

OTHELLO: A SOUTH AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

When the idea first came to Janet Suzman to direct her version of Othello, she had no thought but that it would be a protest play. Given the time, 1987, and the location, Johannesburg, it could hardly have been otherwise. With the help of her good friend and fellow activist John Kani, she recreated the play to draw attention to the issue of race in Othello, shaping it to parallel the issues that troubled apartheid South Africa.

The context of this film plays such a crucial role in its conception that it cannot be ignored or glossed over. Originally it was a play, never meant to be filmed, barely able even to make it to the stage. Suzman was part of a group called the Market Theater, a small company that worked in protest theater, usually relying on indigenous writing for its pieces. Othello was an ambitious project, both for its director—it was her first time directing—and for the actors involved. It brought up the inflammatory issue of mixed marriage, which was considered almost a sin by apartheid society. Indeed, if the Immorality Act, which disallowed contact between couples of different races, had not been repealed two years earlier, the production might never have slipped onto the stage and screen. Opening in 1987 and filmed the year after, Suzman's Othello was one of the first versions of Shakespeare's play to feature a black Othello opposite a white Desdemona, and it was performed for a mixed audience. There were those who walked out at the couple's first kiss, and the company received their fair share of hate mail. John Kani himself had difficulty stepping into his role as Desdemona's husband. Early on in rehearsals, Suzman remembered him saying "I can understand the agony, but I can't do the love. I was taught to hate those white bastards when I was a kid."¹ Another barrier was the language. Not a native speaker of English, Kani had trouble with pronunciations and rhythms, his Xhosa accent allowing him to truthfully

¹ Suzman, Janet. "Who Needs Parables?" *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*. Internet. 10/27/03. Available <http://www.tannerlectures.utah.edu/lectures/Suzman96.pdf>.

say he was “rude of speech” in comparison to the Venetian-born characters. Given only six weeks to prepare the play, Suzman and the cast struggled with these many difficulties, but the final product was sold out again and again, and the decision was made to have it filmed.

From this context, Suzman drew parallels to Shakespeare’s story, focusing on the destruction of Othello’s, and Desdemona’s, happiness by Iago, based on “no more than an evil caprice.”² She makes it quite clear that Iago’s racism and malignity are his primary, if not only, motives for his actions. The director sets up her argument early on, by establishing the purity and strength of the relationship between Othello and Desdemona. From the first time we see them together in 1.3, we know that each is devoted to the other. Othello’s account of his courtship, spoken with a fond smile, and Desdemona’s lingering glance at her husband when she calls him “my lord” (1.3.187)³ affirm this affection, and even the Duke is won over by Othello’s story. When the ships come in bearing first Desdemona and then Othello in 2.1, we are reminded of Desdemona’s reasons for loving her husband as she becomes a “warrior,” lifting Cassio’s sword in salute to her general. This playfulness leads into the tender lines spoken on the gangplank; Othello almost whispers “I cannot speak enough of this content;/ It stops me here; it is too much of happiness” (2.1.190-1). Other scenes, such as 2.3, prove the physical attraction between the two: Desdemona distractedly lets Cassio’s flowers fall and they hasten to bed. Iago’s line in 3.3, “the General’s wife is now the General (3.1.305-6) demonstrates his idea of Othello’s dedication to his wife, and it is confirmed when Desdemona plies Cassio’s suit in 3.3. The strength of their relationship is essential to Suzman’s message because she needs to make it clear that Othello’s destruction comes from Iago, an external force, and not from a natural tendency toward jealousy.

Thus, the onus of the tragedy is placed on Iago. The film tailors the character to represent the racist white section of apartheid society—he cannot bear to see “the Moor,” as he almost always refers to Othello, happy and in good standing, although he knows that “the state/.../Cannot with safety cast

² Ibid.

