



Resource Pack

# OTHELLO

By William Shakespeare

A NORTHERN BROADSIDES &  
WEST YORKSHIRE PLAYHOUSE co-production

Directed by Barrie Rutter



For students (14+), teachers and actors.

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## **Cast List**

<i>Iago</i>	Conrad Nelson
<i>Roderigo</i>	Matt Connor
<i>Brabantio</i>	Barrie Rutter
<i>Othello</i>	Lenny Henry
<i>Michael Cassio</i>	Richard Standing
<i>The Duke/ Gratiano</i>	Fine Time Fontayne
<i>Senator/Lodovico</i>	Simon Holland Roberts
<i>Desdemona</i>	Jessica Harris
<i>Montano</i>	Andy Cryer
<i>Herald/Messenger</i>	Chris Pearse
<i>Emilia</i>	Maeve Larkin
<i>Bianca</i>	Rachel Jane Allen

## **Creative Team**

Director	Barrie Rutter
Composer	Conrad Nelson
Set Designer	Ruari Murchison
Costume Designer	Stephen Snell
Lighting Designer	Guy Hoare
Fight Director	Kate Waters

## **Technical & Stage Management for Northern Broadsides**

General Manager	Sue Andrews
Company Stage Manager	Kay Burnett
Deputy Stage Manager	Lorna Adamson
Wardrobe (on tour)	Dawn Outhwaite
Lights (on tour)	Antony Wilcock



## NORTHERN BROADSIDES THEATRE CO.

Northern Broadsides was founded in 1992 by Artistic Director Barrie Rutter. Having worked as an actor at the Royal Shakespeare Company and the National Theatre, Rutter became frustrated with the bias for speaking Shakespeare with Received Pronunciation. It seemed as though a Northerner couldn't be a king! As Shakespeare's writing is so well suited to the sing-song tune of the north, the upward inflections and the flat vowel sounds, Rutter set up his new theatre company in Halifax, West Yorkshire.

Robust, explicitly theatrical story-telling with language at its heart became the hall-mark of all Northern Broadsides' productions.

The company is as feted for its minimal sets, live music, ensemble-playing and its adaptability to any space large enough, as it is for its northern-ness.

Noted for its clarity and simplicity of style, Northern Broadsides has won international acclaim and a reputation as one of the country's leading exponents of Classical Theatre.

## INTRODUCTION

*I'm slightly allergic to Shakespeare... at school we didn't know you were supposed to stand up and act it out... it just felt like some ancient language that we didn't really understand...*

**Lenny Henry**

Sadly, Lenny's experience is by no means unusual. My own introduction to Shakespeare was dire. Thirty bored teenagers slumped over desks, droning out lines that were totally incomprehensible. Poor Shakespeare. He never meant for that to happen. He wrote plays to be performed by actors and watched by audiences; he didn't write 'works' to be studied for a course. Imagine if your only experience of music was the studying of dots on a page, never actually hearing it, or even better playing it. Imagine being taught how to sing by reading and writing about it rather than actually... singing!



The only way you'll get it, is by **doing** it.

This pack, written by Maeve Larkin who plays Emilia in *Othello*, is not meant as a study aid, it is a **performance tool**.

You will find a series of practical exercises, all of which might be undertaken by professional actors in a rehearsal process, getting this play from **page to stage**. You can do them in your classroom or your bedroom, in a field or in the bath. You don't need props, set or costume. All you need is the **script**.

*The play is in our mouths.*  
**Barrie Rutter (Director)**

NB. It is essential that all participants read the play at least once, in full

## **PLOT**

### **Act 1 Scene 1 - A Street in Venice. Night.**

The scene opens mid-conversation. On hearing of Desdemona's secret marriage to Othello, Roderigo berates Iago. Roderigo has fancied Desdemona for ages and Iago was meant to help him win her. (She is a senator's daughter and Othello is an army general so, class-wise, they are not ill-matched. Othello, however, is a Moor, an outsider, black.) Iago hates Othello because he promoted another soldier, Cassio, to the position of lieutenant over himself. Iago's position is that of a mere flag carrier (an Ensign or Ancient). He persuades Roderigo to tell Desdemona's dad, Brabantio, about the marriage, adding that the newly-weds can be found at an inn called The Sagittary.

### **Act 1 Scene 2 - The Sagittary, Venice. Later.**

Iago has scurried off to Othello and in two-faced, back-stabbing fashion, pretending to be outraged, warns him that Roderigo has gone to Brabantio. Just then, Cassio summons Othello to an emergency meeting; the Turks are about to invade Cyprus, which is governed by Venice. When Brabantio arrives, ranting and raving, Othello tells him of the meeting. A senator himself, Brabantio is keen to go along and complain to the Duke about the marriage.

### **Act 1 Scene 3 - The Assembly, Venice. Later still.**

At the meeting, Brabantio accuses Othello of using witchcraft to steal his daughter. Othello calmly suggests that Desdemona is called for to speak for herself. While they wait for her, Othello speaks eloquently of how she came to love him: for the stories of his incredible and adventurous life. Desdemona arrives and confirms her love for Othello. Brabantio disowns her. The invasion is then discussed and it is decided that Othello and Cassio will sail to Cyprus that very night, with Desdemona, Iago and his wife Emilia following in a separate vessel. Alone once more, Iago assures Roderigo that Desdemona can still be won, instructing him to raise the necessary funds to travel to Cyprus. Once gone, Iago tells the audience that he's using Roderigo in his plot to bring down Othello, Cassio and Desdemona by suggesting that the latter two are having an affair.

### **Act 2 Scene 1 - The Shores of Cyprus. Next morning (Day 2).**

Montano, the governor of Cyprus receives news that a terrible storm has wiped out the entire Turkish fleet, thereby removing any threat of invasion. Cassio arrives without Othello, unsure what became of him in the storm at sea. Desdemona, Iago and Emilia disembark their ship. Then Othello arrives, rejoicing at his reunion with Desdemona. Once left to themselves, Iago tells Roderigo that Cassio is his real love rival. He instructs Roderigo to provoke Cassio into a fight, which Iago will whip up and inflame, such that Cassio will be disgraced and removed as an obstacle to Roderigo's affections.

### **Act 2 Scene 2 - Cyprus 5pm.**

A herald announces that Othello has invited all to celebrate Cyprus' triumph over the Turkish threat, as well as his recent marriage.

### **Act 2 Scene 3 - Cyprus 10pm (outside).**

Othello and Desdemona bid goodnight, asking Cassio to guard against any over-raucous partying. Iago and Cassio exchange some racy banter about Desdemona being fit. Against his better judgement, the normally abstemious (moderate, sober) Cassio allows Iago to get him drunk. They sing bawdy drinking songs. Cassio tries to pull himself together and heads for the watch to go on duty. Back-stabbing again, Iago confides to Montano that Cassio has got a bit of a drink problem. As planned, Roderigo accosts Cassio and they fight. When Montano tries to break them up, he is stabbed. Roderigo flees and raises the alarm bell that summons Othello from his bed. Othello demands an explanation. In the confusion, no-one really knows what has happened. Iago, pretending that it pains him to say it, explains that Cassio stabbed Montano. The horrified Cassio is stripped of his position and Montano is led off to be treated. Alone with Iago, Cassio mourns the loss of his reputation. Iago suggests that Cassio enlists the help of Desdemona in winning back Othello's favour. Iago separately reassures a now-impatient Roderigo that all is going according to plan. Finally Iago tells us that he is going to set it up so that Othello witnesses Cassio soliciting (asking, pleading, begging) Desdemona and that with a bit of help from his own poisonous suggestions, Othello will believe them to be having an affair.

**Act 3 Scene 1 - Following Morning (Day 3). Outside The Citadel, where Othello and Desdemona reside.**

Iago tells Cassio he'll get Othello out of the way while Cassio talks to Desdemona alone. (This scene does begin with a clown and a musician chatting to Cassio but as they add nothing plot-wise, they have been cut from our production.)

**Act 3 Scene 2 - Same Morning.**

Othello deals with Senate duties and embarks on a tour of the island of Cyprus.

