



Othello and apartheid

The play as a metaphor

Commentator

In 1988, actress and director Janet Suzman took an extraordinary decision: to defy the racist apartheid regime in South Africa, by staging *Othello* in Johannesburg with a mixed cast of black and white actors. Here, she is going to explore how her South African stage production used Shakespeare's text to make provocative comments on the contemporary political and social situation.

Janet Suzman

This was not a white man's boring old play, but a really strong protest play. We saw Shakespeare as a protest playwright. If you look at the story of *Othello*, it's about a black man being humiliated by a big white thug, and if you like to be simplistic, but theatre is metaphor, that was the metaphor for South Africa. The black population was being humiliated by a thuggish white, sort of police state. So it was the perfect play. The idea of using a great play to describe the present was not unusual for any of us. So this wasn't a 400-year-old play. This was a play about the situation in South Africa that happened to be written in some of the greatest verse ever written.

Commentator

But Suzman did not want to express these contemporary resonances too literally and decided to stage a traditional production in Elizabethan costume.

Brabantio

*Which, but thou hast already, with all my heart
I would keep from thee.*

Janet Suzman

For the first time in my life, I realised that Elizabethan was foreign. Because I'm playing in Johannesburg now. And who in Soweto has ever seen a doublet and hose in their life? The Elizabethan costumes gave them a sort of Martian otherness. If I'd put them in khakis and contemporary militaristic things, it would have diminished, it seemed to me, the impact in Johannesburg.