

National Theatre Collection

Othello – Rehearsal Insights

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About

This pack 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.

These insights were prepared during rehearsals by staff director Natasha Nixon. They introduce the process of creating, rehearsing and staging this play.

Rehearsal Diary

Rehearsals: Week One

Staff director Natasha Nixon documented the seven-week rehearsal period; these extracts from her diary reveal how the production emerged.

The first day of *Othello* rehearsals begin with a **Meet and Greet**. This gives the extended National Theatre family an introduction to everybody involved in the production, and a chance for the *Othello* company to meet those working outside of the rehearsal room on *Othello* and on other projects at the National Theatre. For the most part, the rehearsal room will be occupied by Nicholas Hytner (director) and myself, the stage management team and the company of 21 actors. However, during this process a few members of the creative team will need to be in rehearsals every so often, such as: Nick Powell, who is composing the music; Kate Waters (Kombat Kate) for fight direction; Jeannette Nelson for voice; and Vicki Mortimer who is designing the set and costumes. This makes the 'Meet and Greet' a unique moment in the process when absolutely everybody involved gets together in the same space at the same time. Luckily there is no test at the end of the session, to check that we've remembered all the faces and names!

Soon after our Meet and Greet, we settle down with great anticipation to hear Nick Hytner talk about his **vision for the play**. Some of the themes that come up involve the differences between *Appearance and Reality* and *Love and Marriage*; and the issue of Race. The latter theme is important to Nick as he does not want the play to focus on race and, in fact, he argues that it has taken four hundred years for this state to come around: the most contemporary example being Barack Obama's election to the White House. Indeed, there are relevant references to all of the themes Nick raised. The day on which we hold this first *Othello* rehearsal turns out to be the day that the bail verdict in the Oscar Pistorius case is announced.

Something equally relevant to Nick's vision of the play is how we use **the language**. The production is set in 2013, yet the play was written in the

1600s. Nick does not want the company to aim for a traditionally recognised way of speaking Shakespeare. They must keep it contemporary. This can be done by committing to long and clear thoughts, with a firm belief in the articulacy of the writing. The result of this draws attention to how remarkable the language is, without labouring the point. Shakespeare is easy really, and we have Jeannette as Voice Coach to ensure the language is as poetic and honest as Shakespeare intended whilst seeming contemporary.



Next: the unveiling of the **Model Box**, which is always a thrilling moment in any production process. Vicki Mortimer and Nick Hytner have been working for months on this and there's a great amount of attention to detail in each setting. Environment is paramount in the play and is always incongruously set alongside the characters at one point or another: *Othello* in sophisticated Venice; or Desdemona in a remote military camp, being two prominent examples. Even on this scaled-down model of the set, the ornate grandeur outside Brabantio's house, for instance, and the slick interior for the War Cabinet meeting to the hot and dusty military camp in Act Two will have a huge impact. There is nothing slick, ornate or remotely beautiful about the military camp in Cyprus. The huge concrete blocks, the worn-down and weary mess room, and *Othello*'s office, are all a far cry from the War Cabinet meeting room in Act

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One. It will be fascinating to explore and see how the actors interact with the space in rehearsals. Stage management have made a mock-up of the set using stand-in doors, tape on the floor to mark out the size of the actual playing space on stage, desks, chairs and so on, because the set is currently being built in the National's workshops, ready for when the show moves to the Olivier Theatre. After the Meet and Greet and Nick's talk about the play and the set design, the room empties and we are left with the cast and creative team for our first **Read-Through** of the play. In this very first read through, the talented cast illustrate such depth of understanding and richness to their characters, it is apparent we are starting in a great place. Nick has made slight cuts from the original script, making the unravelling of the tragic tale more contemporary, snappy and unapologetically reaching to the very core of the action.

The day ends with a brief talk from **Military expert, Jonathan Shaw**, a retired British Major-General. It is fascinating to hear his reaction to our first read-through, to Nick's vision and to the model box showing. He explains how when on duty, a soldier's world becomes functional: it's brutal; it's all about life and death, doused with sweat and heat. It's very interesting, that concept of military life being devoid of beauty. Jonathan observes that 'the human soul craves beauty', which makes me question two things: What is the effect of environment on human behaviour? And what will it be like to bring the beautiful Desdemona into this brutality? The threat of attack to Othello's forces is diffused within only the first few pages of Act Two: the enemy Turkish fleet sinks, leaving a collection of frustrated, testosterone-fuelled soldiers trained to kill, but with nobody to kill. Where does this violence go? It has to have some kind of outlet. Jonathan explains to us that soldiers are trained to be violent and generals are trained to control and manage this violence. Interestingly enough, a modern Othello wouldn't have trained at Sandhurst – unlike Cassio, for instance – instead, he has worked his way up. This raises the question of how Othello copes with the current situation. He is faced with extraordinary circumstances: having his wife on campus; his newly-appointed Lieutenant betraying him with drunken violence; and his ensign Iago informing him of Desdemona's supposed adultery. From Jonathan Shaw's perspective, Othello is deeply linked to slavery, and

his training in hand-to-hand violence and brutality is quickly revealed in these extraordinary circumstances. As always, the joy of rehearsing is to see what manifests, what sticks and to discover from the play what tells the truest story of these characters and their journeys.

Rehearsals take shape in the first week by reading through each scene, asking questions and getting the actors up on their feet to get the rough blocking and shape. A few **Themes** keep recurring:

The ENVIRONMENT: Nick Hytner impressed upon us how exceptional it would be to have Desdemona on campus. This is certainly something for us to explore in terms of, for instance, how the soldiers respond to her and how Othello behaves around her on his home turf, the military camp. It is something that nobody in Cyprus (where Othello has previously fought and is known as a hero) nor any of Othello's soldiers would be used to seeing. The world of love does not fit with the world of war. In Act 1.3, Desdemona steps into a crisis meeting at the War Cabinet, another environment unsuited to an 18-year-old girl. However, delving further into this topic of environment, we find it is Desdemona's father, Brabantio, who brings the domestic theme into the meeting when he accuses Othello of drugging and abusing Desdemona. This scenario of a top-secret crisis meeting involving top-ranking officials and members of government at 2am, juxtaposed with a young girl and her father trying to make sense of her marriage to the general, Othello, is a heady mix which throws the audience into discordance from the very start of the play.

The theme of **Race** is under constant discussion, because we have to keep ensuring that it is not what the play is about. We realise that race is never singularly used in the play: it is never used as an insult until someone doesn't like somebody else (Othello) – and *then* it is brought up and used as a weapon. When it is referred to by Brabantio, he is not insulting Othello on the basis of his race but for the whole package – Othello is the wrong colour, race, class, and age to marry his daughter. We frequently refer to *The Merchant of Venice*: there's a strong impression that is a play about race. Interestingly, in 1604 (when *Othello* is believed to have been written), Jews were perceived as grubby money takers, whereas the Moors (a term used broadly for medieval people of Spain and North

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Africa) were seen to have substance and authority.

Character Journeys

Towards the end of the first week of rehearsals we can see more of a journey for the characters and we have been plotting this so far.



Iago is full to the brim with personal resentment, which is like someone taking a poison and hoping they will die: it eats away at them from the inside. Why? How has Othello managed to hook up with the beautiful, young, intelligent and sexy Desdemona? Why have Brabantio (albeit reluctantly) and the War Ministers accepted the marriage and wished him well? Why has Othello promoted Cassio when Iago has much more experience as a soldier? The terrifying thing about Iago is that he truly believes in what he says when he says it; he has no faith in human beings. To say he is cynical is an understatement!

We meet **Othello** when he is clearly in the throes of love: peculiar for a General. Is he a war hero who has had time to think about love, life and loneliness after being out of service for nine months? We question how aware he is of his love being romantic, idealistic, and adolescent. He must know that eloping with Desdemona is risky. Perhaps Othello is taking a calculated risk – hopefully the people, the army, the State etc will support him because of who he is and how he obviously feels about Desdemona. He must defend his love for her to both father and State. He is an outsider, without doubt. He has suffered and witnessed death and cruelty. To find somebody – Desdemona – who reacts emotionally, with tears and pity (a reaction he might never have had), is incredible to him. This

woman has seen through the cracks, she doesn't just take his stories as the usual sanitized account of war; they actually go through the stories together. Perhaps there is a quality of healing for Othello? Nevertheless, she has disarmed him in a way in which all he has worked for is thrown up in the air, the way only true love can do.

We look briefly at the character **Desdemona** this week, which shows us what a determined, strong, independent young woman she is. Her journey is perhaps the most tragic. To Desdemona, Othello is good looking, tells great stories, her dad is impressed by him and she is on her gap year with the world opening around her. We talk about Othello being middle aged and her being 18 years old and that cryptically, Desdemona simultaneously knows and doesn't know what this means or how it could be perceived. They idolise each other. We meet them in the heat, in the honeymoon period of their relationship. The theme of appearance and reality recurs. Has Desdemona seen Othello's anger before she sees it in Cyprus? She appears to be a woman who will not be told to shut up, and Othello is a man who hasn't been in a loving relationship like this before. In a way, it is the blind leading the blind. Is their tragic fate inevitable?

