

National Theatre Collection

Othello – Learning Guide

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About

This learning guide supports the National Theatre's production of *Othello*, directed by Nicholas Hytner, which opened on 23rd April 2013 at the National's Olivier Theatre in London.

Our packs are designed to support viewing the recording on the **National Theatre Collection**. This pack provides links to UK school curriculum and other productions in the Collection. It also has a plot synopsis with timecodes to allow you to jump to a particular section of the play.

Here you'll also find all the information you need to enable you to study the production and write about it in detail. This includes notes about all of the key elements from performance style to design. You'll also find pointers for further research.

Background Information

Recording Date – 26th September, 2013

Location – Olivier Theatre, National Theatre

Age Recommendation – 12+

Cast

Roderigo	Tom Robertson
Iago	Rory Kinnear
Brabantio	William Chubb
Othello	Adrian Lester
Cassio	Jonathan Bailey
The Duke of Venice	Robert Demeger
Lodovico	Nick Sampson
Senator	Joseph Wilkins
Official	Rebecca Tanwen
Official	David Carr
Desdemona	Olivia Vinall
Montano	Chook Sibtain
Soldier	Sandy Batchelor
Soldier	Gabriel Fleary
Officer	Scott Karim
Emilia	Lyndsey Marshal
Bianca	Rokhsaneh Ghawam-Shahidi
Gratiano	Jonathan Dryden Taylor
Soldier	Adam Berry
Soldier	David Kirkbride
Soldier	Tom Radford

Creative Team

Director	Nicholas Hytner
Designer	Vicki Mortimer
Music	Nick Powell
Lighting Designer	Jon Clark
Sound Designer	Gareth Fry
Fight Director	Kate Waters

Teaching Information

This production is particularly suitable for:

- **English Literature** students who are studying the play for A Level.
- **Drama and theatre** students who are studying the play under the theme of Heroes and Villains for A Level.
- Anyone with an interest in **contemporary staging** of Shakespeare's plays.

In particular you might like to explore:

- The director's decision to relocate the action of the play to a 21st century army camp and how this affects our understanding of the social, historical and political context of the play.
- The role of women in the play, particularly in the context of this contemporary staging.
- The set, costume, lighting and sound design and how they contribute to creating the world of the play.

Production Notes

Adaptation Details *

Very little of the original play is cut in this version with a few minor changes and directorial decisions. The play is set in the modern day.

Although the production has been modernised, the design and directorial decisions still make it very clear that status, violence, deception and the place of women in patriarchal (and military) society are key themes.

- Gentlemen and Officers are simply referred to as Soldiers
- The Clown and Musician are cut
- Act II, Scene ii is cut

* Using *Arden Shakespeare Third Series* edition of *Othello*

Production Notes

The following notes have been compiled to help guide you through the significant design and performance aspects as you watch the production, or to remind you of them after you have watched it. You may also want to make your own notes and form your own opinions on the effectiveness of these aspects as you explore the production.

Key Design Elements: Set

- Naturalistic set, includes external and internal locations.
- A number of locations such as the Duke's office, Othello's office, the mess room and Othello & Desdemona's room are all trucked on and off. They also often create external locations – such as the barracks – and then the scene transitions take place with the removal of an external wall to reveal the rooms inside.
- The creation of the port and barracks is also through colour and material – matted greys of concrete barriers, wire fencing and utilitarian lighting (such as on the concrete barricades). A gap upstage, through which many characters make their entrance and exits, also allows lights to be used to indicate passing vehicles.



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- The mess room – where the fight between Cassio and Montano occurs – is very detailed, including mismatched chairs (folding metal chairs, a wicker chair, a low sofa), metal lockers, and plastic drinks crates. Additional set dressing includes a cork noticeboard including photos of soldiers. There are also a number of posters/photos showing women in bikinis/scanty clothing to reflect the very masculine nature of the location.



- Othello's office is also highly detailed and naturalistic – maps on the walls and even an emergency evacuation plan show the level of detail included by the designers. Filing cabinets, a printer, a drinks fridge, desks and laptops also provide opportunities for actors to behave as a character would in that setting. Note that Othello's desk also provides an additional level on which Iago sits and becomes visibly higher (and higher in status/power) than Othello in Act III scene iii. Again the office is functional rather than decorative in style and is therefore muted in colour (scuffed magnolia walls, grey filing cabinets etc). Consider how the presence of women in Cyprus is unusual – they are constantly in official, operative military locations. The sense of a war zone is always present. Even Othello & Desdemona's bedroom is functional and plain – there is no sense of permanence.
- The only location that is not official or military is seen in Venice (Act I scene I, visibly from the beginning of the performance) – the exterior of a pub

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(completed with a blackboard advertising food), and the window of buildings, the stage left one being Brabantio's house. There are two storeys to these. There are also paving slabs on the floor to reflect the street. It is a clean and upper class location, Brabantio's status partly being reflected in this design. Note the detail that is visible in Brabantio's house when he opens his first floor window.

