



proudly presents

Harlem Shakespeare Festival's

(ALL FEMALE)

OTHELLO

STUDENT GUIDE

Content created by

Directors of Education

Breona Conrad and Joshua Murphy

contact:

outreach@swshakespeare.org

with any questions, concerns, or more fascinating Shakespeare trivia

OTHELLO



quick facts.

Theatrical history took place at the Vere Street Theatre on this date as Margaret Hughes took to the stage as Desdemona, becoming England's first professional actress.

8 December 1660

1943. America's most notable performance of Othello took to Broadway in 1943. Directed by Margaret Webster, this was the first production to feature a black Othello alongside an otherwise white cast. The production starred Paul Robeson in the title role; he had previously played the role in London in 1931. The 1943 production ran for 296 performances; one of the longest running Shakespearean plays in Broadway history. Along with this, this production was the first long performance of a Shakespearean play to be released on record. Paul Robeson is a Shakespearean rock star.

THE TEST OF TIME Brief history lesson: in 1649, King Charles I was executed on the grounds of high treason and thus began the Interregnum, or the time when the monarch was kicked off the throne. All of that was restored in 1660: The Restoration. Hooray! The Monarchy is back! Along with this, theatres, which were banned during the Interregnum, were reopened. Hooray! But here's the rub: though Shakespeare's works made a comeback, many of his works were adapted or tweaked to better fit the times and social climate. OTHELLO wasn't touched. It hit the stages in its original form on October 11, 1660. The themes of Othello are still very relevant in the 21st century. Can you think of any parallels?

WHAT'S IN A NAME? The name DESDEMONA is of Greek origin meaning "misery" and "unlucky." IAGO is the Spanish form of Jacob meaning "supplanter" or a person who trips up or overthrows. OTHELLO is a little more of a guess. The best guess is that Othello is derived from Otello, the Italian derivative of Otto meaning "rich and prosperous."

"There once lived in Venice a Moor, who was very valiant and of a handsome person..."

This is the opening line of Shakespeare's source for Othello: 16th century story *Un Capitano Moro* ("A Moorish Captain") by Italian writer Giraldi Cinthio. It was featured in a collection called *Hecatommithi*. The only named character in Cinthio's story is Desdemona. The other characters were: Moor (Othello), the Squadron Leader (Cassio), the Ensign (Iago), and the Ensign's Wife (Emilia).

MOOR You may have noticed the subtitle of this play: "The Moor of Venice." In 1600s Europe and England, the word "moor" was used to describe a person who was swarthy (dark skinned) or tawny (orange-brown) in skin tone.

HIS FINAL BOW Edmund Kean was an accomplished English actor in the 18th Century. Known to "play the whole round of tragedy, comedy, opera, farce," Kean had a turn at both Othello and Iago. On March 25, 1833, while onstage as Othello opposite his son, Charles, as Iago, Kean collapsed and died.

WAIT, COULD YOU SPELL THAT AGAIN? The first recorded performance of Othello occurred November 1, 1604. The title of the play was *The Moor of Venis* (yes, that is the correct spelling) written by...Shaxberd. Where's spellcheck when you need it?

The word 'honesty' or synonym of that word is spoken 52 times in the play—most commonly by Iago. Honest!

SCOUT'S HONOR

"BUT I WILL WEAR MY HEART UPON MY SLEEVE..."

Ever hear that phrase in a song or conversation? Have you ever spoken this phrase? If you've answered yes, you've encountered Shakespeare. Dialogue from Act 1 scene i, Iago:

"...But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve for daws to peck at: I am not what I am."

(psst...that's Latin for "persons of the drama" or, cast of characters as we know it)

Harlem Shakespeare Festival's
(ALL FEMALE)

Othello

dramatis personae



(That's the lowest ranking in a naval command.)

OTHELLO GENERAL IN THE VENETIAN MILITARY

IAGO OTHELLO'S TRUSTED, BUT CONNIVING, ENSIGN

CASSIO OTHELLO'S LOYAL AND MOST BELOVED CAPTAIN

RODERIGO CORRUPT VENETIAN, IN LOVE WITH DESDEMONA

MONTANO VENETIAN PREDECESSOR IN THE GOVERNMENT OF CYPRUS

OTHELLO'S WIFE; DAUGHTER OF BRABANTIO

DESDEMONA

IAGO'S WIFE AND DESDEMONA'S MAIDSERVANT

EMILIA

CASSIO'S LOVE

BIANCA

ALSO

SAILORS

(That is an official messenger.)

HERALD/SOLDIER

"Men should be what they seem..."
-Iago

HOLD ON!