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Week One Overview

Research topics that have arisen:

- **Films to reference:** *Jarhead*, *Zero Dark 30*, *Full Metal Jacket*, *The Odd Angry Shot*, *Restrepo*
- **Stories** of young girls running off with older men
- **Television:** *West Wing*
- **Act 1.3:** reference the Cuban Missile Crisis or the Falklands War
- Cyprus: THE ARMY BASE – like the Middle East – has seen action and may see action again
- **Kuwait 1991**
- **'Call Me Maybe'**, the hilarious YouTube clip of bored soldiers in Afghanistan [please note that this is age-restricted content]

Rehearsal Room Insight:

Each day, we start with reading through a scene and then discussing some questions raised. Such as, who knows what? Why we are here? What is the time and place? Here's a brief list of examples of the questions we asked and some observations we made:

- The relationship is an abuse of Brabantio's hospitality: middle aged man; 18-year-old daughter
- Desdemona is an only child. Mother died / divorced a long time ago. Father alone
- Desdemona is headstrong and unstable
- Roderigo is obsessed by Desdemona. He's a waster, a drop-out. Is he dangerous?
- Desdemona is on her gap year!
- Iago's job as Ensign is to have his ear to the ground... useful for him
- Who knows about Othello and Desdemona's marriage? Cassio does, but he doesn't know what or how much Iago knows. Initial lack of trust between them
- How did Roderigo and Iago's relationship start?
- Has Desdemona been on the ship with Roderigo on the way over?

Working on Shakespeare in 2013

Rory (playing Iago) and Adrian (playing Othello) had plenty of suggestions for cuts! Every so often, we indulge in debates over certain words or meanings but, of course, the final decision lies with Nick. The director's desk is covered with different translations, versions and editions of Othello, and Shakespeare apps on our phone and iPads, for reference when needed.

We do come across problems with the contemporary setting: for instance, has a whole fleet of Turkish ships sunk in 2013? Probably not! But we make allowances and the audience are 'in the know' and can hopefully make allowances too. The setting is paramount in supporting this, even when problems arise.

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Rehearsals: Week Two

Starting with Act 2.3. We focus more on **Cassio's journey** this week: it is interesting to discover more about the idea of Cassio being an outsider in Cyprus. This is his first posting and experience of a war-time environment, unlike Iago, the rest of the soldiers, and Othello. Not having seen action and being less experienced, he would be aware that he has a lot to prove. Issues of *class* and *command* are becoming more apparent, and we see how uncomfortable Iago can make Cassio feel by talking crudely about Othello's wife and sex life. Cassio also has the challenge of having to integrate with the group of soldiers, to be liked. This explains why, even though he knows he cannot hold his drink, he is still persuaded by Iago to join them. We play a little this week with the idea of him being a wounded creature, and it is only after Othello has demoted him and left the room that we see a lost boy suffering nausea from alcohol and the pain of losing his reputation. Unfortunately, Iago is there to witness and manipulate this vulnerability.

As rehearsals progress, so does our understanding of the journey **Othello** goes on. He is a man who only deals in certainty, otherwise he malfunctions.

For instance, after Cassio has been sacked we learn that Othello has more information about him being a violent drunk, which means he is unreliable. That is certain. Otherwise, Othello sees him as honest, somebody who has supported his relationship with Desdemona and, until now, has been a good soldier. However certain this is, the way in which Iago behaves creates suspicion in Othello's mind: he assumes that Iago suspects something more to do with the business concerning Cassio. He absolutely would not expect Iago to talk of anything he cannot manage or deal with, so when Iago winds him up and says: "O, beware my Lord of jealousy", we play in rehearsals with this being discombobulating, insulting and humiliating for Othello. The subject has suddenly shifted from what he assumed was the business of Cassio's misbehaviour to his love for Desdemona. Something so certain has quickly become uncertain.

A big question arises this week in rehearsals – why does **Iago** refuse to say anything in the final scene?

We plot through the current version of his journey: it begins with him wanting to mess about with Othello's marriage and create a bit of drunken ruckus, and progresses rapidly to bringing Cassio into it... but when that mission is complete, and Cassio is demoted, the mission continues. Why? It quickly gets out of control with talk of killing Cassio and, soon after, talk of killing Desdemona. The first lie Iago tells is about Cassio having a sordid dream about Desdemona. The idea comes after Emilia retrieves Othello's handkerchief, which enables Iago to carry out another plot. He is drunk on the inflated sense of his own cleverness. It's interesting to note that he lets Othello take the lead in trying to make sense of the situation between Cassio and Desdemona. All the talk of violence and killing comes initially from Othello. By the end of Act 5.1 it appears that Iago has no control over his actions and in fact it becomes destruction for the sake of destruction. However, this still doesn't answer the initial question: Why does he refuse to speak at the very end? Nick wonders what would be the final shot if this was a movie. Is it Iago in solitary confinement, with a close-up to his face – and is he smiling?



***Othello* – Rehearsal Insights**

Week Two Overview

Suggestions and research into:

- Drinking games
- Fighting

With a cast of 21, the majority of whom are young men, a plethora of suggestions are made on both topics! We will come back to this when Kombat Kate is in rehearsal. It will be no mean feat to stage a fight with 15 men inside such a small space as the Mess Room.

Research:

- Film showings of *Restrepo* and *Full Metal Jacket*
- News story of the Bolshoi ballet director who suffers an acid attack; story of a small man with an arsenal of weapons... Much like Iago
- News story. Back again to the Oscar Pistorius case: if Bianca is accused of attempting to murder Cassio, this makes it a crime of passion too
- Is Act 5.1 about a potential terrorist attack?

Rehearsal Insights:

Nick gives an excellent tip when thinking of how to speak the **asides** in the play (particularly in the Olivier): speak as though you are speaking to a thousand reflections of yourself: assume that the audience get it. For example, when Emilia talks about the handkerchief, it is as though she is talking to a thousand wives who are also in difficult marriages.

The famous **double time** – see if you can spot it. Here's one instance: Shakespeare tells us that the troops have just arrived in Cyprus, yet Cassio has already managed to have a long-term relationship with Bianca, his mistress. We can't call the writer to question this!

We have fascinating debates and discussions about Shakespeare's intentions and what we think the story is telling us in a particular moment, but Nick is brilliant at steering us to the specificity of what the character is achieving in that moment and what the audience will read and access from it. That, after all, is the most important thing. We could be easily drawn into huge character back-stories and fabricated histories but unless they are relevant to the audience then they are superfluous - and our production needs to remain trim and lean.

It is very useful to treat *Othello* as though it is a new play, as though neither we nor the audience know the story. This means we can play a scene and talk in rehearsals about how, for example, Emilia could save Desdemona. Where would that take us?

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Rehearsals: Week Three

Jonathan Shaw returns and this time gives some practical advice, which is especially helpful because we now have all the scenes up on their feet.

He describes how the army works and that being in the army is about 'Motivation' and 'Spirit' – which is more about love than hate, a big family unit. Soldiers kill because the enemy are threatening something they love – they must protect the family at all costs. If there are people who think they're bigger than the 'family' it's not long before they are taken down a peg or two! In order to look authentic, we must understand that soldiers are incredibly fit and have inner confidence, and therefore do not swagger overtly. Jonathan explains that the army is a unit based on mutual respect, mutual dependency and involves partnership and buddying. Trust is paramount; betrayal is the worst sin. He gives us all a lesson in saluting (which is a sign of respect, not a subservient gesture): Hat on – salute. No hat – no salute, just brace! Long way up, short way down!

It's rather immense when all 21 cast members are called in to rehearse for a scene. This week we look a little more at **rehearsing and choreographing larger scenes**, namely, looking at the opening scene in Cyprus and the storm, in Act 2.1.

It may not be 'Shakespearean' to holler "Bravo, zero, delta, foxtrot, delta!" when entering the gate to the military camp with a message about the Turkish fleet and the fate of their General, but it really lends itself to the contemporary setting and implies a dangerous atmosphere. We immediately understand we are in a military setting.

The staging of this group scene comes from a place of realism. The soldiers have a level of formality and respect for the higher-ranking officers and generals, which makes the staging organic in the space. At this point in the play, everybody is potentially under threat, so the space is active, alive and alert. Each soldier enters the space focused on covering and protecting those around him/her.

