



Othello and apartheid

Othello

Commentator

Key to the success of this production was the casting of John Kani as Othello, the only black actor in an all-white cast.

Janet Suzman

Othello is not a Venetian. Othello is a stranger in a society that has adopted him. Othello is an exotic. And that is precisely what I wanted in that play, the otherness of Othello, because racial prejudice is all about otherness.

Commentator

This sense of otherness was increased by the fact that English was not John Kani's first language.

Janet Suzman

John speaks Xhosa, as his native tongue.

Othello

*That I have ta'en away this old man's daughter,
It is most true*

Janet Suzman

I loved the fact that John's English, though absolutely brilliant in daily life, would now have to express itself through this very great poetry. And I found that difficulty extraordinarily touching in John.

Othello

*The very head and front of my offending
Hath this extent, no more.*

Janet Suzman

There's always a sense of him searching for the right word and then finding it and then delectating it in a very special way.

Othello

*Rude am I in my speech,
And little bless'd with the soft phrase of peace*

Janet Suzman

The analyst argument will be, that's not what he really means, 'Rude am I in my speech'. I took it to be that though. That the foreigner speaking English had to search for conceits and words and ideas more than a native speaker.

Othello

*Come, Desdemona, I have but an hour
Of love, of worldly matters and direction,
To spend with thee*

Janet Suzman

I also liked his neatness, his compactness as a figure. And I tried to think of all the great Generals in history like Napoleon or Montgomery of Alamein, small, neat, dangerous figures, rather than these large Pattonesque Generals. So I didn't equate military prowess with muscularity but with intelligence, strategy. I could absolutely understand why a young woman would fall for somebody as magical and gentle and delicate as that.