Hugh Quarshie famously declared *Othello* a play that black actors should avoid: “If a black actor plays Othello does he not risk making racial stereotypes seem legitimate… namely that black men… are over-emotional, excitable and unstable?”¹ Ben Okri, referencing the reception of Shakespeare’s tragedy by critics and audiences,² said that if *Othello* were not originally a play about race (as indeed it was not in the modern sense of the term), its history has made it one.³ By now, *Othello* both invokes and confounds modern notions of race and racial difference, speaking powerfully to the long history of misogyny it has facilitated.⁴ The play also points to the ways in which race and gender are imbricated in one another and co-depend.⁵ The meaning of Desdemona’s whiteness and femininity depend on each other, as do Othello’s blackness and masculinity. As Celia Daileader has pointed out, Desdemona’s punishment for being an unruly woman is symbolized by and through Othello’s racial identity.⁶

One might say that *Othello* both is and is not about race and racial difference, a play that invokes a relation between gender and the range of human cultures, religions, civic belongings, and/or appearances that we now encode as “race.” Whichever ideological frame one chooses to read through (an early modern construction of Moorishness, a postmodern antiracism, a feminist awareness of domestic violence, a combination of these, or any of the other possible lenses one could apply), to understand the play one must recognize the ways it explores the experience of difference as emotionally fraught at best, potentially dangerous at worst. There is no tragedy without Othello’s vulnerability to Iago and
Desdemona’s vulnerability to Othello. And Othello and Desdemona are vulnerable precisely to the extent that they deviate from what Venetian society decrees they should be.\(^7\)

*Othello* is a play about the vulnerabilities of difference and how difference is constructed and supported by the culture in which the protagonists find themselves. Its performance and reception histories too, as Quarshie, Okri, and a host of critics have demonstrated, reveal an odious story of white patronage and racism encoded in the construction of a literary and theatrical Anglo-American canon. In a recent assessment of the reception history of the play, Philip Kolin considers *Othello* to be “a cultural seismograph, measuring the extent and force of gender, racial, or class upheavals in any society that performs the script.”\(^8\) As such it has been particularly useful as a focalizer of neocolonial conversations: “The generic dark-skinned identity of Othello encapsulates a mythology of exclusion that has become deeply relevant to various writers in the context of contemporary racism.”\(^9\) Of course, not only writers but other artists have responded to the story of Othello’s betrayal (by Iago, of Desdemona). This returns us to Quarshie’s reservations about the play. What can it mean today? To what extent can it transcend its history? What exactly are the parameters of Shakespeare’s meanings about what we have come to call race? Is *Othello*, in the parlance of antiapartheid theater, capable of being a protest play, or not? As Jonathan Dollimore asks:

> Does the fate of Othello confirm, qualify, or discount the charge that this play is racist?... is it endorsing that process [of displacement onto the outsider], or re-presenting it for our attention? If the second, then it still remains indeterminate as to whether we, in attending to that process, repudiate or endorse it. Critics and audiences of the play have indisputably done both.\(^{10}\)

In this larger context, then, what happens to *Othello* when it is performed in South Africa? Is the play’s concern with racialized difference (and its relation to gender difference) reduced or released by being performed in a place obsessed with race? This is a complex question that in its most complicated form may be used to ask, what does, or can, *Othello* mean to Africans? This is a question also about the meaning of Shakespeare to Africans, and in Africa. These statements are, of course, too general to be really meaningful, since *Othello* and Shakespeare will both mean differently in different times and places and to different people in Africa.
Exploring them by focusing on a specific performance in a very specific time in one country’s history allows us to illustrate the contingency of questions about what Shakespeare “means” and to whom, and about what a performance can or cannot do with and to a Shakespeare text. It also allows for a concentration on race and how it works with regard to gender at a time and in a place where such matters were (indeed, still are) extremely politically resonant. In this case, examining her writing about, as well as the televised version of, Janet Suzman’s 1987 *Othello* enables us to see how Shakespeare both releases and constrains in this particular environment. What is both released and constrained is the weight of history, the history of race and racism in “the West” as well as the history of apartheid, and what these histories mean for the definition of “the African” in a Shakespeare production. Suzman’s *Othello* is one example of what might be performed in South Africa when “Shakespeare” is performed and the accompanying constraints are revealed. What does it mean when a black African man living under apartheid plays a part written by a white Englishman during protocolonial times intended for another white Englishman to perform in blackface, as indeed the role was predominantly performed until recently? The actor in question here is, of course, John Kani, internationally acclaimed for his part in developing and performing protest theater.

