



ABBAY THEATRE

OTHELLO

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

RESOURCE PACK 2016

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CHAPTER ONE

THE STORY



THE STORY

WHY OTHELLO?

Many people have preconceived ideas about most of Shakespeare's biggest works, including the tragedy 'Othello'. But what is 'Othello' actually about? And why now? We address this question throughout this resource pack, and we hope that it will give students a better insight into why 'Othello' is still relevant today and why it was chosen to be staged. 'Othello' is a very different play to different people. Every production of the play is conveying the director's interpretation of the text. Every production will concentrate on different issues and themes. The most important thing about this is that you don't have to agree with anyone else's interpretation of the play, only your own.

Is this play, written four hundred years ago, set on an island in the Mediterranean under threat of invasion from Turkey, really relevant to life in Ireland in 2016? Of course! 'Othello' is a play about people, and relationships, and unfortunately the green-eyed monster is as relevant to people's lives now as it was in Shakespeare's time. The beauty of his work is that Shakespeare writes about what it means to be human; which is why his plays have, and will continue to, stand the test of time.



IMAGE: Peter Macon (Othello) and Rebecca O'Mara (Desdemona) in Othello by William Shakespeare. Directed by Joe Dowling.

Does setting the play in a different era change anything about your understanding of the play?

Many productions of 'Othello' set the play in different eras, or scenarios, to convey the universality of Shakespeare's work. In the Abbey's 2016 production, it was not set in any one particular era, with the costumes ranging from traditional military dress to leather jackets and polo shirts. For students studying the play, watch the 2001 film 'O' and compare how 'Othello' has been adapted to 21st century society.

IMAGE: L-R Marty Rea (Iago), Michael Patrick (Officer/ Ensemble), John Merriman (Officer/ Ensemble), Barry John O'Connor (Cassio), Cormac McDonagh (Officer/ Ensemble), Laurence Falconer (Officer/ Ensemble) and Barry Barnes (Lodovico/ Ensemble) in Othello by William Shakespeare. Directed by Joe Dowling. Photo by Pat Redmond.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

William Shakespeare, who was born in 1564, died four hundred years ago this year. He is the most famous playwright and poet in the English-speaking world. Shakespeare wrote about what it is to be human, and what we as humans face. Society has changed immensely, science has given us a far better understanding of our world, technology enables us to do things previously only dreamed of, and yet his plays are still found in libraries and on stages all over the world. Being human has not changed in four hundred years, and so his works have a capacity to transcend time. Shakespeare doesn't focus on modern or time-specific debates like the 2015 marriage referendum, legalising abortion, or the loneliness of rural Ireland, instead he presents us with universal issues such as racism, love, death, fate, conflict, etc... that are as relevant now as when he staged them. He confronts our greatest hopes and fears, and exposes the suffering that we, as people, bear.

His language, while at times seeming almost alien to us, was never intended to exclude anyone. He was quite the opposite, and turned down commissions to write for the upper classes exclusively. He wanted his works to be accessible to all.

Born in Stratford-Upon-Avon in the west of the English Midlands, Shakespeare moved to London in the 1590s to act and write plays, and his company (The Lord Chamberlains Men) quickly became popular and after the ascension of James I to the throne, they became The King's Men.



IMAGE: L-R Michael James Ford (Gratiano/ Ensemble), Malcolm Douglas (Duke of Venice/ Ensemble), Cormac McDonagh (Officer/ Ensemble), Des Cave (Montano/ Ensemble), Peter Gowen (Brabantio/ Ensemble), Marty Rea (Iago), John Merriman (Officer/ Ensemble), Michael Patrick (Officer/ Ensemble) and Peter Macon (Othello) in Othello by William Shakespeare. Directed by Joe Dowling.

Theatre was the most popular form of entertainment in Elizabethan and Jacobean England, and Shakespeare made his living by writing plays that audiences liked, often churning out about four a year. He was not the only playwright living in London, but his works are the ones that have defied time and fashions and which are still studied and enjoyed today.

Why is Shakespeare still so relevant today? And why do we stage his plays rather than other, more modern works? In this resource pack we explore the importance of Shakespeare's works and ask the question 'why Othello', why now?



IMAGE: Peter Gowen (Brabantio/ Ensemble), Michael James Ford (Gratiano/ Ensemble) and Des Cave (Montano/ Ensemble) during rehearsals for Othello by William Shakespeare. Directed by Joe Dowling.

THE LOCATION

The play opens in Venice, a modern, civilised society- a hive of culture and commerce. When Brabantio is outraged at Othello's 'thievery', he appeals to the Council to intervene. Shakespeare sets most of his plays in other countries so that he could safely critique English society, while also hiding behind the façade of a play about another place, or another time. However, even he knows that the behaviour exhibited by Othello as the play progresses needs another setting. Our setting quickly moves to Cyprus, a military society, an island away from civilisation, where Othello is in control. There is a heightened contrast between the ordered, civil society of Venice and the militarised, undemocratic society of Cyprus. Here, and only here, is Iago able to fully realise his goal of warping Othello's mind.

What does Ludovico make of the situation when he arrives with news from Venice?

IMAGE: Gavin Fullam (Roderigo), John Merriman (Officer/ Ensemble) and Michael Patrick (Officer/ Ensemble) during rehearsals for Othello by William Shakespeare. Directed by Joe Dowling.



Is the setting important to a production? How might things have been different if they had stayed in Venice?

In the Abbey's production of 'Othello' in 2016, the setting was indicated by the set on stage. While in Venice, a large ancient Roman symbol of law and civilisation hung above the actors, however that was removed when the action of the play moved to Cyprus and instead an image of the endless sea was projected onto the back wall of the stage. All around the stage was also wood which replicated the same wood on the walls of the auditorium. At various stages of the play, when the tragedy was drawing closer and when the action became more personal, the huge doors at the back of the stage would close, so that there was no more image of the endless space of the sea, and the actors and audience were all surrounded by the same dark wood, indicating an intimate and personal play, in which everyone was trapped.

CHAPTER TWO

THEMES



RECURRING THEMES

RACE

Would your understanding of 'Othello' change if Othello was the same race as you, portraying an 'outsider' in his society?

The people of Ireland, since our joining the EU and experiencing the Celtic Tiger, have changed dramatically in their makeup. We are still a predominantly white, Irish-born nation, but we are steadily becoming more diverse and multicultural. For some, race as an issue in the play mightn't be as important an issue as jealousy, or betrayal. But that's not the case for everyone sitting in the audience. How you interpret a play is an intensely personal experience. In 1997, Patrick Stewart played Othello in a 'photonegative' version of Othello in Washington, and the most startling effect of that production was that it made white audiences relate to the play in an entirely different way.

IMAGE: Peter Macon (Othello) in Othello by William Shakespeare. Directed by Joe Dowling. Photo by Pat Redmond.

