



Othello and apartheid

Breaking Racial Taboos

Othello

O my fair warrior!

Desdemona

My dear Othello!

Commentator

Suzman also took the brave decision to foreground the controversial physical aspect of Othello and Desdemona's inter-racial relationship.

Janet Suzman

One of the pillars of apartheid was called the Immorality Act. And that meant that it was immoral to go anywhere near, sexually, a person of another colour. Only two years before we did the production, that act had been rescinded.

Othello

*It gives me wonder great as my content
To see you here before me. O my soul's joy!*

Janet Suzman

I was determined to lay waste all memories of that Immorality Act in our play.

Othello

*I cannot speak enough of this content;
It stops me here.*

Janet Suzman

They love each other. And I was determined that they must embrace – so they do, with the due passion that their relationship is, with which it is described in the text.

Othello

... the greatest discords be.

Janet Suzman

Well I tell you, there were lots of seats banging up the first night that happened at the Market Theatre, and people marching out and swearing and, you know, all that was going on. We thought yes, right on, that's it, we're touching a nerve here.

Commentator

Choosing to cast Richard Haines as Iago became a direct comment on white racism.

Iago

you are well tun'd now!

But I'll set down the pegs that make this music,

As honest as I am.

Janet Suzman

Iago does everything just because, just because Othello is black.

Iago

'Tis here, but yet confus'd:

Knavery's plain face is never seen till us'd.

Janet Suzman

Just because Othello has refused to elevate him as an officer, he will hate him for that. Just because Emilia succumbs to being thumped, he will hate her. Just because Desdemona is the perfect flower of Venetian young womanhood, he will try to despoil it.

Iago

The lieutenant Cassio to-night watches on the court of guard: first, I must tell thee this – Desdemona is directly in love with him.

Roderigo

With him! why, 'tis not possible.

Janet Suzman

And what I loved about Richard as he developed Iago, Iago has more soliloquies to the audience than even Hamlet, and Richard had a kind of gleefulness, a sense of the awful malicious fun he was getting out of ruining everybody's lives in those soliloquies.

Iago

And then for her

To win the Moor, – were't to renounce his baptism,

*His soul is so enfeather'd to her love
That she may make, unmake, do what she list,
Even as her appetite shall play the god
With his weak function. How am I, then, a villain*

Commentator

The casting of Richard Haines as Iago also had contemporary political resonance because of his physique and appearance.

Janet Suzman

There was a character at the time called Eugène Terre'Blanche and he was a Nazi, really, and he belonged to something called the AWB, a sort of South African SS army of extremely right-wing Afrikaners who wanted to reconstitute their own fatherland. And he was a big chap and Richard sort of inevitably reminded me of him and his hairiness and his beard. And we just decided not to put the AWB insignia on his flash on his black uniform as Iago, because we thought crossing the Ts and dotting the Is we don't have to do. People will pick up the implications, which of course they did.

Commentator

Suzman also exploited the range of attitudes to race displayed by the different characters.

Janet Suzman

When you look at the characters throughout the play it's like an archaeological dig, in a way, you can see different stratas of society: the racists, the bigots, the Liberals, and the ones who really don't care a damn. For instance, Desdemona's father.

Brabantio

I have done.

Janet Suzman

Absolutely delighted to have Othello come to dinner. But cross that invisible barrier into marrying your daughter – no. An armchair Liberal if ever I saw one. Then there's Roderigo, who's an out-and-out bigot, stupid, full of prejudice.

Roderigo

To the gross clasps of a lascivious Moor

Janet Suzman

Then there are people in the play who just don't see colour, at all.

Commentator

This range of attitudes was even reflected in reactions to the production. While some people found the production offensive, the state had to allow the performances to continue.

Janet Suzman

Millions of bags full of hate letters came pouring through the door by people who thought that this was an outrage. But we didn't get banned because they would have been the laughing stock of the world if they had banned Shakespeare.

Commentator

And the response of the press, and above all of the audience itself, was overwhelmingly positive.

Janet Suzman

This was a story told in the highest possible echelons of great verse and insights and poetry into the lives of people who are being manhandled, misused, humiliated, made asses of. And the black audience rose and rose and rose and, I'm telling you, at quarter to 12 in the night, it was rather a long performance, they were up on their feet, cheering, because they'd been told this remarkable story which was utterly thrilling. It's precisely what we wanted.