Key Design Elements: Costume

- All costumes reflect the naturalistic style of the production. Remember that the costume not only reflects status and occupation, but the heat of Cyprus, too.
- Army fatigues, including combat and camouflage shirts and T-shirts, army boots are worn by all characters involved in the military. This includes **Emilia**. Status is indicated by characters' epaulettes. Berets and combat helmets (with goggles) and weapons also form costume for a significant number of main characters and ensemble.
- **Roderigo's** non-military background and the way in which he does not conform to various ideas of masculinity (in comparison to military personnel including Othello, of whom he is jealous) is reflected in his costume which includes boat shoes, blue chinos with rolled up cuffs, cotton long sleeved shirts etc. Pinks, blues and whites contrast sharply with the military camouflage of other characters. He is out of place here. The designer has also reflected Roderigo's financial status in his costume – he is well dressed, his clothes look expensive – but he is out of place in this military setting.
- **Desdemona's** costumes are feminine but reflect both the modern setting *and* her own modern outlook. Light coloured T-shirts, checked Capri trousers, tracksuit bottoms in blues, white, grey, turquoise etc. Desdemona often wears espadrilles/ Toms style shoes, or leather sandals in the scenes where she has dined with Othello and other officers. She appears at her most vulnerable in Act V scene ii in bed, when she is wearing a white T-shirt and blue knickers. It makes her look even smaller and more fragile in contrast to Othello.
- **Bianca** wears much brighter clothes, and appears more brash. Her black short-sleeved kimono style cardigan has sequined/applique patches. She wears a patterned white blouse, lime green trousers and is also seen in a cropped white top with spaghetti straps. She shows a lot more of her body than the other two female characters. She wears pink strappy sandals.
- In Venice **Iago** wears a navy polo shirt, navy slacks and a navy bomber jacket – although he is military, Venice is not a war zone so he wears civilian-style clothes.

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- **Brabantio** appears elderly and vulnerable in Act I scene I when Iago and Roderigo rouse him – he is in white pyjamas. He changes into corduroy-style trousers, V-neck jumper, and wax jacket. He is a man of status but he is also considerably older than many of the other characters.
- We first see **Othello** in a navy, well-cut suit, with a crisp white shirt. He uses cufflinks (another sign of status) on his shirt. His shirt is open necked (no tie). He is comfortable in this suit, which is formal and reflects his status – we never see him in leisure/relaxed clothes. Othello is much more comfortable in his military role than in his role as an ordinary husband/citizen and his costume reflects this. He wears reading glasses in the scenes in his office – another hint to age, focus, and attention to detail.



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Key Design Elements: Lighting

- The lighting reflects location and atmosphere in particular.
- The shifts in time are also represented by the intensity and colour of the lighting, which can be tracked throughout the recording.
- Internal locations in Cyprus use the fluorescent lighting in the offices and mess room as well as a wash of light in cold whites to reflect the artificiality of the light inside the rooms.
- Note that the majority of Iago's soliloquies take place in near darkness, a spotlight focussed on Iago who stands downstage to deliver these soliloquies to the audience.
- In the barracks scenes, pay attention to the way in which lighting is used from the sides to create the sense of vehicles arriving and departing.
- Floodlights are used in the barracks scenes – a sense of brightness, suggestion of security/vigilance, and the metaphorical significance of actions being in plain sight (i.e. Iago being 'honest').
- The colour palette is not particularly wide in this production – instead atmosphere and location are created through the use of intensity.
- Note the back lighting of Act I scene i to suggest a street scene (the windows of the buildings of Venice).
- Outside floodlights used in exterior scenes, e.g. Desdemona and Emilia drinking in Act IV scene iii.



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Key Design Elements: Sound

- Recorded sound effects include planes and helicopters but this is used sparingly – the action is all based on relationships and so too much would be distracting and unnecessary.
- Scenes that take place in the evening (such as the ‘willow’ scene also use the recorded sound effect of crickets to reflect the heat of the location.
- Music assists maintain pace and tension during brief scene changes. Rock-style guitar with a pulsing beat creates the sense of forward-movement and an unstoppable chain of events. Other string instruments including cello have a deep, resonant sound, which often hints at tragedy.