When staging larger scenes, it is important to choreograph group responses. For example, a

group is present when Desdemona and Iago have their 'battle of the sexes', and Desdemona points out the two female soldiers to heighten her own presence and status. She appears to enjoy the banter and feels emboldened in the place - although it's also useful that her husband is the boss! Another moment where the soldiers are used to enhance a moment is when Othello enters the scene after surviving the storm and goes straight to Desdemona and shows huge affection to her. This is a man of war, a hero amongst the men - so it's great to explore the awkward reaction to his public display of affection, which takes priority over military protocol. choreograph group responses. For example, a group is present when Desdemona and Iago have their 'battle of the sexes', and Desdemona points out the two female soldiers to heighten her own presence and status. She appears to enjoy the banter and feels emboldened in the place - although it's also useful that her husband is the boss! Another moment where the soldiers are used to enhance a moment is when Othello enters the scene after surviving the storm and goes straight to Desdemona and shows huge affection to her. This is a man of war, a hero amongst the men - so it's great to explore the awkward reaction to his public display of affection, which takes priority over military protocol.

As **rehearsals continue**, we start from the beginning of the play again, to paint in more colours to the scenes. It is a time for the actors to embed what was discussed the last time we looked at the scene and test it more confidently.

We are also ready for Nick Powell, **the composer**, to come into rehearsals and teach the company some songs. He needs time to assess whether his music works with how the scene is looking and feeling. We had a lot of fun cranking up the volume to Prodigy's 'Smack My Bitch Up' for Act 2.3 to test whether it has the right atmosphere for that moment in the play.

Attention is also being paid to ensuring we are **marking key narrative moments**: for example, Cassio kissing Desdemona's hand as she enters the military camp. We look at how we can play a fine line between arousing suspicion in the audience

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(treating Othello as a new play) and playing the truth of their close friendship, which is more like a brother-sister relationship. In fact, it seems that Cassio does a lot of kissing! Just before he kisses Desdemona's hand, he kisses Iago's wife, Emilia. We soon discover a small problem: it's difficult to kiss someone who is wearing a helmet – and everybody is in full combat gear at this stage!

One of the other key moments in the play comes in Act Three, when Iago snatches Desdemona's handkerchief off Emilia. She doesn't know why her husband has asked her to steal it but the manner in which he takes it from her makes the moment quite dark. We play with the idea that Emilia would like to feel some affection from her husband so she uses the handkerchief as a flirtatious tool by teasing him with it. How quickly that can turn into something verging on violence is not only revealing of their relationship but it is also unsettling to envisage what he may do with this handkerchief.

Just before the handkerchief scene, Desdemona is in Othello's office trying to persuade him to meet with the freshly-demoted Cassio. The scene is torturous. Desdemona innocently flirts and uses play-acting techniques to persuade and woo her husband – all of which are soon to be violently exploited and thrown into question by Iago. We are reminded of a theme that Nick suggested on our first day of rehearsals: Appearance and Reality. It's very clever: we recall seeing Desdemona play-acting with Othello and therefore can't help but feel that Iago has a point! How quickly our perception of appearance and reality can change.



Week three ends with a **solo call with ADRIAN LESTER**. This is an opportunity to have a private chat about the choices that have been made for Othello so far – for instance, plotting when the

doubt or jealousy kick in, and reiterating that Othello is met under extraordinary circumstances, in the throes of love. So is it ok to play this with 100% commitment because the Army General is still there? It doesn't undermine that or feel like two separate characters. We have a wonderful discussion about other facets to Othello's nature: his poetic side, his imagination, how he plays status, what he thought would happen between him and Desdemona as they secretly married, and what it means to be a leader. We refer to Tony Blair, David Cameron and Gordon Brown, and to Barack Obama, the most obviously close parallel to Othello. The thing to note is that leaders have a version of their life which they tell very well. If this is the case, which is the real Othello that we meet in the play?

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Rehearsals: Week Four

We start to question what takes us to the next scene between Iago and Othello, the **bathroom scene** (Act 4.1). The answer: there is one thing left open – proof. By this point, what is Iago fighting for? Othello has told him he is the Lieutenant, he has requested Cassio be killed and with Desdemona, what more is there to be done? Surely this is enough! However, it's important to remember that the handkerchief is still at play: Iago doesn't yet know whether the handkerchief plot will have worked – has Cassio got it? Will they see him use it? For the audience, it is a stroke of bad luck that Emilia found it in the first place and gave it her husband. But for the men to be in the bathroom and for Cassio to come in, followed soon after by Bianca with the handkerchief, is horrifying for the audience, a dream for Iago.

When we return to this scene later in the week, we push to find an interpretation of the epilepsy, which Iago explains to Cassio as the reason why Othello has collapsed. What comes out of rehearsals is more of a panic attack, a physical manifestation of Othello's heart and head in turmoil. That is why, in our version, he rushes to the toilet to dry wretch and, soon after, collapses. It feels very believable. Iago goes to offer Othello some water, Othello faints and Iago then drinks the water as he stands over him. This is a powerful symbol of their relationship now: Iago is undoubtedly in control.

After Othello recovers, the scene takes a radical turn-around in terms of status. Iago becomes the General. He leads the army in Othello's head. He makes a suicide bomb. Yet again he inverts everything by putting Othello down for having collapsed, accusing him of not being "a man"! Othello becomes a pendulum in the scene, swinging from one extreme to the other: his love for Desdemona, to his intention to kill her. Iago works very hard to undermine the love that Othello expresses for Desdemona in this scene with the intention of ensuring he is not taken for a fool. This army world, the testosterone-fuelled, male environment makes the 'man-up tactic' very effective indeed. Playing this scene seems to work best when there's 100% commitment from Othello to both love and murder, and when he doesn't shy away from embracing the extremes. It's quite

unbearable to watch. The love Othello has for Desdemona is poetic, especially in the things he notices about her. Iago, a poet of hate, finds Othello at his most vulnerable when unconscious, and subverts Othello's love into cruel vandalism.

As a side note, as we start running the play, we have been thinking more about what characters can hear, and when. **The Environment** is a closed camp.

Everybody knows everyone else's business. It is easy to find one another. The prefabricated portacabins that they live in have thin walls. We resolve to see how this idea develops in technical rehearsals.

A key figure in the rehearsal room this week is Kate Walters (Kombat Kate), our **Fight Director**. She has a lot to do: the fight between Cassio and Roderigo in the tiny mess room with all the soldiers; Roderigo and Cassio being shot; Othello slapping Desdemona; Othello strangling and suffocating Desdemona; Othello pushing Iago; Emilia being shot; Iago being wounded in the final scene; and finally, Othello stabbing himself. It is fascinating to watch how Kate works and how she encourages the actors to find the way in which they want to carry out their act of violence. Then she can shape and mould it to make it safe and, at times, more theatrically accessible. The key word is safety. But she must also ensure that these fights and acts of violence can survive the course of time. There are around 99 performances scheduled – that's a lot of strangling, shooting, slapping and stabbing!



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To understand the strangling and suffocating in particular, we invite a **Doctor** to give advice on what it would be like, how the victim would sound (Desdemona needs to speak after she has been strangled). The main thing we learn is that Desdemona should not be gasping for breath, because that denotes a recovery. In fact, Othello will most likely have broken her trachea, so she would sound like a zombie, rattling. It's too horrible for words, so we have to remove ourselves mentally and make it a technical exercise since Desdemona must be heard by the audience. We split the difference between realism and theatrical necessity.

We push hard to keep Desdemona in a place of joy, ignorance, confusion and hope for Othello for as long as possible. If she pre-empts the ending too early – the severity and extent of Othello's collapse over his feelings for her – there is no tragedy. It is the tension resulting from her ignorance and hope which makes it tragic and dramatic. As Othello talks to her about losing **the handkerchief**, Desdemona is a little alarmed to hear of its magic powers, and she is surprised that Othello is chastising her. She quickly attributes his behaviour to preventing her from fulfilling her mission to reunite him with Cassio. Even Emilia detects what's going on and asks Desdemona twice if her husband is jealous; Desdemona adamantly replies no! Othello's scene straight after the interval is about *dissembling*. He has to be clever, and it's almost flirtatious when he and Desdemona talk about the hot, moist hand and sweating devil. The more Desdemona apologises, searches for hope and tries to divert the subject back to Cassio, the worse the situation – the tragedy being *we know!* The key is not to play the loss of the handkerchief for Desdemona as a tragedy. It is for Othello but it can't be for Desdemona. Othello succeeds in goading her, which results in Desdemona losing her patience and Othello confirming his victory. Mission complete.

We excavate **Emilia's journey** and her relationship with Iago and Desdemona (see the interview with actor Lyndsey Marshal on page 29). It's important to remember the age and class differences between her and Desdemona. Our Emilia is 'keeping it real'. Cassio and Desdemona are very tactile: in Emilia's eyes, they behave a little inappropriately and, at the very least, should

acknowledge the nature of men and their likely envy. Othello is middle-aged, and he has some insecurities. Another factor to play is that Emilia is deeply resentful of her loveless relationship with Iago. She is rough, earthy and pragmatic, whereas Desdemona is a romantic. This makes it more unbearable to watch when Emilia attempts to be seductive with her husband as she reveals she has found the handkerchief. He snatches it off her, and this could be yet another cold rejection for Emilia. By the end of the play, she puts her life on the line to be Desdemona's saviour. The differences between these two women no longer exist: both become tragic victims of their values and love.