**Act 3 Scene 3 - Later that day. The Citadel.**

Desdemona assures Cassio that she'll win Othello round. As Othello returns to the citadel with Iago, an ill-at-ease Cassio quickly departs. Iago makes something of this by muttering seemingly to himself but so that Othello can hear. Desdemona entreats Othello to make a reconciliation with Cassio. Distracted by Iago's utterances, Othello dismisses Desdemona, not unkindly, making vague assurances that he'll deal with the situation later. Alone with Iago, Othello asks him to explain. Feigning great reluctance, Iago eventually declares that he suspects something between Cassio and Desdemona. Shaken to the core, when Desdemona urges Othello in to dinner, Othello claims to have a headache. She offers to mop his brow with her handkerchief but he brushes it away. They go in to dinner. Emilia picks up the handkerchief, a love token from Othello to Desdemona and at Iago's request, gives it to him. She goes in to dinner. Othello comes back out, full of disquiet and anger, demanding proof of Iago's allegations. Iago invents a story of Cassio talking about Desdemona in his sleep and tells Othello that he has seen Desdemona's handkerchief at Cassio's lodgings. Convinced by this and heartbroken, Othello vows revenge. He orders Iago to kill Cassio within three days and pledges to kill Desdemona himself. He makes 'honest' Iago his new lieutenant.



**OUR INTERVAL IS HERE.**



### **Act 3 Scene 4 - Same day. The Citadel (outside).**

(We have cut another clown interlude here, where Desdemona asks him to fetch Cassio.)

Desdemona frets over the loss of her handkerchief. Emilia lies that she doesn't know its whereabouts. Othello enters in aggressive mood. Desdemona once again pleads for Cassio. Othello asks for her handkerchief. She says she doesn't have it. He rants about its value as an heirloom and asks if she's lost it. She lies, saying 'no' and tries to bring the conversation back to Cassio, innocently stoking Othello's rage. He demands the handkerchief and exits in a fury whereupon Cassio enters and asks Desdemona again to be his advocate. She bids him patience, citing Othello's mood and comforts herself with the hope that matters of state are the cause. Once alone, Cassio is approached by Bianca, a courtesan, who is Cassio's on-off mistress. He asks her to copy the design he has found on a handkerchief in his room. She suspects it is some love token from another woman but Cassio denies it and so she agrees.

### **Act 4 Scene 1 - Later. The Citadel (outside).**

Iago chips away at Othello's state of mind, conjuring images of his wife's infidelity until Othello has a kind of fit. Cassio approaches but on Iago's advice, moves away. Othello comes to and Iago sets up a lewd conversation between himself and Cassio for Othello to overhear, tricking him into believing they are talking about Desdemona when in fact the conversation is about Bianca. Bianca arrives in a huff and gives the handkerchief back to Cassio, who follows her off. Having recognised the handkerchief and mistaken the conversation, Othello is whipped up into a murderous fury. Lodovico arrives from Venice with news that Othello is to return to Venice and Cassio to remain as governor of Cyprus. Desdemona who has accompanied Lodovico begins telling him of the Cassio feud, provoking Othello with her innocent words until he strikes her and sends her off. Lodovico is shocked and horrified by this behaviour. Iago twists the knife once more by confiding that Othello has gone off the rails.

#### **Act 4 Scene 2 - Same day. The Citadel.**

Othello grills Emilia, who refutes any suggestion of wrong-doing by Desdemona. He summons the latter and accuses her directly. She denies it. He storms out. Desdemona asks Iago if he can shed any light on Othello's behaviour. Emilia curses the meddler who has stirred things up. Iago hypocritically comforts Desdemona and shushes Emilia. The women go and Roderigo arrives. He rails at Iago for the total failure of his plan to win Desdemona. Iago promises a final opportunity for Roderigo to bump off his supposed rival, Cassio.

#### **Act 4 Scene 3 - That night. The Citadel (inside).**

Desdemona and Emilia discuss the nature of male/female relationships. Desdemona sings an ominous song that she can't get out of her head.

#### **Act 5 Scene 1 - Same night. A Street.**

Iago has set it up so that Roderigo is poised to kill Cassio in the street. However, Cassio fights back and both men end up injured. Lodovico and another gentleman run on and in the furor, Iago kills Roderigo, pretending revenge for Cassio but really to stop Roderigo from talking. Bianca arrives to see her Cassio injured and Iago points the finger at her. Emilia arrives to the commotion and Iago sends her to the citadel, to alert Othello.

#### **Act 5 Scene 2 - Same night. Desdemona's bedroom.**

Desdemona is asleep. Othello wakes her with a kiss. He tells her to pray. He accuses her of infidelity with Cassio, which she vehemently denies. He smothers her. Emilia arrives with news of the previous scene. Desdemona murmurs from behind the curtain, then dies. Emilia cries murder. Lords and Iago come running. Emilia blames Iago for setting Othello on and exposes the truth about the handkerchief. Iago stabs her and flees. The lords chase him. Emilia dies. They bring back Iago with Cassio, who denies any wrongdoing to Othello. Devastated, Othello stabs himself and dies next to Desdemona. Lodovico hands Iago over to Cassio to deal with while he returns to Venice to tell all.



## WITNESS STATEMENTS

The idea is to get to know the **plot** by exploring events from different character perspectives.

Choose a character.

In your own words, provide a witness statement to the police (written or verbal) giving your own account of the facts relating to the various stabbings that are committed in the play, both fatal and non-fatal.

### Example 1

Bianca's might go something like this:

*My name is Bianca. I am a professional courtesan. I've been seeing Cassio for a while and things have been going pretty well. I hadn't seen much of him in the days leading up to his stabbing and when I did finally catch up with him, he gave me this handkerchief etc...*

### Example 2

Roderigo's could be something like this:

*My name is Roderigo. I used to be a wealthy gentleman. I'm from Venice. I came to Cyprus because my so-called friend Iago persuaded me that it would be a good idea. You see, I've been madly, head-over-heels in love with Desdemona for ages and when she married Othello, I just couldn't accept it etc...*

Whilst making your account chatty and colloquial, make sure that you don't invent any of the facts. They should all come from the play. However, you can take the liberty of providing statements by characters that are meant to be dead (like Roderigo)!

### Investigate this...

How many stabbings are there in this play?

How many result in death?

## CHARACTER

### Othello

***A jealousy so strong that judgement cannot cure... (Iago 2.1)***

Othello is a Moor, an outsider, black. He is also a high-ranking member of Venetian society. A Christian and an army General, he is greatly respected for his military prowess. Something of a celebrity, with an amazing life-story full of adventure and excitement, as well as a beautiful way with words, is it any wonder that Desdemona falls for him? Even his greatest enemy, Iago says: *The Moor is of a constant, loving and noble nature...*

Although we see him as an unhinged, jealous murderer later on, it is important to remember the man at the beginning of the play, before Iago succeeds in breaking him. Recall how calmly he deals with Brabantio:

*Keep up your bright sword... good Signior, you shall more command with years than with your weapons...*

The definition of a tragic hero is *a great person, destined through a flaw of character, fate or society to downfall or destruction*. The apparent ease with which Othello accepts Iago's lies suggests that he might have an insecure nature. Why might this be? His position as an outsider seems to make a very strong man incredibly vulnerable. Like most outsiders he has probably had to struggle harder to prove himself.

### Desdemona

***Her own goodness makes the net that shall enmesh them all. (Iago 2.3)***

Desdemona is the only child of a Senator. Motherless, it is suggested that she runs the affairs of the house. Seduced by Othello's life-story, she wishes *heaven had made her such a man*. Although Brabantio says she is *a maiden never bold*, portraying her as the perfect quiet daughter, he reveals elsewhere that she was *so opposite to marriage that she shunned the wealthy darlings of our nation...* This paints a somewhat different picture.

The contradiction sums up the ambiguity surrounding Desdemona. On the one hand she is humble and meek (or a bit of a wimp, depending on how you look at it). On the other, she is feisty and headstrong. She defies her father by marrying against his wishes, she marries an outsider, a man who is black, and insists on accompanying him into what is a potential war-zone.

It is true that as Othello's behaviour becomes more aggressive and incomprehensible to her, she loses her confidence and becomes more submissive. But might that not be the reaction of any woman in her position? Aware of her total lack of experience with relationships, her response to it

all going wrong is to blame herself. Her innocence is both her weakness and her strength.

### **Iago**

*And what's he then that says I play the villain? (Iago 2.3)*

Passed over for promotion by Othello, losing out to Cassio who has less experience, Iago has to make do with the more lowly position of Ensign or Ancient (flag bearer). Suspicious that his wife has had an affair with Othello and interested in sleeping with Desdemona to get revenge, he has a whole host of motives for his actions.

Or does he?

There are many and yet there are none.

Clever and manipulative, remorseless and cruel, Iago is unfathomable. As humans, we like to understand villainy so that we can protect ourselves against it. That there is no obvious explanation for his actions is what makes him so compelling. Shakespeare tells us less about Iago's background than Othello's or Desdemona's. What we get instead is someone who delights in the destruction of others whilst making us laugh in the process. By enlisting us as his confidantes we are drawn in to his plan, marvelling at his skill rather than questioning why. However he is no lovable rogue, as is evident from his dogged hatred of Othello (is it racial?), his dislike of women in general, as well as his pathological need to control people and situations. Othello's emergence as a tragic hero and Desdemona's unswerving innocence ultimately expose Iago for the coward he is.

