INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR
PETER EVANS

THE TEXT
Like any Director, Evans’ exploration of Othello begins with Shakespeare’s words. Evans notes that around the time he wrote Othello, Shakespeare had adopted the habit of hammering away at certain words and playing with the power of repetition. In Macbeth, the word man is repeated constantly whereas in Othello Shakespeare repeats the words bed, lie, honest and see. More importantly, Shakespeare plays with the double meaning of lying (as to deceive) and lie (as to lie with) over 25 times, psychologically pressing on the audience’s awareness of the deceptive innuendoes that Iago is placing in Othello’s mind. It is no surprise then that the line Evans finds most fascinating in Othello is Iago’s own unapologetic confession to Roderigo in the very first scene of the play, ‘I am not what I am.’ This simple antithetical statement sets up the kind of the language and themes that will carry the whole play.

FRAGILITY AND IRRATIONALITY
When he began work on Othello, Evans approached the theme of jealousy with a critical and investigatory eye. Although he found at times it lessened in importance for him, jealousy would constantly return as a central idea. Evans’ interest lies in the power of jealousy and how fragile the human mind can be, ‘how easily jealousy conquers it’. Evans states that with Othello, ‘Shakespeare goes out of his way to give us someone so ordered and rational in his thinking, someone military and fair-minded who is not led by emotion. Shakespeare stacks the deck up only to show how easily Iago can topple it over. Iago poisons it so quickly.’ At the end of the play Othello finds himself arguing that he is not one prone to jealousy, because that is how he defined himself. As an audience we too were presented with an unshakable man at the opening of the play, yet we have witnessed how easily jealousy consumed him. For Evans, Shakespeare’s text reveals the power of irrationality; how quickly one can lose their mind, and he believes Othello does just this. As humans we have a ‘capacity for fixation’, and ‘Shakespeare’s genius is that he drops an image into Othello’s head and presses it, not allowing for any space.’ Othello certainly loses power, position and respect, but for Evans what he truly loses is his capacity for rationality, and the ease with which this happens is truly frightening.

OTHERNESS AND INSECURITY
Every human being has weaknesses and from a dramatic perspective, Evans feels that Shakespeare has inserted Othello’s insecurity over his otherness into the play in order to allow for his downfall. It is his Achilles heel, the crack that Iago leans on to expose Othello’s fragility. Evans states that ‘Othello is central to society, yet isolated.’ He is essential to the war effort, yet not completely accepted in society, and this is what makes him vulnerable. Evans feels that for men (and possibly women alike) humiliation, or ‘being made a fool of,’ is a huge fear. Iago presses this insecurity within Othello, having Othello think that he has been hoodwinked by Desdemona because he doesn’t understand Venetian women; his ‘otherness’ or cultural differences have allowed her to ‘take him for a ride’. For Evans this insecurity is an essential part of Othello’s character and ego, and therefore his downfall.

AUDIENCE AS IMPLICATED CONSPIRATORS
Peter Evans discusses Shakespeare’s use of dramatic irony within the play in a clear and simple fashion. He describes it as a central narrative technique in which the audience knows more than the lead character. In a comedy, this technique gives the audience much enjoyment as they watch a character stumble through the unknown. However in tragedy, the audience feels somewhat implicated or complicit in the events. For Evans this is central when considering an Othello audience member’s experience, as they are unavoidably troubled by it. As opposed to Hamlet, where the audience are working out the facts alongside the title character, in Othello we know from the very start that our protagonist is being led and manipulated and we are ‘forced to go through it, with no relief.’ Evans notes that at times Shakespeare even slows down the action to make it more agonising for the audience. For him this play is almost a study in torture, it is painful to watch, yet also ‘troublingly delightful’ to observe and be part of Iago’s workings.

WOMEN IN OTHELLO
Evans notes that Desdemona is commonly perceived by audiences as naive, and he feels that this is in many ways unfair. There is a preconceived idea that ‘women should be careful’ and when Desdemona doesn’t act with caution around Othello, audiences often blame her for not being aware of his decline or shift in opinion. However, if we track her journey, there is no reason for her to pre-empt Othello’s suspicions. In fact, we should
afford her the right to sit in the trust of their original union. Evans states that ‘she thinks Othello is being over-sensitive when he scolds her in public and asks repeatedly for the handkerchief and she has every right to do so’. Ironically, it is her belief in Othello and their relationship and her own self-assurance that cause her own downfall. For Evans, Desdemona’s best qualities are actually, and quite unfortunately, used against her.

With regards to Emilia, Evans feels that she is actually the easiest female character of Shakespeare’s to contemprize; as her notions of women, their position and desires, fit so well into our current thinking. Emilia quite openly states that women are the same as men and men are troubled by this. However, both her theatrical journey and functionality, in delivering the handkerchief to her husband, tend to pose a problem. She so easily and blindly hands it over, yet in the closing scenes her character is so wise and protective of Desdemona. How does a director solve this? This is something Evans will explore in the rehearsal room as it requires an actor’s perspective or take on character. However, he has considered Emilia’s lower status and possibly an abusive marriage as driving forces behind her neglectful actions. Evans is also interested in Emilia’s treatment of Bianca in the play, for Emilia clearly supports females, yet chides Bianca’s lowly role as the courtesan. This reveals something intrinsic to Emilia, she is very aware and critical of her own lower status and yet is even quicker to recognise those below her and treat them just so.