The third woman in the play is Bianca. **The Cassio and Bianca** scenes have to be, in contrast, light relief. Their relationship is very simple and straightforward. Even Bianca's jealousy is transparent and open. The staging problem we come across is how she finds the handkerchief in Act 3.4. We try lots of things. What finally works is remembering the play's world and the temperature of the place. Before she enters the scene, Cassio wipes his forehead with the handkerchief, which gives him the chance to carelessly place it back in his pocket – just as Bianca brazenly enters the military camp.

We move onto Act 4.2, which is where we first see the bedroom setting, and now we are **approaching Desdemona's impending murder**. Just before this scene, Othello strikes Desdemona in public after the arrival of Lodovico. An interesting quality to play now is that Emilia watches her boss, Othello, in his private space, raiding through Desdemona's clothes and luggage. We want to see how far we can push this relationship so we try having her stand to attention and then choose a moment where she breaks rank and pleads with Othello. What can Emilia do? It's like trying to contain a rabid dog. When Desdemona is brought into the bedroom she does not understand what she has done wrong, why the man she loves is behaving like this. Her ignorance and hope remain tragic. When Iago then enters the scene (sadly, called in by Desdemona) we eventually see a strange coming together of 'Mr and Mrs Iago'. Rory Kinnear unashamedly commits to whatever truth it is that the character is playing, so there are moments where an audience will forget that Iago is one of the most evil characters. He becomes a good husband, a good carer, a man

Rehearsal Diary

who can take control of a situation, say the right things and calm everybody down.

We think about the famous Barbary's **Willow song** that Desdemona sings after returning from an awkward dinner with her husband and Lodovico. To suit our world, we want the song to sound like a Joni Mitchell track, and to certainly be something both women know. We experiment with Emilia singing along too. We don't want this scene to be sentimental or indulgent in its sadness. It is interesting to look into the background to the song: Barbary was Desdemona's mother's maid, who loved a 'mad' man. When he left her, Barbary recalled a song that reflected her 'fortunes' and died singing it. It's a reconciliation of sadness: it means Desdemona is not alone. She remembers the story again, a memory which haunts her. Emilia works hard to liberate Desdemona from her depression with her ironic, almost comic point of view about men. But even then, there is a quick turnabout when it appears Emilia struggles to comfort her and it becomes a more personal account of her own battle with Iago. The fact of Desdemona's scant experience with men becomes unbearable and Emilia quickly leaves. Is Emilia right all along? Was the marriage of Othello and Desdemona absurd and unrealistic in the first place?

Here, two people circle around an issue and don't talk about it, like the "elephant in the room". The closest they come to it is when Emilia says, "When they strike us". There is a disconnect which creates tension between the two women, even when they are seemingly connected.

During rehearsals, lots of questions about **weapons** arise. Take the final scene in the play: does Iago stab or shoot Emilia; does Othello wound Iago by a sword – and why not a gun? How does Othello kill himself? Why, in a room with other trained military (Montano, another General), do they not disarm Othello or shoot Iago dead? How do we control the scene so that not everybody raises his or her gun and it becomes a shoot-out?

Behaviour with props becomes a key detail to accessing the right pitch for the start of the War Cabinet scene. The characters are trying to make sense of top-secret documents with conflicting information about the Turks invading. We decide they have been in the room for about 30 to 40

minutes before the scene starts, they were woken in the middle of the night (which lends more of a sense of peril), and are absorbed in the files (to demonstrate that they are under attack from their mortal enemy). Slowly, we add music, coffee, sandwiches into the setting, details which push the scene out of 'Planet Theatre'. The great thing about this scene is that the urgent state of affairs is interrupted by a very bizarre accusation: has the General abused Brabantio's daughter?

Othello – Rehearsal Insights

Week Four Overview

Research:

Verdi's Otello. Hear Rome Opera Orchestra and Chorus perform the scene on YouTube.

Barbary's 'Willow' song

The poor soul sat sighing by a sycamore tree.

Sing all a green willow.

Her hand on her bosom, her head on her knee, Sing willow, willow, willow. The fresh streams ran by her and murmured her moans,

Sing willow, willow, willow.

Her salt tears fell from her and softened the stones, Sing willow, willow, willow.

Sing all a green willow must be my garland.

Let nobody blame him, his scorn I approve

I called my love false love, but what said he then?

Sing willow, willow, willow.

Rehearsal Insight:

Extra lines amongst the cuts! There are lots of moments in the play where we need a vocal response from the other characters, be it in the War Cabinet meeting room, in the Army Base, in the Mess, in the bedroom when Othello attempts to rush at Iago - the list goes on. However, they must of course, be sourced from Shakespeare.

Here are some of the phrases we have been using:

Hold your hand!

Good Lieutenant!

Hold, sir!

Help! Ho!

Help/Hold, Masters!

Nay Masters, hold your hand!

For shame!

Nay, I'll break thy head!

I'll kill you, sir!

What's the matter here?

What noise is this?

What means this, sir?

I'll beat thee out of Cyprus!

I'll beat thee like a dog!

I'll beat out thy brains!

Nay, thou villain!

Cypriot dog!

Rehearsal Diary

Rehearsals: Week Five

We are starting to **run different acts** in isolation. Lighting Designer, Jon Clark, sits in on rehearsals because most of the blocking is now set, as do the composer and set designer. Outside of rehearsals the actors are having costume fittings, and hair and make-up discussions. They wear their army boots in rehearsals so that they are worn in.

Getting the right first impression of **Cyprus and the soldiers** begins by approaching it with a West End musical-style choreography, before slowly filtering down into a place of realism. Nick works like this because there are so many soldiers to locate in the space, and there is a set change to happen and a story to tell, so we have to ensure the roots are established before sewing in more detail. There is a huge piece of set to fly out – Brabantio's house – and we are in the middle of a storm! When we are settled in the scene, we need to make clear the absurdity of Desdemona being present, and Othello's arrival and disregard for urgent matters of state in favour of kissing and declaring his love for Desdemona. It must be disturbing and awkward.

The **Iago and Roderigo scenes** are sometimes tricky because Roderigo is depressed. How can we make that dramatically interesting? How can we make him active when he doesn't have much to say? What is he trying to get from Iago? What does he need? What does he want to achieve? One key into these scenes is *location* because it gives an obstacle for both of them to play. This discovery becomes apparent when we run all their scenes together.

How the **company are bonding**: much to stage management's dismay, we always kick about a football, a Frisbee or a rugby ball – not far from the computers on their desks! It's funny having 18 men and four girls (or five including me) in these situations – the girls tend to get special treatment in the ball games. However, they give as good as they get. Adrian is sneaky, always throwing the ball to somebody who isn't paying attention. It's a lot of fun, and we make the rules up as we go along – sometimes it will be 'hot potatoes' and sometimes 'take a limb away if you drop the ball.' But for all the fun, it feels important not only in bonding but to expel a bit of the energy and tension which naturally accumulate when working on a tragedy!

***Othello* – Rehearsal Insights**

Week Five Overview

Research:

Emilia's line: "I will play the song and die in music" has huge meaning behind it which we spent a while chatting about and researching. This was another moment where rehearsals were inspired by music, as a way of understanding the text.

Rehearsal Insight:

Jeannette and Nick revealed three golden tips for working on Shakespeare, and indeed in the theatre:

1. Believe in the character's imagination. Shakespeare gives it to them, they own it.
2. Thoughts always give way to feeling. Be clear on the clarity of your thought and then the feeling will come.
3. Commitment. Keep it simple. Don't paint on a painted canvas!

Rehearsal Diary

Rehearsals: Week Six

We have been **running the play** in the last week of rehearsal. This has been invaluable though the actors look exhausted, as do the audience afterwards– a good sign, I believe! It has become even more pronounced when seeing the play as a whole that all these characters are destroyed by love. We run the play in the morning then do working notes in the afternoon. The notes Nick gives range from the tiny to a big change, and it's remarkable to see the transformation from the first run-through to the last run-through. The production is in great shape and ready for the technical rehearsals to begin.

A **final thought** from rehearsals. Nick is committed to the idea that Shakespeare always works best when you roll it along and indeed, our rehearsals have, in the last two weeks, picked up a huge amount in momentum. It feels as though everybody has completed the stage of feeling their way through their parts and now they are living and breathing the moments with absolute conviction. Nick spots the moments which are a bit “undercooked”, and he turns the temperature up so, by the end of rehearsals, I think we will be absolutely ready to serve this up to an audience. I can't wait to see it all together with the design, music, lights and costume.

Interview – Adrian Lester

Interview with Adrian Lester, playing Othello

Members of the Othello cast were interviewed six weeks into rehearsal by staff director, Natasha Nixon.

Adrian, you've just done your first runthrough – how was that?

It was good. A lot of pieces fell into place, and other moments went by so fast! There was a lot that we had slowly worked on in rehearsal that whipped past. I suddenly thought 'oh my God, I missed that and this'. It just went. But it was good, it mostly hung together.