### **Emilia**

Iago's wife and Desdemona's attendant, Emilia is unsure of her husband. She displays a cynical world-weariness. However she is devoted to Desdemona. Her two important plot points are the giving of the handkerchief to Iago and then lying to Desdemona regarding its whereabouts. Why does she do either of these things?

### **Cassio**

Cassio is the young, good-looking antithesis to Iago. Devoted to Othello and Desdemona, proud of his duty as lieutenant, he is mortified and ashamed by the loss of his rank after a drunken brawl, especially as he doesn't usually drink. He is less of a gentleman in his treatment of Bianca but as she is a glorified prostitute, this wouldn't have been deemed shocking or unacceptable.

### **Roderigo**

A wealthy suitor to Desdemona, Roderigo foolishly places his trust and money with Iago in order to win her. Dim-witted, lovelorn and morally bankrupt, he agrees to kill Cassio whom he believes to be his love-rival, only to end up losing everything, including his life.

### **Brabantio**

Desdemona's father and a respected Senator, Brabantio is outraged by his daughter's marriage to Othello. Despite a previous friendship with him, Brabantio accuses Othello of using witchcraft to trick Desdemona. When his petition to the duke fails, he disowns his daughter warning Othello:

*Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see:  
She has deceived her father, and may thee.*

### **Bianca**

Although as a courtesan Bianca is placed outside the moral framework of this society, she is one of the few characters in the play who never lies. She seems genuinely fond of Cassio, a regular client/consort. Her important plot point is the returning of the handkerchief to Cassio, as witnessed and misinterpreted by Othello.

A courtesan wasn't a lowly street whore. She was often educated, sophisticated and revered. She would be 'kept' as a mistress, usually paid for by one client at a time, in a more long-term arrangement than that between prostitute and punter.





## CHARACTER ACTIVITY 1

### SUICIDE NOTE

The idea is to explore Othello as a **tragic hero**.

Stand in a circle. All together, read Othello's dying speech aloud.

Read aloud again, this time taking a line each.

Read aloud again, taking a line each. This time the group echoes every line, so that all lines are repeated.

This time, a line is spoken aloud then the next person echoes it but **IN THEIR OWN WORDS**.

The first two lines might go something like:

*Soft you, a word or two before you go.*

*Wait, I'd like to say something before you go.*

Edited speech Act 5 Scene 2

*Soft you, a word or two before you go.*

*I have done the state some service, and they know't:*

*No more of that. I pray you, in your letters,*

*When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,*

*Speak of me as I am. Nothing extenuate,*

*Nor set down aught in malice. Then must you speak*

*Of one that loved not wisely, but too well;*

*Of one not easily jealous, but, being wrought,*

*Perplexed in the extreme... threw a pearl away*

*Richer than all his tribe.*

Finally, in your own words and drawing from the speech above, write Othello's suicide note. Put yourself in his shoes. You can add details or motives that aren't in the speech but they must be from the play. Read your notes out to the group and discuss.

**Investigate this...**

What is Othello's essential flaw of character?

Where does fate play its part in his downfall?

Why might society be partly responsible?





## CHARACTER ACTIVITY 2

### OTHELLO'S BREAKDOWN

The idea is to chart Othello's mental journey.

Working in groups of four or five, create six tableaux that map out Othello's journey from happy newlywed to jealous murderer (the exercise might also be called **Iago's Progress**).

Use different characters in each tableau to portray the events that lead up to Othello's death. Remember, Iago's lies coupled with innocent situations chip away at Othello's stability. Give each tableau a title or phrase that encapsulates your image. Try and take the words directly from the play. For example **Pestilence Into His Ear**. The images can be literal or abstract, to show how Othello's crumbling state of mind distorts reality. For each tableau, one group member becomes the curator who will talk us through the picture.







## CHARACTER ACTIVITY 3a.

### PASSIVE OR PLUCKY?

The idea is to explore the ambiguity surrounding Desdemona's character.

One end of the room is **Passive** and the other **Plucky**. Take it in turns to read Desdemona's speech aloud. Starting in the middle of the room, move back and forth according to how passive or plucky you think she is being. You can move as often as you like, changing direction as you see fit. Some moves might be bigger than others. Really allow the exercise to help you break down the text. What discoveries do you make?

### Act 1 Scene 3 - Desdemona

My noble father

I do perceive here a divided duty.

To you I am bound for life and education:

My life and education both do learn me

How to respect you; you are the lord of duty,

I am hitherto your daughter. But here's my  
husband:

And so much duty as my mother showed

To you, preferring you before her father,

So much I challenge that I may profess

Due to the Moor my lord.



### CHARACTER ACTIVITY 3b.

The idea is to look at how the same lines can be given different interpretations according to the actor's choices.

Try the following scene with Desdemona playing the game from **ACTIVITY 3a**. The men can move freely or remain still, as they see fit. In this instance, we are exploring Desdemona's choices.

Dispensing with **ACTIVITY 3a**, try the scene again. This time chart Desdemona's emotional journey in one direction - total passivity, so that by the final line she is crushed into submission. Remember not to arrive at your finishing point too early. It is important that you have somewhere to go.

Try the scene a third time, taking Desdemona's state of mind in the opposite direction, so that her final line is one of defiance and anger.

Let's try the scene again, using **ACTIVITY 3a**. This time however, it is Othello and Lodovico who move Desdemona back and forth, according to where they believe she is on the passive/plucky spectrum. Desdemona starts in the middle. Only one character can move her at a time, probably when he is speaking.

Finally, see if you can come up with more interpretations of this scene, particularly with regard to Desdemona, taking into account the subtleties and complexities of human behaviour.





## EDITED EXCERPT FROM ACT 4 SCENE 1

Lodovico has arrived from Venice with news that Othello is to return home. Othello is now convinced of his wife's infidelity. Desdemona still hopes for reconciliation between Othello and Cassio.

Lodovico            Is there division 'twixt my lord and Cassio?

Desdemona        A most unhappy one: I would do much  
t'atone them, for the love I bear to Cassio.

Othello            Fire and brimstone!

Desdemona        My lord?

Othello            Are you wise?

Desdemona        What, is he angry?

Lodovico            Maybe the letter moved him. They do command him home,  
deputing Cassio in his government.

Desdemona        By my troth, I am glad on't.

Othello            Indeed!

Desdemona        My lord?

Othello            I am glad . . . to see you mad.

Desdemona        Why, sweet Othello?

Othello            Devil!            (Striking her)

Desdemona        I have not deserved this.



## CHARACTER ACTIVITY 4

### MOTIVE HUNTING

The idea is to explore Iago's motives.

Put Iago in the dock and ask him why he did it. Call witnesses from the play, living or dead, to give evidence. We do not need to ascertain his guilt, we know that already. This is a pre-sentence hearing. The outcome of this trial will determine Iago's sentence. The purpose therefore is to discover **why** he did it. Appoint a judge, a prosecution barrister, a defence barrister and as many witnesses from the play as you wish. Make sure that all evidence is drawn solely from the play.

Allow the courtroom environment to remind you that exploring a script is like examining a criminal case. It requires attention to the details, such as time and place, as well as the ability to search for the clues beneath the surface - subtext.

## CHARACTER ACTIVITY 5

### ACTORS' HOMEWORK

The idea is to examine your character from different perspectives.

Choose a character.

Go to the script.

Extract as many things that you say about yourself as possible.

Extract as many things that **other** people say about you as possible.

Compare.

What do we learn?

This is a useful exercise for actors when preparing for a role. We often discover that characters' perceptions of themselves are very different to those of the people around them. It gives the actor clues as to how to play the part. Obviously bigger characters say more and therefore reveal themselves more clearly. This exercise is particularly useful for the smaller parts, because having fewer lines to say means that there are fewer clues as to what makes a character tick.

## LANGUAGE

*In the end, all you've got is the words* - Barrie Rutter.

As language is the bed-rock of any exploration of Shakespeare or Northern Broadsides, it might seem strange that this section is being kept to a minimum. As I said in the introduction, this work should be practical. The accompanying workshop focuses on speaking the words. It is virtually impossible to make this interesting on the page. The first time I read about de dum de dum de dum de dum de dum, I nearly lost the will to live. So no discussion about iambic pentameter here, I'm afraid.

We are sometimes fazed by Shakespeare because we 'don't know what it means'. This shouldn't be underestimated as a complaint. You cannot enjoy something if you don't know what's going on.