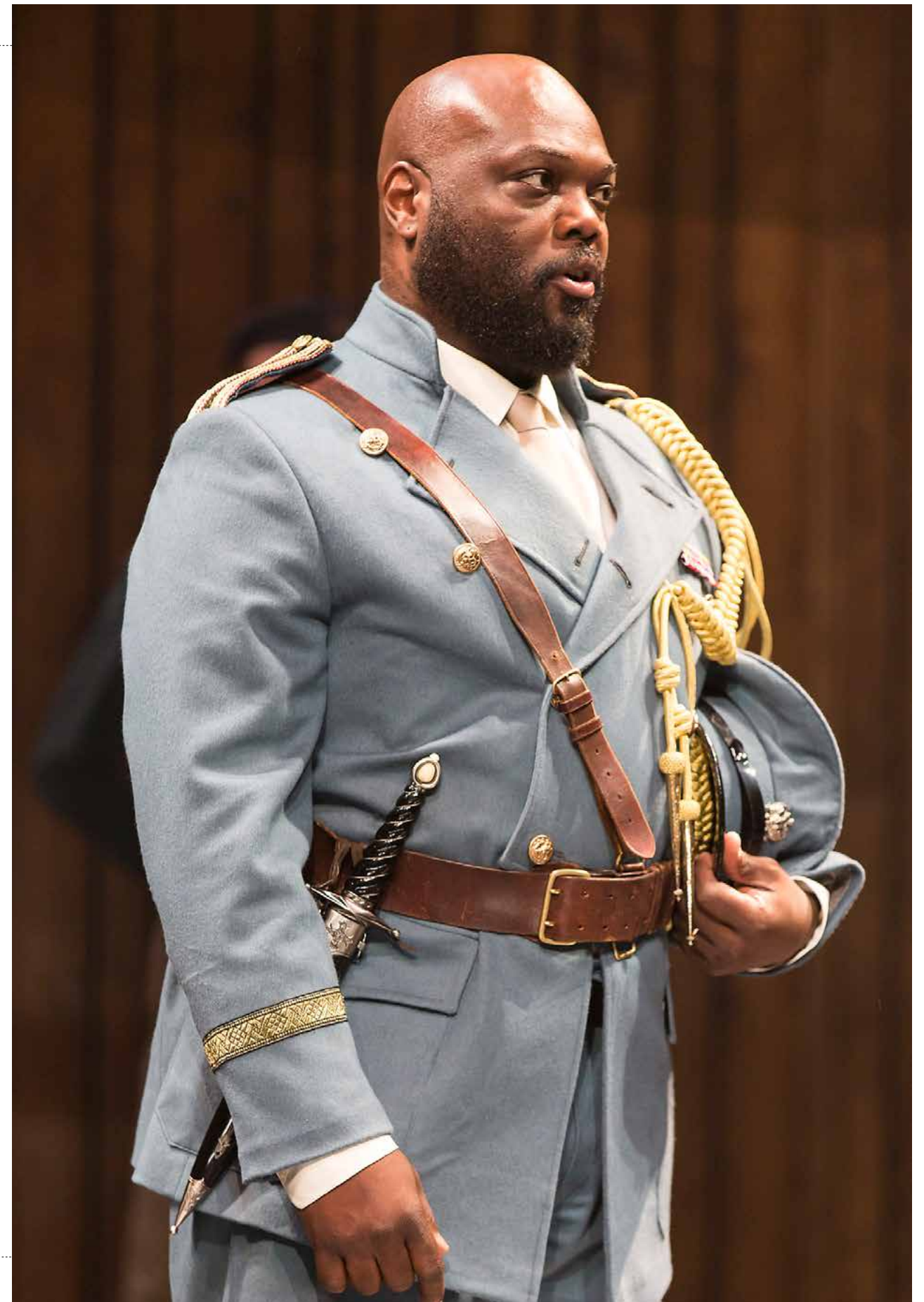


IMAGE: Peter Macon (Othello), Rebecca O'Mara (Desdemona) and Marty Rea (Iago) in Othello by William Shakespeare. Directed by Joe Dowling.

If you were to stage 'Othello' in a modern context, what race would you make Othello/ the other characters?

In the Royal Shakespeare Company's production in 2015, the cast was multicultural. Othello was black, and Desdemona was white, but Iago was also black, and Emilia was Indian. This decision, argued the director Iqbal Khan, made it more modern and transformed the production from a racist play, to a play with racist characters. Hugh Quarshie, who played Othello

in the RSC's production in 2015, argued in his essay published in 1999 'Second Thoughts About Othello' that any black actor offered the role should consider refusing, as he believed that the play was inherently racist, and that it is often suggested that Othello is reduced to the murderer he is at the end not because of jealousy, but because he is black and that his behaviour is inevitable. Iago, as the main inciter of hate in the

play, is only ever racist when with other characters. He is never racist when speaking to the audience, and so we can almost see his racism as a front for his behaviour, a more acceptable reason for his actions, rather than an inherent belief of his. Having a black Iago, as in the RSC production, made this even more apparent, and so Quarshie agreed that it was then acceptable for a conscious black actor to play Othello.



IMAGE: Laurence Falconer (Officer/ Ensemble), Cormac McDonagh (Officer/ Ensemble), Michael Patrick (Officer/ Ensemble) and John Merriman (Officer/ Ensemble) during rehearsals for Othello by William Shakespeare. Directed by Joe Dowling.

RECURRING THEMES

JEALOUSY

“O beware, my lord, of jealousy. It is the green-ey’d monster; It doth mock the meat it feeds on”.

[Act 3, scene 3.]

‘Othello’ is arguably a play all about jealousy, that human emotion that constantly taints our relationships with ourselves and with others. Jealousy is not only found in romantic relationships, but also in friendships, careers, and familial relationships. In ‘King Lear’ Edmund is jealous of Edgar, in ‘Macbeth’ Macbeth is jealous of Duncan, and in ‘Hamlet’ Hamlet is jealous of Claudius, who was jealous of King Hamlet. It is no coincidence that jealousy pervades Shakespeare’s tragedies. It is a natural emotion, it makes us human, but it is also our undoing. Many relationships fall victim to jealousy, which stems from the insecurities of one of the parties.

In ‘Othello’ the theme of jealousy permeates the plot. There are glaring examples such as Othello’s own jealousy when he thinks Desdemona has been unfaithful, and Iago’s resentment and envy of Cassio’s promotion.



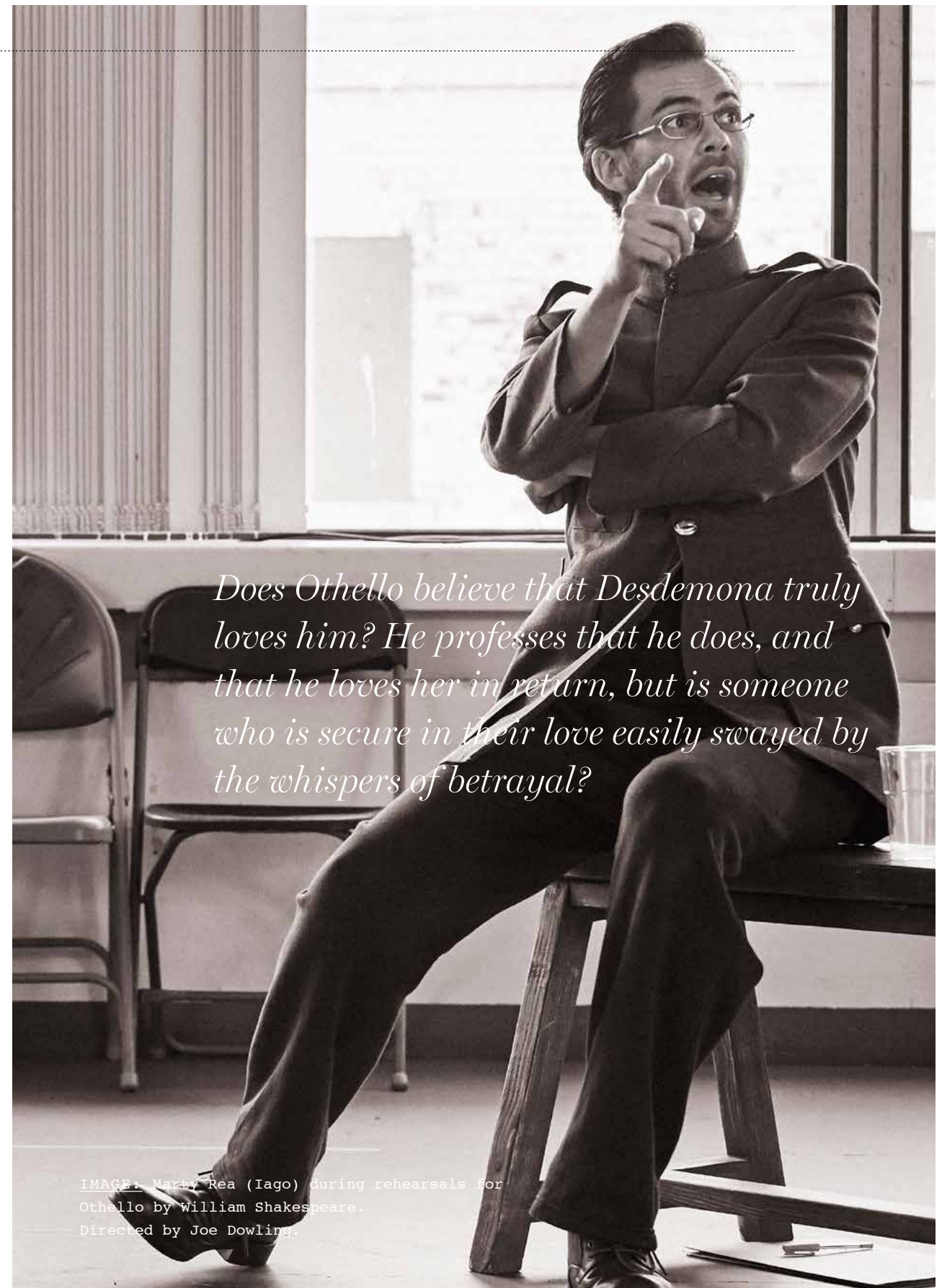
IMAGE: Marty Rea (Iago) and Karen Ardif (Emilia) in Othello by William Shakespeare. Directed by Joe Dowling. Photo by Pat Redmond.

But a closer look at the play reveals jealousy in places you mightn't always expect, and with different outcomes. Bianca's envy when she finds the handkerchief in Cassio's possession is quick and passionate, but she is open about her emotions and is rewarded with an explanation and thus the dissipation of her rage. Emilia, in her only open and honest speech in the play, reveals herself to be jealous of men and their freedom and power. Iago, when speaking to the audience, even reveals that his motivation is the rumour that Othello has slept with Emilia. He knows how powerful and destructive jealousy can be, because he has experienced it himself.