RACE AND ETHNICITY
The issue of race in society has obviously changed over the 400 years that Othello has been performed. However, Peter Evans laments that it is still very much an issue in our society and therefore it is important to keep the conversation around this issue going. Evans draws parallels between Othello’s rank and the sporting prowess and position of Australian Indigenous football players, namely Adam Goodes. He believes that racial stereotypes still exist and although these sportsman are lauded and accepted, society still make sure they ‘know their place’. Peter Evans recalls the violent reactions to Adam Goodes Indigenous war dance, and views them as a sign of latent racism that is still very alive under the surface of our community; just as racism sits under the surface of Othello’s Venetian society and only rears its ugly head when Othello steps out of place by marrying a white woman. As Evans says, Othello ‘is not about race, but at the same time it is absolutely about race’.

Although Evans will not change any of the original Shakespeare text he does wish to have Ray Chong Nee’s Samoan ethnicity very present within his production. According to Evans, Othello (Chong Nee) will very much be a familiar figure, an Australian Islander, rich in natural comedy and charm. That way the audiences are very aware of the history of this 400-year-old text in its original form and watch it ‘vibrate against the contemporary’ world and characters that they see before them.

STORYTELLING
Evans is very interested in the layered storytelling that functions within Othello. He states, ‘The characters don’t know what play they are in. Bianca feels she is in a troubled story of unrequited love with a handsome soldier Cassio, but Cassio’s story is something very different again. The play is a series of plays within plays, and each story is controlled by a very unreliable narrator, Iago.’ Iago uses characters against themselves, manipulating their reality to suit his needs. When Cassio bawdily mocks Bianca, he thinks he is in a ‘restoration comedy’ engaging in friendly male banter, when he is actually part of something much more sinister. For Evans, Othello is ‘all about stories; the lies we tell, our obsessions, the realities we create for ourselves and how we replay them to alter reality.’ Othello wins Desdemona through storytelling and ironically loses her in the same fashion. Iago plants a story about Desdemona in Othello’s mind and for him it becomes reality. As an audience we watch history change before our eyes through the power of Iago’s storytelling and the other characters’ belief in it.

THE RISK OF THE IDLE SOLDIER
Evans tells an anecdote of a discussion he had with a former senior member of the Australian armed forces who said he was well aware of Othello and from experience, understands the danger of soldiers being idle, cooped up on base and lacking purpose. Evans is very interested in exploring the volatility of contained masculinity in the theatrical space as he feels it is central to the play’s conflict. He asks the question, ‘When the threat of battle has subsided where does the energy go?’ He finds it fascinating that Shakespeare builds the stakes for battle in Othello and has the characters travel through a tempest all to arrive at ‘nothing’ on the other side. According to Evans, this ‘lays a bed for mischief’ as the characters are emotionally geared up with nothing to spend their energy on. He feels that this potential and dangerous energy is very present in the drinking scene in Act Two and works to drive the action for the rest of the play.
THE VOYEURISTIC AND THE EROTIC

Othello deals a lot with sexuality and sexual relations. It is constantly discussed but we are never actually witness to it, or even present in the bedroom until the tragic death of Desdemona at Othello’s hand, in their wedding bed. As an audience we are privy to many varied male and female interactions and the characters take much interest in inferring conclusions from observing heterosexual relations. For Othello, the adultery between Cassio and Desdemona is fleshe out so thoroughly in his mind that it takes on the shape of reality. In fact, so much of the play’s sexuality lives and cultivates in the character’s minds. The audience becomes a voyeur into a society that is both obsessed with, and paranoid of, the sexual. The audience are forced into a complicit relationship with Iago for five acts and then in the final scene they are ‘made to watch’ the fruits of his labour, Desdemona’s death. As Evans notes, many of Shakespeare’s great deaths occur off stage, but with Othello the audience are forced to go through it. According to Evans, ‘we shouldn’t be watching’; we are voyeurs into a very private moment. Evans draws on Alfred Hitchcock’s theory that there is some strange pleasure in this temporary pain. We wish we could turn away yet we are drawn to watching it.

THE CHILD

For Evans, Othello falls further than we think. In the final scene of the play he becomes like a child, trying to excuse his actions, or as Peter says ‘he tries to get out of it’. Evans sees this as a total loss of dignity, a complete fall from grace, not just in position and power, but in personal strength and decorum. Perhaps in the Elizabethan era this sort of ‘honour killing’ had a place, and somewhat justified Othello’s actions, but society’s opinion of violence has luckily shifted. As Evans rightly notes, it is no longer acceptable and so our view of Othello has forever changed.