Key Design Elements: Wigs, Hair and Make-up

- Characters’ hairstyles are natural, with military personnel conforming to short/cropped hair.
- Emilia wears her hair in a plait or ponytail – she is also a soldier whilst Desdemona’s much longer hair is worn down in some scenes (it is tied back in others which often simply suggests the heat/practicality).

Performance Style

- The naturalistic acting style is maintained throughout. The blank verse of the play sounds conversational and natural to the audience, as does the prose.
- There are no static scenes – one of the ways in which the pace and tension is created is by having constant movement. Even in Act I scene iii (the Duke’s office/chamber), the scene is blocked to include movement around the office, some characters sitting whilst others stand, and Shakespeare’s script provides enough entrances and exits to avoid any slowing of pace.
- Iago and Othello both deliver soliloquys that offer excellent opportunities to focus on their language and delivery.

Production Notes

Key Moments

You might like to consider these key moments in particular when you are studying the production.

- Act I scene i – Roderigo and Iago taunt Brabantio. (0:04:00 – 0:07:10)
- Brabantio’s response and Othello’s ‘Rude am I in my speech’ monologue. (0:13:00 – 0:19:32)
- Desdemona, Brabantio and Othello, Act I scene iii. (0:19:36 - 0:25:08)
- Iago’s first soliloquy. (0:28:00 – 0:31:00)
- Scene change: external to internal, as an example of set design. (0:47:30)
- The drinking scene. (0:47:30 – 1:01:05 (to end of Iago’s soliloquy))
- Act III scene iii from “I like not that”. (1:06:35 – 1:18:12)
- Act V scene ii, Othello’s “It is the cause” speech. (2:25:35)

Plot Synopsis

Act I, Scene i: Roderigo, who has been courting Desdemona, is distressed at Iago's news that she has eloped with Othello, a Moorish general in the service of Venice. Iago, who is Othello's aide, assures Roderigo that he also hates the Moor because Othello has denied him a promotion that went instead to Cassio. He says that he only continues to serve the general in the hope of revenge. Iago and Roderigo awaken Desdemona's father, Brabantio, to inform him of the elopement.

Act I, Scene ii (0:07:18): Iago tells Othello of Brabantio's anger, as Cassio arrives with word that the general has been summoned by the Duke to a council of war. Brabantio and Roderigo arrive. The angry father, informed of the Duke's council, plans to accuse Othello there.

Act I, Scene iii (0:11:32): The Duke and several Senators receive news of an imminent Turkish attack on the Venetian island of Cyprus. Othello and Brabantio arrive and Brabantio makes his accusation. Othello replies that Desdemona loves him and has married him of her own free will. When she is summoned she supports his account. Brabantio concedes, and the meeting turns to business: Othello is ordered to leave for Cyprus.



Plot Synopsis

Desdemona is to live there with him, and Iago is to escort her in a later ship.

Privately, Iago assures Roderigo that Desdemona will soon repent marriage to the Moor, and that he will continue to help him with his pursuit of Desdemona in Cyprus. Roderigo agrees and leaves. Alone, Iago reiterates his hatred for Othello and plots revenge upon both he and Cassio; he will make the general believe that Cassio is the lover of his new wife.

Act II, Scene i (0:31:06): In Cyprus the Venetian governor, Montano, and several Soldiers discuss a great storm that destroyed the Turkish fleet. Iago arrives with his wife Emilia, Desdemona, and Roderigo. Othello eventually arrives and greets his wife affectionately, in stark contrast to Iago's behaviour towards Emilia.



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All apart from Iago and Roderigo go inside. Iago proposes a plot: he says that Desdemona is in love with Cassio and proposes that Roderigo pick a fight with the lieutenant while he commands the guard that night, in the hopes that fighting on duty will disgrace Cassio. Roderigo agrees. Alone, Iago meditates on the course of his plans: he will embarrass Cassio in front of Othello and get credit from the general, while at the same time making him sick with jealousy.

Act II, Scene ii: Cut.



Plot Synopsis

Act II, Scene iii (0:44:30): Despite Cassio's insistence that a little alcohol will make him very drunk, Iago convinces him to drink for the sake of the public holiday. They join others at the party, where Iago makes Cassio drink to excess. Drunk and aggressive, Cassio exits. Iago tells Roderigo to go after him; he shortly reappears, pursued by the drunken lieutenant, who gets into a fight with Montano. A brawl breaks out and the alarm sounds. Othello appears and angrily dismisses Cassio from his post. Left alone with a dismayed Cassio, Iago convinces him that his only hope of recovering his position is to get Desdemona to present his case to Othello. Cassio agrees and leaves, and Iago exults in the success of his scheme.