While jealousy is present throughout the play, Shakespeare makes it clear that jealousy which springs from the souring of love is the most potent and harmful of all. Othello and Iago are the two characters who experience this, and thus are the two characters who drive the plot to the catastrophe. Envy reduces Othello from the respected and rational general who we meet at the outset to the violent and aggressive murderer he ends the play as. Jealousy, as an emotion, is completely internal. There may be external triggers, but ultimately it is more to do with the personality of the jealous person than the trigger.

Shakespeare is showing us the tragedy of giving in to our insecurities and believing the truth of our jealous speculations. The greatest tragedy of 'Othello' is that while the audience can observe, and reflect, and judge, we will still be victims to the same green-eyed monster that consumed Othello, because we are only human.

Does his jealousy come from her behaviour, or his own insecurities?



Does Othello believe that Desdemona truly loves him? He professes that he does, and that he loves her in return, but is someone who is secure in their love easily swayed by the whispers of betrayal?

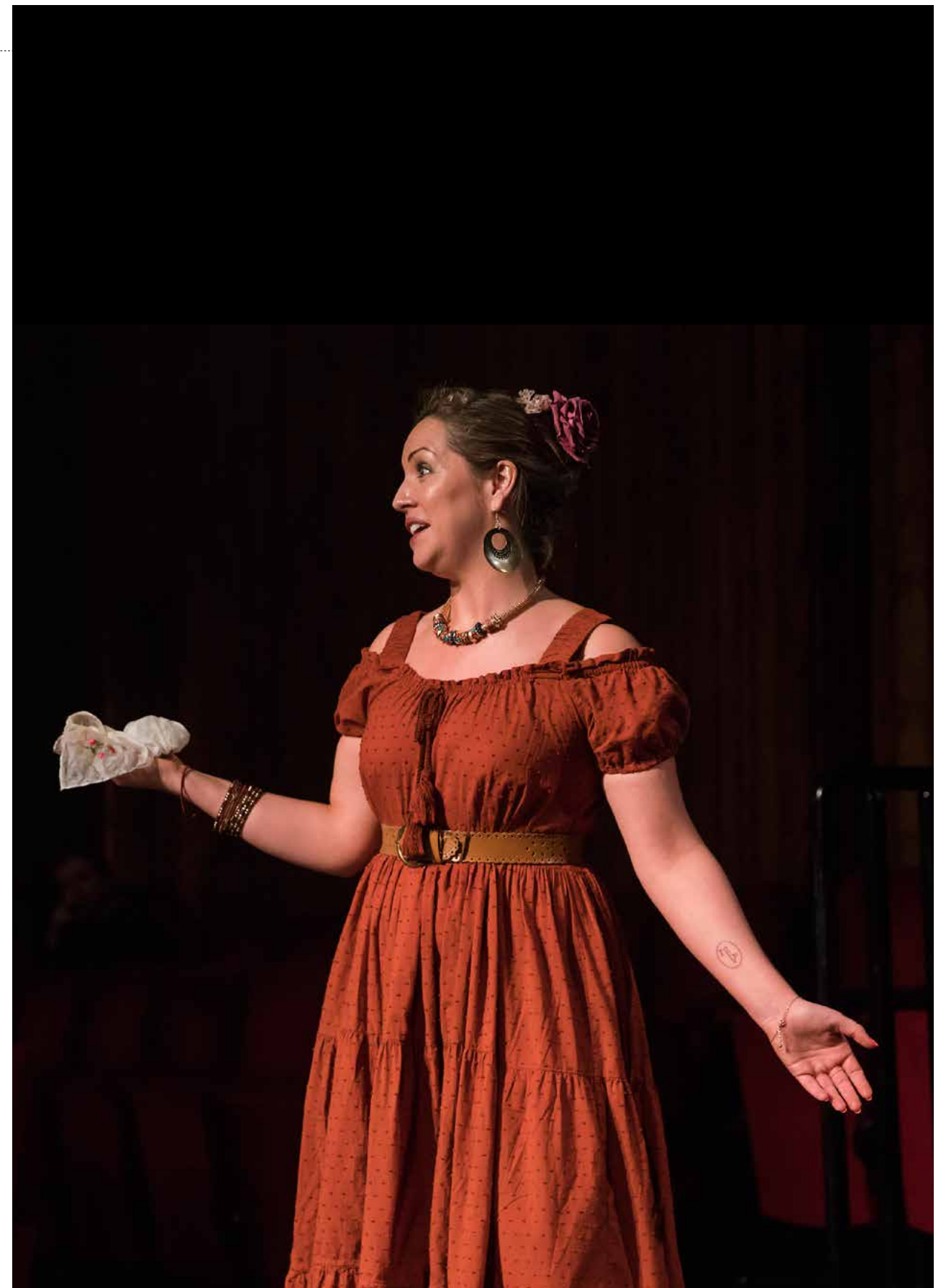
IMAGE: Marty Rea (Iago) during rehearsals for Othello by William Shakespeare. Directed by Joe Dowling.

RECURRING THEMES

THE HANDKERCHIEF

The handkerchief in this play is a key symbol of love and fidelity. Othello got it from his mother, who was given it by a gypsy woman who told her that as long as her husband kept this he would remain faithful. He, in turn, gives it to Desdemona as a token of his love. The handkerchief is later the “ocular proof” Othello needs to believe that Desdemona is guilty. The handkerchief is also key to the truth being made clear to all the characters at the end of the play, when Othello tells Emilia that he had no doubt of her infidelity because of the handkerchief, she puts all the pieces of the puzzle together and exposes her husband for what he is. She admits to stealing the handkerchief, because he asked her to. Iago knew the importance of this love token and had long planned to use it in his scheme.

IMAGE: Liz Fitzgibbon (Bianca) in *Othello* by William Shakespeare. Directed by Joe Dowling. Photo by Pat Redmond.



What he didn't plan, however, was that Bianca would find the handkerchief and fly into a jealous rage over Cassio's suspected betrayal. Both Bianca and Othello associate this symbol of fidelity with their partner's betrayal. But it is not the well-respected general and leader of his people who shows us how to deal with jealousy, but the lowly prostitute who becomes our paradigm. Instead of festering alone and allowing the "green-eyed monster" to pollute her mind, she embraces her jealousy and instantly confronts Cassio with the evidence. Othello, on the other hand, never outwardly asks Desdemona to explain. He accepts her apparent treachery too easily, because he believes himself to be unworthy. Bianca escapes the tragedy of the play due to how she dealt with her jealousy

Why does Emilia steal the handkerchief for Iago? How was this exchange portrayed on stage?

The handkerchief, which begins as a symbol of fidelity, is perceived in two separate situations as proof of infidelity. Shakespeare is trying to show us how people can damage themselves and their relationships by jumping to conclusions. Is that still relevant today?

When the play begins, do we expect that it is Bianca who will be the one to show us how we should behave? How can this be related to the handkerchief and assumptions?



IMAGE: Barry John O'Connor (Cassio) and Marty Rea (Iago) in Othello by William Shakespeare. Directed by Joe Dowling.

RECURRING THEMES

WOMEN

“Othello” is set in a hyper-masculine world. Not only do we find ourselves in a completely patriarchal society, where Brabantio brings Othello before the law to charge him with stealing his property, Desdemona, but for the majority of the play our characters are in a military garrison, a place where men hold all of the power. So where does that leave our women?

Shakespeare gives us very few, but very contrasting women in ‘Othello’. Bianca embodies the wanton female sexuality that Iago insinuates is present in all Venetian women, Emilia is heartbroken, yet has a strong sense that she deserves the exact same treatment as men, and Desdemona is the embodiment of a perfect Elizabethan woman- loyal, dutiful, gentle, and pure.

Women don’t have much power in the play, if any. While the men may joke that Desdemona has power over Othello, and that she is the general’s General, the audience can see clearly just how limited her supposed power is. She is only powerful, or influential, while she is in Othello’s favour. All of her status and influence stem from her husband, and he takes them away as quickly as he bestows them, leading to Desdemona being completely powerless and becoming a victim of her husband’s jealousy.



IMAGE: Peter Macon (Othello) and Rebecca O'Mara (Desdemona) during rehearsals for Othello by William Shakespeare. Directed by Joe Dowling.



IMAGE: Rebecca O'Mara (Desdemona) in Othello by William Shakespeare. Directed by Joe Dowling.

If Emilia hadn't revealed the truth at the end of the play, do you think Othello would have face repercussions for his actions? Consider that in modern day France they still have the 'crime of passion' clause in their law, and it was only abolished from UK law in 2010.