In Suzman’s production, in her comments at the time and afterward, a Shakespeare against apartheid is explicitly invoked. At the same time, the complexities of the performance of Shakespeare in the context of racialized meanings as they adhered to the relation between the canon and an Africanness that is constructed as Other, complicate the message. This essay explores the question of what happened to Othello in the 1987 South African performance.

*Othello* was first performed in South Africa in 1818, and, according to Rohan Quince, was “the defining dramatic expression of South African society in the Shakespearean canon” by the mid-nineteenth century. But it was only in 1983 that the play was performed with a genuinely black Othello in Phyllis Klotz’s production. Kani was the second properly black Othello the country had ever seen. Given South Africa’s always fraught race relations and entrenched racism, then, *Othello*, until Kani’s performance, generally must have played a different part, one way or the other, in the psyche of its audiences than the one offered by Suzman.
Many of the black actors who have played Othello have been confronted with the issue of race. Quarshie, as we have seen, believed that “Othello is the one [canonical role] which should most definitely not be played by a black actor” because of its reliance on racial meanings in performance. For James Earl Jones, the part must not rely on race if it is to be properly realized. In order for the play to be great, it needs to be a conventional classical work of art, and for Jones this means it cannot be “reduced” to race, since the presumably local or historically specific experience of racism is not relevant to the grand human themes of “great” literature. The black actor’s experience of the meaning of race becomes a problem to the realization of the part; it blocks true understanding of the character:

I observed in Errol John’s 1964 performance of Othello that he was so defensive it was as if he was unconsciously aware of second-class-ness, and this made him guarded. I think that is what Othello is not. That guardedness is one of the problems with the stigma of the second-class citizen. It keeps him on edge…. We don’t want an Othello who is on edge about his colour…. To reiterate: Othello is a prince. He has not experienced the second-class-citizen syndrome. What does he know about personal or institutional racism? Jones seems to need an Othello free of the corrosive effects of racism in order to enable him to be as noble and spiritually pure as Jones understands him to be, “really a superior human being.” Instead, he argues that Iago infects an otherwise racially unaware society with racism (he “creates racism on the spot”) and that Brabantio’s main objection to the marriage is its disruption of custom. The social disruption is the unnatural thing he objects to, and Iago leads him from one unnaturalness to the presentation of the Moor’s racial difference as another one, says Jones.

I focus on Jones’s reading because his is one of the great, acclaimed renditions of the part and because I find it significant that he claims access to a Shakespeare who, in order to be truly classical, must transcend the localities of race (Kani’s performance, at least in the eyes of his director, relies on the localities of race, as I will discuss below). In doing so, Jones enacts one of the impossible contradictions facing the black man in a racist world, a contradiction that Othello himself could be played as experiencing. This is the condition of having to disavow what it feels like to live in a black skin whose meaning is defined by white people in order
to claim access to the universal humanity promised by a well-intentioned liberal discourse whose central subject happens to be white. To refuse the terms of this culture is to confirm that to be black and male is to be angry, rude in one's speech, violent, and uncivilized. The impossibility of this position is perhaps best described by Bloke Modisane in his 1963 autobiography, *Blame Me on History*, and perhaps best exemplified by Sol Plaatje’s fruitless lifelong quest to achieve political rights in the terms of English colonial citizenship. Jones’s interpretation stands counter to Kani’s. If for Jones Othello only makes sense as a character freed from modern racism, for Kani, Othello is compelling because of the truths about racism he instantiates. In discussion with a journalist at the time, he asks, “What could have moved [Shakespeare] to inject into his play this black character? What moved him to put interracial sex into this play, and the kind of venality of whites that we see today? I read that script, and I thought I was in South Africa in 1987.” The question of whether or not *Othello* can be played to explore racism became central to the meaning of Othello in Suzman’s production.