This adaptation is full of significant cuts to the original text. Fear not! All of the major plot points are still very much in tact. One BIG change to this version is that our action begins in Cyprus, not Venice. Because of this, we never meet Desdemona's family. If you like this adaptation, read the whole text! When you do, you'll meet these guys:

BRABANTINO

VENETIAN SENATOR AND DESDEMONA'S FATHER

GRATIANO

BRABANTIO'S BROTHER

LODOVICO

BRABANTIO'S KINSMAN AND DESDEMONA'S COUSIN'S BROTHER

OTHELLO

In a single play, Shakespeare penned both his most disdainful villain and poignant tragic hero. To quote the introduction of *Othello* by Leslie Dunton-Downer and Alan Riding from their book *Essential Shakespeare Handbook*, "Iago's pathological fiendishness has never been surpassed in dramatic literature, set against Othello's honesty, love, and purity of principle." The following is a summary of the entire play; this production has been condensed and some characters and scenes have been completely cut for time and flow.

1

One name is at the center of every conversation: Othello. He has recently promoted Cassio to Lieutenant- a title Iago had been coveting. News has reached Brabantio, via Iago, his daughter, Desdemona, has secretly eloped with Othello. This news infuriates Brabantio and devastates Roderigo who is desperately in love with Desdemona. Brabantio is convinced Othello used witchcraft to woo Desdemona until she arrives and professes her love. Iago and Roderigo join forces to seek revenge against Othello. We set sail for Cyprus: Iago with Desdemona, Othello with a fleet to prepare for battle against the Turks.

2

Othello is still at sea for battle; news arrives that the Turkish fleet has wrecked. Meanwhile, Iago lands in Cyprus with Desdemona where they are greeted with great affection by Cassio, an affluent gesture that enrages and inspires Iago. Iago convinces Roderigo to confront Cassio with being in love with Desdemona. Othello arrives and throws a party to celebrate his marriage and the demise of the Turks. Iago convinces Cassio, who has a drinking problem, to get drunk. Cassio causes a scene and is disgraced by Othello. Iago then convinces Cassio to plead forgiveness through Desdemona; he plots to make Othello see the Cassio and Desdemona together.

3

Othello walks in on Cassio and Desdemona talking. Cassio leaves with haste and Desdemona takes to pleading to Othello on behalf of Cassio. These actions, fueled by Iago's sinister advice, takes hold and Othello becomes suspicious of Desdemona's fidelity. Emilia, Iago's wife, steals the handkerchief Othello gave to Desdemona so Iago can place it in Cassio's room to further the deception. Othello demands proof of the affair. First Iago claims that Cassio, while sleepwalking, passionately embraced him thinking Iago was Desdemona, but Othello doesn't bite. He then says he saw Cassio wipe his beard with Desdemona's handkerchief. This works. Desdemona presses Othello to speak with Cassio. Othello demands the handkerchief; she can't produce it. Uh-oh.

4

Iago sets up Othello to hear Cassio speaking candidly about his "affair" with Desdemona and does so by tricking Cassio into talking openly about his real relationship with Bianca. Othello is over the edge and seeks to murder Desdemona for revenge; Iago feeds that fire. Word comes that Othello must away and Cassio is to be put in charge in Cyprus. Roderigo confronts Iago about not delivering gifts to Desdemona on his behalf as promised. Iago spins this into convincing Roderigo that what needs to happen is Cassio being murdered. Desdemona, now full of fear, confides in Emilia.

5

Roderigo and Cassio fight; Roderigo is injured. Running to his "aide," Iago takes the opportunity to kill Roderigo. Cassio gets away with a leg wound. Othello watches Desdemona sleep as he contemplates killing her. She awakes and pleads her innocence after Othello confronts her to confess her sin. He smothers her and then confesses to Emilia. His confession leads Emilia to connect the dots of the command to steal the handkerchief; Iago immediately kills her upon the confession and is swiftly arrested. Cassio then enters and reveals the entire plot to Othello. Overcome with remorse and sorrow, Othello stabs himself.

Not Your Average Shakespearean Tragedy

Ever wonder why, after 400 years, the works of Shakespeare are the most performed plays in the world? One of the reasons is that his plays explore humanity, and humanity is ALWAYS relevant.

"But, study guide," you ask, "what about some of the devices Shakespeare uses, like the poison in *Romeo and Juliet* that makes Juliet appear dead or the incantations of witches in *Macbeth*, or the ghost in *Hamlet*, or the ghost in *Julius Caesar*? And we don't live in a monarchy.

