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**Article:**

Mold, G. (2024) Review of Shakespeare's Othello (Directed by Ola Ince for Shakespeare's Globe) at the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse, London, 8 February 2024. Shakespeare, 20 (3). pp. 485-488. ISSN 1745-0918

<https://doi.org/10.1080/17450918.2024.2348827>

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# Review of Shakespeare's *Othello* (Directed by Ola Ince for Shakespeare's Globe) at the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse, London, 8 Feb 2024

A contemporary production of *Othello* is always going to be contentious amongst audiences, critics and scholars alike. The tension arises around how one should handle the play's racism in light of contemporary socio-political events. Should the racism inherent in the play be softened or emphasised, or should the focus entirely be changed? How can you manage the themes of racism while giving fair attention to its depiction of misogyny? Do these themes need to be given attention at all or does the play merely reflect its moment of production? I am of the school of thought that the problems around racism and misogyny in the play must be handled with care, and presented in ways that are recognisable to modern audiences, to be received constructively by spectators, and that is precisely what director Ola Ince managed to do with her production of *Othello* for Shakespeare's Globe.

Ince's production aptly updated the world of the play to the present day: the Venetian army became the Metropolitan police and Cyprus was the Docklands. The production made use of a space where the camaraderie amongst colleagues, together for long periods of time on long operations, is akin to that of the soldiers of *Othello*. The Met was an appropriate site for the modernisation; the institution's hierarchical structure mirrors that of the military, and the issues of racism and misogyny in early modern England represented in the play similarly, and topically, pervade the contemporary police force. The relocation was then made even more compelling through its ability to help Shakespeare's play speak to the concerns and anxieties of its contemporary audience. The updated style also pumped energy and pace into the tragedy which in its first moments resembled a BBC crime drama series and unfolded as a thriller. This was supported by the beautiful low-fi jazz score from Renell Shaw that, at accordant times, dipped into spells of uneasiness and darkness.

The play began with a montage of Othello's recent life events on fast-forward. In the space of a few minutes, the audience watched Othello in the midst of a raid, catching the criminal, being rewarded for his heroic efforts, proposing to Desdemona, gifting her the handkerchief and marrying his love. This opening gave both Othello, and Othello and Desdemona as a couple, credibility. A significant feature of the play as printed is that so much is heard about Othello before he is ever seen and this montage worked to reverse that balance. Since the audience bore witness to events usually withheld from them as the action of play begins after these milestones have occurred, they were able to see both exactly what Othello loses throughout the duration of the play and the mutual love he and Desdemona share. Othello was not Desdemona's exotic fantasy, nor her wooer via dark magic as Brabantio insisted; their romance was presented as one of a legitimate and evolving burn.

Their chemistry remained convincing throughout. Desdemona often proves a difficult role to perform in contemporary circumstances because the character is painted as an Elizabethan paragon of femininity and virtue, yet, a modernisation requires a parallelism between her and Othello, reshaping the submissive wife role. Poppy Gilbert mastered treading this line as she

offered a thoughtful rendering of a hopeful young woman, able to set boundaries for herself and on an equal platform to her husband. She was suitably enchanting but her naivety was refreshingly replaced with an awareness of her worth. Ince took playful liberties with Shakespeare's script to redefine Desdemona as a 'Chelsea girl', successfully adapting her well-rounded Elizabethan character to a modern day it-girl.

These changes to the dialogue, although clunky at times, introduced new ideas about privilege into the play. Roderigo was a 'Chelsea boy', socially destined to be with Desdemona; Cassio was an entitled 'Eton' graduate, whose social background determined his high ranking position; and Othello was shown rising through the ranks due to his own merit. These social rankings gave Iago, who was also presumably from an affluent borough of London, a cogent case for his response to being snubbed. Ralph Davis's Iago was understated which, in some ways, worked well with the contemporary lens since he was an unexpected everyman. Additionally, his character avoided charming the audience and making for an Iago-centric production, which can prove problematic. Much of the humour that is typically afforded to Iago was placed on Roderigo, the clownish brat and part-time deliveroo driver and plumber, serving in jobs that got him that bit closer to Desdemona. On the other hand, Iago's lacking performance made for uninspired monologues and disbelief at his ability to pull off his puppetry, which was perhaps why each time he tried to manipulate a character, the band made a recurring musical note, to emphasise his stratagem.

Nonetheless, his relationship with Emilia was surprisingly stirring. Her desire to please him in the form of securing the handkerchief made perfect sense as the pair had a kittenish tousele for it, although it was clear for Iago that the stakes riding on it were high. Emilia was not presented as his meek wife or Desdemona's maidservant, but another officer in the police force. The change was welcome and although, at moments, it seemed superficial as Desdemona ordered her around, the two were mostly placed on an equal footing. As Desdemona bid her goodnight in the final act, Emilia covertly passed an item to Desdemona. It was not clear to me exactly what the item was: I speculate a walkie-talkie or a knife in keeping with the other props used, but this subtle gesture between friends added a new dimension to the play. The actors performed their roles as though they were unaware of what awaited Desdemona, yet they were simultaneously vigilant. This might have been meant to signal Emilia's awareness of domestic abuse from her partner, Iago; it may have been a comment on the unprotected safety of women alone leading to hypervigilance; or it may have been exploring Desdemona's willingness to be murdered. Desdemona's apparent acceptance of her fate and refusal to blame Othello for her murder can be seen as an act of taking control, an expression of her undying love or an indication of her passivity and total submission. Ince gave Desdemona more ways out, supplying her with the weaponry or device to put a stop to it, yet she still chose not to.

Where Desdemona may have had some control over her fate, Othello's agency was completely removed from his. As Othello was about to shoot himself at the play's end, a voice shouted 'TASER, TASER' from behind, before he was stunned and fell to the floor. Following this, both Othello and Iago were marched out in handcuffs, briefly pausing for mugshots, as headlines about 'mental health in the police', 'the black beast' and 'cops gone bad' were shouted, overtly connecting the tragedy of the play with contemporary police concerns, institutional racism, toxic masculinity and mental health, as well as with the media's treatment of these issues.

Ken Nwosu commanded the stage as Othello, delivering Shakespeare's lines with a cadence that made them feel fresh and connected. The programme and marketing for the production indicated the presence of a second Othello, a subconscious Othello, who portrayed Othello's internal thoughts through physicality and movement on the stage. This idea of a literal embodiment of W. E. Du Bois' notion of 'double consciousness', a theory that Jeffrey Boakye references in the programme, intrigued me, especially alongside the lighting of the Sam Wanamaker playhouse, lit only by candlelight and police torches, choosing what was seen and what was not. Regrettably, this aspect of the play was not present on the day I saw the production and Ira Mandela Siobhan (subconscious Othello) was absent from the performance but I believe the fragmented state of Othello, highlighting his dual self-perception as a black man facing racist discrimination, would have emphasised the play's currently faint references to mental health and the psychological effects of racial trauma.

The production did, however, draw attention to the racial trauma that Othello suffers. Ince elected to front-load the production with the racist remarks made about Othello in Shakespeare's play. 'Moor', 'old black ram tupping your white ewe' and 'devil' are some of the quotes that cast members chanted through walkie-talkies whilst wearing police uniforms and balaclavas after the play's opening montage. Foregrounding the racism worked well to stress to the audience the treatment of Othello in the workplace, how microaggressions and abuse might amass and, by placing them together, helped to forestall the laughter that such epithets sometimes generate when they were spoken by characters later on. This carefulness over tone and response was in keeping with a production of Othello that not only anatomised racism but sought to inhibit its unconscious perpetuation.