How have you changed, if you have indeed, your perception of Othello – his character, his journey– from when we first started six weeks ago, and before that? I think it was said on day one of rehearsals that you and Nick [Hytner] have been talking about this play for ten years?

Yes, he first mentioned it ten years ago. He said we should do Othello, and I thought it would be great. But I was doing Henry V at that point and knew I was not old enough for Othello: I had to wait until my voice broke! The idea was left hanging, although as with all those things it's very flattering to be considered. We just thought it would be nice if it comes up, then went our separate ways and carried on working. A while later we talked about doing it some time after Hustle finished. Then about four years ago we had another conversation where he said 'I won't do it with anyone unless you do it with us.' And I said, 'well ok, I won't do it anywhere unless I do it with you.' We sort of made an Othello marriage, we promised it to each other. And it took four years for other things to get out of the way – other jobs and things – before it was the right time.

I am interested to know your process as an actor, in terms of discovering the history or the previous circumstances of this character, Othello, before we meet him in the play. What have you researched, where are you coming from?

I had to look at his speeches, of course – what the characters say about him and what he says about

himself. All with the awareness that even though some of what's said is just praise, and some is just criticism, they both have elements of truth in them. I/ we chose to cut and ignore the line where Othello states that he is "from men of royal siege". In our production, that line doesn't feature and it didn't make sense for me to follow it. Othello says it once and no-one mentions it again ever – not Iago, nor Othello. It's like it's stamped there to underline his inventive ego.

I looked at a lot of writers who – in their various writings about Othello – had this blatant disregard for character. In their slightly warped points of view, colour was substituted for character. People would write things like 'he regresses to a former state of savagery'; 'Desdemona is in love with his animal nature'. I found all that to be slightly insulting, and a path I didn't want to follow at all.

I can't stress enough that nothing in this play happens because of Othello's colour. Nothing. No moment of story, drama or concluding action happen because he is Black. It is only used as a factor that heightens his sense of insecurity in a world that he is foreign to. That is all.

Even when arguably the last great performance of Othello was given at the National Theatre (at the Old Vic), Dexter and his leading actor, Laurence Olivier,



Interview – Adrian Lester

both commented that Othello regresses in violence to an earlier form which was to do with blackness, colour, heat, temperament and religion. All of these decisions are generalised, they were wide-sweeping and negative. We have come a long way since then. Any performance of the play nowadays has to be more detailed and actually much more respectful to Shakespeare's genius in writing character.

So, I started with someone who had been a child soldier. A little boy, ending lives before he understood what life was. I looked at someone who had been in conflicts from an early age, and had gotten used to it; someone who had left his country, the land of his birth; someone who had lost his parents. And had found that the only thing that covered and gave structure and meaning to all of that insecurity and pain is the uniform that Othello wears as an army officer.

That's where I started my work. I thought of somebody who would, in normal circumstances, have been destroyed as a person except for the uniform that they were wearing and the structure of the life they had chosen to live in.

Then, in the play, when that structure begins to break down, he loses everything.

Obviously you have worked on Shakespeare productions before, but Nick's set up a very clear world for Othello. How have you played your part in making this contemporary and modern, or more accessible?

Contemporary and accessible comes from the staging and the production, which this production does brilliantly. It's strange for me when acting on stage opposite characters who have more of a modern sentence structure and rhythm; Othello repeatedly comes out with exact and proper verse. I found that quite hard at first, because I was not speaking like the rest of the cast! As an actor who is spending much of my time trying to make myself less self-conscious in a role, I found myself playing somebody who was more self-conscious and in some way, in a state of performance when he opens his mouth to other people. At first I shied away from it and tried to break the rhythms up. Find the shorter, smaller thoughts inside the sentences and use those. But then I realised that I would be doing a disservice to what's been written.

You must accept that this slightly polished delivery has been created on purpose. It's there for a reason.

The more I play his scenes, the more I understand that Othello is wearing a 'coat of arms', a shell to protect himself. He will not allow anything to taint his projected vision of himself – until Iago manages to work on his armour from the inside out.

Some people ask why Othello would listen to Iago in matters that concern his new wife. Firstly, Othello is listening to somebody he has shared a battlefield with. Their bond is not the usual bond of businessmen who work together: it's beyond that. It's the army, it's life and death, they've been under fire, and the only reason Iago has survived is because Othello has been covering his back at certain points; and the only reason Othello is still here is because Iago has done the same. The trust that's built up between them is quite strong.

The second thing, which I don't think people understand in the play, is that in Act 3.3, Iago does not begin by talking about Othello's wife. He starts by talking about Cassio. Othello has seen his trusted officer get drunk, have a fight and injure Montano, who is of great worth in Cyprus. So Iago asks 'how long have you known this guy, did he know about your love for Desdemona, was he there when you courted her, and do you trust him?'

That's Iago's way in. It's absolutely logical. Othello has to 'fess up and say 'I thought he was fine, I thought he was great.' Then Iago asks 'was he there when you were wooing your wife?' And Othello admits he was. Othello asks for clarity, he wants to know what Iago is hiding from him in his thoughts. Iago refuses to speak. Only after this refusal has wound Othello up somewhat does Iago say... 'watch her, watch your wife, watch her with Cassio.'

What you don't see on stage is that Desdemona has already been talking to Othello at breakfast about Cassio – 'Cassio this, Cassio that, he loves you, you shouldn't have done that to him, and so on and so forth' – so that by the time Iago brings it up, it's easier for the seed to take root and twist its way in until cracks begin to show. That was my logic.

Interview – Adrian Lester

Just to give as much insight as we can to the rehearsal room, is this a conversation you have had with Rory (playing Iago)? Have you talked about your characters' relationship? Or is it something that you both hold internally and when you're playing the scene, it comes through by osmosis so you don't need to talk about it?

We've said as much in rehearsal that we've said generally to everyone else, in the scenes. I think this goes for everybody when I say no one wanted to make sweeping judgements – the characters are always most important and how they reveal themselves to both you and the people you play with is part of that process.

Although we see Iago start to lie in this production, he is called honest and straightforward and 'worthy Iago, that's an honest fellow', for a reason. Let's think – five months ago, a year ago, what was Iago like? He must have been the kind of guy you would want on your side in a fire fight. He must have been a fine, upstanding soldier. That's why we believe him. We can't fudge the reason why we all believe and trust Iago. This sentiment has to come from somewhere.

Rory once said that he has found this quite a lonely production, because the only person he speaks to honestly is the audience. No one else shares his thoughts, everyone else is being played. It leaves him in quite a cold position.

We didn't spend too much time talking. Nick got the play on its feet very quickly. Some directors spend weeks sitting at the table and dissecting the script. But this approach is great, because it means you're discovering it how, I believe, it should be discovered, which is by doing. You can't intellectualise too much.

On the other hand I found it all a bit tricky because I immediately started playing Othello's complex emotions in very broad strokes: what he feels is so large and powerful. You can't sketch them out because the intensity of what he feels is his only eloquent guide as he moves through the play. At about four weeks in, I was really quite worried. I had a chat with Nick about it. Broad strokes do not a character make. I was just at the beginning.

As I said, we were on our feet quickly which meant we all got to see the shape of the scenes, the play

and the feel of the entire story by the end of week one. We knew what everyone was trying to do or discover – brilliant.

I am sure people will wonder how you access the places this character goes to – be it killing, be it suicide. Or being a general?

I have no experience of being in the army to call on, but everything I have spoken about with our adviser, Major General Jonathan Shaw, smacks of my relationship to my martial art [Adrian Lester holds a Second Degree Black Belt in Moo Duk Kwan Tae Kwon Do] and sometimes to leading a class. When you're in a class and you're asking people to pretend to hurt each other and to exercise, you have to look after how warm they get, stretch them down, have them do the correct kicks, correct them on the procedure of kicks, do the forms and have them do them correctly – the shape of the class is mapped out in your head. The class follows, all the while calling you 'Sir'. People can get hurt. It's a martial art, so by its definition has a military element. For me, there was an affinity that was very useful for the character.

Othello is a highly decorated officer. I wanted to make sure that he looked like he could kill – with his bare hands, in a moment, in the flick of an eye.

Also, when you're in front of the object of your desire, it isn't something that makes you feel strong, it actually makes you feel much weaker than normal. It eats away inside you, especially if it's a desire for something you cannot have, or a love for someone that is not being returned. That feeling of having your body, your mind and your heart under siege or under threat, with no solace – this is Othello's twisted logic – is something you would need to protect yourself from.

Othello goes into a world of doubt, so the problem then doesn't become proving that Desdemona is innocent, the problem becomes proving that she is guilty. Once you truly doubt you can never be resolved to innocence again, as doubt will always exist. It's like torture. So in order to remove doubt you have to be resolved in finding guilt. Once that guilt has been found the soldier will have to remove the threat.

At the end, there is no reversion to any other form of religious thought for Othello. By making sure

Interview – Adrian Lester

Desdemona prays to heaven to absolve herself of her sins before he kills her, not only is he saving himself from the impact of having this person exist in his world and yet be unable to own her, he's also saving her soul, making sure she repents before he sends her to heaven. That's old-school redemption: Christian, very much to do with God, Jehovah, angels and devils. Not much to do with any other religions.

