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Othello at the Market Theatre

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Othello, more than any play in the canon, has a fascinating and contentious performance and reception history. In 1987, at the Market Theatre, Johannesburg, in apartheid South Africa, Janet Suzman added significantly to this history by breaching South Africa's color-bar and casting John Kani as the first black South African actor to play *Othello*. What was this production about? What cultural work did it perform? It is embedded in what have come to be understood as competing discourses: the literary criticism which shapes our understanding of the play, the influence of the reviewer discourse that surrounds the production, the voices of actors and directors, the performance history of the play which casts its long shadow over all subsequent directors, and the pressure of the play's "past significance" on its "present meaning" in the historical moment, in this instance, 1987 apartheid Johannesburg (Weimann xiii). What a careful review of the play's reception history reveals is that when a black actor plays the title role at times of social change, particularly having to do with racial or class politics, the play engages audiences in an exceptionally intense way. This "collapse of aesthetic distance" invited black and white audience members alike in 1987 South Africa to consider their own complicities in fantasies surrounding miscegenation and violence (Neill 11). The production, as courageous as the multi-racial casting was and in spite of the rhetoric surrounding it, fits into a long reception/performance history. Where the production definitively breaks new ground is in its treatment of women. Surprisingly, there is nothing in all of Suzman's paratexts—her responses to theatre critics and her published accounts of her role as director—about her treatment of the women in the play, but it is from Suzman's depiction of gender relations within the context of racial politics that the production draws its considerable power. The production was a huge success over the course of its six-week run but it set off

a debate in the press with no two critics taking the same position on any aspect and, indeed, taking opposing positions within their own reviews. All who write about it use the phrase “powerful and controversial,” but most critics—literary and theatre—locate its power in the daring (for that time) multi-racial casting. My reassessment of this theatrical event shows that it is Suzman’s direction of women trapped in a destructive male-dominated society that is ground-breaking.

Suzman claimed that her production of *Othello* with a Xhosa man in the role of Othello found its historical moment as protest theatre in apartheid South Africa. Shakespeare as Tudor historiographer was re-cast as anti-apartheid social historian. Suzman’s 1987 production is widely received as groundbreaking, in part because of the multi-racial casting, in part because of her insistence on the play’s “transhistorical immediacy.”¹ Following a brief sketch of the particular historical moment in which Suzman situated her production, I explore the role played in any assessment of this production by Suzman’s own account of events. I then place Suzman’s production of *Othello* in its long performance and reception history in order to evaluate what is truly radical about it.² In order to do both of these things, I bring together reviews, a close reading of the playtexts,³ performance and reception history, literary criticism, and an awareness of the South African political and cultural contexts. Theatre is a cultural production—it performs cultural work—and the political contradictions of the apartheid system in which this particular production was embedded charged the space between representation and reception.

Since its establishment in 1976, desegregated audiences have been permitted to attend the Market Theatre.⁴ The Immorality Act barring marriage or sexual liaisons across ethnic groups had been repealed in 1985.⁵ All other repressive legislation prescribing segregation and censorship—the Separate Amenities Act, the Group Areas Act, the Job Reservations Act, the Publications Act, and the Population Act—remained firmly in place. John Kani was himself a living example of the consequences of the Population Act. As a black South African, Kani’s place of residence was prescribed (forcibly reassigned according to apartheid’s terms) and he lived in Soweto, the largest township in Southern Africa, where, to use his own words, “We had rendered South Africa ungovernable. We hadn’t paid rent in six years. We didn’t pay services but nobody would come to the township to cut off the water.”⁶ Apartheid had affected him and his family much more personally. In 1962, one of his brothers was sentenced to five years imprisonment for guerilla warfare activities on behalf of the outlawed ANC. Then in 1985, another younger brother was shot and

killed while reading a poem at a young girl's funeral.⁷ Staging *Othello* with a pair of multi-racial lovers was an act of boldness against this backdrop of repression. The first run-through of the play, for example, was postponed because police cordoned off Soweto in preparation for the funeral of a murdered activist. Police roadblocks were a constant challenge for Kani as he made his way from Soweto to the Market Theatre in downtown Johannesburg. In this context, Suzman and Kani's act of courage cannot be over-emphasized.

Both Suzman and Kani brought considerable cultural capital and professional credentials to the enterprise. By 1987, John Kani had won a Tony Award for his 1975 performance in Athol Fugard's play, *Sizwe Banzi is Dead*, a play he co-wrote with both Fugard and Winston Ntshona, his fellow actor in the piece. He was, at the time, Executive Director/Artistic Director of the Market Theatre, a position he had held since 1977. In fact, Suzman had to ask his permission to direct him in the production of *Othello*. The *New York Times* theatre critic stationed in Johannesburg in 1987 wrote, "Janet Suzman, perhaps South Africa's best-known actress, is directing John Kani, one of the country's top actors, in the first professional production here of *Othello* with a black actor in the title role" (Associated Press). The offer to play Othello presumably appealed to Kani because, for him, art and politics were a single event and he considered himself as much an activist as an artist. Only politically relevant work interested him.

And what of Suzman? Suzman left South Africa after graduation and quite quickly established herself as a distinguished actress with the Royal Shakespeare Company. *Othello* was her directorial debut. In two widely cited addresses, both delivered a considerable time after the event at such prestigious venues as Oxford University in 1995 and the Shakespeare Association of America meeting in 1996, Suzman described how she came to choose *Othello* with John Kani in the title role. She had worked with Kani in 1976 on the Market Theatre's inaugural production, *The Death of Bessie Smith*, and, since that time, had been searching for a play on which they could collaborate. The idea of *Othello* came to her as she watched Kani performing in a "protest" piece.

