

JOHN

KANI

APARTHEID

AND

OTHELLO

OTHELLO

**LIVING
SHAKESPEARE**

A collection of essays.

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FOREWORD

CIARÁN

DEVANE

The essay *Apartheid and Othello* is about the coming together of a group of actors, a controversial Shakespearean play, a divided audience, and the security forces of the apartheid regime. Remembered by actor, playwright, activist and theatre-legend John Kani, this engaging and personal recollection looks back over 60 years of South African history.

Kani recalls the famous production of 1987 in which he played Othello and remembers his own school days when the Bantu Education Act removed English language Shakespeare from the curriculum, but could not take away the Xhosa translation. He ends with reflections on racial integration in today's South Africa with a critical eye on his country's future.

This essay is part of a collection, for which we asked some exceptional public figures – Nobel Laureates and best-selling authors, musicians and politicians, actors and activists – to reflect on Shakespeare's continuing relevance to today's burning issues. The collection is part of *Shakespeare Lives*, our extensive, year-long programme marking the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death.

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OTHELLO

IS ONE OF

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IMPORTANT

ROLES FOR AN

AFRICAN

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INTRODUCTION

SHAKESPEARE

IN SOUTH AFRICA

In the following essay, John Kani reflects on his experience of playing Othello in Johannesburg in 1987 during the closing years of apartheid. This boldly political performance builds on Shakespearean history which stretches back to the earliest years of British presence in the Cape. Starting with a production of *Henry IV, Part 1* in Cape Town in 1801, Shakespeare became the major playwright in the Cape's theatrical repertoire. His centrality in the cultural life of the colony's English community was consolidated in classrooms, where pupils were required to memorise details of his plays.

From the late 19th century, black South Africans were, on occasion, able to attend Shakespeare performances, and a small elite were produced.

From 1950, apartheid laws prescribed that Shakespeare's plays be performed before racially segregated audiences, and that black South Africans receive a vocational education stripped of Shakespeare. John Kani recalls the impact of B.B. Mdedle's Xhosa-language *Julius Caesar* during his school days. Following the end of apartheid, South Africans of all races have watched Shakespeare productions together, and students have continued to encounter Shakespeare in their studies of English literature. *Othello*, the play that most unsettled apartheid ideology on the Johannesburg stage, was re-invigorated in the acclaimed post-apartheid Zulu surf film *Otelo Burning* (2011), part of a new movement producing South African Shakespeares.

APARTHEID AND OTHELLO

by John Kani

Shakespeare brings us the problem of racism in *Othello*. It's a problem people slide away from. They say, 'I don't like you because of *who you are*', not 'because *you are black*'. Shakespeare presents racism – the problem and reality – to all of us. Shakespeare challenges us and we take sides.

Even today *Othello* still makes people uncomfortable.

Iago – who is the greatest racist in the entire play – gets the lion's share of the text. That's 25 per cent more than *Othello*. Right from the beginning he dominates, when he tells the Duke,

'... an old black ram

Is tupping your white ewe.'¹

Janet Suzman, a South African-born British director, approached me to do *Othello* at the Market Theatre in Johannesburg in 1987, seven years before the end of apartheid.

I knew the South African Apartheid government had become very violent in dealing with any kind of resistance politically or culturally. Although the so-called Immorality Act had been repealed two years earlier – meaning that it was no longer illegal to have an interracial relationship – the struggle against apartheid was intense.

When Janet suggested *Othello*, I was apprehensive. I felt that the relationship between *Othello*, black, and *Desdemona*, white, would be very problematic if not dangerous to do in South Africa at that time.

I agreed to do the play on condition that I should be the only black actor in the cast and that all other parts should be played by white actors. I had seen the state institutions do *Othello* with a mixed cast, and when they did, saw that it wasn't a black and white issue any more. As well as that, I wanted to see the South African white actors work with me.

When the rest of the cast were interviewed about the production they would say, 'I play Cassio', or 'I play Iago', 'I play the Duke', and then about me they would say, 'the Market Theatre wants John Kani to play *Othello*'. They would say that, not standing with me. But in just six weeks, we became a company together – the best company I had worked with. They said I was the first black man who looked them in the eye as an equal. And I told them, I will always be in the majority.

I was fully aware of the inherent risks in playing this role in apartheid South Africa. But for me it was an invitation I couldn't refuse. For me, it was an opportunity to bring the relationship between black and white to the stage.