At this point in *Othello*'s tortured psyche he occupies logical facets of thought, piece by piece. They aren't added together in a smooth tone. By the end of the play, he loves Desdemona desperately; in the next four lines, he hates her; in the next four he is going to kill her; the next four it is somebody else's fault; the next two lines it's his fault. He jumps into each state of being fully and completely. As we rehearse it, I am trying to speed that up and make sure I occupy love, hate, pain, and revenge, and then return again to love as fast as I can.

A good challenge.

It's a challenge that I think isn't going to end for me until the final performance. I will never truly fulfil this part. I think each performance will be a work in progress toward a more complete character. A bit like life.

The run we did today went well. But I am already wondering if I can do that again tomorrow? I think it's going to be an expensive role.

We'll see!

Interview – Olivia Vinall

Interview with Olivia Vinall, playing Desdemona

When did you first come across *Othello* – or indeed Shakespeare?

Perhaps I shouldn't talk about this, but I hadn't actually seen a theatre production of *Othello* or read it before I had the audition for this production. I saw the film with Laurence Fishburne as Othello and Kenneth Branagh as Iago when I was at school, but we didn't study it. So when I found out that I had the audition I read it. The amazing thing, which I haven't had with that many Shakespeare plays, is that I couldn't put it down. I had to read it all the way to the end in one sitting. Every scene just builds on the last in tension. I knew what was going to happen because I knew the plot – but I wanted to know how. How are they going to do that? Are they really going to do it? I was frantically turning the pages – it was ridiculous how fast I was reading it. I was really captivated. There aren't any subplots that take you away on tangents, like a lot of the other Shakespeare plays. You are with the characters right to the end.

As to Shakespeare in general, my parents have always loved his work and that's rubbed off on me. My Dad used to read sections to us when I was little. I have always wanted to understand it or see productions where I know what they are talking about, and engage with the feelings because they are so truthful and humane. It isn't exaggerated and pompous and it doesn't need to be really alienating to watch or listen to a Shakespeare play. Actually what they are talking about is just as modern as plays that are being written today.

Does Desdemona connect with any other parts you've played in your acting career? Are there any connections?

The thing I am finding is that the moments when she is really strong, I see her as someone who wears her heart on her sleeve and gives everything. There are elements of that in other characters that I have played before but I have never been able to really release it. When I read *Othello* the first time, the thing I got really excited about – that was also in the casting brief – was Desdemona as a tomboy, a

feisty Desdemona. I was really struck by that because I had only ever heard that she was a subservient character, obedient and sometimes squashed in comparison to the two big houses of Othello and Iago. When I saw the casting brief I realised this was a chance for people to see her in a different way. Her being completely in love can be the thing that someone would fight for, no matter what. That element has come into other parts I have played, like Harper in *Angels in America*. Elements of Harper's struggle with her husband – that real 'you don't know what's wrong, what is it, why won't someone communicate with you' – is the stuff that I am interested in in all plays, that relationship between two people in any moment, on any level. It's nice to be exploring someone with real strength but vulnerability at the same time; someone who's young and can feel those things, because people feel those things at any age. You don't have to be thirty!

How have you taken responsibility, as a performer in this Company, for the idea of making the play feel contemporary? Obviously Nick has the vision and has set up the world for you – but is it something you have done physically, or in work with the voice coach, or on the language?

I think it began with the style of performing the language. I started work with Jeannette, the National's voice coach, before we came into rehearsals so that I could be at a point, when I reached rehearsals, of being like a blank canvas. Preconceptions aren't there, held in your body or in your voice, then Nick Hytner could work with you in any way. It was a really interesting way to think about going into rehearsals, and the approach he was going to take. How I had heard Shakespeare at school, how you learn about it, seemed so structured and formal. Even at Drama School we learned about pausing at the end of every line. It seemed so set, so structured – but the verse gives you that anyway. Jeannette worked with me on how to adhere to all of those things whilst thinking the character's thoughts at the moment that you're

Interview – Olivia Vinnall

saying them: they're all there, contained in all the passages. And we looked at placing them in the audience's or the other character's ear, really trying to communicate. She kept asking me to think about 'where is that thought going? Where are you putting it in space?' That helped with the modern aspect, I think, it helps you to avoid being really exaggerated or proclaiming your emotions and transforms it into something a lot more personable and human. Physically, the setting helps to make it modern.

Also it helps to think of her as really young – like 18 – on the cusp of adulthood, on her gap year and with her future set up for her; as well as basing it in her real world: thinking about where she lives and her backstory.



Desdemona's relationship with Othello is played as very tactile and overtly sexual, which is a contemporary statement.

The most important thing about their story is that they see each other as equal – not that she's younger, or he's black, or he comes from a different place. They've had a meeting of minds and souls, which people can be cynical about if they think that the age difference is unlikely. For Desdemona and Othello, it's about finding the other part that fits and complements them, which is what makes the ending so tragic – that someone can tear that apart. It makes you wonder if it's true love.

When I read *Othello* the first time, knowing that Desdemona would be feisty and a tomboy, it struck me that Othello says "she wished heaven had made her such a man". I know that doesn't literally mean she wants to be a man, but part of me feels like everything she sees in him, she also wants to be. Actually she has this fight in her to go to war. And because of the world that she's opened to him, he's opened up another world to her, which has

expanded her mind from her tiny little London life. That's what allows them to be so tactile and modern.

Moving on from love – to being strangled! Kate (Kombat Kate), our fight director came into rehearsals recently to work on a fight effect. How was that?

It was great watching her being 'strangled' – by Adrian! – because Adrian and I had attempted our own version, and that really hurt! It was good to have Kate in. She makes it really mechanical so both actors know what they're doing, but at the same time she shows you ways to be free with it. It is really tricky because obviously Desdemona's larynx would be broken yet she keeps speaking. We had a doctor come in to rehearsals and explain to me what it's like when your airways have been completely shattered and how you can possibly find a noise or a voice. It's more like a heartbeat that's failing as opposed to you having lots of energy to be able to speak. The strangling is quite hard to create, and will be fun to do over and again! I do love that bit because everything about the two of them goes out of the window: it's man trying to kill woman, two people trying to fight, and she's fighting for her life. All relationships go out of the window at that point.

The strength that people can get; you can't even conceive what that would be like.

We are now in week six. How has the process been since the first day of coming in, meeting everyone and reading through, to now? How have you been working in rehearsals? What have been the challenges?

I have never been in a play of this scale before. What an amazing thing, to be allowed to do it! Coming into rehearsals I had a lot of fear – and excitement. Watching Rory and Adrian and everyone, I have noticed their ease with the text and willingness to talk about relationships. Doing character work outside of the rehearsal room so that we can come in and work with Nick on the text and the meaning of all the words has been a way that I have never worked before. But it has been a really interesting challenge to find your own way there so that you are at a level, when you come into the rehearsal room, to go forward. Week six! Every week it has felt like the temperature has just been turned up, it's tightening. I feel I have all these feelings but they haven't yet homogenised or formed together – and it's week six. Each week there's a different part of her that I've

Interview – Olivia Vinall

been trying to chip at – whether in a scene, or physically, or emotionally, or from her mental space. Each week you feel like you are layering it up. It's definitely been a process that hasn't been planned (on my part), but in a way that's really helpful, because it almost comes to you in the way the rehearsals have been programmed. There's still loads to do!

Interview – Rory Kinnear

Interview with Rory Kinnear, playing Iago

We are in week six, and it is Bank Holiday Monday. How have rehearsals been today?

It has been good! We've been putting together the beginning of the second half. What I am beginning to realise is that once we start running it, everything will change and, I am hoping, fall into place in terms of the momentum of the play, which – albeit it doesn't – sort of plays out in real time. And the connections between the scenes, which are difficult to try and create or recreate falsely when rehearsing scenes individually, should, I hope, be infused with the developments of the play up to that point.

When did you first come across *Othello* – if you remember?

I think it was at school. I didn't do it for A' Level, but I might have done it at GCSE; I certainly read it at school. The first time I saw it was the Willard White/Ian McKellen version when I was probably, well, little – about ten. It was incredibly hot, it was in a tin hut that was a temporary structure for it. I went with my mother and I think my father, and my sister. It was incredibly hot which was, I have now realised, very good for the madness of the play and indeed for the setting. But I also remember being quite engrossed in the narrative of the play. Not perhaps understanding everything at the age of ten, but certainly, as I now know from rehearsing, it is that narrative drive which is very compelling and propulsive.

How did you prepare before you walked in on day one and did the read-through?