Othello doesn't see his killing of Desdemona as murder until after Emilia reveals Iago's involvement. Before this point, he feels as though he is making a needed sacrifice and he believes that he must kill her in order to save other men from her dishonesty. When he realises his mistake, his regret over what he has done is evident and results in his own death, but this is only after it is revealed that Desdemona was true. Therefore, if Desdemona had slept with other men, Othello would have felt that it was

perfectly right to kill her. This highlights the powerlessness of wives in the play, as their husbands can judge whether they live or die.

While 'Othello' is extremely relevant to modern life, often the hardest task for a director when adapting it is choosing what situation to set it in. What kind of situations in modern society would you find this masculine tone or patriarchal setup?

RECURRING THEMES

MARRIAGE

There are two examples of marriage we see in the play, and neither is particularly desirable. While Othello and Desdemona's marriage begins promisingly, with passion and genuine regard for one another, it quickly deteriorates. It becomes a completely unequal relationship, with Desdemona changing from the witty and charming woman we first meet, to the appeaser of Othello's temper. Marina Carr describes her simply as a plot device, a character who lacks complexity and colour. Emilia, on the other hand, is a much more fascinating character. She only fully reveals herself in the 'Willow Scene' with Desdemona. That beautifully subtle scene reveals a wife who is loyal despite continuous neglect. She is much more knowledgeable of the world, and asks

“who would not make her husband a cuckold, to make him a monarch?”

[Act 4, scene 3.]

We rarely see her and Iago alone, or interacting for longer than a few lines. As with Othello, Iago despises Emilia for what he believes she has done, but unlike Desdemona she does not love blindly. She still loves Iago, there is no doubt about that, but she is wiser about it. Both marriages in the play end in death and catastrophe, both were once a source of happiness but have become sources of resentment, anger and jealousy. Shakespeare's comedies always end in marriage, but this tragedy is a tragedy because of marriages gone sour.

Emilia admits that she would commit adultery if it benefitted her husband. At the beginning of the play Iago tells us he suspects that Othello has slept with his wife. Iago was hoping to be promoted to Othello's lieutenant, and admits that a few well known Venetians put his case forward to Othello, to no avail. Is it possible that Iago's accusation against Emilia and Othello is true?



IMAGE: Barry Barnes (Iodovico/ Ensemble), Michael Patrick (Officer/ Ensemble), Laurence Falconer (Officer/ Ensemble), Malcolm Douglas (Duke of Venice/ Ensemble), Cormac McDonagh (Officer/ Ensemble), John Merriman (Officer/ Ensemble) and Michael James Ford (Gratiano/ Ensemble) in Othello by William Shakespeare. Directed by Joe Dowling.

CHAPTER THREE

CHARACTERS



OTHELLO

Othello, the eponymous character of the play, is a deeply complex man. At the outset of the play we are told of the wrongs he has done to others (Iago and Brabantio) and he is slandered before us. When we finally meet the general, our perception of him quickly changes as he proves himself to be a rational and clever man, who then invites Desdemona to speak her love for him herself, something none of the other men have thought to do until this point. He professes that he loves her deeply, but their marriage is from the outset very public and he treats Desdemona more like a trophy wife. Playwright Marina Carr observes that

“women [in this play] are not wanted for themselves, but for what they signify”

and Othello and Desdemona's marriage is proof of that. By marrying Desdemona, Othello is securing his place in the ranks of high society in Venice. He does seem to have genuine affection for her, however, and is happy to see her safely in Cyprus. Many actors playing the role have observed that the biggest challenge is the massive change Othello undergoes during the course of the play. He transforms into a 'green-eyed monster'. Until this point, he is a charismatic character, but once his armour is pierced by jealousy his anger takes over and he becomes animalistic and savage.

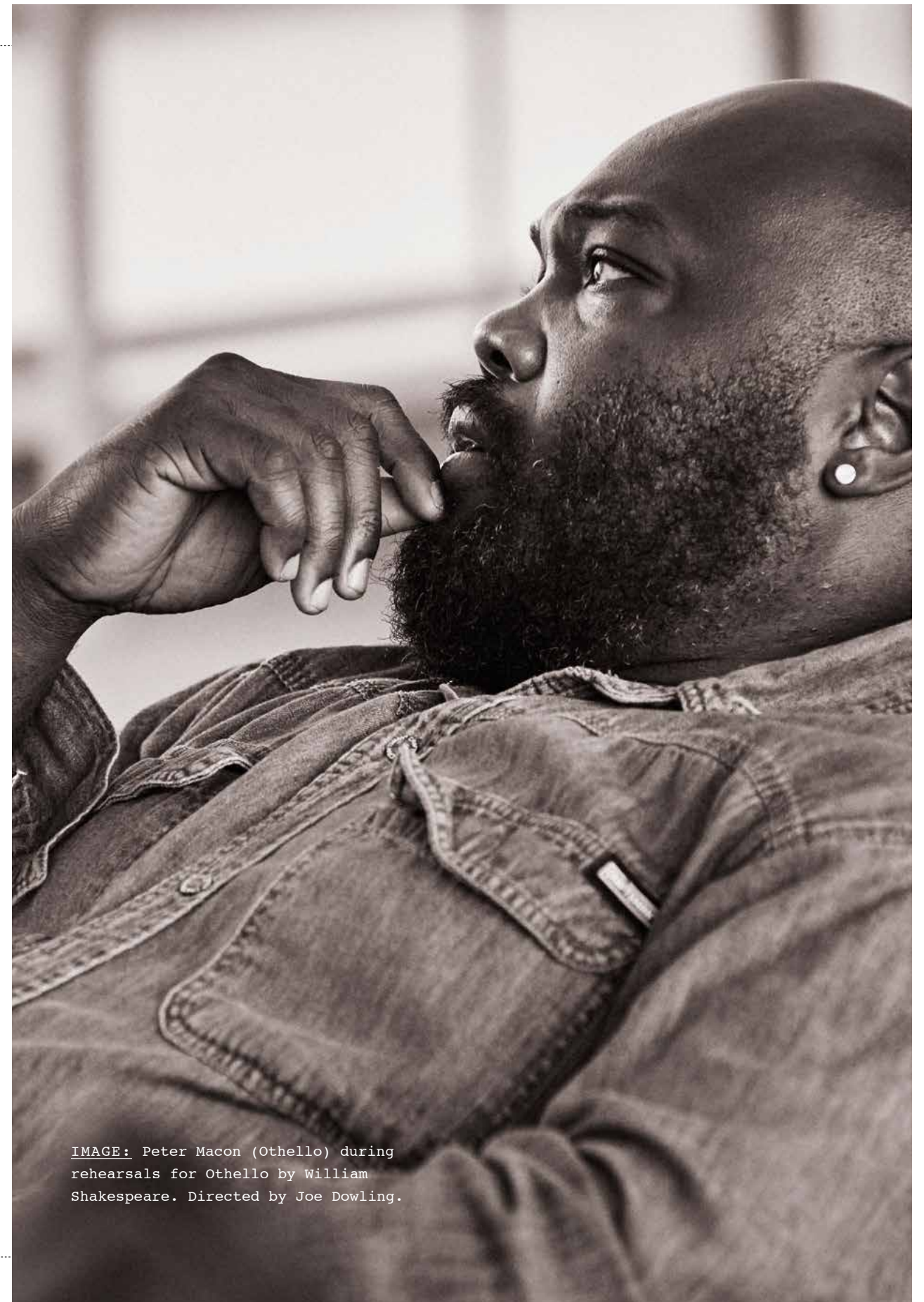


IMAGE: Peter Macon (Othello) during rehearsals for Othello by William Shakespeare. Directed by Joe Dowling.



IMAGE: Peter Macon (Othello), Peter Gowen (Brabantio/ Ensemble) and Rebecca O'Mara (Desdemona) in Othello by William Shakespeare. Directed by Joe Dowling. Photo by Pat Redmond.

The extent of emotion and passion we see in Othello at the end of the play, while brutal and savage, tells us a lot about how he felt about Desdemona at the beginning of the play. As the character himself says that he is “one who loved not wisely but too well”(Act 5, scene 2). The rage and jealousy we see in him as the play nears its conclusion can only have come from a place of great love. He redeems himself again in our eyes by taking his own life when he realises the magnitude of his mistake. This last, redemptive act restores our faith in his character and prevents audiences from judging him too harshly, laying the bulk of the blame with Iago.

Othello is an extremely complicated character, and audiences are often confused about his drastic change. Can a man who is secure in himself and is wife's love be so easily convinced otherwise?

Does the final blame for the catastrophe of the play lie with Othello or Iago?

If you feel pity for Othello, do you also feel pity for a husband who appears under the headline 'MAN KILLS WIFE, THEN HIMSELF'? Why/ why not? What is the difference?



IMAGE: Laurence Falconer (Officer/ Ensemble), Barry John O'Connor (Cassio), Michael Patrick (Officer/ Ensemble) and John Merriman (Officer/ Ensemble) during rehearsals for Othello by William Shakespeare. Directed by Joe Dowling. Photos by Ros Kavanagh.