It was very important to Suzman that Othello speak to apartheid South Africa. This point is reiterated in her interviews at the time and those given fifteen-odd years later: in her Tanner Lectures given at Oxford in 1995, in the versions given at the Shakespeare World Congress in 1996 and reprinted in the sleeve notes of the DVD of the production in 2005. According to these accounts, it was in seeking the perfectly “relevant” play that Suzman stumbled onto the idea of doing *Othello* with Kani. With her suggestion of that text, both of them “were, at last, fired up after ten frustrating years of keeping a constant vigil for the play that might speak not just to both of us as actors but to our anguished country.” It was clearly necessary to claim the play as protest theater to make it politically and emotionally legitimate, and Suzman explicitly invokes the play as such. She casts the tragedy as “a perfect metaphor for South Africa,” since “*Othello* relates a black man’s humiliation at the hands of a lying white thug—the perfect apartheid metaphor.” In her 1987 director’s notes she writes:

The rightness of doing this play, with this cast, in this theatre, at this time, seems to me so obvious as hardly to warrant clarification. The overtones, undercurrents, and reverberations for our country are hauntingly evident …[the ruined love story] is the chief metaphor for South Africa.
This opening sentence of the Notes speaks to the need, precisely, to clarify why a colonial archive remains “relevant.” Despite her disavowal of the need to justify her choice, she continues:

There are many forms that protest theater can take, but one that makes use of a past masterpiece to examine a present tragedy was not the usual Market fare in those years…. But 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 destroyed, on, when you think about it, no more than an evil caprice, made Othello not only germane, but essential to our purpose.23

The status of the play as a work of Shakespeare, as a “past masterpiece,” becomes central to both its meaning and its justification:

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. Not even the most punctilious civil servant could find a clause in any Act of Parliament that specifically banned Shakespeare from being performed.24

Ironically, it was precisely Shakespeare’s “unassailable position as the world’s greatest playwright” that made him suspect to a liberation movement dealing with the legacies of colonialism, one of which is precisely this Shakespeare and his cultural positioning. Suzman writes of the necessity of convincing Wally Serote, then the ANC’s London cultural attaché, that the play was politically legitimate in order to receive the movement’s blessing and permission to violate the cultural boycott: “I convinced him that it would be useful to think of this play as being a reminder of Shakespeare’s inexhaustible relevance, rather than to downgrade it, by the fashionable theorising of certain pundits, as merely a cultural imposition from the white man’s canon.”25 Transient fashionable theorizing is trumped by the putatively unarguable transcendent applicability of Shakespeare’s work. Although Suzman acknowledges Shakespeare’s elite status in the world and especially in South Africa,26 it is this very status that becomes the reason for affording Shakespeare his exceptionalism. Thus, Othello deserved the status of subversive protest theater because, again, “the most dedicated Calvinist policeman could not find a clause in any act that could permit the banning of a play by William Shakespeare. The Dead White European Male had won over a punctiliously controlling regime.”27 Clearly relishing
this irony (she calls it “a nice paradox”), Suzman reiterates that under apartheid, “the classics” were the “only... safe” way to challenge authority. Shakespeare, universal because of the material history of colonialism (as certain fashionable pundits have theorized), is the perfect antiapartheid weapon precisely because of the status granted to him by a system of white supremacy. This is indeed a productive irony for Suzman to develop. But, as I suggest below, this contradiction is a complicated and tricky weapon, a double-edged sword indeed. Shakespeare in South Africa—in this example, in 1987—means very contingently, and very precariously, especially when celebrated in this wholesale manner as a declaration of universal human rights.