There are many forms that protest theatre can take, but one that makes use of a past masterpiece to examine a present tragedy was not the usual Market fare in those days. The story of a black man and a white girl who fall irretrievably in love, and who then commit the unforgivable sin—to a prejudiced society—of sealing that love with marriage vows, was surely germane to South Africa. That the marriage is then systematically de-

stroyed, on, when you think about, no more than an evil caprice, made *Othello* not only germane, but essential to our purpose. (Suzman 1996, 255).

Protest theatre, or agit-prop as it was called, was standard fare at the Market Theatre in the 1980s, but using Shakespeare or other “classical” drama as protest theatre was unusual. Suzman brought this idea to Kani and the Market Theatre. Furthermore, Suzman felt that her hand was immeasurably strengthened since “Shakespeare in particular is always a useful writer to have up your sleeve, sanctioned as he is by his historically unassailable position as the world’s greatest playwright” (Suzman 1996, 270). In her view, being the “sublime humanist that he was,” Shakespeare “examined the idea of *apartheid* four hundred years before the term was coined” and he fully rejected it (Suzman 1988, 90). She chose the play, in short, because she believed that it opposed racism. Likewise, she chose Kani because “he was the REAL THING” (Suzman 1988, 90). But whose real thing? If Suzman was searching beneath Kani’s articulate, urbane surface for “the race memory of generations of warriors, and of centuries of smoky African nights beneath a glittering Southern Cross,” she found herself the target of critical responses that reflect tropes in the reception history of *Othello* (Suzman 1998, 26).

To take one example: critical responses to how black actors—American, British, or South African—speak Shakespeare’s verse. It has been historically difficult for a black Othello to “speak the speech” in a way that satisfies white theatre critics. Critical responses are rooted in a long tradition that begins at least with American-born Ira Aldridge. Aldridge’s acting career spanned a forty-year period from 1827 to 1867, during which time he toured Britain, Ireland, Germany, and Eastern Europe. It was in Germany and Russia that he became a star. He first performed Othello at Covent Garden in 1833. Despite his previous successes in smaller London theatres and in the provinces in a repertoire of black characters and white roles in white makeup, his Othello drew small audiences. Critical responses to Kani’s alleged struggles with iambic pentameter—his allegedly disconcerting staccato, jerky phrasing—echo a critic’s comment at the time of Aldridge’s 1833 Covent Garden performance. According to the critic, Aldridge did not “fully comprehend the meaning and force or even the words he utters” (quoted in Hankey 43, n. 165). There were also complaints about Aldridge’s accent and the fact that he seemed mannered. Ironically, Aldridge’s reception in Eastern Europe, where he toured from 1858 to his death in 1867 speaking his lines in English while his fel-

low performers spoke in their native languages, was more enthusiastic. One could speculate that this occurred because the language difference underlined the outsider nature of Othello's character as effectively as his color difference.

Paul Robeson, to cite another widely known black Othello, played the role three times over a thirty-year period in 1930, 1943, and 1959. He performed the role first in London opposite Peggy Ashcroft. Significantly, he accepted the role on condition that he spend several years learning how to speak English with a British accent. He was rewarded for this effort by many reviewers who thought his diction excellent and the lines well spoken, confirmation that a rigid set of expectations prevailed for a Shakespeare text. Nevertheless, when Robeson was quoted on May 19, 1930 in the *Times* as saying that "The rhythm of Shakespeare has come easily to me, for it is just pure music," he was sharply rebuked because "the rhythm of music is not the same as that of Shakespeare's blank verse" (quoted in Potter 124–125). This particular criticism became a recurring theme throughout his career. And Willard White, the Jamaican-born opera singer, cast by Trevor Nunn in 1989 (two years after Suzman's production) for the RSC's studio theatre, *The Other Place*, was considered unsuccessful at sounding "the famous Othello music" which carries the intense anguish of the part (quoted in Neill 95). Critics complained vociferously about his speaking of the verse.

I would argue that what is in play here is a kind of essentialism (how British Shakespeare should *sound* on the stage) tied to what is perceived as the privilege of a British classical dramatic training, all designed to arrive at the "monolithic Shakespearean voice" (Bennett 42). In practice, this voice and delivery are coded white and British/RSC. In South Africa particularly, this coding has its own interesting history. There is a long tradition of devaluing indigenous actors in favor of visiting British actors playing the empire, which harks back to the introduction of colonial theatre to the Cape Colony at the beginning of the nineteenth century.⁸ The expectation of a particular homogenized voice and delivery is, in my view, a further development of this colonial history and, in the case of Shakespeare's texts, this expectation is especially strong. One recalls the frustrated theatre critic, who, when evaluating Kani's performance, grumbled that "this talented and accomplished actor cannot cope with the flow and metre of Shakespeare's lines. . . . There are scenes where he copes fairly well, but the great poetic speeches are lost. The ability to cope with iambic pentameter is rare enough in this country, even among actors who have had the chance to accumulate some experience of it, which Kani has not" (Venables).