IAGO

While the play is not called 'Iago', many critics argue that he is the main character of the play. He certainly dominates the play, having 31% of the lines compared to Othello's 25%. The character of Iago is the third largest role in Shakespeare's entire canon. He is arguably the most fascinating character in the play, and his marriage is far more evolved and complex than Othello's. In the opening scene Iago admits

"I am not what I am"

[Act 1, scene 1.]

which defines his character throughout the play. He manages to manipulate everyone in the play, and even in the final moments of the play, he would have gotten away with his scheme had his own wife not exposed his treachery. Iago's relationship with the audience is crucial to the play. The audience are the only ones Iago trusts, which almost makes us complicit in his plans, and yet powerless to stop them. Wrestling with these emotions has always been a part of the audience experience of 'Othello', and in the 19th century an actor who was playing Iago was shot on stage by a member of the audience.

He is the driving force of the play, and is insanely clever. He is one of Shakespeare's most fascinating characters. In the Abbey's 2016 production, the auditorium was reconfigured to allow for seats on the stage. In doing this, the director brought a portion of the audience into the production and magnified the relationship between Iago and the audience, as Marty Rea would frequently address the audience directly, thus making them feel even more complicit in his villainous plans.



IMAGE: Marty Rea (Iago) during rehearsals for Othello by William Shakespeare. Directed by Joe Dowling. Shakespeare. Directed by Joe Dowling.

WHY DOES IAGO DO WHAT HE DOES IN THE PLAY?

He has been described by Samuel T. Coleridge as ‘motiveless’ and simply a villain, but there is more to the play than that. Shakespeare doesn’t write characters who just simply ‘are’, without explanation. He was fascinated with psychology, and in characters such as the Macbeths has shown us how one becomes as twisted and villainous as they, so why would he begin the play with Iago as a villain and never give us clues as to why? Well, he doesn’t. While Iago’s motives seem to be endless, there is one that stands out from the rest. When talking with other characters he says that he has been slighted for promotion, proves himself to be a racist, and declares that he simply

“hate[s] the Moor”

[Act 1, scene 1.]

However, when addressing the audience, he mentions that he has heard a rumour that Othello has slept with his wife. Iago is never racist in his addresses to the audience, the only reason he gives us is his jealousy. Is Iago’s racism a front to hide his true motive from the other characters? His jealousy makes him spiteful, and he wants Othello to feel how he has felt, and so

initiates the events of the play. The whole sequence of events isn’t planned by Iago, he goes along with situations that are given to him, such as the relocation to Cyprus, obtaining the handkerchief, and murdering Desdemona and Cassio. It must be noted that Iago does not suggest murdering the pair, that is entirely Othello’s suggestion. Iago’s spite and continued jealousy enable him to know exactly how to mentally tip Othello over the edge, and he sees this as just revenge for what he believes has been done to him.

Iago never gets to explain himself at the end of the play. This is a clever move by Shakespeare, it keeps us guessing as to what his motivation was, and it suggests to some critics that he is simply psychotic. However, this is too simple an escape for such a complex character. Try writing an inner monologue of Iago’s thoughts as that final scene is played out. Compare with others in your class and discuss differences and similarities in the monologues.



IMAGE: Barry John O'Connor (Cassio) during rehearsals
for Othello by William Shakespeare.
Directed by Joe Dowling.

CASSIO

Michael Cassio is a young, learned, up-and-coming young man. He is progressing up through the ranks of the army swiftly, and is Othello's newly-appointed lieutenant. His loyalty to Othello is proved early in the play, as when Iago reveals that Othello has married he pretends to know nothing, though we later find out that it was he who helped Othello to woo Desdemona. Cassio has learned about war from books, not from experience, which makes him a very different soldier to Iago and Othello. On the whole he is a likeable character, and his devastation at losing his position is understandable. His appeals to Desdemona to help him are quite natural, he is a man desperate to restore his reputation. However, none of Shakespeare's characters are without faults, and it is his own drinking and ego that cause him to lose his reputation, helped of course by Iago's plotting. Cassio's behaviour towards Desdemona is honourable and noble throughout, and serves as a **dramatic foil** to Othello's worsening behaviour. But, as J.K. Rowling has taught us, "if you want to see the true measure of a man, watch how he treats his inferiors, not his equals" (Albus Dumbledore, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*), and for this our regard for Cassio starts to slide. Bianca, the likeable prostitute in love with Cassio, is not only slighted and ignored by him, but also mocked by him behind her back. Shakespeare reminds us that even Cassio has flaws, and that at the end of the play we are not left with a paradigm of goodness and honour and respect to take Othello's place, but just another man who, like Othello, is subject to human emotions, weaknesses and flaws.

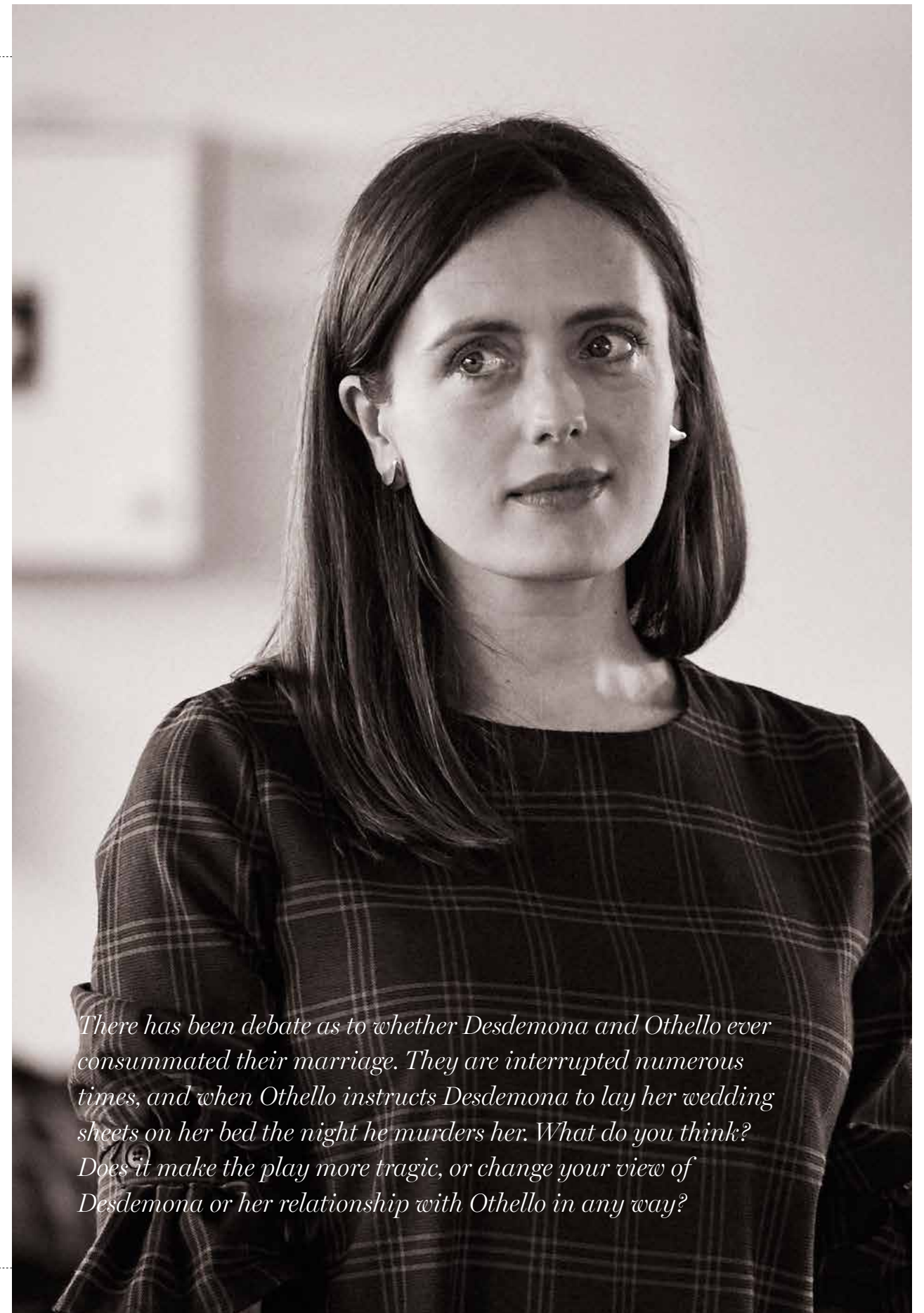


IMAGE: Barry John O'Connor (Cassio) during rehearsals for Othello by William Shakespeare. Directed by Joe Dowling.