³ *The New Penguin Shakespeare* edition, 1996

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him" (1.1.148-50). In his cries to Brabantio, Iago uses every possible issue to rile him up over the apparent disappearance of his daughter—he creates sexual images involving animals and pointing out the age difference between Desdemona and Othello, dwelling also on the difference between their races. His filthy sexual metaphors wake Brabantio and turn his anger first at the “scoundrels” who slander his daughter, and then at Othello, when the slanders turn out to be, more or less, true. From Iago, Brabantio picks up the habit of animal imagery, and he is also the only other character who clearly has an issue with Othello’s color. When he confronts the Moor in 1.1, he cannot believe that Desdemona would “Run from her guardage to the sooty bosom/ Of such a thing as thou” (1.1.70-71). Suzman uses this characteristic to equate him to the landed Afrikaners in South Africa. It’s all right for Brabantio to invite Othello to his house many times, and enjoy the stories of his adventures, but God forbid that he should marry his daughter! To her father, she would be much better off to marry one of the “wealthy curled darlings of our nation” (1.2.68), rather than “in spite of nature,/ Of years, country, credit, everything,/ To fall in love with what she feared to look on!” (1.3.96-8).

Thus Iago successfully begins his campaign of manipulation. Roderigo falls victim first, as Iago convinces him of his hate for the Moor, and his sympathy for Roderigo’s situation. This manipulation repeats itself throughout the play, as Roderigo again and again doubts Iago, and is always reassured. The last time provides the best example; sure that Iago has been deceiving him about his gifts to Desdemona, he confronts him and determines to find out for himself, promising to call his friend to reckoning if the jewels he gave him are not returned by Desdemona herself. Iago immediately turns the situation around, playing on Roderigo’s desire to be thought of as noble and intelligent:

IAGO: Why now I see there’s mettle in thee; and even from this instant do build on thee a better opinion than ever before. Give me thy hand, Roderigo. Thou hast taken against me a most just exception; but yet I protest I have dealt most directly in thy affair.

RODERIGO: It hath not appeared.

IAGO: I grant indeed it hath not appeared; and your suspicion is not without wit and judgement. But, Roderigo, if thou hast that in thee indeed, which I have greater reason to believe now than ever—I mean purpose, courage, and valour—this

night show it. If thou the next night following enjoy not Desdemona, take me from this world with treachery, and devise engines for my life. (4.2.203-16)

He tells the poor fool everything he wants to hear, and as a result continues to get everything from him—money and service.

Brabantio too acts according to Iago's plans, responding to his crude warnings and turning on Othello when he finds that he can lay the blame for his daughter's misbehavior on him. As mentioned before, the vulgar images that Iago presents have the desired effect on Desdemona's father; Suzman's Iago, played by Richard Haddon Haines, also has a very expressive way of articulating his meaning through gestures. From something as harmless as miming the action of eating to illustrate "provender" (1.1.48) to the offensive imitation of "the beast with two backs" (1.1.116), Iago makes sure through his body language, that he cannot be misunderstood—and he never is.

Othello, of course, is the main object of Iago's manipulation. Although he gives many reasons for his hatred of the Moor, the play gives no confirmation of any of them. Suzman, however, goes further, insisting that none of the mentioned reasons are the true motivation, but rather that Iago's reasons stem from his racism and his natural malignity. The first explanation offered is given to convince Roderigo of Iago's hatred of Othello; he claims he is jealous of Cassio's promotion. However, in 1.3 we have a second justification in Iago's monologue: there is a rumor abroad that Othello has slept with Iago's wife Emilia. Generally, an audience must believe what is said in a monologue because the assumption is that the speaker is talking to himself—and what reason would a character have to lie to himself? In Iago's case, however, he puts forth as many reasons as he can think of to add credibility to his plots, even in his own mind, because he knows that truly they are only based on his destructive whim. We hear a third reason in 2.1, when Iago professes to love Desdemona, albeit for different qualities than her other admirers love her. In the end, he even refuses to explain his actions; he could have given any of the three explanations, but for once he chooses not to throw out an excuse, and in the absence of anything but the truth to reveal, he remains silent. The film stresses this last speech of Iago's—Haines

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spits with contempt at Othello's feet, sorry to have been found out, but satisfied in the fulfillment of his scheme.