This thwarted expectation is at odds with efforts to encourage a naturalized indigenous or regional diction, especially for black South African actors. In the fall of 1994, several years after Suzman's production, Britain's Royal National Theatre's Studio sponsored a series of actors' workshops and classes at the Market Theatre led by Gregory Doran and Antony Sher with eminent actor Ian McKellen and director Richard Eyre in attendance. In a fascinating account of this experience, Doran reports that a black actor articulated his desire to "find a way of doing Shakespeare in my own voice, using my Africanness" (quoted in Sher and Doran 13). A number of acting exercises followed quite spontaneously in which black and white actors successfully played the roles of Cleopatra and the Messenger in *Antony and Cleopatra*, using Zulu, Kaaps (a Cape coloured dialect), and class-inflected (white) accents. The obvious status differences between the Messenger and the Queen of Egypt were immediately underscored by the class and color system implied by the array of South African accents. The vignette concluded with the wry observation from one actor: "This is really fascinating but a South African audience would never buy it" (quoted in Sher and Doran 15). That audience includes theatre critics whose ability to influence and direct audience response is enormous.

Where did Suzman, herself a member of the RSC, stand on the issue of accent in relation to the speaking of Shakespeare's verse? On the one hand, she dismissed a critic's reference to Shakespearean "verbal clusters" (Lickindorf 70) as something that "went out with the dodo" (Suzman 1988, 95). On the other, she identified the speaking of blank verse as a potential problem for her cast. Referring to Kani's decision to accept her offer to play Othello, she observed: "For a man who had never uttered a line of iambic verse in his life, it was a brave decision" (Suzman 1996, 255). She also noted that:

He, at that stage, didn't know what I knew; that sustaining a Shakespearean role of that size in a language that is not your mother tongue, was going to be a gargantuan task. . . . To ask a man who dreams in Xhosa to play the single most poetic role in all of Shakespeare was unfair, to say the least. (Suzman 1998, 24–25)

Was she not, in fact, guilty, however unwittingly, of a kind of racial essentialism?⁹ In theory, by effectively collapsing the aesthetic distance between representation and experience, she claimed Kani as the "REAL THING" (a "real" Othello) precisely because, as a Xhosa, speaking Xhosa-inflected English, he might, depending on the hearer, be able to say, "Rude am I in

my speech.” In practice, as the play constructs him, Othello is anything but “rude” in his speech. He is orotund, as Michael Neill would have it, and his rhetorical prowess, executed in the service of many different ends, is always on display. Suzman had to work intensively with the entire cast on their vocal delivery. Of Joanna Weinberg, the young woman cast as Desdemona, who had no previous experience whatsoever speaking blank verse, Suzman commented, “Well, that at least makes the match a fair one” (Suzman 1998, 32). Not a single reviewer, however, commented on Weinberg’s delivery.

In 1987, seven years before the dismantling of apartheid acknowledged the existence of eleven official languages spoken by all South Africans, English and Afrikaans were the two official languages. English vocal imperialism dominated the English language theatres and most powerfully when applied to the iambic pentameter of the “Othello music” or any other Shakespearean verse. The idea of Shakespeare as universal and timeless goes hand in hand with the expectation for a homogenized vocal delivery. A further development of this vocal imperialism is the implication that it is, first, a necessary prerequisite on the actor’s part for understanding Shakespeare’s text, and second, as a consequence, a strategy for communicating that understanding to the audience.¹⁰ Speaking Shakespeare’s lines in the South African context with an indigenous, regional accent (always coded black) appears to have distorted the text’s intelligibility for theatre critics even when, in the actual listening experience, the result is revelatory.¹¹ Thus, the criticism that John Kani seemed “a bit swamped in the role and unintelligible at times” masks completely the way that Kani’s delivery lays open for discovery the meaning of the verse (Wright). Furthermore, the degree to which an English-speaking white South African accent is closer to Shakespeare’s verse than Kani’s Xhosa-accented English is highly debatable.

Before leaving this discussion, it is important to note that in the South African context, “white” accents are often read for socio-economic class. Just as often, the hearer infers (sometimes incorrectly) from “white” accents the speaker’s position on the political spectrum. A consequence of this coding in Suzman’s production is that it sets up a class hierarchy that maps neatly onto the class issues in the play. The actor playing Iago (Richard Haines) speaks an Afrikaans-inflected English;¹² Suzman imagined him as Eugene Terreblanche, the demagogue who spearheaded the extreme right-wing party, the Afrikaner Resistance Movement (Suzman 1988, 90). As Afrikaans and lower class, he is subordinated to an aristocratic, exotic black man with an upper middle-class white wife. In

the world of the play, Iago uses his inferior rank as ensign to construct arguments for his hostility towards Othello. Perhaps a coincidence of timing and opportunity in relation to the actors who were available for the production, the particular actors Suzman selected use accents that sustain cross-class interaction in ways that a more homogenous vocal register would not have done.

Reviewers' reactions to the staged demonstrations of affection between Desdemona and Othello also have their own history and impact on reception, perhaps especially when black actors are employed. Ever since Thomas Rymer's *Short View of Tragedy* (1693), some critics have expressed revulsion at the union between Desdemona and Othello, and at the impropriety of the match between a "blackamoor" and a senator's daughter. Audience reaction was captured, or perhaps was keyed, by the headlines for Paul Robeson's 1930 London performance as Othello with Peggy Ashcroft as Desdemona. "Vivid Acting as the terrible Moor. Kissing Scene. Coloured Audience in the Stalls," ran the headline on May 20, 1930 in the London *Express* (quoted in Potter 119). Not very different from 1987 South Africa. In a widely cited passage, Barbara Hodgdon has identified the extent to which the film version of Suzman's production insists that "it is *Desdemona's* trajectory of desire . . . that initiates the narrative" and Desdemona's gaze which focuses the viewer on "Kani's exoticism and the sexual bond between them. . . . One effect is to reveal how sexual intimacy between black and white bodies drives Iago's fantasies" (Hodgdon 45–46).¹³ I would argue that this is an effect of the text itself that Suzman chose to highlight.