There are two ways of unlocking the text and both are valid.

1. Break it down and put it in your own words. This is a good starting point. We'll call this approach **From The Inside Out**.
2. Speak the words aloud repeatedly and allow the **sound** to reveal the meaning. We'll call this **From The Outside In**.

Why do we have the ability to learn endless amounts of song lyrics whether or not we like the song?

Because the words are set to music.

The rhythm and tune of the music help us absorb and remember the words. Rhythm is **felt** and tune is **heard**, so it is working on two senses.

[Have you ever seen the round in *Never Mind The Buzzcocks* where contestants are given a line of lyrics and have to name the song? They nearly always get there by hearing the song in their heads then singing it aloud until the title line comes to them. The music triggers the memory.]

Shakespeare's writing is similarly rhythmic and musical. By adopting the **Outside In** approach, the meaning reveals itself to us through sound and rhythm.

**How** Shakespeare says something is as important as **what** he says.



## LANGUAGE ACTIVITY

### GOBBLEDYGOOK

1.

The idea is to explore how the **sounds** of words make meaning and affect us.

Note the difference between the words **good** and **fandabbydosey**. Both relate roughly to 'high-quality' but look at how the different shapes of these words affect the impression they give. [Fandabbydosey might not be in the Oxford English Dictionary but that sort of thing never worried Shakespeare. He made up words and expressions all the time. *Green-eyed monster*, *foregone conclusion* and *wear my heart on my sleeve* are all Shakespeare's inventions (all from *Othello*), now in common usage.]

Try an exercise where you remove any attempt at making meaning through content - by talking gobbledygook - but where you string words together whose **sounds** suggest meaning.

For example:           Stab beats hard cold mud splats.

OR

Lovingly singing in swaying blissful meadows.

Choose what it is you want to say, then find the words to fit.

2.

In pairs, have a very brief conversation - just a few lines each. Then remove all normal language and repeat the same conversation using only expressive gobbledygook. Try repeating your gobbledygook conversations to the group and see if they can understand the nature of your discussion. To be successful, choose your words carefully.

**Read Barrie Rutter's interview for more on Shakespeare's language and Northern Broadsides' approach to it.**

## THEMES: FAMILY

### Fatherly love, wounded pride or racism?

It's interesting to note that it was Brabantio himself who invited Othello into his home and begged to be regaled with the fascinating stories of Othello's life. As a Senator and upstanding member of the community, Brabantio was happy to fraternise with this Moor, perhaps because Othello was of high-rank and good reputation, socially.

### So what changed when Othello married his daughter?



In groups of three, improvise the confrontation between Brabantio, Desdemona and Othello. Take a character each and use your own words. Be careful not to invent facts from outside of the play. Draw your arguments from what Shakespeare has told us. You might consider the following...

1. Desdemona has already rejected several suitors.
2. Brabantio's wife and Desdemona's mother is dead.
3. Othello entered Brabantio's house (and Desdemona's life) at his invitation.
4. Brabantio seemed happy enough to have Othello as a friend.
5. Othello is a soldier.
6. Othello is a foreigner with an adventurous, mysterious background.
7. Desdemona never asked for her father's consent.
8. Desdemona and Othello married in secret.
9. Brabantio was informed of the wedding by being woken up at night by a man shouting in the street.
10. An unmarried woman was the property of her family, expected to be completely obedient. A married woman then became the property of her husband.
11. Brabantio accuses Othello of using witchcraft to trick Desdemona into marrying him.
12. Brabantio describes his daughter as:  
*A maiden never bold,  
of spirit so still and quiet that her motion  
blushed at herself...*

How well does he know her?

## THEMES: RACISM

- *Noun. Hatred or intolerance of another race or races. A belief that differences in race determine superiority/inferiority.*

**The Moor, the thick lips, an old black ram, a Barbary horse, of here and everywhere, having a sooty bosom, bond-slave and pagan, these Moors are changeable in their wills, an erring Barbarian, the lusty Moor, blacker devil, filthy bargain, dirt.**

Does racism feature in this play? What do certain characters do or say that might reveal their racist opinions?

Have a look at the first scene of the play. How many racially-loaded expressions can you identify? Do you think that Shakespeare is consciously setting up a theme here, right at the start of his story?



### THE RACIST SPECTRUM

Take a character from the following list:

Brabantio Desdemona Iago Cassio Duke Emilia Roderigo

Form a line from 1 - 7, 1 being the least racist and 7 the most. Where does your character stand? Why? Support your position with something your character says.





## THEMES: SEXUAL STATUS

### REPUTATION, REPUTATION, REPUTATION!

As we see from Cassio's response to losing his rank in Act 2 Sc 3, reputation in Shakespeare's day was EVERYTHING.

Social hierarchy being much less flexible than it is today, the boundaries of social behaviour were set in stone.

This was true of social/financial reputation, military/professional reputation and perhaps most importantly, **sexual reputation**.

#### 1. Women

Women stood to lose the most by transgressing from the strict moral codes of the time. An unfaithful wife or unchaste maiden could be stripped of all position in society and made an outcast. It wasn't unacceptable for husbands to kill unfaithful wives.

When Lenny and Barrie work-shopped Act 4 Sc 1 with a group of students, where Othello strikes Desdemona, the group questioned why Desdemona would put up with such treatment.

It is important to remember that absolute obedience was expected in a wife towards her husband, her 'lord'. He literally owned her as legal property. Before marriage, women belonged to their fathers. Brabantio's question on hearing of Desdemona's elopement 'how got she out?' hints at how daughters were practically imprisoned within the house.

This helps us to understand the women in the play (why does Emilia give Iago the handkerchief?) and shows us that in real terms, Desdemona had no choice but to put up with her husband's behaviour. It also informs us of the scale of her rebellion in marrying Othello in the first place.

[Incidentally, it could be argued that it is not un-modern for a woman to put up with domestic violence.]

#### 2. Othello as egalitarian?

The horror of Othello hitting his wife is made all the more poignant by the fact that before Iago has sewn the seeds of doubt, Othello more than any other male character in the play, treats his woman as an equal. It is he who suggests Desdemona speaks for herself before the Senate. It is he who agrees to her unconventional suggestion of accompanying him to a war-zone. When he sees her for the first time in Cyprus, he greets her *'My fair*

*warrior*'. Contrast this with Cassio's description of Desdemona as *'a most fresh and delicate creature... perfection'*.

To Shakespearean audiences, the concept of equality between the sexes would have seemed very foreign. Like Othello. Perhaps it is no accident that Shakespeare chooses someone from outside the established mainstream who, initially at least, has the imagination to see things differently.

## 2. Men

Cassio, Roderigo and Iago all display varying forms of sexual immaturity and double standards. Cassio idealises women like Desdemona yet the reality is Bianca whom he pays for and treats unkindly.

Roderigo is almost buffoon-like in his belief that he could win the newly-married Desdemona with gifts.

Iago's sexuality displays distaste or even disgust of women. The imagery he uses is base and animalistic - *the beast with two backs* - and whilst his own marriage is apparently loveless, he relishes imagining other people's sexual behaviour in a mentally voyeuristic fashion.

## 3. Place

Venice was deemed by Britons during Shakespeare's time to be something of a 'pleasure' capital. For 'pleasure', read sex.

*In Venice they do let God see the pranks they dare not show their husbands; Their best conscience is not to leave't undone but keep't unknown (Act3 Sc3).*

As Desdemona is from Venice, could that city's reputation for sexual promiscuity help convince Othello of her unfaithful nature?





## STATUS SPECTRUM

In his introduction to the Arden edition of this play, Professor Honigmann states:

*Othello is a General and the pressure this play exerts on the characters is dependent on that hierarchy.*

Thinking about hierarchy and looking at Act 1, put the following characters in order of status, bearing in mind social standing, professional standing and sexual standing.

Roderigo	Iago	Brabantio	Othello	Cassio
Duke	Desdemona	Emilia	Bianca	Montano

Repeat the exercise looking at Acts 2, 3, 4 and 5. What changes? What do these changes tell us?



## THREE CHAIRS

Put 3 chairs out.

One represents **social** status, one **sexual** status and the other, **emotional** status.

In character pairings, make a tableau of high/low status, using one chair at a time.

Be as inventive as you like with the chair. How you use it should denote the status of both characters.

For example, Desdemona and Emilia on the **social** status chair or Iago and Othello on the **emotional** status chair.

The same pairing of characters might have different status on different chairs.