None of those examples are relevant to our real world." *Othello* is different. This play explores societal hot buttons that are still very much a part of our 21st century lives:

"Oh, beware, my lord, of jealousy!  **JEALOUSY**
It is the green-eyed monster which doth mock
The meat it feeds on..." -Iago, Act 3 scene 3

The overwhelming driving force in *Othello* is jealousy: Iago and Roderigo act out of jealousy and it is the single force that leads to Othello's undoing. Today, we don't really call it "the green-eyed monster," but have you ever encountered the phrase "green with envy" in conversation or in a movie, TV show, or book? **Have you ever made a choice influenced by jealousy?**

RACE  "And, noble signior,  -The Duke of Venice -
If virtue no delighted beauty lack, Act I Scene iii
Your son-in-law is far more fair than black."

Unrest due to an interracial marriage and snap judgements and assumptions based on skin color. No, I am not describing an episode of *Parenthood*. 400 years ago, people dealt with the very same issues and the hold and effect of racism is still palpable in our daily lives.

Do you personally know anyone affected by racism?

"...And, though he in a fertile climate dwell, **MANIPULATION** 
Plague him with flies. Though that his joy be joy,
Yet throw such changes of vexation on 't
As it may lose some color..." -Iago, Act I scene i

Insert name of any Soap Opera here...or *Game of Thrones*! House Lannister is fueled by manipulation. But, let's get back to reality: bending the truth to suit our needs is a tactic we use regularly. From little white lies to full on fraud, manipulation is EVERYWHERE in our lives.

Have you ever faked being sick to get out of class?

REPUTATION  "Reputation, reputation, reputation!
Oh, I have lost my reputation! I have
lost the immortal part of myself..." -Cassio,
Act 2 scene iii

Social media presence. Number of followers. Being voted Prom King or Queen. Earning the title of most epic prank. It's the basis of every high school rom-com: reputation = status.

Have you ever worried what others might think of you?

"It is a creature  **GENDER**
That dotes on Cassio—as 'tis the strumpet's
plague... /He, when he hears of her, cannot restrain
From the excess of laughter..." -Iago, Act 4 scene i

Let's face it, the women in *Othello* are not treated well. Women around the world still fight for equality and for their voices to be heard. Think about this: Arizona elected its' FIRST two female senators in 2018.

Do you know anyone affected by #MeToo?



Meet Debra Ann Byrd! She's the founder of the Harlem Shakespeare Festival and plays the title role.

In January, Debra Ann took the time to answer these questions from the Education Department here at SSC:



Can you talk to us a little bit about The Harlem Shakespeare Festival? What can I expect if I were to plan a trip to New York to experience the Festival?

With the plays of William Shakespeare as its foundation, the Harlem Shakespeare Festival™ is a classical theatre festival spanning across Harlem with ongoing programming from late summer through early spring. The festival, now celebrating it's 7th season was formed with a social justice mission to foster understanding and unity in the arts by producing special events and plays with multicultural casts, with a special emphasis in giving center stage opportunities to women, youth and especially classically trained actors of color. The Festival, inaugurated in summer 2013, brings Shakespeare scripts alive featuring 3-5 Shakespeare and modern plays, master classes, panel discussions, workshops, international symposiums, artist talk-backs, Shakespeare4Kids, ShakespeareInMusic, ShakespeareOnFilm, and Shakespeare-In-The-Open-Air.

What is it about Shakespeare that lights you up?

The main thing about Shakespeare that lights me up is his use of words and language. It not only lights me up, but inspires me and empowers me all at once! Being an actress who gets to "speak the speech" is like having superpowers. It is like wearing a large magical cape. And this super-cape lights me up and gives me the power to stand tall, to break barriers, to bring people together and to walk boldly towards my dreams and goals!

Why an all female Othello?

The Harlem Shakespeare Festival chose to produce an all-female Othello in order to give more opportunities to female classically trained actresses. The opportunity to play roles traditionally outside of their reach, gives women the ability to stretch and flex their acting muscles, which in turn gives them the chance to reach towards their highest potential.

What is your most memorable moment on stage?

I would have to say that my most memorable moment on stage happened while performing Othello in 2015. My Othello was quite emotional at the realization that Desdemona was dead and moreover that he was responsible. I began to say a line that began with "O". When I opened my mouth to speak the words, a sound came rushing from my belly, my head and body reared back and I let out a such a roar as would shake the room. It was as if I was levitating. I recall having to tell myself to come back to the stage and finish the line. Wow!, I thought, I will never forget such a moving moment.



Debra Ann Byrd as Othello