I come from the theatre of revolution. I want to mobilise, to educate, to inform, interact and explore every moment on the stage. When I was put on

¹ *Othello*, Act 1, Scene 1

the list for assassination they said I was a terrorist masquerading as an artist. They tried to kill me two years before this production. I was stabbed 11 times and left for dead. Because they said I was not an actor. A terrorist.

* * *

In 1987, Mandela was still in prison. At that time in South Africa, the struggle was bitter and violent – bombs and bullets, protesters and police, landmines and grenades. Dozens lost their lives and many more, millions of black and coloured South Africans, suffered.

So it is no surprise that during the rehearsals there was a tense atmosphere. Even the white cast members felt that the director was being unnecessarily controversial by casting a black actor to play Othello.

Joanna Weinberg played Desdemona. Early in the play, Othello explains how they fell in love. A guest in her father's house, she hears him speaking about his adventurous, painful, exciting life. She listens 'with a greedy ear'²; she is moved to tears, amazed, and falls in love with him:

'She loved me for the dangers I had passed,
And I loved her that she did pity them.'³

Our scenes were filled with passion. Some believed that we overplayed the love/sex scenes deliberately to offend the white conservative community of South Africa.

In fact there were some professors here in South Africa, who said the marriage between Othello and Desdemona wasn't consummated. They said they had proof it wasn't. Proof? What do they think it means, 'an old black ram is tupping your white ewe'? Joanna said to me, here you can hold my waist, now you can touch my breast. Joanna was very courageous and prepared to explore every possible facet of the relationship between Othello and Desdemona. And for her performance she received hate mail. The letters she got, they said only a Jewish slut would behave like that, not a proper white actress. In fact, she left South Africa and today she lives in Australia. We met up a few years ago and she told me that for her, after she had worked on that particular play, it was harder to get mainstream work; she was marginalised.

Othello and Desdemona. The truth is always in the text.

* * *

I was born in 1943 in New Brighton township a little outside the white city of Port Elizabeth.

We were introduced first to Shakespeare at primary school through his Sonnets:

'Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?'⁴;

^{2,3} *Othello*, Act 1, Scene 3

⁴ *Sonnet 18*

'... Love is not love'

Which alters when it alteration finds.⁵

We did not know or care to know what the hell these sonnets meant. All we knew was that our teachers, black and white, judged our being *civilised* native children by being able to recite these sonnets to the white inspectors during examination days. Oh, I was the teachers' favourite. They always praised me by saying I spoke English with the Queen's accent.

When I was ten, something happened. Afrikaner Minister Dr Hendrik Verwoerd introduced Bantu education for black schools, which downgraded the quality of education for black people.

Many black and white teachers resigned from schools as they refused to teach this new education system. First to go, in the black child's education, was Shakespeare. But our parents kept the plays and sonnets of Shakespeare at home, and so it was that Shakespeare's plays were read as part of the subversive literature feared by our white oppressors.

My first real introduction to Shakespeare came five years later, when my teacher, Mr Budaza, walked into our class room. Looking very proud, he said, 'Today we are going to study one of Shakespeare's most important plays, *Julius Caesar*, translated into the Xhosa language by B.B. Mdlele.'

The revolution of knowledge had come into our lives.

The purpose of allowing this play to be taught in our native language was to warn us of the danger of challenging the state. If we dared to rise against the establishment, we too would suffer pain and failure like Brutus.

But our teacher taught us differently. He told us that Caesar was ambitious and did not care about the rule of the majority. He was a dictator and would fall just like the apartheid government of the Afrikaners. I still remember Mark Antony's speech when he found Caesar's bloodied body at the feet of Pompei's statue:

'Awu ndixolele wena gada lophisayo
Ukuba ndilulame ndithambe kwezi zikrelemnqa
Wena sowuyiyona ndoda ibizukile.'⁶

Later in my life I happened across the English version by William Shakespeare:

'O pardon me, thou bleeding piece of earth,
That I am meek and gentle with these butchers.
Thou art the ruins of the noblest man'.⁷

This was all turned around for me. I felt that Shakespeare had failed to capture Mdlele's description of Mark Antony's pain.

* * *

Thus began my complicated South African journey with William Shakespeare that brought me, in 1987, to the Market Theatre, Johannesburg.

⁵ *Sonnet 116*

⁶ B.B. Mdlele, *UJulius Caesar* by William Shakespeare (Johannesburg: APB, 1957)

⁷ *Julius Caesar*, Act 3, Scene 1

Othello opened to rave reviews.

In the African community we have great legends – passion and jealousy, the fate of great kings and their kingdoms. There are parallels to Shakespeare's tragedies in our culture.

When we played at the Market Theatre we used to walk through the audience. I remember when Cassio walked through with Desdemona and I said to Iago, 'Was not that Cassio parted from my wife?'⁸ an old lady in the audience called out, 'Don't you listen to that rubbish. That lady, your wife, is innocent!' And in the bedchamber scene when I took the pillow, black audiences were screaming, 'Don't kill her! She is innocent! Don't murder her!'

The production was called 'ground breaking'. And this, of course, immediately drew the attention of the police. Everyone came to see what the controversy was about. White audiences came to see the play in big numbers, only to leave as soon as *Othello* and Desdemona started to show their love for each other.

Black audiences booed white people who walked out of the theatre. To be fair, there were white audiences who stayed too – who loved the play too – and who also booed those who walked out. But it is important to note that not one black person who saw the play took offence.

One day, as I was preparing to leave my house in Soweto to go on stage, two white men from the security forces, the colonel and his warrant officer, knocked on my door and asked me to sit down, as they had a few questions to ask me.

Flashback to my struggle days when I lived in Port Elizabeth. I sat down. The colonel asked me where I was going and I told him to the Market Theatre in Johannesburg to perform the play *Othello* by William Shakespeare.

The warrant officer asked me whose idea it was to do this play. Without trying to put the blame on the Market Theatre management I said, 'In every actor's career there comes a time that they have to perform some of the classics, especially some of the plays by William Shakespeare.'

At this time my heart was pounding in my chest. I found it difficult to breathe. I kept praying not to be detained. Not again.

'This is a communist plot to attack the State's racial segregation policies. You people deliberately broke the Immorality Act on stage, in front of a white audience, who were disgusted by all the love and kissing scenes you put in the play,' said the colonel.

I tried to explain to them that everything we did in the production was actually in the text of the play. 'How come then when *Othello* is summoned by the Duke and Desdemona arrives, you took her into your arms and kissed her on her mouth?' this from the warrant officer. 'That is not in the play. And again when *Othello* is about to leave, he asks Iago to look after Desdemona, you stood up and kissed very passionately, and for a long time, before you left. That is also not in the script.'

⁸ *Othello*, Act 3, Scene 3

Suddenly a thought came to my mind, 'Oh my God, the policemen had actually read the play.' It was at that moment I realised the power of the arts, the power of theatre, to change a society.

Othello and *Desdemona*: the truth is always in the text.

Mischievously I said, 'You see sir, when this play was done in England by the great Laurence Olivier and the actress Maggie Smith, they could not show their love for each other, as every time they held each other tight and kissed, Olivier left the black makeup on his face and hands on *Desdemona*'s white face and costume. I do not have that problem.'

The colonel looked at me with that look that said to me – shut the fuck up.

I kept looking at the time. I was going to be late for my performance. I began to panic. I realised that I could really be detained tonight.

The colonel continued citing parts where I deliberately broke the law, right up to the end of the play. He even questioned the fact that we made *Desdemona*'s white gown totally see-through in the death scene, where I also wore a scanty black loin cloth and was sitting on her white body, when I used the pillow to kill her.

At last they left without taking me with them.

My wife was freaking out at this time. She begged me to stop doing the play. She was afraid that next time the police would detain or kill me.

I arrived at the theatre and we started 30 minutes late.

* * *

Things have changed in South Africa.

In 1990 Nelson Mandela was released and negotiated a peaceful transition to democracy. In 1994 he became the first democratically elected President of South Africa. Everything looked fine.

I was 51 years old when I voted for the first time in my life.

I still walk about with those 51 years of the horror of apartheid. I was periodically detained, beaten up in detention cells, and survived an assassination attempt. Most painful to me, in 1985 I buried my younger brother Xolile, a poet, who was shot by the police while he was protesting at a funeral.

No amount of truth and reconciliation will erase those nightmares.

Thinking about *Othello* takes me back to those days. It's a play that is woven into the struggle for equality in South Africa. The first General Secretary of the ANC, Sol Plaatje, translated *Othello* into Setswana. But after his death, his manuscript was never found. We looked everywhere for it.

If Sol Plaatje had got his way we wouldn't have gone through the hell of apartheid. He is a highly revered person in the ANC.

If we found his Setswana *Othello*, it would be like archaeologists finding a missing piece in the search for humanity. It would speak to the role of the arts in the liberation of the African continent. It would celebrate our humanity.

When we look at Shakespeare, he affirms us in the equality of all human beings. *Othello* is one of the most important roles for an African. In *Othello* we take centre stage. We even get the title of the play. I carried the title. I knew Shakespeare wanted it to be presented with a black man.

People say I hate white people. I say I love them. I've loved them so much, I wanted to kill them for hating me.

Over these years of our democracy, I look back where we have come from. Have we made a society which has space for Othello and Desdemona, where they won't be persecuted, prosecuted, or imprisoned?

We have a constitution. We have a community which is emerging to embrace non-racialism. There is a strong percentage in the white community which is accepting because there is nothing they can do about it. They have created enclaves, segregated schools.

You can't take a country from five million whites and give it to 48 million blacks. We have democratic rights but we don't have economic rights.

Violence will beget violence until we weave the fabric of reconciliation. We are still segregated. There are townships which were created in the 1940s for blacks, and they are still lived in by blacks. There is racism in the classrooms. Teachers are being fired for refusing to accept black children in the classroom. In the street we stop when we see a black and white couple.

Racism is alive because of our democracy and our freedom despite wanting to be a non-racial society. We aren't there yet. We have not realised Nelson Mandela's vision.

You can introduce racism to show its ugliness. But how far can you present racism, without the audience feeling you have pushed one side of the story more strongly?

This is sometimes my fear with *Othello*: that in the end, whatever else has happened in the play, Iago's fate is unclear. Desdemona is murdered. Othello becomes a murderer, and kills himself. While Iago is arrested and taken away.

That bothers me, that Shakespeare leaves racism alive in some way.

* * *

When the Supreme Court of Appeal convicted our national hero Oscar Pistorius of murder, the judge remarked that this case is a human tragedy of Shakespearean proportions.

Was he thinking of *Othello* when he said that?

The amputee and hero who falls in love with a model, a beautiful Afrikaans girl, and then he kills her. There is a tragedy of love and passion, and of rejection, of the fear of not being loved, of not being accepted. To think that he shot her in the toilet, and that when he walked there, he walked on his stumps.

Othello and Desdemona, a tragedy with its roots in disadvantage and being different, and the way in which being different and disadvantaged can make you capable of terrible violence. It could be disability. It could be race.

ABOUT THE WRITER JOHN KANI



John Kani is a South African actor, director and playwright, from the Xhosa tribe in the Cape Province. He started his career with the Serpent Players drama group, afterwards joining the renowned Market Theatre in Johannesburg in 1986.

Among his best known plays is *The Island* (1973), written with Athol Fugard and Winston Ntshona, and first performed in Cape Town in 1973. In the play – set in an unidentified prison – inmates put on a performance of *Antigone* by Sophocles. It resonated strongly with the imprisonment of Nelson Mandela on Robben Island just a few miles off-shore, and within a year was staged at the Royal Court Theatre in London and the Edison Theatre in New York.

John Kani was committed to the anti-apartheid struggle through the arts, and performed *Othello* in Johannesburg during the apartheid era in 1987 at the Market Theatre. In 1989 he co-founded the Market Theatre Laboratory, a drama school for young black people without access to financial resources.

He has won multiple awards for his work on stage and in film and television, including Tony, OBIE, Olivier and Evening Standard awards. In 2005, he received the Order Of Ikhamanga from the President Thabo Mbeki, recognising his contribution to a free, non-racial, non-sexist and democratic South Africa.

John Kani's post-apartheid play *Missing*, which explores the legacy of apartheid, is studied today in South African schools.



The British Council has commissioned a collection of essays by eminent thinkers around the world, from politicians to Nobel Prize-winning writers, interpreting themes in Shakespeare's work for today.

Living Shakespeare is a dialogue between exceptional public figures and Shakespeare's works in relation to the burning questions which each writer faces. The collection demonstrates Shakespeare's relevance, from the stage, to our homes, to the staterooms of power.

The issues raised include optimism in diplomacy, female empowerment, listening, racial integration, and a response to extremism.

The essays are part of *Shakespeare Lives*, a global celebration of the influence of William Shakespeare on culture, language, education and society.

The British Council, the GREAT Britain campaign and an unprecedented number of partners are commemorating the 400th anniversary of his death with a series of initiatives including a unique online collaboration, performances on stage and film, exhibitions, public readings, conversations, debates and educational resources for people all around the world in 2016.



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