Having established a primary motive for Iago, we must now focus on how he managed to so completely destroy Othello, and what qualities of Othello made it possible for him to be ruined. The first step in this process is taken in 3.3, as Iago skillfully plants the first seeds of doubt in his quarry's mind, remarking on Cassio's exit as if it was a sign of a guilty conscience, but also keeping himself out of it by saying only good things about Cassio. He starts off using very vague terms, and when Othello demands again and again to know his thoughts, he inadvertently lets his own fears slip; Iago seizes on them and then uses them to further destroy Othello's trust in his wife. When he is certain that Othello is buying his story, he reiterates Brabantio's warning, "She did deceive her father, marrying you" (3.3.203), and finally, when the initial doubt and Iago's reasonings have wormed their way into Othello's heart, he plays his trump card. Othello is a foreigner—he cannot understand Venetian women—and Iago uses this assumption to argue that Desdemona's choice of the Moor for a husband, in Venetian society, shows a particularly perverse judgment, an unnatural tendency, one that can only be temporary—and such a return to the acceptable parameters of her society could very well be satisfied by an affair with such a one as Cassio. He says,

Ay, there's the point: as, to be bold with you,
Not to affect many proposed matches
Of her own clime, complexion, and degree,
Whereto we see in all things nature tends,
Foh! One may smell in such a will most rank,
Foul disproportion, thoughts unnatural.
But, pardon me, I do not in position
Distinctly speak of her, though I may fear
Her will, recoiling to her better judgement,
May fall to match you with her country forms,
And happily repent.
(3.3.226-36)

This speech, so reminiscent of Brabantio's conviction that the Moor could only have wooed his daughter by enchantment, gets to the heart of the film. The marriage between Desdemona and Othello is

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considered odd, unnatural, even vulgar in Venetian society; similarly, mixed marriage in South Africa was treated with disdain and contempt by members of all sects of society. For Iago to argue that Desdemona's will was proven corrupt by her decision to marry Othello shows that Suzman attributes the same attitude to the racist elite. It works so well on Othello because he recognizes the truth of the initial statement; he is indeed a foreigner, and knows little of the ways of Venetian women. He is quite willing to believe the implications of this "fact" because he knows that such a reaction to his marriage is not unusual, and indeed, there are indications that he himself is uncomfortable with the ethnic differences between himself and his wife. At the end of the play, he describes himself as "One who loved not wisely, but too well" (5.2.340), as if all his troubles were derived from the fact that he loved Desdemona too much—that this love was against nature, which righted itself with their tragedy. This final poison forces all peace out of Othello's mind. Only when he has hit this argument does Iago perceive enough of a change in Othello to venture an out-and-out lie; he tells the Moor that he hears Cassio speak of his affair with Desdemona in his sleep, and Othello, in his altered state of mind, agonizing over Iago's testimony, believes him. The later "proof" of Cassio's "confession" only adds to Othello's misery.

This quality and several others inherent in Othello's nature make it possible for Iago to manipulate him. We see right from the very beginning that his conception of what people are like is entirely opposite to that of Iago. Whereas Iago tells Roderigo that he never allows outward actions to "demonstrate/ The native act and figure of my heart" (1.1.62-3),—indeed, he declares enigmatically that "I am not what I am" (1.1.66)—Othello insists that the man perceived by others must show exactly his real thoughts and intentions. He is open, trusting, and as Iago says "thinks men honest that but seem to be so" (1.3.394). Othello refuses to go inside when Iago urges him to avoid Brabantio, confident that he has worth to the state that will not be overlooked, and insistent that "I must be found./ My parts, my title, and my perfect soul/ Shall manifest me rightly" (1.2.30-2). Thus, when Iago starts to poison his ears with doubts and slanders, ever appearing reluctant to do any harm, Othello cannot but think that he is acting according to his true thoughts and apprehensions. Indeed, Iago so convinces him of his own