I had met with Nick Hytner and Adrian a couple of times. We had talked about various aspects of the play that we thought we should talk about, ie the things that are often brought up with the play. We talked about setting, and period, and we also did two days just working through the play act by act and seeing what thoughts came up, and whether or not, at that juncture, Nick was hoping to do a contemporary setting. I think he wanted to see whether or not there was anything that really jarred. And also, as we had done with *Hamlet* (we did a week workshop on *Hamlet*), we just went through

and cut bits that we didn't think were easily comprehensible – as long as they didn't affect the narrative of the play.

Personally, I had read up quite a bit about soldiers and war, particularly war now – what it's like and what kind of things you do. And I read accounts of war over long periods of time, from the First World War onwards, just because it felt I had to have some kind of 'in' to – as wonky a world view as Iago holds – this sense of people having gone to war and into battle regularly over fifteen odd years: what that does to peoples' psyches and how regular deployments take their toll, and what it means to Iago to be a soldier. I thought there was probably some relevance in looking into post-traumatic stress disorder and the like. But once you get into rehearsals, you throw all that away! I putatively learnt the soliloquies before we came to rehearsals, but that was it.

Everything changes once you're actually working on the scenes. And, as pretty much always with Shakespeare, the scenes do most of the work for you as long as you unpick them and play them with conviction.

What about the language? How have you made the language sound and feel contemporary, fun – and Shakespearean, so to speak?

The idea of 'Shakespearean' speaking comes from people's experiences of productions they've seen, rather than necessarily reading it or studying it. I also don't think it's always declaimed. I think that's how people describe Shakespearean acting, they think about declamation and a sort of quality of sound over meaning. But I think that is something that is going away. These things come in cycles and people have expectations of what they want from a Shakespeare production. I think you have to work out what they [the characters] are thinking and what they mean with each sentence. If Shakespeare uses imaginative language it's to do with the character rather than just as a verbal flourish from the poet's self-regard. It does tend to be just about breaking the thoughts down into digestible chunks and then

Interview – Rory Kinnear

saying them!

I have been trying to get inside the head of someone like Iago – and what he ultimately ends up doing. We have talked in rehearsals, trying to track his journey: when he is in control of his behaviour and when things spiral out of control. It's not like we meet Iago and he is setting out to kill people.

So how have you tracked this journey? Where are you up to thus far with trying to understand it?

I think it is definitely something that will change during the run of performances, and will also change in terms of which foot you start off on in the first scene. From what we are given – using the bald facts – he's a man who has suspicions about his wife's fidelity with Othello in times gone by: even though he is not sure whether it is true or not, he has heard rumours. And he seems pissed off that he has been passed over for promotion. At the start of the play, with no war looming and no ability to be as close to Othello, Cassio and Desdemona as he ends up being, Iago's only idea is to let Desdemona's father know that she has run off with Othello and hope that he tries to ruin their marriage or demand that it be annulled. That's all he wants at the beginning of the play. He is then, by surprise, sent off to war with Othello, Cassio and Desdemona and brings Roderigo as – he thinks – a useful force for implementing what plots he has. And what Brabantio is unable to do, he hopes to do himself by making Othello jealous of or suspicious of Cassio and Desdemona. He never talks about murdering anybody.

That first mention of killing is by Othello.

Yes, and I think in those scenes that straddle the interval – Act 3.3 and Act 4.1 – his attitude to his increasing power and ability and success, and the way things fall into his lap in the way things happen, does seem to be a sort of divine providence to how successful he's been. Whether or not he finds that so empowering and so overwhelming that it drives him on to do things he had never previously considered...? And equally it might tap into something inside his psyche, a psyche that has been surrounded by killing for 15 years; and here on an army base, with the thought that you might end up killing people in a war, then being told when you arrive that the war is over – all that aggression and adrenaline, where is that going to put itself? It

seems psychologically plausible that it turns in on itself.



What I find interesting about watching you develop Iago is what genuinely affects him, what upsets him. We just watched Act 4.2, where Othello has been rummaging through Desdemona's bedroom, and then he leaves and Emilia's comforting him and Desdemona asks for Iago. There's a moment at the end of the scene where the three of you are on the bed, comforting Desdemona. I suppose the interesting question is, is Iago affected by Desdemona's distress right now? Because I suppose it's most inhuman to not be. I don't think Iago is inhuman... it's intriguing.

I guess part of the way that my attitude has changed to the part before and during rehearsals is that I thought I was probably going to need to invent things – in terms of what an audience would see – to make an audience understand the character more, or to make his motives clearer. And actually in rehearsals I have realised that an audience will project onto Iago so many different things and that ambivalence, and the fact that he refuses to explain at the end, should engender a sense of ambiguity. As Othello says – 'why?'. If from moment to moment you tell the audience 'this bit means something, this bit doesn't', the success of his mask-wearing is undermined. In the first half he's given all kinds of soliloquies that can be infused with excitement, or bewilderment, or self-loathing. But in the second half, in which he really does get down and dirty, he's not afforded those soliloquies – not one – and is basically saying 'Should I kill Cassio?' Or, to Roderigo, 'let's work out which one would be best to die.' It seems that once it's out of Iago's total control, once the poison is in Othello, the poison that Iago talks of in his second soliloquy – that thought of

Interview – Rory Kinnear

Othello and his wife, gnawing at his innards – it takes root so successfully it has been transferred. It's almost like he's cured, cured of having to work it through.

Do you sleep well at night?

Yes, very well!

Does anything affect you?

I do sleep well. I don't like to take anything home, because you have to be careful of that. You always have to do it without judgment. I think once we get into running the play, the energy of it is so ferociously quick of course, and it's so mutually dependent – particularly between Iago and Othello – that it probably will be harder to shake off for a little while. At the moment we are just trying to unpick each scene, make them work and see if some things stick and some things don't. Once we get into the full rough and tumble of playing it through – I am sure for a few weeks it will wreak havoc.

Interview – Lyndsey Marshal

Interview with Lyndsey Marshal, playing Emilia

We're in week six of rehearsals. Maybe we can talk about how it feels after you've done your first run through?

Usually I am quite nervous and feel quite unready to do the first run-through, but this time I have to say that I felt very ready to do a run through – just in terms of plotting the journey and how quickly it happens. Because what's quite interesting in this play is how fast things turn completely upside down. The scene with Iago and Othello, where Iago plants the jealousy seed, is 20-25 minutes in and it's a massive 360-degree turn in the play. So I really enjoyed doing the run. It's very interesting to see what Emilia says, but more interesting what she *doesn't* say at certain points when you think she would say something.

Probably when people come to watch the play they will question why Emilia gives the handkerchief to Iago. When do you think Emilia thinks that: 'I thought so then I'll kill myself for grief'?

I am still charting through this, but I think there are a couple of points – the big one is when Emilia is witness to the scene with Othello and Desdemona, and Othello talks about how important the handkerchief is, and things start churning inside her, thinking oh God, oh God, oh God. I think of it as being a diamond ring, or something of extreme value that Emilia has basically stolen. I mean, that's what's interesting about Emilia. She isn't all goodness and light. She's quite a complicated character because, like all good characters, she has faults. What she does with the handkerchief is the wrong thing to do, and she knows it, but I think she is doing it to get something from her terrible, cold relationship with her husband. It's a gift.

In our world, Emilia is a soldier. How have you found that?

I didn't know that I was going to be a soldier until the first day of rehearsals, which at first I thought exciting and then I thought, oh gosh, I never perceived Emilia to be like that. Actually, it's very interesting, and clever. It works really well in a

modern world, because otherwise Emilia's just a servant and that doesn't really ring true in the world that we are depicting. Also, it adds a layer to her relationship with Iago because she's always there, they're always together, there's no escaping one another. They're within the workplace, they live together, work together, they are within each other's worlds constantly.

It adds to the claustrophobia in a really effective way. For example, Emilia is in the mess room, so she gets to witness how her husband behaves. And there is a moment where she tries to tell Iago to shut up when he is taking the mickey out of Cassio. These are all great layers to bring in, it helps us to understand Emilia better.

How does Lyndsey prepare? Do you come into rehearsals as a really clean slate? Or do you come with a strong idea?

For me, the work is now kicking in, certainly in the last week. I don't really know how I prepare – it's different for different jobs. I have only ever done one Shakespeare before. My first was *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, playing Hermia.

What's quite interesting is now that I feel confident with the staging and the lines, the real investigative work has started. At 6.30am I am awake, thinking 'Why does she say that?' It's really exciting because it feels like a puzzle. The writing is so wonderful, there's so much in there, and I keep finding things where I think 'I don't know why that's there, maybe it was a mistake.'

I realised that the first time we meet Emilia, she's kissed by Cassio. And as soon as she's kissed, the next line from Iago is putting her down in front of a group of people. That's how you first are introduced to that character.

Also, it's really interesting that there are only three people who have soliloquies: Iago, Othello and then suddenly Emilia. She just does it once. Why has Shakespeare decided that is the point she speaks to

Interview – Lyndsey Marshal

the audience?