Suzman's robust defense of her directorial decisions in relation to dramatizing the sexual bond between Othello and Desdemona is striking and confirms the text's authority. Speaking as a director rather than as a literary or cultural critic, she displays the appreciation and understanding of the playtext which underlay her staging choices. When one critic argued that the "temptation to play to a specifically South African audience" led Suzman to stage "explicit demonstrations of physical intimacy" which robbed "Iago's insinuations of their calumny and the tragedy of the part of its dignity" (Lickindorf 70 & 71), Suzman responded with textual support. After citing "And this, and this" (where Q1 has the stage direction, "They kiss"), Suzman countered:

Now why should I be tempted "by a specifically South African audience," in EL's view, to what she deems vulgar and I believe *must* be discovered in the play? . . . "It was a violent commencement," says Iago, "and thou

shalt find an answerable sequestration." He wasn't wrong. . . . I just cannot see why a languorous and tactile relationship should "rob the tragedy of its dignity." Prudery gone mad. I suspect it's a specifically South African critic talking here! (Suzman 1988, 94–95)

Certainly, Lickindorf had not read the Quarto text's stage direction. However, it is, perhaps, too easy to read Lickindorf's comment as prudish discomfort with erotic passion staged between black and white bodies.

It should come as no surprise therefore that, even before he was cast as Othello, John Kani had his own history in this regard. Performing opposite a distinguished white Afrikaans-speaking actress in a 1982 production of *Miss Julie* required, in his words, a "peck on the lips." About two hundred members of a 70% white audience walked out of the auditorium and the police were notified. After telling his leading actress that *his* people had no problem with this interracial kiss—but *her* people did—Kani instructed her to pull away from him at the first hint of any disturbance from the audience. He did not want to put her in any danger. In this same radio interview, he recalled that when he played Othello in 1987, the cast hid the hate mail addressed to actress Joanna Weinberg (Desdemona).¹⁴ The cast also received death threats and warnings that bombs had been placed in the theatre. As a consequence, the security police were required to scour the theatre auditorium for bombs at 7:30 pm every night prior to the opening of show.

While depicting interracial love relationships has presented challenges in other countries, miscegenation and its consequences have haunted South Africa's tragic history from its earliest beginnings as a victualing station for sailors on their way to the East Indies.¹⁵ One can safely surmise that from the moment of the first importation of west African slaves (slaves later came from East Africa, Mozambique, Madagascar, Indonesia, India, Ceylon, Java, and Batavia) and the enslavement of indigenous peoples at the Cape, miscegenation was a fact of ordinary life among slave-holding families; a child born to a slave mother and a slaveholder father was considered part of the slave family. Likewise, the vast majority of men and women of slave descent were seen by the elite as *coloured* (*mestizo*) and therefore, axiomatically, as lower class. Despite the fact that, during the Dutch East India Company period, the slave lodge was the brothel for sailors passing through the Cape Colony, and despite the fact that, in the 1820s "Rainbow balls" were organized opportunities for British officers and others to pick up *coloured* women, power relations, class, and shame operated to marginalize families with mixed

race children. These same pressures served to destroy families and drive them apart. Paler skinned and more economically successful members of mixed race families “passed” as white; their darker skinned children were cast out to protect the children who were “passing” (see Bickford-Smith). And, it cannot be over-emphasized, miscegenation typically involved white men and black or *coloured* women. There were very few instances of white women who had sexual relations with black men.

A theatre audience in 1987 Johannesburg would have brought this history into the auditorium with them. Completely unaware that the dismantling of apartheid policies was a mere (and unthinkable) seven years away, they would have observed the ways in which Suzman’s production engaged with all too familiar political issues. Given the white South African imaginary and the “steamy”¹⁶ viewing prospect that audiences faced, it is easier to understand the ways in which the debates provoked by casting a black South African actor as Othello were conducted in a coded, subterranean discourse that served to marginalize Kani’s performance. In the week of the show’s opening, there were interviews in the press with John Kani. A color photograph of Kani was featured in *The Star* (September 12, 1987) under the ambiguous heading, “For the first time.” The reference, however, was not to Kani’s first as a black Othello, but, instead, to the first time that Kani appeared in his stage costume. However, a story on Kani in the *Sowetan*, a local black newspaper, focused not on the production but on Kani’s success since 1976 as associate director at the Market Theatre where, with a “string of international merit awards under his belt, [he] now sits on the pinnacle of responsibility at the Market Theatre” advising other writers, many of them presumably white (Khumalo). Vusi Khumalo, the writer for the *Sowetan*, went on to point out that Kani, together with Athol Fugard and Janet Suzman, had been made patrons of the theatre in 1981. Kani, concluded Khumalo, could by no means be considered “a token appointment” (Khumalo).

Such an acknowledgment of Kani’s distinguished career albeit as an administrator, rather than as an internationally accomplished actor, coupled with the observation that he was not a token appointment but was eminently qualified for his position at the Market, sat uneasily with another banner headline which ran that same week. Above a photograph of Kani and Weinberg in another newspaper, *The Weekly Mail*, September 18–24, 1987, was a banner headline: “With *Othello* drawing crowds at the Market Theatre, Caryl Phillips looks at the true nature of the first black man to make it in white society.” The article itself was headlined, “Othello: The first black to make it in suburbia.” It was an extract from

Caryl Phillips' *The European Tribe*, reprinted from the London *Guardian*. Apparently, according to the logic imposed by this excerpt, Kani *was* a token appointment.¹⁷

A great deal could be said about the power and influence of reviewer discourse and about the ability of theatre critics to hijack a theatrical production. *The Weekly Mail's* decision to advertise the production and to frame it for South African viewers, black and white alike, by running this particular text by this particular author, revealed not only a post-colonial cringe of inferiority in the rush to print something British, something from the metropolitan center. It also re-framed John Kani as precisely the affirmative action hire that the *Sowetan* had been at pains to disavow.