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honesty, that he is able to tarnish the good name of others—even Othello’s most beloved wife—in the eyes of the Moor. And once his affections are thus, abused, Iago can lie outright, even inconsistently, without fear of being found out, for Othello loses his perceptiveness as his view of those around him is turned on its head. He does not stop to think that Iago has had no opportunity to hear Cassio speak in his sleep—for that matter Cassio has had no time at all to carry on an affair with Desdemona. When Iago talks of the handkerchief, some accident of the stage has it peeking out of his coat—right before Othello’s eyes—and yet he does not see that either. Blind to these holes in Iago’s tales, he sees, now, only through the oily sheen of Iago’s poison; his views are distorted and imperfect. Symbolically, he looks at Desdemona in 5.2 through the gauzy curtains of the bed—he does not see her truly until he steps inside to murder her, and by that time it is too late to stop and rethink his conviction. Once the idea takes root, once Othello truly believes in Desdemona’s adultery, he is committed to carrying out his plan to the end. He views her murder as a sacrifice, saving her from herself, and saving the other men she would have beguiled (fittingly, she wears white in the end—a faithful sacrifice indeed—whereas she is seen in green throughout the play, the color of the monster’s eyes). The tragedy is that Othello’s nature drives him to be unequivocal in his act of “justice,” and only afterwards does he hear from Emilia the truth.

Suzman goes a long way to illustrate Othello’s descent into madness and destruction through Shakespeare’s text and the use of color and costume. In the same way that Iago’s racist language seems to be transferred to Brabantio in 1.2, Othello picks up Iago’s habit of using animal metaphors and images of hell. He calls his wife “the lewd minx” (3.3.473) and “the fair devil” (3.3.476), and lets out a tortured reiteration of Iago’s image of goats and monkeys in 4.1. Iago also transfers his violent nature to the Moor as the play wears on. He beats his wife, Emilia, early on; Othello strikes Desdemona across the face in front of Lodovico much later. This violence also indicates a loss of Othello’s noteworthy self-control. In the beginning of the play he is all calmness, gently entreating his men and those of Brabantio to “Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them” (1.2.59). By the end of the play,

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however, this composure has been ripped to pieces by the conflicting beliefs in his mind. He becomes dazed, uncertain of what he can or should believe—reminded of his estrangement from Desdemona due to the very difference of their colors and cultures. In the final scene he rejects his Venetian finery and stands before his wife bare-chested and distant. He becomes as foreign as Iago's insinuations sought to establish. Having completed the inner struggle and condemning Desdemona to death, he smothers her in the white bed linen, his own difference in color all the more apparent in the contrast. Suzman makes it quite clear that Othello has killed an innocent.

When the truth is unraveled, and the play winds to its tragic conclusion, Othello redeems himself in suicide, and the blame is placed squarely on the shoulders of Iago and his bigoted caprice. The two left to pick up the pieces, significantly, are Cassio and Lodovico, both of whom know the truth of what has occurred and its implications, and both of whom prove throughout the play that the racism latent in Iago's speeches does not sully their judgment.

Thus does the film bring Suzman's message full-circle. Her hopes for South Africa are enmeshed with Othello's tragedy; her vision of the future, like the future for Venice, is one of peace, understanding, and tolerance. Apartheid, like Iago, with subtlety and cunning wreaks havoc on the innocent relationships between persons of different color—but, when the damage is done and the villain revealed for what he is, a new generation of color-blind administrators can set about fixing the blunders of the old system. While in 1987 Janet Suzman could not predict an outcome for the apartheid issue, happily, we as viewers today can look back on recent history and be thankful that it resembles the hopeful resolution reached in Othello as Cassio and Lodovico “to the state/ This heavy act with heavy heart relate” (5.2.367-8).