In keeping with her reading of the play as “the chief metaphor for South Africa,” Suzman presents Iago as a metaphor for apartheid, as embodying what then becomes its motiveless malignity. “Evil for whatever sake (in the presence of Iago), mysterious and senseless in the final analysis,” in 1987 she writes,

leaves us filled with sorrow and with anger, and with a feeling of dreadful waste....When the full power of a state is turned upon human happiness, how much greater the tragedy. Let Iago stand for that and be damned. He has no defence.

To focus on Iago’s evil both in his destructive capacity and his brutality is to find a powerful emotional force in the play and in the times. To point out the similarities does emphasize apartheid’s inhumane, ugly logic. But this comparison also lets apartheid and its proponents and beneficiaries off the hook. Apartheid becomes about the human capacity for nastiness and malice. The sheer profitability—economically and emotionally—of entrenched white privilege is lost in this presentation. Othello may well have been a protest play in apartheid South Africa, but when it is represented like this, what is protested is a universal human quality. This could serve to make us all complicit in the logic of racism and misogyny, properly invoked. That being said, I cannot shake the feeling that what happens instead is that apartheid becomes an evolutionary force, part of human nature on some level.

And so the complexities begin to emerge: Shakespeare becomes a human right, the denial of which is further proof of apartheid’s cruelty, as Suzman’s account of one rehearsal attests:
“Where's the Pontic Sea? Where's the Propontic, the Hellespont? Why them? What do they mean? Why marble heaven? It’s not made of stone.” John's questions were fired in a sort of glowing rage, and as I tried to explain the cultural implications that classical mythology holds in the European collective psyche, his anger suddenly snapped. He kicked a chair plumb across the room, yelling, “Damn my bloody education! Damn effing Bantu Education! I was never allowed to learn an effing thing! How the eff am I supposed to know what this is all about?” I know you will forgive the language, but extremity calls on extremity, and it nearly broke my heart. But I was damned if I was going to allow apartheid its victory.

I would be surprised if most “European” (in apartheid parlance, this means “white” generally) psyches, including those with university degrees, did not have exactly the same responses to this speech from act 3, scene 3, lines 451–62. Indeed, if they did not, the educational publishing arm of the Shakespeare industry would be out of a job. But for Kani and for Suzman the arcane references acquire the additional weight of apartheid’s deliberate theft of education from black people. There is one further point to note here, given what I go on to say below about the construction of Kani’s authentic black South Africanness as Suzman sees it enacted in part through scenes such as the one just quoted above. In her Tanner lectures given at Oxford University she says that South Africa has no great artists comparable to Europe’s, that whites are caught in a “cultural inertia” as a result of being deprived of access to Europe's art by the cultural boycott, rendering “everyone” “ignorant” “intellectual vegetables,” and that culture is a luxury black South Africans cannot afford, although they are very “jolly” in their ignorance of how to behave in a theater.

But to return to the incident Suzman describes, when Kani loses his temper because, as she presents it, he is rendered culturally ignorant due to apartheid’s racist education policies, it serves both as a wrenching account of Bantu Education’s pernicious and, indeed, crippling effects, and an endorsement of the culture Shakespeare stands for as something no one should be denied, as a kind of central world culture (as clearly, for Suzman, European culture is). One cannot imagine Olivier feeling similarly disenfranchised by a lack of knowledge of oral history should he ever have chosen to stage a famous protest play—if the anachronism is not straining the point too much. It is indeed to the point that someone like Olivier (or a modern counterpart—Branagh? McKellen?) cannot easily be
imagined as interested in or profiting from, or indeed bringing anything “authentic” to, Wozza Albert! or Asinamali. My point is to illustrate the way Shakespeare tends to occupy the position of world culture while South African plays tend to speak for local realities and experiences (a little like Jones’s opposition of classical art and the experience of racism). All good art will express human emotion and experience; Shakespeare’s art is produced out of local realities, as all art will be. Yet one of the inheritances of the colonial conduit of Shakespeare’s iconography is that Africans’ meanings tend to remain local while Shakespeare’s (English) meanings become universal. In her representation of Kani’s experience of coming to terms with Othello, Suzman reinvokes and reinscribes this universal Shakespeare, with all its political baggage. This universal Shakespeare is necessarily related to the invocation of Kani’s authentic Africanness, which is necessary to animate the production.