The filmed version that emerges from the shadows of all the paratextual material that complicates any assessment of the production's place in performance/reception history is whole and coherent. All of the actors give stunning performances, and the ensemble work captured in the filmed version is impressive. "These plays were meant to be performed and it is in performance that one often finds the answer to the many disparate views reached over a desk. Of course, I don't mean THE answer, I mean the answer that makes sense" (Suzman 1988, 91). And, this statement alone may provide the key to Michael Neill's claim that Kani's performance is one of four outstanding Othellos in the twentieth century (Neill 94). None of the commentary can disguise the fact that Suzman's production makes theatrical sense.

For whatever Suzman may have intended or claimed to intend in her lectures, interviews, and lengthy rebuttals to critics—a universalized, transhistorical, tragic experience delivered by an inexhaustibly relevant Shakespeare for all time who was always already against apartheid—the performance captured on film of this vexed and vexing play transcends, even, it could be said, shakes off all of her published paratextual material. As Paromita Chakravarti argues, the play's polyvalence resists any attempt at reductiveness.

The exploration of racial issues in *Othello* has made it a useful and enabling text for racially segregated cultures and more generally for colonial and postcolonial readers, adapters and performers of Shakespeare. Othello's character provides a mouthpiece for the consciousness of a denigrated people in the unequal and exploitative cultural encounter with Europe. But the Moor's status as the voice of a persecuted race remains debatable and deeply problematic. (Chakravarti 39)

The filmed version of Suzman's production is powerful and heartrending because it exposes the audience's complicity with its dramatization of society's racist constructions. It does so in particular through the way it mediates "the codes and conventions that have forbidden or disapproved of miscegenation, or racial mixing—perhaps the most sensitive issue of the play" (Chatterjee and Singh 66).

This production in no way evades what Ben Okri has described as "the terrors that are at the heart of the play" (Okri 72). It is in fact around these twin foci—sex and difference—that Suzman constructs the production for her audiences. Speaking of nineteenth-century audiences and their preference for a tawny Arab Moor, Okri has argued:

They did not want to face the full implications of Othello's blackness. They did not want him in their dreams. They also did not want to confront the powerful sexual element in the play. If you take away Othello's color then you don't really have the magnitude of the tragedy. . . . Reducing the color diminishes the force of the sex. Together they can be quite unbearable. (Okri 72–73)

Suzman makes certain to diminish neither. She yokes Othello's color (and difference) inextricably with sexual intensity. In the filmed version she keeps a tight focus on Othello's color and the sexual intensity between Desdemona and Othello. The glow emanating from Othello's blackness and Desdemona's opalescent whiteness are, at one and the same time, registered as difference itself and as the source of sexual power. The music playing under the scene, the lighting, Desdemona's white costume (almost a trope in the theatrical tradition in which this play is embedded), *and* her gaze in the reunion scene on Cyprus where she slowly floats up a staircase to greet Othello, Cassio's sword in her raised hand ("my fair warrior"), together evoke a potent sensuality. Her face (at least in the filmed version of the production) is radiant with desire.

Representations of, and references to, talk about sexual intimacy and sexuality almost never leave the text; they are, therefore, never far from the viewer's mind in this production, whether through metonymic onstage action, evocations conjuring bestial imaginings (Iago), or through the pervasive use of Shakespeare's bawdy language. The final scene, however, adds necrophilia to the viewer's imagination. As white robes on white skin, black skin on white skin, and, finally, Weinberg's white robes swathed around Kani's neck as he attempts fruitlessly to force the dead girl into throwing her lifeless arm around him, cue the observer, Suzman takes full advantage of the stage directions, "*He kisses her*" at 5.2.15, 16, and 19.

When I have plucked thy rose,
 I cannot give it vital growth again,
 It needs must wither: I'll smell thee on the tree—
He kisses her [Q2]

O balmy breath, that dost almost persuade
 Justice to break her sword—one more, one more!
[He kisses her: Neill edition]
 Be thus when thou art dead, and I will kill thee
 And love thee after—one more, and that's the last.
He kisses her [Q1]¹⁸

Kani tenderly kisses her on the lips and the breasts so that when Desdemona awakes and pulls him down towards her suggestively with “Will you come to bed, my lord?” (5.2.24), her tenderness is painful to watch. It is at this point that Weinberg begins to caress Kani’s arms, an action she continues while he strangles her. This piece of stage business has the effect of increasing the intensity of erotic violence which the text makes explicit.

The black/white opposition is most powerful in this final scene, perhaps the most heartbreaking, harrowing scene in the filmed version and in the play. Little wonder then that the still photograph of John Kani, seated on the wedding bed holding in his arms a dead Desdemona, clad in her white “nightly wearing,” howling in pain, caught at the very moment that he attempts to gather the dead girl’s arm around his neck in an embrace, is widely anthologized. While James Siemon has documented the ways this final scene of the play was interpreted in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there can be no doubt that this particular photograph of the bed scene has now been entered into the material record of the play’s chilling concluding scene.