Act III, Scene i (1:03:42): Iago sends Emilia to Cassio; she assures him that Desdemona favours his cause and agrees to take him to meet with the general's wife.

Act III, Scene ii (1:04:58): Othello gives Iago letters to relay to the Venetian Senate and prepares to conduct an inspection of the fortifications.

Act III, Scene iii (1:05:20): Desdemona assures Cassio she will plead his case to Othello. Cassio and Desdemona withdraw together as Othello and Iago approach; Iago pretends to regard this suspiciously. Desdemona returns and asks Othello to take Cassio back, and he agrees. She leaves, and Iago begins to ask leading questions about Cassio. He pretends to be reluctant to express his suspicion, but goes on to inflame Othello with the idea of a sexual affair between Cassio and Desdemona. He suggests that if Othello delays Cassio's reappointment he can investigate. Othello fears that Desdemona has been unfaithful because he is black or because he is old, but he tries to resist the thought.

Desdemona and Emilia arrive to accompany him to a banquet. As they leave, Desdemona drops a handkerchief that was Othello's first gift to her. Emilia picks it up, and Iago takes it from her as she leaves. He states his intention to plant it on Cassio.

Othello returns and demands proof of Desdemona's infidelity. Iago asserts that he heard Cassio sleep talking about the affair and has Desdemona's handkerchief.

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Enraged, Othello goes on his knees to formally swear vengeance, and Iago affirms his loyalty and joins him in the oath, promising to kill Cassio.

Interval

Act III, Scene iv (1:35:36): Desdemona laments to Emilia about the loss of her handkerchief; Emilia denies seeing it. Othello enters and demands his handkerchief. He says it was charmed by an Egyptian sorceress so that the woman who lost it would be damned in the eyes of her lover. Desdemona denies that it is lost. She tries to change the subject back to Cassio, putting Othello in a rage. Iago and Cassio enter; Desdemona remarks on Othello's strange anger, and Iago volunteers to go see the general. The women leave. Cassio as Bianca, Cassio's mistress, enters. She chastises Cassio for not seeing her more often. He asks her to make him a copy of the embroidered handkerchief he has found.

Act IV, Scene i (1:44:19): Iago says that Cassio has admitted to sleeping with Desdemona. Othello is beside himself with rage, he vomits and faints; Iago has drugged him. Cassio appears, and Iago tells him he has important news that he will



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give him once Othello has recovered and they can speak alone. Cassio leaves, and Othello awakens. Iago tells him that if he eavesdrops on the meeting he has arranged with Cassio, the general will hear Cassio speak of his affair with Desdemona. Cassio returns, and Iago speaks to him of Bianca. With amused disrespect, Cassio laughs about how she presumes to think she'll marry him, and Othello, seething in asides, believes he is speaking of Desdemona. Bianca arrives, angry about the handkerchief, which she believes was given to Cassio by another woman. Othello now thinks that Cassio has given Desdemona's love token to a harlot. Bianca and Cassio leave, and Othello says he will kill Desdemona; Iago promises to kill Cassio that night.

Lodovico arrive from Venice calling Othello back and placing Cassio in command of Cyprus. When Desdemona is pleased, Othello hits her. He orders her away, agrees to return to Venice and then leaves. Lodovico is surprised at Othello's behaviour, but Iago confides that he is often even worse.

Act IV, Scene ii (1:59:41): Othello quizzes Emilia who says there is no reason to suspect Desdemona and Cassio. He does not believe her and sends her to summon his wife. When Desdemona appears he accuses her and ignores her denials. He leaves in a rage and lets Emilia re-enter. When Desdemona tells Emilia of Othello's state, she fetches Iago, and the two try to reassure her.

Iago leaves and is approached by Roderigo. He complains that Iago has taken his money and jewels and done nothing for him. Iago tells him that because Cassio is to replace Othello as governor, the general is leaving and will take Desdemona with him. Iago promises to help Roderigo kill Cassio so that Othello will have to stay, and Desdemona will remain within reach.

Act IV, Scene iii (2:13:17): Othello and Desdemona bid farewell to Ludovico. On his way out, Othello tells Desdemona that she is to prepare for bed and dismiss Emilia. Desdemona says that she loves Othello despite his unreasonable anger, though she also has a presentiment of tragedy; she sings a song that was sung by an abandoned woman while she died. Though Desdemona is revolted by the idea of sexual infidelity, Emilia says that men deserve it.

