act 3, Sc 3, line 317)? Write an aside for her at this point in the play, as she leaves the stage.

8. REPUTATION, REPUTATION, REPUTATION!

[Cassio: Act 2, Scene 3, line 255]

Two significant themes in the play are honour and reputation, whether in a parental, marital or professional context.

REPUTATION VS. REALITY

Role-on-the-Wall

Pupils should work in groups of 3 or 4, each group being given a character from the play.

On a large piece of paper, pupils should draw an outline of a person or some kind of symbol to suggest each character.

Inside the outline of this shape, pupils should write down **all they know about** the character, including evidence from the text for their ideas.

Then, **outside** the outline, they should write down **what is said about** this person by the other characters, again using evidence from the text.

Groups should then present their ideas.

As a class discuss:

- which characters are slandered and underestimated?
- which characters have a reputation that far exceeds what they deserve?

References

- i www.rsc.org.uk
- ii A.C. Bradley, **Shakespearean Tragedy** (London: Macmillan & Co, 1961) p. 196-198
- iii Braham Murray, quoted in The Royal Exchange Theatre Company's resource pack for **Othello** available at www.royalexchangetheatre.org.uk
- iv A.C. Bradley, **Shakespearean Tragedy** (London: Macmillan & Co, 1961) p. 160
- v *Ibid.*, p. 144
- vi Kenneth Muir (ed.), **Othello** (London: Penguin, 1968) p. 14
- vii A.C. Bradley, **Shakespearean Tragedy** (London: Macmillan & Co, 1961) p. 143
- viii *Ibid.*, p 147
- ix Paterson Joseph, quoted in The Royal Exchange Theatre Company's resource pack for **Othello** available at www.royalexchangetheatre.org.uk