The visual cues of fluttering white hands on the muscular black arms of her soon-to-be-murderer husband sends the witness’s imagination, one may presume, exactly where the dramatist intended. Just as Othello has begged Iago to make him, in the words of Edward A. Snow, the “guilty and at the same time punitive onlooker in the primal scene of his own marriage,” so we, the audience, are now the guilty, onlookers of the primal scene to which the play has insistently pointed since Roderigo’s opening lines (Snow 224). The audience is implicated in the “this” that Roderigo complains of in the third line of the play, and the audience must now face their own “unacknowledgeable fantasies” (Boose 2004a, 27). The scene does not exist in isolation; it gets its cumulative power from key preced-

ing scenes: the scene prior to the brothel scene (4.1.), the brothel scene itself (4.2), and the viewer's accretive memory of all the scenes in which Desdemona and Othello have occupied the stage together.

Suzman links the erotic intensity not only between the two protagonists, but also between Cassio and Bianca, and within Emilia, too, who is portrayed in this production as saturated with an unfulfilled, pained yearning, in a web of sexual politics and power relations distributed among three couples. Who has the power and who, in the world of the play, exhibits a free and open sexual nature? The answers lie in Suzman's exploration and staging of gender relations in ways that render the production, at least to this viewer, quite radical. In this regard, credit goes to Suzman and to the three actresses—Joanna Weinberg as Desdemona, Lindsay Reardon as Bianca, and Dorothy Ann Gould whose performance as Emilia is breathtaking. A pivotal scene for any discussion of the production's gender relations is 3.3.293, the scene in which Emilia picks up her mistress's handkerchief and then gives it to Iago. Suzman claimed the Afrikaner Eugene Terreblanche as her inspiration for directing Iago as a vulgar boor, but it is Iago's misogyny, his sexual disgust, and his abuse of Emilia that drive the action of this scene. According to Lynda Boose, in a carefully reasoned essay, the handkerchief stands in for sexuality itself. Boose argues that, through the stories that Othello tells about the origins of the handkerchief and its power over love, sexuality in the world of the play is elevated "from the degradation of Iago's pornographic literalism into the realm of myth" (Boose 2004b, 269). It is not only Iago's lewd literalism that is on display in this production, but also his disgust at himself and his hatred of women.

Richard Haines, the large, overpowering man, who was cast by Suzman to play Iago, enters at 3.3.303, chucking Emilia on the neck with his sword, "What do you here alone?" His response to her "Do not you chide: I have a thing for you" is a singsong, mockingly intoned, "You have a thing?? For ME?? It is a common thing / To have a foolish wife." As Haines stresses the contemptuously bawdy meaning of both words—"common" and "thing"—he grabs Emilia's crotch. Suzman's blocking in this scene contributes to the representation of Emilia and Iago as a couple. The agony and the subjection of the desiring, rejected woman drench her response, "What will you give me now / For that same handkerchief?" At his initial embrace of her, sexual longing fills the actress's face, and it is hideous-to-behold and horribly at odds with the instrumentality of Iago's embrace. "A good wench! Give it me" is only intended as an opportunity for him to snatch the handkerchief. The dialogue that ensues between

them as Emilia struggles to regain possession of the handkerchief is punctuated by his beating her and pushing her to the ground. As she exits, looking back at Iago, it is the expression on her face, a mask of horror and hurt, that sets up the violence in the play's concluding scenes, 5.1 and 5.2, and the lethal exchange between Emilia and her husband in 5.2.

This production links all three women in their subjection to their men. For Desdemona's "My heart's subdued / Even to the utmost pleasure of my lord" Suzman chooses Q1's "utmost pleasure" over F's "very quality" thereby infusing Desdemona's speech with a dangerous sensuality. Joanna Weinberg, dressed in white for the Senate scene, captures both the innocence that lies behind Brabantio's description of his daughter as "A maiden never bold, / Of spirit so still and quiet that her motion / Blushed at herself" (1.3.95–7) and the sexual passion implied in her own words, "That I did love the Moor to live with him / My downright violence and scorn of fortunes / May trumpet to the world" (1.3.246–9). Emilia's "I nothing, but to please his fantasy" (3.3.302) picks up on the subjection of self to spouse. And Bianca, the third member of this triad of women, completes the theme of subjection with her acceptance of Cassio's refusal to "to bring [her] on the way a little" (4.1.192): "I must be circumstanced" (4.1.196).

But this is the subjection of erotic politics and the erotics belong to pornography. In a brilliant essay, Lynda Boose links pornography's erotic narratives to romance narratives as purveyors of the culture's masterplots in which women are subjected culturally and physically (Boose 2004a). It is a commonplace in *Othello* criticism to note that Desdemona falls in love with Othello as romance hero as he weaves his own travel tales for her. Less commonly noted in *Othello* criticism is Boose's observation that the goal of pornography is not sex but death: "death experienced as erotic completion" (Boose 2004a, 35).

For this trio of women are all desiring women in Suzman's production. Desdemona, as a desiring woman is sexually submissive yet she challenges the system of patriarchy. She rejects her father's authority by eloping with Othello and insists on her right to sue for Cassio in the face of "her lord's" objections. Suzman's production dramatizes Desdemona's independence in an opening montage which reveals a cloaked Desdemona leaving her father's house with a secretive smile of pleasure playing over her face. To the extent that all three women violate patriarchal structures, they must be silenced by their male partners.¹⁹ Dorothy Ann Gould captures how hard (and how destructive) it is for Emilia to break her customary silence. And Lindsay Reardon as Bianca provides a variation on the violence done to Desdemona. The abuse they receive from men links all three women.