Why that moment? That speech unveils many things about her character, because I think she knows she is doing something wrong and so, rather than grapple with her own conscience, she is basically trying to enlist the audience. It's that thing when you know you are not doing something right and you speak to a friend because you want them to convince you that it's fine. There's also something about the end, when she dies – if you know someone, if someone looks you in the eye, if you've met them, if you've touched them, if you've shaken hands, if you've spoken to them, you feel a deeper loss when that person goes. I think it's interesting that she befriends the audience.

The other thing at stake, considering Emilia is a soldier, and Othello's her boss, is her job.

And also being in a relationship that isn't completely smooth. In the world she's in you leave people to their own business, leave people to their own relationships. 'Desdemona's relationship isn't perfect, so you know what, it's got nothing to do with me'. There's a bit of that as well, until she takes action.

It feels like there's a nice journey between you and Desdemona.

It's interesting that the first scene, as well, Desdemona comes to her aid when she's being put down. She helps her.



It feels like they learn from each other, which is really nice because they are like chalk and cheese: their backgrounds, age, husbands, everything. That's coming across really clearly.

She and Desdemona get closer. Desdemona is in an abusive relationship, and the more Emilia sees their relationship being played out and the more she sees

Desdemona being abused, she takes on a position, a role of trying to help her. She has seen it all before. That's a really interesting connection.

Are you finding it easy enough to make it contemporary?

Very much so. I have done lots of new plays, mostly, so I think that's the only way I know how to approach it. I have also seen many productions of *Othello*.

Yes, it's a bit of a running joke in rehearsals that you are the fount of knowledge in the room for all *Othello* productions!

I think we're finding things that I haven't seen before. Maybe it's the world that we're setting it in, the fact that Emilia is a soldier. You approach it like it's a new piece of writing.

Research

Email extracts from Major General Jonathan Shaw to Nicholas Hytner, giving advice on the realities of senior level operational command.

On Feb 06, 2013, at 08:27 AM, Jonathan Shaw wrote:

Dear Nick, what a stimulating lunch! I went away reeling with insights and enquiries. You set trains of thought running that haven't reached the end of the line yet. But some preliminary thoughts.

You described Othello as having risen from being a slave to being a commander. In modern parlance, that makes him a 'commissioned from the ranks' officer. This adds to the psychological strain in the man. It is a commonplace to say that the job at the bottom of an organisation is different to the job at the top; all officers know this as they climb the ladder. But for a private soldier to become an officer and then to rise to high rank, he has to face an even greater shift in requirement. Boiled down to its basics, a soldier is trained to do violence; an officer is trained to organise the doing of violence. So Othello will have earned his spurs as a soldier by doing violence; that will be his default setting. He has had to learn to organise violence as an NCO but the NCO's style of leadership is more macho and physical than an officer's style of leadership. Again, to be a successful officer, he not only has to organise rather than do violence, he has to adopt a more intellectual style of leadership (like riding a horse, you cannot lead as an officer by brute strength, the soldiers are too powerful; as an NCO you can, and often have to, lead by brute strength!). In both what he does and how he does it, he is working against himself. This places an enormous strain on him. When, as you described, Desdemona introduces something out of his control into his life, and then Iago introduces the idea of betrayal, he can sustain the facade no longer, reverts to type and does violence. Fascinating. For this strain adds to the more obvious strain of Othello being from a different class to the officers and courtiers around him; for many commissioned from the ranks officers, command never sits easily with them as they can spot that they are out of place socially and this discomfort communicates itself to the soldiers who in turn lose respect for him and he for himself. Othello is probably too strong for this but the strain is there; as with the colour difference, maybe he is more aware of it than his observers, but it is another

strain on him. So he has a whole bundle of 'denials' going on which Iago unwittingly exploits. Or maybe it is 'wittingly'? Maybe Iago fuels his resentment by seeing Othello as not a proper officer and, worse, one who, having made the transition himself, is denying the same chance to Iago. Ouch, the spur of hypocrisy.

And as for Iago, personally I found this even more of an eye-opener. I heard Lord Puttnam quote Augustine of Hippo: "harbouring resentment is like taking poison and waiting for the other person to die"; how true. You describe how Iago questions his own motivation and paranoias as the play goes on; I see him as going mad with his own poison, seeking personal redemption by bringing Othello down. But once this poison is loose in the brain, it gets out of control, breaks clear of its initial focus and infects his attitude to everything and everyone, including himself.

So the play is about two people who help each other destroy themselves. And all that from an hour's lunch! I must now re-read the whole play and see what other insights our lunch prompts.

Nick, thank you, that really was a privilege. If I can be of any further help as you move to production, or if you want me to speak to any of the cast as you suggested or (even greater fantasy!) attend one of the rehearsals, I would be delighted. Meanwhile, thanks for lunch and good luck with the play.

Best wishes, Jonathan

Research

From: Jonathan David Shaw
Subject: Thanks
Date: 25 February 2013 18:36:37 GMT
To: nick hytner, Adrian Lester

Thank you for the privilege of attending your first read-through. Terrific cast. Great clarity.

Cassio raises the issue of saluting. The body language of the rank structure takes months and years to get natural. And which Regt's norms are you following? The Guards are absurd, even on ops, but then they would think Paras are slovenly. You will need to pick a reality or ask a mentor to supply one. The key will be to make the respect natural and unlike a drill movement. And the natural response becomes a barometer of people's respect. As Cassio falls from grace, people respond to him differently; although Iago ingratiates by staying the same. Etc. Start people saluting or bracing up off as well as on stage: excellence is not an act, it's a habit (Aristotle). If this doesn't cause a riot, it'll make people natural on stage. Just an idea!

Film. 'The odd angry shot' is a film about the Australian SAS in Vietnam. It was filmed with soldiers in the non-starring roles. The behaviours are spot on. Note the piss-up with the Yanks; the inevitable punch-up. Note the lack of venom, this is soldiers enjoying having a fight but with no intent to harm. These are people comfortable with violence. In my day, officers never went drinking with soldiers for precisely this reason – they don't read or understand violence in the way soldiers do. Hence Cassio is out of his depth, fails to read the signs, overreacts and causes actual bodily harm rather than just honest fisticuffs.

I can see that you need a behavioural military coach full-time if you want to capture all this. Good luck. Yell if you need help.

Best wishes
Jonathan

On Feb 26, 2013, at 11:09 AM, Jonathan David Shaw wrote:

I'll seek one out, just in case you ask.

Women in a war zone: fascinating and disturbing memories came crashing back after yesterday's sessions. Soldiers high on potential violence and fear suddenly faced with a beauty – visceral emotional overload! I've had it myself and had it reported to me. More stories anon. The impact of beautiful (and she is!) Desdemona arriving on an operational base still swilling with anticipatory anti-Turkish testosterone would have been dramatic; body language, gestures, magnet of attention etc. "F***ing hell, get a load of that!" is putting it mildly. As I say, I'll give you some real life stories to back that up if you want.

On second thoughts, can I be the coach?!

Best wishes
Jonathan

Date: 11 March 2013 21:39:22 GMT

To: Nicholas Hytner

The two quick ones. 1. The confusion of kit on or kit off will only become apparent when the players are in costume. Cassio has to take his helmet etc off early in order to give Desdemona the visual clue for her to take hers off (or you make her a complete free spirit who does it regardless!). But if all the rest of Iago's party do likewise then there'll be very few people still booted and spurred for war when Othello announces the war is over. 2. You were very firm that O did not shake Iago's hand (after Montano's and the Cypriot's); I did not want to offer a counter view in public, as you obviously have your reasons for that. Yet this is the man who is O's close and trusted ensign who has just safely delivered his wife to Cyprus; a salute then a warm handshake would be what I would expect, in a relationship of mutual trust and respect. Iago has no headgear so a brace up as O approaches then a warm handshake. This also sets the very personal levels of trust that are what Iago exploits later.

I can explain more at the prod meeting tomorrow.

Jonathan

Research

12 March extract:

The officers fill their time with tedious admin! I was telling Rory that on arrival it would be natural for him to whip out an A5 notebook from his thigh pocket in his combats and start scribbling notes of things that need doing eg. Get someone to get Othello's kit. He can be apparently thinking about what needs doing as cover for his plotting; that was his idea which I said would be a natural cover.

...

Cassio taking his kit off at the first hint of peace is a classic of someone inexperienced in war. Dress states are set by the commander/HQ, having considered all the evidence, not just rumour control. So a bit of dress relaxing, ie. helmet off, is humanly to be expected, especially from a sap like Cassio. But most people should still have their helmets on; officially, the dress state has not changed.

p32. Othello: "I'll make thee an example". Exemplary punishment exactly what commanders do to control the soldiery! And the bigger the example, the less he can reduce it later. And hence the futility and impossibility of D's appeal, no matter O's private words to her to the contrary.

p80. The knife is the covert, silent murder weapon; the pistol is an open, noisy self-defence weapon. The knife is the weapon of crime; a pistol is legitimate. This fits Rodrigo trying to kill Cassio covertly with a knife, Cassio responding overtly with a pistol, and Iago finishing off Rodrigo silently with a knife without anyone noticing. So that works, both dramatically and in reality.