Plot Synopsis

Act IV, Scene iii (2:13:17): Othello and Desdemona bid farewell to Ludovico. On his way out, Othello tells Desdemona that she is to prepare for bed and dismiss Emilia. Desdemona says that she loves Othello despite his unreasonable anger, though she also has a presentiment of tragedy; she sings a song that was sung by an abandoned woman while she died. Though Desdemona is revolted by the idea of sexual infidelity, Emilia says that men deserve it.

Act V, Scene i (2:20:29): Iago sets Roderigo up to ambush Cassio. Cassio appears, Roderigo attacks him, and they wound each other with gunshots. Lodovico and Gratiano arrive, responding to the noise. Iago returns, pretends to be enraged at the assault on Cassio, and kills Roderigo. Bianca arrives and Iago declares she was probably involved in the attempted murder and orders her arrest.

Act V, Scene ii (2:25:22): Othello, at the bed of the sleeping Desdemona, declares that he will not harm her beauty, but will kill her bloodlessly. She wakes, and he tells her to prepare for death. She pleads for mercy, but Othello smothers her with a pillow. Emilia appears, and Desdemona recovers enough to declare that she is dying in innocence. She dies, and Othello proclaims that he has murdered her because she was unfaithful. Emilia denies it, and Othello declares that Iago has proved it. She calls for help, and Montano, Gratiano, and Iago appear. Othello speaks of Desdemona's handkerchief, and Emilia reveals the truth. Othello punches Iago; in the ensuing confusion Iago kills Emilia and flees. Montano chases him, leaving Othello to his mounting grief. Lodovico brings Iago back, Othello attacks and wounds him before he is disarmed. When asked for his motive, Iago gives no answer. Othello declares himself a fool but not a dishonourable one, stabs himself with a hidden weapon and dies. Ludovico declares Othello's fortunes will pass on to Gratiano.

The End

Find out more

Read

The **Rehearsal Insights Pack**, featuring the rehearsal diary from the production, written by Staff Director Natasha Nixon, which gives an insight into the rehearsal process and the creative team's interpretation of the play. This includes interviews with the actors playing Othello, Desdemona, Iago and Emilia.

Watch

Iago and Othello – Rory Kinnear and Adrian Lester discuss their characters and the relationship between them.

Rory Kinnear and Lyndsey Marshal in conversation about their roles in *Othello*.

Behind the Lines – Exploring the contemporary military setting of the play.

Representations of Race – Exploring the portrayal and interpretation of *Othello* across 4 productions of the play.

Performance history of the title role – Adrian Lester and leading academics reflect on the impact of performances of *Othello*.

Shakespeare at the NT: The 21st Century

Shakespeare at the NT: Writer for Today

Performing Shakespeare

Find out more

Listen

Adrian Lester in discussion with **Al Senter** about playing the role of Othello.

Nicholas Hytner in discussion with **Abigail Rokinson Woodall** discussing Shakespeare in the twenty-first century.

Explore

The National Theatre's digital exhibitions on Google Arts & Culture, including **Shakespeare at the National Theatre** and **Costume at the National Theatre**.

More materials relating to the production including the costume bible, poster, prompt scripts, programme, stage management reports and more are held at the National Theatre Archive, which is free to visit. Find out more here: **<https://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/archive>**

Suggestions for Further Activity

Research other productions of *Othello* to compare directorial approach. This could include Laurence Olivier as Othello and Maggie Smith as Desdemona (National Theatre, 1964) and the 1997 Sam Mendes/Peter Stein version, also at the National Theatre. Key issues such as the portrayal of Othello by a white actor can be researched and discussed.

Find out more

Visit the [**NT Archive**](#) to access photographs of the above productions, focussing on set and costume design.

Watch this video of Adrian Lester and Rory Kinnear. Take note of what Lester says about Othello's awareness of how he appears. Identify those moments in the recording that you could describe in what Lester does with voice, facial and physical expression. How does design support this?

Suggestions for Further Research

Read this review from The Guardian and discuss the issues raised within it, including the hiring of an experienced military expert to advise Hytner on those issues.

We hope that you have enjoyed watching and studying **Othello**. Don't forget that there are many more fantastic productions to explore as part of the **NT Collection**. We hope that watching this recorded production has made you feel inspired to see and make live theatre. **Why not find out what's happening at your local theatre and how you can get involved?**

This guide to support your viewing of the production was compiled by Teacher and Arts Education Consultant Susie Ferguson.

*If you have any comments or feedback on our resources please contact us:
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