Indeed, it is Bianca, often cast as black and played here by an actress of indeterminate color, who, in this production, prepares us for the eroticized violence of the concluding scene. In this production, we always see Bianca in flowing, white *palazzo* trousers, white cummerbund at her waist, and white gymnast's top. Reardon's movements are fluid, cat-like, and athletic as she moves up and down the set's broad flight of steps. Her movements, her costume, and her skin color suggest someone who exists outside the categories that the play imposes. Neither wife nor obviously the "courtesan" that F designates, she appears to belong neither to Cyprus nor to Venice. Yet, in this production she is closely affiliated with the other two women.

Suzman's direction in this scene tightens the focus on misogyny. When Bianca enters at 5.1.74 to find Cassio injured, Iago addresses her as "strumpet" and "trash." He repeatedly cues the white soldiers and sailors, who are circling around Bianca, to interpret her concern for Cassio as signs of her guilt for his injury. Following Emilia's attack on her (Emilia spits on Bianca), Iago sends Emilia off to "Tell my lord and lady what hath happed" (5.1.126). As Emilia leaves the stage, she turns back to take in the action, and the viewer is left in no doubt that she understands what is to follow.

What follows is an offstage gang rape orchestrated by Iago.²⁰ Bianca's fearless defiance is powerless against the soldiers making obscene gestures who eventually carry her offstage from where the audience hears her cries. This violence in the streets pre-figures the violence to follow in the bedroom. Unmoved, Iago turns matter of factly to the audience, "this is the night / That either makes me, or fordoes me quite" (5.1.127–28). Iago's orchestration of violence has met with no intervention from Cassio despite Bianca's urgent ministering to him. Cassio leaves her to Iago and the soldiers.²¹ The play leaves no doubt that she been used up by the men, as are all the women in the play.

Dorothy Ann Gould is a powerful actress and she rises brilliantly to the challenge issued by Suzman's direction of her as one of this company of abused, spirited (in this production, at least) women. Emilia has twice demonstrated her complicity with Iago. Under Suzman's direction, Emilia is made to appear extremely guilty at 3.4.21 when Desdemona, after the camera tracks her searching the floor for the lost handkerchief, asks, "Where should I lose that handkerchief, Emilia?" There is a long pause before the upwardly inflected word "Emilia," and Emilia's guilty silence thickens the audience's anticipation. After all, Emilia spends sufficient time with her mistress to justify Othello's interrogation of her in 4.2. "I know not madam" is spoken with eyes lowered.

Confronted with the incontrovertible enormity of what Iago has wrought, she breaks free of her subjection. Assisted by some judicious cuts and direction, Suzman allows Emilia her moment of awakened independence. "Good gentlemen, let me have leave to speak" (5.2.192) for example, is cut. The Quarto's stage direction, "Othello runs at Iago, but is disarmed by Montano; Iago kills his wife" is preserved. Suzman's direction has Othello castrating Iago. Aside from that intervention, Suzman's cuts simply require that Iago be led off after he stabs his wife. Emilia drags herself across the floor to the bed where she takes Desdemona's hand in both of hers. This production is noteworthy in its treatment of this moment. Kani, who has been keening on the bed, leans over to close the dead Emilia's eyes, in silent acknowledgment of her dying words, "Moor, she was chaste, she loved thee, cruel Moor / So come my soul to bliss, as I speak true!" (5.2.248–9). The text contains no further reference to Emilia, but her body half on, half off the bed does, in this production, constitute the third body on the bed's "tragic loading/lodging."²²

Barbara Hodgdon observes that, "Although Suzman's production also stages moments of domestic violence (Iago slaps Emilia on several occasions), it emphasizes race more than gender" (Hodgdon 249, n. 62). However, Suzman's production portrays a violent, patriarchal society in which sexuality, gender relations, and difference (read as race in this play) are public matters of the state. In those ways, the play was, indeed, apposite for the South African racial and sexual politics of 1987.

These aspects of the production's "radical" intervention are imbricated in the play's production and reception history. A careful review of this history reveals that when a black actor plays the title role at moments of social change, particularly in relation to race or class, the play engages audiences in an exceptionally intense way. In the 1833 performance at Covent Garden, London, Ira Aldridge received a cool reception from the press. Covent Garden was subsequently closed for five days because of an influenza epidemic and when the theatre re-opened, Aldridge was no longer on the bill. The political context is instructive. This was the year that slavery in the British colonies was abolished (Potter 110).

Robeson's experience was similar. His 1943 performance took place against World War II and if a play could be said to have found its moment, this was the moment. The production was a phenomenon, apparently holding the record for the longest run of any Shakespeare play on Broadway, and always playing to sold-out houses. Once again, the prevailing political conditions tell more than half the story. This performance attracted audiences of all classes and all ethnic and racial groups. Julie Hankey quotes a GI who saw the play with a group of soldiers; on their

six-hour train ride home they could talk of nothing but *Othello* (Hankey 72–73).

While, to quote Jyotsna Singh, “the end of the play *cannot foresee* the violence and conflict of colonial history,” the strand of empire already evident in Jacobean England and well developed in neighboring Portugal and Spain, the concomitant emergent racism and its linked misogyny leave one wondering about the extent of the play’s prescience (Singh 176). *Othello* is Shakespeare’s fourth play to take up blackness or ethnicity as difference. For the production to succeed in apartheid Johannesburg (granted a high level of professionalism), it had only to stage miscegenation as a way of “exposing the extraordinary fascination and fear of racial and sexual difference” in white South Africans.²³ To put this another way, the question for this play is not whether it upholds or rejects racism, a question which has received many different answers. The question is whether or not the society for which it is being performed can recognize in it those societal forces which construct racism and oppression.