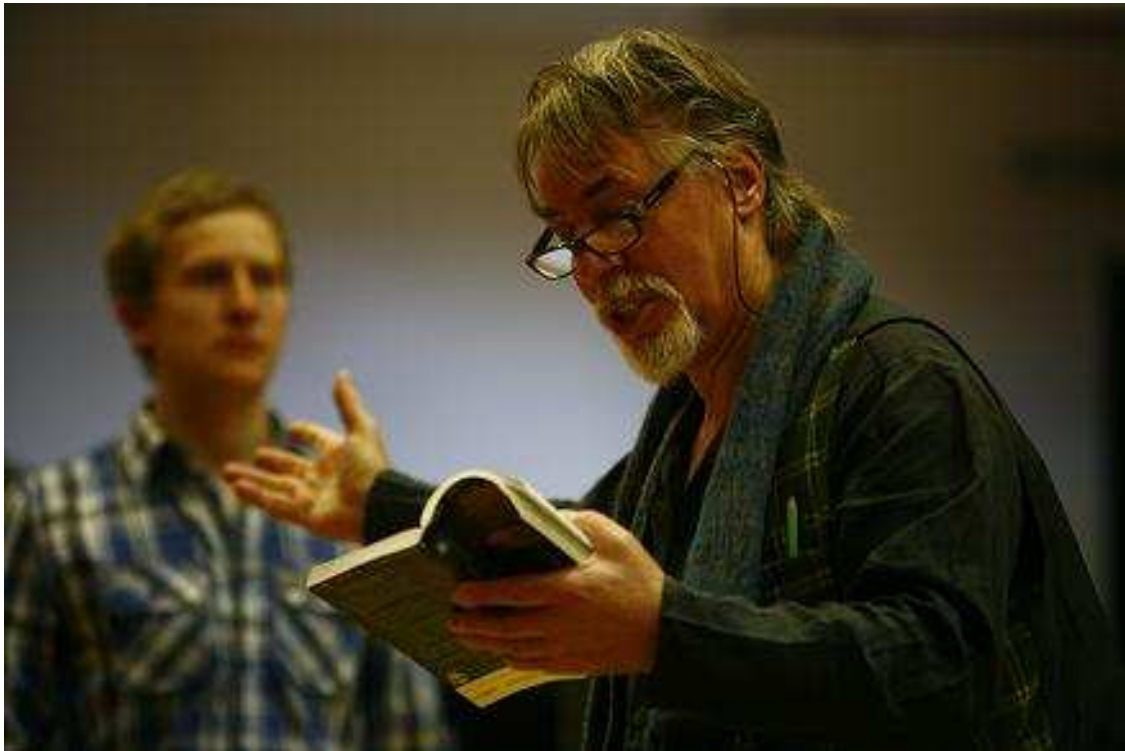
Remember that the status between two characters can change throughout the play.

Try this exercise with as many character pairings as possible.



## CONVERSATION 1

**Maeve Larkin (Emilia) talks to Barrie Rutter (Director and Brabantio)**



The **Language** section of this pack refers to two ways of approaching text: **from the inside out**, where we first put the speech into our own words to gain an understanding of what is being said; and **from the outside in**, where we allow the *sound* of the language to reveal its meaning to us.

Barrie Rutter is a big advocate of the second approach. He believes that by trusting the words completely and not attempting to impose modern interpretations or inflections, the audience gets the clearest presentation of the play. He calls this style of performance **presentational acting** (as opposed to naturalistic acting) and believes it allows audiences to make their own interpretations, without interference from the actors.

From an actor's point of view, this approach is challenging because it is unusual for us with our Western style of training and experience to dispense with a psychological approach to character. Rutter's style asks that we become vehicles for the writing rather than interpreters of it, a bit like musicians in an orchestra.

His stout commitment to this approach - letting the play speak for itself - is what has made Northern Broadsides so successful and unique.

**M.L: What do you mean when you say you don't want to get bogged down in character?**

**B.R:** The word *character* grew up with the English novel in the late seventeenth century. Then when psychology was discovered, we liked to play Freud or God and put ourselves in the mind of, and have opinions about, what we were reading. Plays written four hundred years ago weren't about that. Whatever a character did, they verbalised. All the psychology four hundred years ago was verbal. That's what I mean when I say I don't want to get bogged down in character. When Lenny is asked how he is going to play Othello, I know exactly how he's going to play it - theatrically. You have to follow what the play says. That's how to do it.

**What do you mean by 'the play is in our mouths'?**

These great plays are delivered *by* their text not *in spite* of it. As I said, I don't let the twentieth century or modern psychology or filming techniques get in the way. Two and a half thousand years ago actors wore a mask, so everything was voiced. In Shakespeare's time he had to fight a very lively auditorium - daylight was top technology - so he had to write a spell-binding language. We are our play. The words are our play. You might not have costume or props but there's the audience, the actors and the text and those three things are all you need.

**You said after the first read-through that you were more convinced than ever it was the music of this language that would reveal the play to us. Can you expound?**

There's a lot of line by line fishing and reeling in. Confrontation. Point, counterpoint, point, counterpoint, move on with narrative, revelation, bam, bam, bam. What I mean is, the emotional development is not naturalistic. It has a music. It'll go out of kilter and we'll stutter when we lose the pulse. I find myself conducting more and more when I'm directing. There will be times - with you and Lenny on that confrontation in Act 5 - that I'll conduct

it because I have found it so good a way of revealing the emotional journey that both parties have in a scene. Getting it is quite delicate but very rewarding once it's there. That's what's underneath presentational acting, which great classic plays require.

**For an actor, this approach is quite technical. If you conduct that scene, which is quite an external process, then I have to work in reverse and make a connection emotionally, so that it doesn't look like we're acting by numbers.**

Of course, of course. That is the struggle but that's how you *find* the emotional journey.

**I do find the hands-on, pragmatic nature of these rehearsals liberating.** Allowing the music of the language to reveal the drama is the most pleasurable way. It *is* delicate, finding it, but it's robust as hell when you get it.

**In rehearsals, you often tell us to 'climb the stairs narratively'. What do you mean by this?**

Build the vocal energy of a line right through to the end of it. The most important word of a line is often the last one. By climbing the stairs narratively, we play the rhythms of the speech - what I call rock and rolling it. Downward inflections kill the natural rhythm of the language and drag the energy floorwards. The words need to bounce around and dance off the tongue.

**Finally, how is *Othello* a play for our times?**

I give the same answer I always give when I'm asked this question. These classic plays are classics because of the conflict of human nature. That's what makes them contemporary. The racism is of its time, it's four hundred years old, but if you do the play straight, audiences can pick up what they want from it. Let the play speak for itself. Technology's changed but the stuff of human conflict hasn't changed at all.



## CONVERSATION 2

### Lenny Henry - Othello



**M.L:** How do you think this play speaks to a modern or young audience?

**L.H:** Anyone who has ever been isolated because of class, gender or colour will empathise with Othello. The play has got a lot to say about male/female relationships. And trust. Anyone who has been stabbed in the back will get *Othello*. It is a play you can read a thousand times and still find something new, something that speaks to you.

**Can you see parallels between you and Othello?**

I'm used to being the only black person wherever I go. I won a talent competition when I was younger and travelled all over Britain as a comedian; I was the only black person wherever I went, always moving in a predominantly white world. There was never a black or Asian director when I went to the BBC. Eventually I thought 'where are they all?' I spent a lot of time on my own. Things have changed a bit, but rarely at the BBC do I meet anyone of colour in a position of power. So yes, I do see parallels with Othello.

**What are the main differences between performing in a play and doing your own stand-up show?**

I'm used to being on-stage on my own with a microphone, not having to project my voice. In a theatre show, voice projection is paramount. The other difference is that you're in a company, an ensemble. What's great about that is that you're with people who are going through the same thing as you. You can really rely on them to help you out if you've got a problem - learning lines or bits of advice.

**What's it like being told what to do?**

Being told what to do is horrible! My daughter is 17 and she knows this. Actually, working with a director is great because they've got the idea for the whole show in their head. The director is someone who has thought through the whole process; they know what they want and they steer you into pole position to achieve it. You treat them as your North Star, you stick with them like glue, because they're going to guide you to a good point. You've got to trust them because it is their big idea; you're just a cog in the wheel.

**What advice would you give to people encountering Shakespeare for the first time?**

Get up and do it. Shakespeare was never meant to be studied, he was meant to be performed. So get up with three or four of your mates, try and act it out and see what happens. Maybe get one of your mates to watch you and say, 'try it like this, try it like that'. On the page it can be a bit dry. The minute I hear someone speak it, suddenly it's like a friend talking to me in the room. You might struggle with the language at first. Download a very simple storyline off the internet. . .