DESDEMONA

Desdemona is a young, bright, kind, and dutiful woman of Venice. She is esteemed by all characters we meet in the play, and the love between herself and Othello is passionate and intense. She begins the play as a strong and wilful woman, eloping with Othello without her father's permission and marrying for love, but she ends the play as a different woman. She is still completely in love with Othello, but this love no longer gives her strength and support, it has soured. Instead this new love makes her meek and always attempting to appease her husband, even to the point where she does not want him to be brought to justice for her murder. Desdemona is an excellent example of how one partner's rejection and callous treatment can harm or change the other. She proves to us that the love between herself and Othello was true, as without it she wilts. They were a partnership and without this, she is not the same character we meet at the start. Playwright Marina Carr, renowned for her portrayals of strong women, describes Desdemona as merely a 'plot device' in the play. All we know of Desdemona in this play is in relation to Othello, she considers herself as an extension of him and therefore she is often treated as such, and her character doesn't get the chance to fully develop or show us any other side to her. In comparison to fascinating characters such as Iago, Desdemona is quite flat.

IMAGE: Rebecca O'Mara (Desdemona) during rehearsals for Othello by William Shakespeare. Directed by Joe Dowling.



There has been debate as to whether Desdemona and Othello ever consummated their marriage. They are interrupted numerous times, and when Othello instructs Desdemona to lay her wedding sheets on her bed the night he murders her. What do you think? Does it make the play more tragic, or change your view of Desdemona or her relationship with Othello in any way?

EMILIA

Emilia is undoubtedly the most interesting female character in this play. Together with her husband, they make a fascinating pair. As the play progresses we see more of her character, and learn more of her mind. Unlike Desdemona, she has a personality and an identity separate to her husband's. As an audience, we do pity her in a loveless marriage with a villainous man, but she has made the most of her situation and is devoted to Desdemona. Like the two other women of the play, her love never wavers or falters. The men may question their feelings and love, but the women all remain steadfast. Emilia, in what would have been a shocking speech at the time, asks if women and men are not the same? She asks if women should not look elsewhere if they are not getting affection from their husbands? At the end of the play, she is so devastated by the murder of Desdemona and the realisation of her husband's true nature that she declares she that even killing her then would be less pain than what she is experiencing. Described as the "most fluid" woman in the play by Marina Carr, Emilia has far more depth to her character than Desdemona. Without Emilia, Iago would never have gotten the handkerchief, and Othello would never have learned the truth about Iago's treachery, so she serves two very important **dramatic** functions in the play.

*Why does Emilia take the handkerchief for Iago?
What motivation or reasons might she have for
doing this?*



IMAGE: Karen Ardiff (Emilia) during rehearsals for Othello by William Shakespeare. Directed by Joe Dowling.

BIANCA

Bianca is a minor character in the play, we meet her on very few occasions, and always when we see her it has something to do with her relationship to Cassio. Like Desdemona, she is defined by the man she loves for the audience. Still, we can see that she is an honest, open, passionate woman who is in love with a man who she will never be able to marry. Bianca has a hard life, and her future doesn't look bright, and for this our perception of her is instantly filtered through a lens of pity. She is the least respected of our women and is able to interact freely with the soldiers but she is not accepted in 'respectable' society, and she represents the wanton female sexuality that men believe is the same in all Venetian women. However, in a sense, Bianca is our hero in this play. When confronted by jealousy, the power that has destroyed both Iago and Othello, and by extension Emilia and Desdemona, she confronts Cassio about the handkerchief and demands to know if her emotions are justified. By the end of the play she and Cassio are the only pair left alive and whole. The irony of Bianca behaving in a more rational and acceptable manner than the esteemed general and his popular ancient would not have been lost on Shakespeare's audiences.

IMAGE: Liz Fitzgibbon (Bianca) during rehearsals for Othello by William Shakespeare. Directed by Joe Dowling.



COSTUME DEPARTMENT DRAWINGS

These drawings by Sandra Gibney were used by her colleagues in the Costume Department to decipher who gets killed, implications for blood, doubles of costume & the duration of the play.

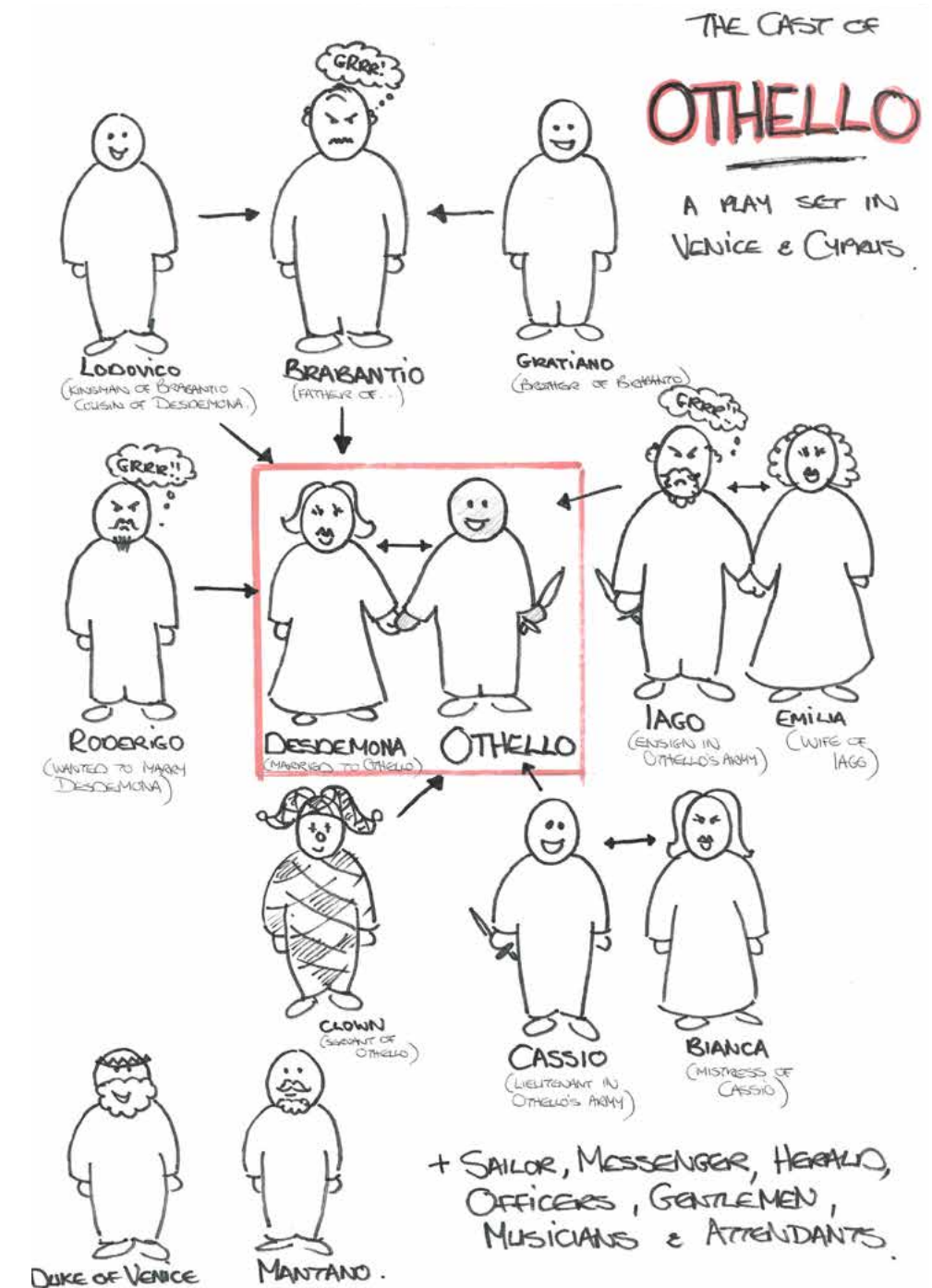


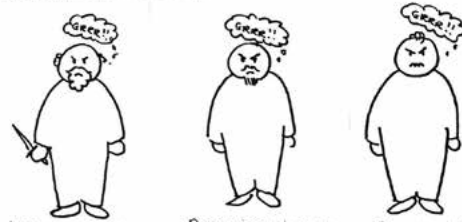
Image 1: The cast of Othello - Illustrations of cast used to show connections between characters

OTHELLO by William Shakespeare (A TRAGEDY SET IN Venice & Cyprus)



- Othello is a Moor, who is a General in the Venetian Army.
- He has just secretly married Desdemona, the daughter of Brabantio, a senator.

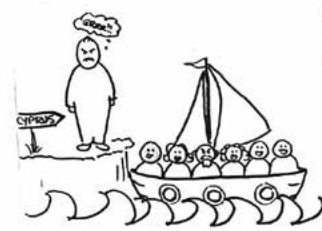
- A few people really hate Othello...