And so Suzman on Kani, in Oxford, in America (at the ISC in Los Angeles), and in print (in the proceedings of the conference and in the DVD notes), says:

John [Kani] had strayed far from his African roots, physically speaking, but I was eager to find out just how far. If, beneath my articulate, politically impassioned, urbane friend the race … memory of generations of warriors, and of centuries of smoky African nights beneath a glittering dipping Southern Cross, and of natures generous and quick to light up, and of warm brown skins impatient of the borrowed panoply of constricting uniforms, I’d cheer. It was going to be up to me to release that memory, via the incomparable verse of the DWEM of all DWEMs. What a gorgeous paradox.35

To be truly Othello, Kani needed to rediscover—with Shakespeare’s help, and via his politically committed director’s skill—his true African self. This authentic African is as far from Shakespeare’s usual meanings as it is possible to be, belonging as he does in the bush and in animal skins. Othello functions as protest against apartheid if Kani can portray the true Othello, which Shakespeare, in his genius, knew how to represent effectively. And so Suzman compares Kani’s Othello to Olivier’s (this precedes the section quoted above in the published versions):

[Olivier’s] was a performance to be admired for its physical daring and its vivid dexterity with the poetry, but at no time was I truly moved by it. On thinking about why that should be…it seems to me that no one who was so
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much of a sophisticate through and through, as Olivier was, could convey fully the vulnerable innocence of a man who has been conned—conned unto death. [He]...cannot be considered...a worldly man. Olivier was always in control—wild, dangerous, elegant, but never really out of his depth. I knew that in John, whatever technical expertise might be wanting, would nevertheless be an Othello that had that rarest of qualities: innocence...Olivier was an actor who studied himself at every turn and produced effects so powerful that resistance was useless. His genius was to act with his body as an equal partner to his mind, which in the English is rare. His physical assumption of a black man, unfurling pink palms and all, had been truly Protean. Ah, but...but...but. John was the real thing…I so wanted a foreigner at the Venetian court [the DVD notes read, “a true foreigner,” 15, emphasis in original]; a man who could say “rude am I in my speech” and not just be referring to his want of romantic vocabulary;...a man who had witchcraft in his history....I wanted, too, a man who could embrace his Desdemona without the fear of leaving smudges on the alabaster skin.36

By virtue of his authentic blackness, Kani is everything Olivier is not, including not sophisticated and not controlled.37 As we have seen, only when Kani loses the veneer of civilization he has learned is it possible for him to return to his African self. This progression charts Olivier’s interpretation precisely, as his Othello moves from physically contained gentleman in gorgeous robes and wearing a cross, to a blackamoor in an open robe with slave shackles on his ankles who tears off that cross and all the civilization that went with it, to fall to his knees in prayer like the Muslim he is and abandon himself to murderous jealousy and violence via increasingly wild gestures and passionate vowels. Indeed, the question of whether a real African can play Shakespeare at all cohered in Suzman’s production (as it did, with different inflections, in Antony Sher’s South African Titus Andronicus some years later)38 around the question of rude speech.

Kani’s accent became a focal point for reviewers at the time39 and is singled out by Suzman for comment in her recollections of preparing the production. When she convinced Kani to take on the role, she writes:

He, at the 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...I could, at least, help him to speak the verse.40

Whether or not Kani managed to master iambic pentameter became a submerged discussion about the relationship between Shakespeare and
all “he” stands for, and race and racial difference as they were experienced in apartheid South Africa, at least by those who attended the theater and wrote about it afterwards. Suzman’s retelling of the process of coming to terms with the language once again invokes that impossible contradiction of what Shakespeare was doing onstage in South Africa in 1987. An antiapartheid Othello requires Kani’s authenticity, and Kani’s authenticity requires that he be alienated from the language that, it is claimed, is the best vehicle for expressing his dilemma as an oppressed African. Authentic Africanness requires a return to precivilized experience. But this casting off of the shackles of colonially acquired civilization to return to the noble savage within, needs the dramatic skills of a white director schooled in the nuances of European theater. In reaching this place of authenticity, Kani learns to speak Shakespeare “properly”—as though any modern rendition of the language approximates Elizabethan pronunciation.