**There's one in this pack!**

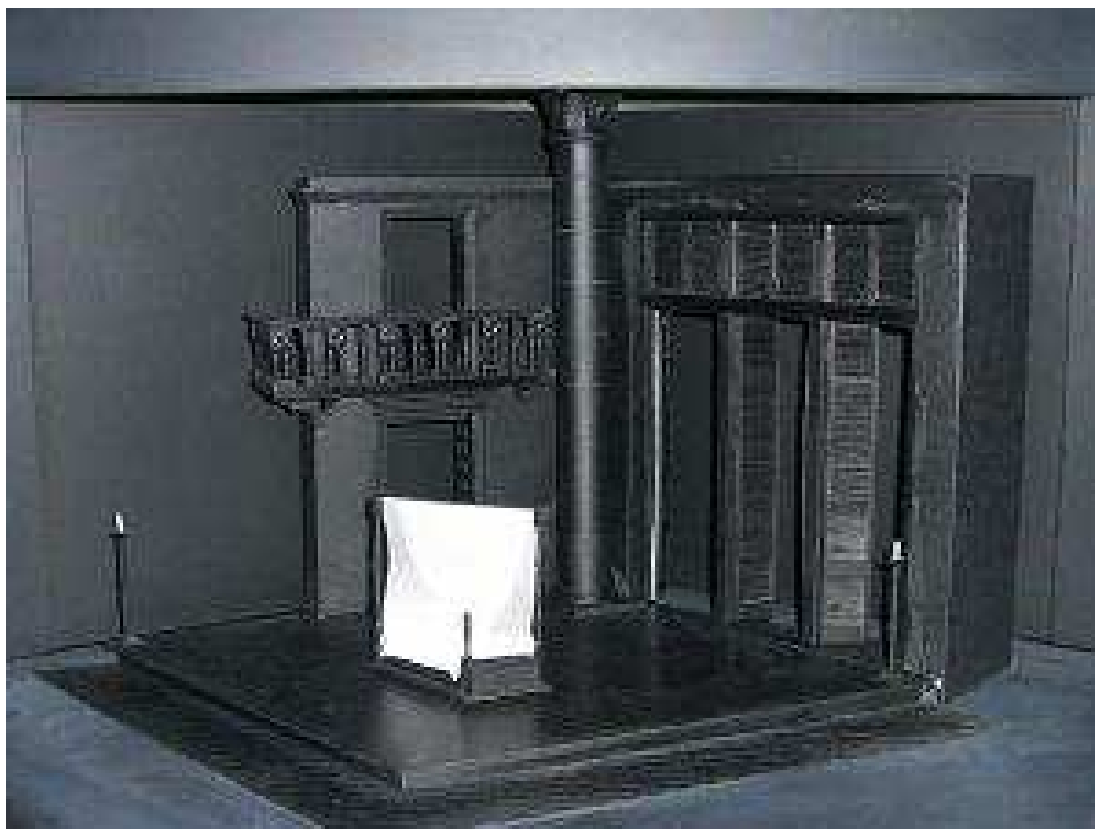
Oh ok. Download the story-line and then just get up and muck in. It's good fun, speaking the language, really good fun.





## CONVERSATION 3

**Ruari Murchison - Set Designer**



**M.L:** Can you talk me through your design for *Othello*?

**R.M:** I think it was Ralph Koltai (theatre designer) who said that Shakespeare was the designer's enemy because you don't need anything to do Shakespeare. You tend to ask yourself 'what do we produce?'

*Othello* is one of the more intimate plays, kind of chamber-like. With the exception of the first act in Venice, it takes place in Cyprus and with the exception of one scene, it takes place at night. So I thought, let's do a black set. We talked about it being set in the past but not absolutely referenced to one particular period, as you'll see with Stephen's costumes. We wanted to put in a bit of architecture because I think you need it. We have a floor defining two spaces. We have two walls, one with three big Venetian doors and the other with imposing double doors. There is a balcony and it is all

centred by a big pillar. Because the set is black, it is the lighting that picks out the various textures and provides dimension.

I knew that this design had to be flexible for when the show leaves West Yorkshire Playhouse and goes on tour. There'll be many different theatre spaces that the set needs to adapt to, including the round.

**What does a set designer do first?**

Read the play, a few times. Then I'll have an early talk with the director to get a brief. I don't do too much before this although I usually have a few ideas. Different directors work in different ways; with ones I've worked with before, you have a shortcut. Some ask for my ideas, some have their own ideas about what style they're after. Generally, it's a collaboration. I'm aware of the Broadsides aesthetic - that sets and costume are simple and quite minimal - and that's pretty much my own aesthetic too. This is the first time I've worked with Barrie and I've really liked it. He works visually and practically - he's been very collaborative.

**What training did you do to become a set designer and what advice would you give to someone wanting to pursue it?**

I did two degrees in biochemistry! Whilst at college, I was recommended by a designer friend, Ralph Koltai, to apply for the Arts Council Bursary Theatre Design course, which I got onto. Sadly that course doesn't exist anymore. The best course now is probably the Motley Design course, run by Alison Chitty - it's a post-grad course and you have to have had some design experience. The next thing to do is to try and become an assistant to a designer - it's a good way of getting in.



## CONVERSATION 4

Stephen Snell - Costume Designer



**M.L:** Your designs fall loosely between late Regency (1811-1820) and early twentieth century. How did you arrive at this?

**S.S:** We knew that we didn't want to pin ourselves down to a particular period. Costume is a great way of helping an audience gain a clearer understanding of the hierarchical and social relationships within a play. However, we didn't want to create a historical re-enactment. Neither did we want modern dress. Although it can be a good way of helping audiences into Shakespeare, again, we didn't want to be too specific. Barrie Rutter's word was *verisimilitude* - authenticity or realism - that's what he **didn't** want.

For an Elizabethan audience, Venice and Cyprus were exotically far away. With that in mind, I proposed the 1850s as a hook because this pre-industrial period has an exoticism but is not so far removed from modern dress that it becomes mere pretty costume. The men are in suits but there is an echo of romanticism. For the women too, the Edwardian influence

brings with it a modernity, so that it's not all bustles, hoops, petticoats and corsetry.

**You've collaborated with Ruari, the designer, before. How does it work?**

**Who goes first?**

Rutter and Ruari had an early meeting where there would have been a lot of problem solving because of the nature of the tour - adapting the set for different theatre spaces etc.

Ruari sent me some early pictures of his designs, then later I saw the set model and he talked me through it, explaining its function and how it would be used. That was our first opportunity to talk altogether (Ruari, Rutter and I) about how we would dress it.

I've been cherry-picking from three hundred years of military uniforms and adding a heraldry of my own invention. I talked to Kombat Kate (the fight director) and Chris (props) as well as Ruari about what weapons we would use. We didn't want swords; the space is too small and they get in the way. We found a solution based on a Japanese short sword, which we're dressing to look more European. We also brainstormed how to do Othello's hidden blade in the last scene. So you see, all these decisions are very collaborative, involving many departments.

**How did you get into costume supervising and design and what advice would you give to someone interested in pursuing either?**

My path wasn't direct. I did an arts foundation year and then three years in industrial and product design. I'd always had an interest in theatre. I did a post-grad design course at Croydon and focused on costume. I'd done so much training and theory up until that point that I really wanted to learn a craft - I wanted to *make*. After the course at Croydon, I went into clothes manufacture. I did millinery, printing, making dye, cutting and sewing. I then went on to costume supervising for theatre but managed to keep my design work alive alongside.

I get a lot of letters asking how to get into it. Obviously, the more skills you have in relation to costume the more useful you are as an employee. My advice is do your research and shop around for the best courses. Many of them are run by people with design backgrounds, offering little with regards to *making*. Whether you're interested in costume construction or design, you should want to make - it shouldn't be seen as a failed-at-design option.

Theatre tailoring is very different from high-street tailoring.

And if you're not serious about it, don't do the course.



## CONVERSATION 5

**Conrad Nelson - Composer, musical director and Iago.**



**M.L:** How did you set about writing the music for this production?

**C.N:** There are three songs in the actual play. Two of them are drinking songs for the scene where Iago gets Cassio drunk and one is the Willow Song that Desdemona sings in Act 4.

In the text the drinking songs are assigned to Iago as solos but I've tried to make them more of a group activity and a conceit to make Cassio drunk. So I've taken the lyric from one of the songs and turned it into a drinking game, not dissimilar to one you'd play in a rugby club. I've set it to military type music and the overall theme is like *Land Of Hope And Glory*. It says in the text that the song Iago sings was learnt in England (bearing in mind the Venetian/Cyprian setting), so it's to give it a touch of Englishness.

**For a Northern Broadsides' production there is perhaps less music than usual.**

Yes, there probably is less than usual. I only put music in where it counts. I don't think it is warranted so much here.

**Do you think that says something about this play?**

Yes. I think it says it's smaller, not in terms of its themes but in terms of its claustrophobia. It's a tighter chamber piece. It doesn't warrant any time out from the overall flow of the narrative. It's unstoppable. It careers towards its natural end. We've got one guitar interlude but that's really there for functionality - to cover getting the bed on - and to introduce the melody for the Willow Song.

**When composing music for any Broadsides show, what do you think about first?**

The play first, the text, to see where it fits, what it's doing. Is it a passage of time, is it entertainment, is it functional? It could be all those things. I start from there and build up the melody. The melodic side of it is quite straightforward. I usually work out the melodies in advance, especially when I know what I've got by way of instrumentalists in the cast. It's important that the music is never a hindrance. It is there to augment or to do something the text cannot do. What I've done with the drinking song is to turn it into plot. We see Iago's engineering of Cassio getting drunk.

**Northern Broadsides often uses actor-musicians. What would you say to actors training or starting out?**

For the past fifteen years, the trend towards actor-musicians has grown. There isn't the money in companies like this to have separate band members. Obviously, the more skills you have, the more attractive a proposition you are to an employer. It is possible to be a great musician *and* a great actor. One shouldn't water down the other. You'd hope that actors would have a certain sort of musicality anyway, for an understanding of drama, especially its rhythms, but to have something by way of an instrument is always a useful tool.

**As well as composer and musical director, you are also playing one of the biggest roles in the play, Iago. How do you juggle it?**

I learn the lines in advance. I can't learn them on the hoof and then try and sort out everything else. I don't find that a very comfortable place to be. I'd rather have the lines, mess them up, find out why they're not right but have them somewhere in my head to fall back on. And if you are doing more than one job, it's imperative.



## CONVERSATION 6

**Kate Waters a.k.a. Kombat Kate - Fight Director**



**M.L:** What do you do when you're first booked to work on a show?

**K.K:** I read the play, usually a couple of times, to find out where the action comes and why. I look at the structure, why there's a fight coming out of that situation, what characters are involved and what kind of impact that fight needs to make on the audience. Most of all, I'm interested in the *story* of the fight.

Sometimes I'll talk to the director before rehearsals start about what they want and how they see it, to make sure that we're both singing from the same hymn-sheet.

**How much do you do in advance, technically-speaking?**

Although I'm familiar with the story of why a fight is happening, I can't do too much before rehearsals start, I have to wait until we're in the room. I need to meet the actors, I need to know what the set will be like and what they'll be wearing. Also, it should be a process that actors are involved in, rather than me just working out a fight, like a piece of choreography.

**Generally, you only get a few days in total over a rehearsal period with the actors. Is that hard?**



I've got used to it. It's not ideal, I would like to be more a part of the process but I do try to be as collaborative as possible and to use my rehearsal time as best I can. I've got so many tools in my box now that I can pull them out very quickly.

I try to get the actors to trust me immediately. Most actors want story and respond well to working that way. It's my job to make them so comfortable with what they're doing that when they're on stage, they know how to perform it.

It's great to see the difference when I come back the following week and the fight has improved massively.

### **How did you get into it?**

I trained as an actor and did stage combat at college. I enjoyed it and realised I was good at it. I liked having an outside eye on things; I was better at that than being on the inside, looking out. I'd always danced as a kid - ballet, modern, tap - and did judo. I just love it. I love telling stories in a physical way.

I worked with a guy at Bristol Old Vic Theatre School (Jonathan Howe) who took me under his wing and mentored me. You have to get certain qualifications to get registered, so I did those.

I worked with Jonathan and his students and learned the trade. He sent me out on a few little jobs with smaller companies. One thing lead to another, I got a reputation, I got called back. This all takes a few years, none of it happens over night.

### **How is it being a woman fight-director in a traditionally male profession?**

For me, it makes no difference at all. Because I'm more interested in the story of a fight than the physical action (action comes out of story), actors generally respond well. It's not about aggression and competitiveness. I've very rarely met with any resistance from actors. They don't see me as a woman but as someone with a skill.

### **What's it like to watch your work?**

I do get nervous but I never let the actors see that. With stage fights, it's a very fine line between getting it right and getting it wrong. It's so important that it looks like the characters' actions and not something that is tacked on. But that's what rehearsals are for - to ground the actions in characters' intentions.



# REHEARSAL DIARY

## Week One

### Day 1

We assemble for the obligatory tour of the building and a general meet and greet. This is followed by a presentation of the set model by Ruari Murchison, our designer and the costume designs by Stephen Snell. This is a co-production between Northern Broadsides and the West Yorkshire Playhouse and it is great to see how both companies can benefit from the other. The designs are sophisticated yet simple. More importantly, the reasons for them are sound (see **Conversations**). Barrie Rutter talks a bit about how this collaboration with Lenny Henry came to be. They met on a radio programme about Shakespeare and things grew from there.

After lunch we do a read-through, attended by various departments from the building: marketing, stage-management and wardrobe. Although read-throughs are really just a means of starting, their merits debatable, we are all excited by the play. Barrie says that on this read-through alone, he is more convinced than ever that it will be the music of the language that reveals this play to us. He's dismissive and irritated by questions (mainly from journalists) about how Lenny will play the role. He finds these discussions meaningless because, as he says, the play will tell Lenny how to play the role.

First days are strangely tiring. On the one hand you don't do much in the way of work and yet there seems to be a lot of information to take in. Although no-one would care to admit it, first days can be nerve-wracking for actors. Usually, they just want to get on with it. It's through the work that we get to know each other.

### Day 2

We're straight in on our feet at Act 1 Scene 1. With Rutter, whom I've worked with before, you just start. He throws you in with no instruction or advice and tells you to swim. So in an embarrassing, doggy-paddle kind of a way, you do. The discoveries are made in this process. So. There is a presumed conversation before the play starts. Roderigo's one line interjections give Iago his momentum. The racism is evident immediately. Is Iago's suggestion to 'rouse her father' a new thought or something Iago's

been planning? We refer to the set model frequently to acquaint ourselves with the space.

I'm struck by how the first act introduces the characters very quickly - Iago, Roderigo, Brabantio, Othello and Cassio - five key players by Scene 2. There is little discussion at this stage of rehearsals about 'character' or status but the all-important practicals are discussed: where we are, where we've been and where we're going. We're mapping our way through at quite a pace.

In the afternoon, we have a knife-throwing session with John 'The Knife' Taylor. He's a world champion knife-thrower and he's here to train Lenny to throw a blade into a target. We all have a go, five throws each, in what is meant to be a bonding exercise. All my blades fly straight under the target but I'm proud of the fact that I have thrown them with such force and at such a bad angle, they draw sparks across the floor!

### **Day 3**

I have a costume fitting up in the wardrobe department. I love fittings. As you stand for what seems like an age in front of a mirror - while the designer and costume-makers pin you in and snip bits off, discussing what works and what doesn't - a picture begins to emerge of what your character is. It's not to be underestimated. What you look like is, after all, every bit as important as what you say. You tell a story with your appearance, whether you like it or not. Here is a woman who is smart and not of poor means. She wears a corset and a high collar and is upright. Her shoes and her sleeves are feminine and dainty but her belt and her tie tell a contradictory, almost conflicting story, not unlike Emilia herself. Her condition as a woman and its associated constraints within the culture of her time is embodied in the literal restraint of the corset. I can hardly breathe. But her clothes are like a uniform, elegant yet authoritative and this gives her a certain hardness. I am reminded by Stephen (designer) that she is an army wife.

It's great to move through a building of this scale and see all these departments with different personnel and various skills beavering away to make this show a success.

### **Day 5**

Well it's the end of our first week and we've worked pretty rapidly through the play, establishing a rough geography. Rutter said he wanted to get to the end by Friday and we did - just.

## Week Two

### Day 1

We start at the beginning again. The scene takes place in the street. There is a great sense of energy and speed. The traffic of this first act is very fast flowing. Iago goes, Brabantio comes, Brabantio and Roderigo go, Othello comes, Cassio arrives with news, they all go. It's a perpetual continuum of action and information that doesn't slow down until Othello's first big speech in Act 1 Scene 3. That Shakespeare puts some space around this moment allows us to engage with Othello as a leading character. Othello earns his status immediately by slowing down the movement of the play and literally holding court with his story-telling. He entralls.

I am struck here, not for the first time, by what good casting Lenny is. There are some interesting parallels between Lenny and Othello. They are feted, well-loved and respected figures. As black men, they have been accepted into the mainstream of British/Venetian culture. They are physically imposing (Lenny towers over us, he's massive). They both have backgrounds full of vivid, adventurous experience and global travel. And yet, for different reasons, they are both outsiders. For Othello, it is because he is a foreigner and black. For Lenny, it is because he isn't (until now) an actor. In the small world of the theatre rehearsal room, this dynamic gives him a vulnerability that is absolutely right for Othello. He is not in his comfort zone yet he is incredibly brave with his openness. Othello was a General loved by all who knew him (except Iago); it's impossible not to be endeared to Lenny. His good humour, even when under pressure, is enormously affecting.

Finally on this point, in terms of Othello's isolation in the world of the play, it has to be said that even though it is 2009, Lenny's is a rare black face in the building. White-dominated theatre still renders him, in one sense at least, an isolated figure.

Amidst the frenetic activity of these early scenes, we note the importance of speaking names and titles clearly, so that the audience can identify these people.

### Day 3

In the afternoon, we have an open rehearsal for the Friends of Northern Broadsides. This has long been a policy of the company and although it can

seem daunting for the actors to have an audience at such an early stage, the Friends are here to observe the process, not to watch a performance. They are always supportive and interested, and events such as these are what give Broadsides its reputation for audience-friendly, unpretentious productions - and its following, of course.

#### **Day 4**

The musical director, Conrad Nelson, who is also playing Iago, works on the drinking songs of Act 2 Scene 3. The action of this scene is Iago's engineering of getting Cassio drunk. Conrad has decided that these songs will form some kind of drinking game. Between them, the actors work out what the rules of this game might be. It's very funny to watch.

### **Week Three**

#### **Day 1**

Kombat Kate, the fight director is in. She starts with the first brawl in Act 2 Scene 3, where a drunken Cassio is set upon by Roderigo and ends up fighting with Montano. The actors show Kate where they've got to with the scene and discuss what the story-telling aspect of the fight is. Kate looks for clarity of story in her fight choreography. The questions asked are: who is starting on whom, how to keep it safe technically and what are the reactions of the other characters? Do they get involved? She reminds the actors that the moves that appear to be the simplest are often the ones where most injuries occur.

There is some discussion of how to hold and handle the weapons. For this fight call, the actors wear their costume boots. This is important, for reasons of safety but also to discover how their physicality might be affected.

The first fight, according to Kate, is not particularly showy or flash. It's very natural, almost clumsy. It is after all a drunken brawl. She reminds the lads not to go wild. She says 'only technique will see you safely through eight shows a week'.

#### **Day 4**

As rehearsals go on and we have begun to run acts together, I have found it harder to keep up this diary as I am in the thick of it. I realise I haven't said very much about Rutter's direction of the actors specifically. Here are a couple of his regular mantras:

### **Come off the pronouns!**

He calls this a modern soap-opera disease, where actors senselessly favour the pronoun in a sentence without giving due weight to the more important nouns or verbs. For example, in response to Iago's instruction: *Speak within doors*, Emilia says:

*O fie upon them! Some such squire he was  
That turned your wit the seamy side without  
And made you to suspect me with the Moor.*

I was hitting the *them* of the first line in an attempt to refer to Iago's suggested listeners, the reason for his instruction. We often do this as modern actors because we want to illuminate meaning to our audience. I was also hitting the *he*.

Because Shakespeare's writing is quite dense, it is important that actors choose carefully which words to favour. Shakespeare gives us very clear signals about the key words in a line because they usually adhere to the iambic rhythm. By hitting the *them* and the *he*, I was not only flattening the rhythm but also obscuring the meaning.

### **Don't qualify what you haven't introduced!**

This is where we emphasise the flowery bit of a line before we've mentioned the thing we're being flowery about. Audiences need to tune into the nouns and verbs of a line because they carry plot. The adjectives and adverbs dress the meat, as it were, and to an extent they take care of themselves. Descriptive words don't need to be spoken descriptively. Have a look at the following speech of Emilia's in Act 4 Scene 2.

*I will be hanged if some eternal villain  
Some busy and insinuating rogue  
Some cogging cozening slave, to get some office  
Have not devised this slander...*

Read the speech aloud, first hitting the adjectives and adverbs. Read it again, hitting the nouns and verbs. Can you hear the difference? Which reading makes the meaning clearer?

**Let the thought be the word, the word the thought.**

Don't think the line then say it, don't act thinking the line, don't explain the line, don't extemporise vocally or act off the line. Do all the acting **on** the line.

## Week Four

### Day 2

We worked on the Willow Scene, where Emilia helps Desdemona to get ready for bed. Desdemona sings an ominous love-song that she can't get out of her head. She is still reeling from Othello's inexplicably violent behaviour but trying to brave it out optimistically. Emilia tries to calm her and the scene becomes quite intimate, with the two women talking about relationships. It seems to me that the women in this play are defined, publicly at least, by their husbands. Here we see them revealing their truer or more private natures, alone in a bedroom. The mundane, physical activity of Emilia taking off Desdemona's clothes mirrors what is happening in the scene emotionally. As the layers are shed, Desdemona seems ever more vulnerable. But the action has another effect. The intimacy of the undressing prompts a closeness between the two women that we haven't seen before. Emilia has never said as much up until this moment in the play. It is as if the action works on her too, forcing her to open up and reveal herself.

For me, the whole of Emilia's character is embodied in what she *doesn't* say. (Why doesn't she speak up when the lost handkerchief causes so much strife?)

This scene is clearly exceptional for Emilia. She forgets herself.

Desdemona's open, trusting nature affects a usually closed and uptight person and changes her. Desdemona's honesty forces Emilia out of herself, which is why, I think, that Emilia's later grief over Desdemona's death is so powerful and comes as such a shock, even to Emilia. I don't think she has hitherto realised how much she loved Desdemona until her death.

### Day 3

We worked on Act 5 Scene 2. These denouement scenes can sometimes feel as if the play is just being recapped for the audience. Not so here. The revelations come to different characters, at different times for all of them, according to what they know. Although Emilia reveals certain truths, she makes her own discoveries too - that her husband really is the villain she feared he might be. There is a rattling, rhythmic dropping of the penny in her repetitions of '*my husband?*' '*my husband say she was false?*' '*that she*

*was false? To wedlock?* etc. This play hurtles towards its conclusion. The revelations and the way they are revealed are exactly what the audience needs to see. They are not the recapping of plot, they are the plot.

## **Week Five**

### **Day 1**

We ran the play for the third and final time before moving out of the rehearsal room. We go into the theatre and start the tech tomorrow. My notes to myself on the back of this run are that I really need to engage with the enormity of the accusation against Desdemona. In terms of story-telling, it is important that the audience sees how the accusation alone, never mind her innocence, can ruin a woman forever. Even though Emilia knows that Desdemona is innocent (she doesn't doubt her for a moment), she is fully aware that the implications for Desdemona are huge. It is hard for us with our modern sensibilities to really understand this. It has to be the ultimate taboo. In modern day terms, it would be like being accused publicly (and wrongly) of paedophilia.

### **Day 4**

We're doing our second dress this afternoon. We tech-ed on Tuesday, it took a day. Short techs are one of the benefits of the Broadsides' style. Apart from lighting, there is very little technical business. All the sound is acoustic and there isn't much in the way of scene changes. We get acquainted with the unusual angle of the set, how to play the house, where the best positions are.

The costume department are making tweaks and adjustments all the time. They are incredibly accommodating. Stephen, the costume designer, checks that things look right and that the actors are comfortable.

### **Day 5**

Officially, tonight is an open dress rehearsal. It is a pound a ticket. However, as long as there is an audience, it is a performance. As far as I'm concerned this is the first night.

It's great to get a sense of the show as seen through outside eyes. Apart from our director, who is shaping the show, we've all been on the inside, looking out. Now there is this diverse mass of people, alert and sensitive to every word and action. They inform us how this play really works. It is so exciting to hear their responses: laughter, gasps and pin-drop silence. After

his Brabantio bit, Barrie is out there with them, soaking up reactions and making notes. Lenny's 'fool, fool, fool' is the best I've ever heard it.

## **Day 6**

### **First Preview**

A very different audience tonight, there was a lot more laughter. We are listening to them as acutely as they are us. In some ways these early shows are the best. There is nothing knowing about our performances. We rely utterly on the audience. There is a raw-ness and a vulnerability at this stage that inevitably disappears over the course of the run. At the moment, we're at our most open, if not our most practiced.

Well it's press night on Wednesday where, largely because of Lenny's presence, all the world and her husband are going to be. It'll be buzzing, there'll be nerves, there'll be critics and then there'll be a party. Bring it on!