- Iago, a villain in the Venetian Army. Othello married a young girl named Desdemona to his lieutenant instead of his daughter. Iago is furious.
- Rodrigo, a Venetian gentleman. He and Desdemona are in love. He has just found out that his daughter has secretly married Othello the Moor.
- Brabantio, Desdemona's father. He's just found out that his daughter has secretly married Othello the Moor.

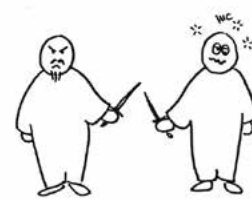
- When Brabantio finds out about the secret marriage, he goes off to find and punish Othello. Fortunately for Othello, news reaches Venice that the Turks are attacking Cyprus...

1



- Othello heads off with his armies and new wife to defend Cyprus. Brabantio warns Othello not to trust Desdemona. 'She has deceived her father and may thee.'

- They arrive in Cyprus to discover that a storm has wrecked out the Turkish fleet. They decide to celebrate! Othello goes off to have some time with Desdemona and the rest of them on.
- Iago sees his chance to get revenge on Othello and Cassio.

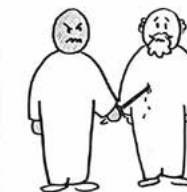


- Iago gets Cassio drunk and persuades Rodrigo to draw him into a fight. Othello has to break up the brawl, blames Cassio for it and demotes him.
- Iago suggests to Cassio that he should ask Desdemona to put a good word in for him with Othello.

2

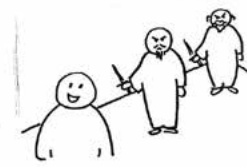


- Meanwhile, through some elaborate scheming, Iago has persuaded Othello that his wife has been unfaithful with Cassio.
- Othello is hopping mad and wants his revenge...

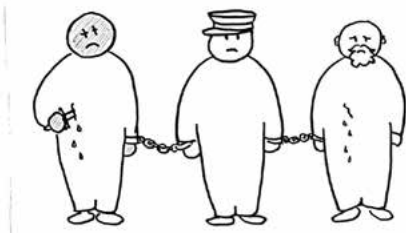


- Othello, realizing that Desdemona was innocent, stabs Iago, but not fatally. He wants Iago to live in pain for the rest of his life.
- Iago refuses to explain his motives, vowing to remain silent from that moment on.

- Iago persuades Rodrigo to kill Cassio. Rodrigo tries, but ends up injuring himself. Iago sneaks up and wounds Cassio in the leg. People come to assist Cassio, he says Rodrigo attacked him. Iago kills Rodrigo before he has a chance to flee.



- Meanwhile - Othello confronts Desdemona, then suffocates her. Emilia (Iago's wife and Desdemona's assistant) comes along, puts them together and realises what Iago's been plotting.
- Iago then kills Emilia.



- Iago and Othello are apprehended for the murders, but Othello kills himself with a hidden dagger.

THE END

3

4

IMAGE: Plot summary used by the costume department as notes to understand the key plot points.

CONCEPT





INTERVIEW WITH Fiach Mac Conghail

How are plays chosen for our National Theatre? Who chooses them, and why are they chosen? Often, audiences forget about the hidden world of the theatre and the months of work it takes to bring a play to life. From the hardworking backstage crew, to the costume department, the people who sell the tickets and our own finance team, the actors are only a small portion of the massive team of people it takes to bring a play together. To give students a better insight into the programming of a theatre, I spoke to the head of our Literary Department and poet, Jessica Traynor, and our artistic director, Senator Fiach MacConghail, about how and why plays, like 'Othello', are chosen.

When it comes to choosing plays for a programme, is it more of a personal preference or is it more of a cohesive theme throughout the whole theatre?

FIACH MACCONGHAIL, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR:

So, I programme within the context of the overall mission statement of the theatre and that's the driving force. The mission of the Abbey Theatre is to reflect and engage with Irish society,

and we do that through three different ways, through new writing, through looking at the Irish repertoire, the Irish canon, and we also do it through the international repertoire. In that then, of course, I test plays and in that there

are personal preferences I have. When I started in 2005 one of the key insights I received, particularly when I was talking to various writers like Tom Murphy and Marina Carr, was their shared love and admiration for what everybody calls the greatest writer ever, William Shakespeare. I noticed that sporadically in the history of the Abbey theatre there had been large gaps where Shakespeare hadn't been produced. And Shakespeare in terms of the audience, writers who want to learn, actors, designers, he is the greatest writer that you can be challenged by in terms of insight into human behaviour, design, the iambic pentameter, verse speaking. So it's a great training ground, but also great in terms of audiences, so as a part of my policy I decided we should do an annual Shakespeare play, and we've almost achieved that, there was only one year we didn't do it. The idea is that I wanted to place a particular play by Shakespeare every year, and that's why 'Othello' is included in the 'Waking the Nation' programme.

And, on the main Abbey Stage, he is the only non-Irish playwright, and he is 400 years dead this year. Is it a testament to how powerful his work is that he is still being programmed, and still relevant to modern Irish society?

FIACH MACCONGHAIL, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR:

Ya, so, there's many reasons. Sometimes the relation to modern Ireland doesn't have to be so obvious. I think the themes of Shakespeare are common to all of us, common to humankind. I was particularly interested to programme one of his plays in this year of commemorations knowing that we're also acknowledging the anniversary of his death. We're opening it around the time of his actual anniversary. That was important to me. Secondly, 'Othello' has never been done in the Abbey before and that's odd, and unique, and it's great for us to be able to give 'Othello' it's Abbey premiere. Some of his other plays have been done of course, like 'King Lear' but when we did 'King Lear' in CHECK DATE, it was almost 70 years since it had last been performed at the Abbey. So, I've been trying to reintroduce the works of

Shakespeare to the Abbey to challenge everybody-actors, and audiences. And 'Othello' is one of these great plays about power, about how one gains and maintains power. And I think this play is a great insight into that as well. So I wanted to do that, I wanted to celebrate Shakespeare and give 'Othello' it's Abbey premiere.

Great! The Abbey has a bit of a reputation for modernising Shakespeare's plays, how do you think that benefits students seeing it done in a non-traditional way?

FIACH MACCONGHAIL, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR:

It does and it doesn't, we don't present Shakespeare in a modern way for the sake of doing that, that's important, because his plays are brilliant, they're fantastic. We try to find what I would call a contemporary filter; you know how could you see 'Othello' through a contemporary filter? We do think that his plays are both timeless and universal, and that's the important thing. I do think that if an audience come to see a play set 400 years ago, that's ok if they're aware of their surroundings and the context and they can find something through it. We're not a museum. So therefore

we're not interested in putting plays on that are historically accurate, we're more interested in the contemporary performance and the contemporary moment. It doesn't matter where they're set for me, I think 'Othello' is one of those great plays and it's a privilege for me to produce for the Abbey.

Fantastic, what aspects of this production do you think will set it apart?

FIACH MACCONGHAIL, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR:

I think, for me one of Shakespeare's greatest characters is Iago. Iago's character and his trajectory through the play, his growth, the way he manipulates and the way he desires power and how he treats his peers for his own advancement is a study. If nothing else, I'm really looking forward to seeing how Marty Rea interprets that character. I'm also delighted to be welcoming back one of my illustrious successors in Joe Dowling. Joe was one of the most successful artistic directors the Abbey has ever

had. When he was at the helm here, he introduced a lot of Shakespeare to Irish audiences and I suppose that's where I got my inspiration from. So I think to see a contemporary production directed by one of my predecessors with Marty Rea as Iago is something I'm really looking forward to.

Brilliant, thanks so much. Lastly, for the students, what is your favourite Shakespeare play?

FIACH MACCONGHAIL, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR:

Ah! It changes but I think my favourite play, because I still find it elusive, is 'Hamlet'. I love Hamlet, I love the various versions I've seen and it's still a play that I'm still really not sure what it's about but I think as I read it all the time I can rediscover elements of it that are personal to me as I grow older, and I think that'd be my favourite play.

IMAGE: Marty Rea (Iago) in Othello by William Shakespeare. Directed by Joe Dowling. Photo by Pat Redmond.





INTERVIEW WITH Jessica Traynor

How far in advance usually are plays chosen to go on the stage?