If accent was the one major issue for this production, the interracial relationship was the other. Suzman deliberately emphasized the sexual connection between the lovers, and as a result, members of the audience regularly walked out after the first passionate kiss. The Immorality Act had only recently been revoked (in 1985), and South Africans had never seen the public display of physical contact between a black person and a white person performed in this manner before. In emphasizing their joyous sexuality, Suzman clearly intended to unite sex and politics: “It was, you will have gathered, important to me that both the sexual and the political content in the play should be attended to, because in the South Africa of the time, they went hand in hand; sexuality was a political matter.” That Kani need not “fear… leaving smudges on the alabaster skin,” a reference to Olivier’s blackface famously coming off on Maggie Smith in the final scene of his production, also stresses the importance of Kani’s authentic Africanness to the sexual politics being staged. Kani’s genuine blackness is performed in and through the challenge presented by its sexual union with Weinberg’s white femaleness.

In this context, it is worth mentioning that the production does not manage to contain the misogyny encoded in the play itself. In the charge that Desdemona has become “our great captain’s captain” (2.1.82), with the implications of emasculation, the play is suspicious of the hold she has over Othello. It is her belief in this hold—in their love and connection—that costs her her life, as she undertakes to speak for Cassio: “[M]y lord
shall never rest, / I'll watch him tame and talk him out of patience; / … / I'll intermingle everything he does / With Cassio's suit. Therefore be merry, Cassio, / For thy soliciter shall rather die / Than give cause away” (3.3.24–30). As such, Othello's love for Desdemona and his concomitant willingness to listen to her unruly female voice is a nodal point of the play. If a production is unsympathetic to this female influence, it can affect the representation of everything that follows. Suzman chooses to reference Desdemona's female power in quite telling ways. In addition to performing their physical union overtly, she also constructs Desdemona's power in ways that suggest a specific attitude to Othello's vulnerability to her. Desdemona's sexuality is figured as flowers, in an old trope that values women as precious objects whose worth resides in their transient youth and beauty, both of which are assumed to signify sexual potency. Having just been with Desdemona, Kani's Othello first appears caressing and inhaling a rose in act 1 (this is of course a reference to Olivier's first entrance). If Desdemona—for-the-having is a rose, Desdemona-dangerously-admired is ironically figured by the lilies Cassio gives her at the start of act 2, scene 3, which she drops to the ground while wrapped in Othello's arms as he buries his face in her breasts and leads her offstage to make love (“Come, my dear love, / The purchase made, the fruits are to ensue: / That profit's yet to come 'tween me and you” [2.3.9–11]). To liken Desdemona to the flowers of love and death in two highly sexualized stage moments is to locate her value and her power in traditional misogynistic figurations of female worth and suspect sexuality.

And Suzman's production is pointed in its suspicions of the relation between the sexuality of the protagonists' connection and Desdemona's related female power. This is nowhere clearer than in the use of the spaniel in act 2, scene 1, when the lovers have both arrived in Cyprus. Suzman picks up on Iago's line comparing Cassio to “my young mistress' dog” (2.3.40), a comparison which, in the way it is played out in this production, like the flowers (and his crestfallen reaction when she forgets about them) implicates Cassio as equally smitten by Desdemona. While this is an interpretation of Iago's assertion, “That Cassio loves her, I do well believe't” (2.1.270), it is also further evidence of her desirability and the power it putatively gives her over men. Accordingly, Iago comes off the ship from Venice at the start of act 2 carrying said dog. At the end of
this scene, