

OTHELLO

HERE'S A HANDY GUIDE TO BLUFFING YOUR WAY THROUGH



STAGE FRIGHT

Keep your friends close, and your enemies closer

You're about to meet some of Shakespeare's greatest characters: The definitive flawed hero, his brave and devoted wife, and his conniving, deceitful best friend. What could possibly go wrong?

SPEED READ

Better watch your back, Othello. The Moorish general has returned to Venice having wed Desdemona in secreto. Their elopement has Roderigo sharpening the knives, because he wanted to marry Desdemona himself. And Brabantio's blood is boiling too; he's Desdemona's overbearing father and he appeals in vain for the senate to arrest Othello. Plus, Iago is peeved because Othello passed him over for promotion to lieutenant in favour of Cassio.

Othello is sent to command a Venetian army against the Turks in Cyprus. Desdemona goes with him. As do Roderigo and Cassio, plus Iago and his wife Emilia.

Cut to Cyprus, and to the murkiest recesses of Iago's mind. Iago insinuates to Othello that Desdemona is cheating on him with Cassio. Then Iago orchestrates a boozy brawl, and sees to it that a drunken Cassio is blamed. A shamed lieutenant; a wife pleading on his behalf; an increasingly suspicious Othello; and Iago's plot is thickening.

But while Cassio has lost his reputation – Emilia has found a handkerchief belonging to Desdemona. Emilia gives it to Iago, who plants it in Cassio's room, and in doing so rubs Othello's nose in Desdemona and Cassio's apparent affair. Othello is driven mad with jealousy and orders Iago to murder Cassio, before he suffocates innocent Desdemona himself.

When Emilia reveals what Iago has done, Iago kills her for speaking out. Upon learning the truth Othello commits suicide. Iago is captured, stubbornly refusing to explain his behavior.

HERO? VILLAIN? (OR BOTH?)

Othello

Since arriving in Venice as a north African immigrant (aka "Moor"), Othello has overcome other people's racial prejudice to become a celebrated military general and war hero. He has absolute trust in his brothers in arms.

Iago

Publicly, Iago has a bromance happening with Othello. Secretly, Iago hates Othello's guts. Sly and wily, Iago is a man who bears grudges: Against Othello. Against women. And against all that is good in the world.

Desdemona

As a white noblewoman, Desdemona has recently defied social convention by marrying Othello. Loyal to her husband, Desdemona is an intelligent young woman who stands up for what is right.

Brabantio

The senator is searching for a "suitable" husband for his daughter Desdemona. Like many fellow Venetians, Brabantio judges people by social status and the colour of their skin.

Emilia

Desdemona's friend Emilia is married to Iago. She has seen her husband's dark side but doesn't realise the depths of his evil.

Roderigo

Roderigo wanted to marry Desdemona (or at least enjoy a little hanky panky) but his overtures were rejected by Brabantio. Still, if at first you don't succeed...

Cassio

An educated military man, Cassio puts honour and honesty before everything, including his lover Bianca. Othello recently promoted Cassio to lieutenant, unaware that Iago thought the position should rightfully have been his.

BIG BANG

Shakespeare clearly understood a thing or two about jealousy. He used it as the gunpowder to ignite the plot in several of his plays, including *Much Ado About Nothing*, *The Winter's Tale* and *Cymbeline*.

But the most explosive example of all is *Othello*. It's riddled with jealousy. First, Iago lights the fire in Othello by insinuating that Desdemona has somehow been unfaithful. Then he fans the flames with false "proof" of Desdemona's infidelity. Othello's jealousy overwhelms him, driving him to kill his wife and then himself.

But if you think Othello is the jealous type, he is more than surpassed by that "inhuman dog" Iago, who envies everybody: Cassio for becoming lieutenant, Desdemona for stealing Othello's affections, and Emilia because of (unsubstantiated) rumours of infidelity.

As with the other Shakespeare plays where men lose their minds with jealousy, it is a strong woman who provides the voice of reason. However, in *Othello* the men are too far gone to ever redeem themselves. Desdemona's words of loyalty and love go unheeded by Othello and the fire Iago started burns out of control. By the end of the play, several characters have perished in the blaze, including Othello, Desdemona, Emilia, Brabantio and Rodrigo.

SAY WHAT?

Post-show conversation starters to make you look smart

Low brow

Laurence Olivier played Othello at London's Royal National Theatre in 1964. He apparently suffered stage fright so badly that, whenever alone on stage, he needed Frank Finlay (playing Iago) to stand offstage where Olivier could see him to soothe his nerves.

As the villain that everyone loves to hate, actors find the role of Iago irresistible (just ask Daniel Craig, Kenneth Branagh or Ewan McGregor). Even Jerry Lee Lewis took a stab at it in a 1960s musical version.

Othello is one of several Shakespeare plays set in Italy and some conspiracy theorists even believe Shakespeare was, in fact, Italian. They point to the fact that Shakespeare's *Othello* script bears more resemblance to an Italian play *Un Capitano Moro* by Cinthio than it does to Gabriel Chappuy's 1584 French translation that was doing the rounds in Shakespeare's time.



"QUOTE – UNQUOTE"

The play includes several lines and phrases that are still well known today, including:

"the green-eyed monster"

"a foregone conclusion"

"I will wear my heart upon my sleeve"

"Heaven is my judge"

"making the beast with two backs"

"She is sport for Jove"

High brow

The word "Othello" has become so inextricably linked to the emotion of jealousy that it is now part of medical terminology. "Othello Syndrome" is a form of psychosis involving extreme morbid jealousy.

With its emotional extremes and high drama, *Othello* was always going to be ripe for operatic adaptation. In 1887, Giuseppe Verdi created the most popular *Otello* opera to date. This sumptuous interpretation even became a movie in 1985 with tenor Plácido Domingo in the title role.

For a long time, Othello was typically played by a white actor with "blackface" make-up. That began to change in the nineteenth century when black American actor, Ira Aldridge, played Othello in London and toured throughout Europe. Today the role is invariably played by black actors, although Patrick Stewart played a white Othello alongside a cast of black actors in a "photo-negative" production in Washington, DC in 1998.



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