Notes

¹While I endorse Jonathan Bate’s view that “Shakespeare’s survival and continuing influence may be put down to his exceptional capacity to be appropriated,” we must question how and what a play comes to *mean* through a production (Bate 5). Is it valid to claim, following Jonathan Miller, that a play’s “meaning begins to be fully appreciated only when it enters a period that I shall call its *afterlife* and after it has submitted itself to the possibility of successive re-creation” (Miller 23)?

²I did not see the production. My observations are based on the filmed version of the production, filmed at the Market Theatre in 1988.

³The play exists in three texts—Q1 (1622), F (1623), and Q2 (1630)—with significant differences between them.

⁴An entire paper is required to describe the history of theatre during the apartheid years. Suffice it to say that, prior to the founding of the Market Theatre in Johannesburg, resistance theatre (read as critical of the apartheid regime) produced for multi-racial audiences was performed in private spaces such as store-fronts, hotel dining rooms, backyards, and cabaret spaces. This did not protect the actors or the directors from a banning order by the state censors, which closed down plays on grounds of obscenity, blasphemy, or inciting white South Africans against (white) Afrikanerdom. Although South African universities were officially segregated in 1955, their theatre spaces were open to mixed audiences. Even then, state censors found opportunities to close down plays and, in some cases, to arrest the actors involved. This was still the case in the 1980s. The theatre of the time could be justly described as a kind of guerilla warfare.

⁵In practice this simply meant that sexual relationships across racial groups, as defined by apartheid legislation, could no longer be prosecuted. It meant that consenting adults could no longer be arrested for actions in their private lives. The tragic effects of the Immorality Act, however, remained in effect well after its official repeal.

⁶“John Kani: A Conversation.” Accessed December 9, 2008.

⁷White South African police routinely treated large-scale funerals for black members of the society as political rallies and, therefore, as occasions for quelling potential unrest by shooting into crowds of peaceful civilians.

⁸*Othello* was first performed in the Cape Colony at the African Theatre in 1818. All actors in this performance would have been the (white) British garrison soldiers. The play was performed subsequently in 1829, 1831, 1834, and 1836 under the title, *Othello or De Jaloesche Swart (The Jealous Black Man)*. The 1836 production provoked a sharp protest in Afrikaans against Christians for watching such an atrocious, immoral, and indecent play. Nonetheless, the play was revived again twenty years later, and on that occasion, in 1855, the reviewer for *The Commercial Advertiser* noted that the play was better understood in the Cape Colony than any of Shakespeare’s plays because “its hero [is] (a coloured) man who has moved and won a white lady, [and] ships, a bay, soldiers, a castle, and a governor, [are] all familiar to the colonist’s ear as household words” (Anonymous).

⁹I am grateful to my colleague, Karen Nelson, for pointing out to me the ironies in Suzman’s avowed casting of a man who dreams in Xhosa in the “most poetic role in all of Shakespeare.”

¹⁰Denise Albanese claims that the argument goes the other way: for vocal imperialists, understanding Shakespearean verse leads inevitably to a classical enunciation of that verse (Albanese 225).

¹¹This experience is not limited to South Africa. Albanese cites the vocal coach, Kristin Linklater’s claim that any good Shakespearean actor will eradicate the “limiting stamp of regionality” (Albanese 245, n.13).

¹²Afrikaans is, ironically, a creole language: a mix of Portuguese, the Dutch of the original settlers at the Cape Colony, and linguistic borrowings from indigenous peoples.

¹³This is an elegantly written essay, but some of the assumptions underlying the arguments do not coincide with the facts. One of those assumptions is that there was a predominantly white audience at the Market Theatre and that this segment of the audience, particularly white women, drove some of Suzman’s directorial choices in staging sexual intimacy. However, a record number of black South Africans attended the play, and, according to the *New York Times* review of October 26, 1987, audiences were regularly forty percent black. Suzman observed that audiences tended to be young and new—90% of them had never seen the play before—and audience participation was unruly and vociferous (Suzman 1988, 95–96).

¹⁴“John Kani, A Conversation.”

¹⁵Sujata Iyengar writes about how the first interracial screen kiss in 1964 between Captain Uhura and Captain Kirk was revealed by William Shatner to be an illusion: the camera tracked around the two actors, creating the illusion of physical contact, but their lips never actually met (Iyengar 125, n. 8).

¹⁶This is Suzman's description of the play (Suzman 1996, 273).

¹⁷The first time I read the headline, I assumed that it, too, referred to Kani's role as artistic director of the Market Theatre.

¹⁸For alternative readings of "I will kill thee / And love thee after" see Snow 222–223.

¹⁹Snow argues that Othello comes, by the end of the play, to represent patriarchy. As Snow succinctly describes Othello at the moment that he addresses the audience for the final time, "he is confident that damned though he may be, he has done the state some service, and they know it" (Snow 241).

²⁰Critics vary in their interpretations of this scene. For some, Bianca is killed, while for others, she is dragged off to prison. According to Dorothy Ann Gould, in a private conversation with me in May 2008, it was intended to be a rape.

²¹For a different interpretation of Bianca's end, see Boose 2004a, 36–37.

²²For the best note on this crux, see Snow 241.

²³I am appropriating Karen Newman's conclusion to her essay "And Wash the Ethiop White" and substituting white South Africans for "Elizabethan and Jacobean culture" (Newman 92). Apologies to Karen Newman.

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