JESSICA TRAYNOR, HEAD OF LITERARY DEPARTMENT:

Well it kind of depends on whether it's going to be a new play, i.e. a commission, or whether it's going to be a revival or a play from the canon. Fiach brings the programme together but the Literary department's involvement would be quite far in advance for planning. So, if we were to commission a play, for example 'Cyprus Avenue' (Peacock Theatre, 2016) generally that play might be two years in development before it's

considered ready for production. In most cases we're planning a season in advance, for example we are programmed up until the end of 2016 now, more or less, and then 2017 is when our two new Artistic Directors, Neill Murray and Graham McLaren, come on board. A lot of the time people don't realise how far in advance we have programmed, so for example we've been getting a lot of '1916' plays at the moment or at the end of last year, and obviously it seems perfectly reasonable that if something is sent in say, November, that it could be on the stage for the next year but in most cases I've had to say to them 'sorry, but we already have our programme

planned out'. Mostly, the most pressure from my point of view is exerted in making sure that the commissioned plays get their time on the stage and they are the ones we have the most information about, and that Fiach has the most information about in terms of his planning, because there is such a long gestation process for those. With plays like 'Othello' or the other Shakespearian plays, I know Fiach has been interested in making sure that Shakespeare has been an integral part of what we've done for the past ten years. Our tradition with Shakespeare was kind of sporadic before that, and it'll be interesting to see what our relationship with the

Shakespearian canon will be in the future. But, for 'Othello' I think Fiach was very interested in a play that both encompassed the political atmosphere of 2016, but also the human aspects. I think 'Othello', it has that fantastic line "I have done the state some service", which obviously was quoted by Charlie Haughey, so that has a huge resonance with Irish people that's not necessarily apparent to the wider world. But it's a play about politics with a big 'P' and a small 'p'. The big 'P' is the political notion of Othello's place within the state which is contested and a little bit uncertain because of his ethnic background and that's referred to constantly, and then there's politics with a small 'p', there's relationships between the various characters and their manipulation of each other. But all of that manipulation, a lot of it is prejudicated on a desire for power, but most of the desire in the play is based around attraction, love, sexual jealousy. I think it's a play that explores politics right from the very first stirrings of personal desire, right up to that kind of macrocosmic state level. So I think Fiach felt, looking at that, that it fits very well into our programme for 2016 with plays like 'The Plough and the Stars', which again really juxtaposes the personal, the individual story and the individual's trauma against the formation of the state as a whole, and 'Tina's Idea of Fun' by Sean P. Summers which

again is a very domestic, heartfelt exploration of Dublin now, and set against the pol backdrop of the Queen's visit. The same as 'Cyprus Avenue', it was one man's personal meltdown in terms of positing himself as part of this loyalist identity. I think in all of the plays you can see where personal drama and personal tragedy is set against the backdrop of these wider tectonic shifts in society.

When it comes to choosing the 'big' plays, does Fiach mainly choose them or is it a case where the Literary Department, and Fiach and maybe Development, Production, or other departments, are involved?

JESSICA TRAYNOR, HEAD OF LITERARY DEPARTMENT:

It can come together in many different ways, Fiach generally has an over-arching sense of what he wants each season to be. So, in the case of 'Othello', that was the one he presented as the one he was interested in doing this year. In other cases, we are looking at a number of different factors so for example, if you're trying to programme a Christmas show you have a number of different boxes you

want it to be able to tick in terms of you want it to be able sustain a long run, you want it to appeal to an audience that can be from 8-80, you hopefully want something with Irish interest, so there's lots of different things and a fair amount of research that goes on in terms of Fiach saying to the Literary Department 'I'm looking for this kind of play- can you suggest a number of different options'. And we do a lot of research into the Abbey cannon as well, and the Abbey repertoire and have a look for things that maybe haven't been produced in a while or are coming back around again so for example 'Sive', something that we've had a past relationship with but that hadn't been here for a while and something that we felt we'd love to give another outing and also to recognise that audiences have such a great love for the work of John B. Keane and it resonates so strongly today, and so it kind of comes about through a number of different channels. Also, what's currently going on, the current atmosphere in society, is something we're always attempting to reflect. Whether we succeed in that or not is another case, but that comes into it as well! So, there are a number of different routes for a play to get on the Abbey stage.

Brilliant, and do you think that 'Othello' reflects modern Irish society today? Do you think it's relevant for students?

JESSICA TRAYNOR, HEAD OF LITERARY DEPARTMENT:

Of course! Well, I think so! I think 'Othello' has a huge amount to teach us, as with most Shakespearian plays, and one of the things that's so interesting about Shakespeare is that he manages to evoke such universality in his creation of relationships and experience that even though there's a huge amount of time dividing his experience and ours, I think the works are quite easily mapped onto a number of different circumstances and a number of different times and that's because they deal with the mistakes that we, as a species, make over and over and over again. And I think racial insensitivity, sexual jealousy, all of the themes that come to bear in 'Othello' are very, very current for us now and even just how societies deal with perceived 'difference', in the wake of the marriage equality referendum [in 2015], and everything like that. I heard on the radio this morning that a woman had been

assaulted, she had suffered a homophobic assault on Camden Street in Dublin recently and I thought, we as a society can say we have embraced the perceived 'difference' and everybody is now an equal citizen of Ireland, and yet things like this can still happen. You can draw parallels with Othello's experience. And the jealousy in the play, he's not the only character who experiences this jealousy, all of the characters in this play- their sense of themselves has been unmoored slightly by Othello's presence- [myself and Jess stop to laugh at her terrible pun] he's a threat to them all in some way. His masculinity, his intelligence, his power. All of these things are sowing jealousy and insecurity in most of the other characters in some way, shape or form. Even coming back to Iago, who gives several reasons for his actions throughout the play, none of which really add up as to why he's so keen on Othello's destruction, on his downfall. I think that's one of the most interesting

psychological quirks of the play. But, again, it's something to do with the notion that even though we have, on an outward scale, claimed to have embraced diversity, human nature takes longer to change than that and there's something ugly beneath the surface in most of us, as a society. It's not necessarily the individuals, it is in the way that people come together that can rear its head in a very damaging way, and I think that there are the vestiges of those prejudices absolutely rife in Irish society and 'Othello' is a play that might just make us take pause and say, yes things are changing, yes things are changing for the better in terms of equality, in terms of diversity but psychologically we might be a couple of steps behind where we are outwardly.

OK, lastly, what is your favourite Shakespeare play?

JESSICA TRAYNOR, HEAD OF LITERARY DEPARTMENT:

My favourite Shakespeare play... I think is 'The Tempest' because it has such a great world-weariness to it, and a kind of magic and a metaphysical reach. It's just a play, for me, that I have seen a number of times and I could see again and again and again. It's really hard to choose one but 'The Tempest' is always the one that springs to mind.

STUDYING THE PLAY





THE SINGLE TEXT

IMAGE: (Top) Peter Gowen (Brabantio/ Ensemble), Michael Patrick (Officer/ Ensemble), Barry Barnes (Lodovico/ Ensemble), Laurence Falconer (Officer/ Ensemble), Malcolm Douglas (Officer/ Ensemble) and Cormac McDonagh (Officer/ Ensemble) during rehearsals for Othello by William Shakespeare. Directed by Joe Dowling.

'Othello' as a single text is a fantastic play for Leaving Certificate students to study. As one of Shakespeare's greatest tragedies, it gives us meaty characters, relevant themes, and fine examples of Shakespeare's signature mastery of language. When approaching any play as a single text, the best thing for any student to do is to set some time apart and spend a block of time thinking about the play. Spend some time thinking about the characters, their lives, hopes and ambitions. Consider the themes- would it be possible to stage this story in a modern day setting? Speak the lines aloud; get a feel for the

language techniques Shakespeare used to get a better understanding of them.

The worst thing in an exam is finding yourself half way through answering a question, only to realise you have changed your mind on what you are writing. The best preparation for answering on the single text, or any play you might be studying, is to have your opinions formed and know your own mind before going into the exam, as time is tight. Throughout this pack there have been various questions, aimed at students, to get you to consider various aspects of the play



differently. Use these questions to explore how you feel about the play. Discuss them in class, or within your own study group. Bouncing ideas and arguments off your peers is the best way to form an opinion on any play, and will help to cement your opinions, which will enable you to write coherent, full-bodied answers in your exam. Every student in the country is studying a single text and whether it's Shakespeare or not, students should keep in mind that their competition is also

getting notes from class or an online source. The only thing that can make your answer different, and make it stand out, is you. Your personal opinion is the strongest weapon you have when it comes to fighting for those crucial points in the exam. So take the time to develop your own opinions of the play, read through the interviews in this resource pack, have a look at the pictures of how we staged the production in 2016. Don't be afraid to disagree with anything you find in

this pack, use it to make your argument stronger. You don't agree with everything in life, so why agree with everything in English? Ask questions, form opinions, argue your case, and watch your English grades soar.

IMAGE: L-R Laurence Falconer (Officer/ Ensemble), Michael Patrick (Officer/ Ensemble), Marty Rea (Iago), Barry John O'Connor (Cassio), Peter Gowen (Brabantio/ Ensemble) and Cormac McDonagh (Officer/ Ensemble) during rehearsals for *Othello* by William Shakespeare. Directed by Joe Dowling.



IMAGE: Malcolm Douglas (Duke of Venice/
Ensemble), Des Cave (Montano/ Ensemble) and
Marty Rea (Iago) during rehearsals for Othello
by William Shakespeare. Directed by Joe Dowling.

CREDITS



Othello

Resource Pack 2016

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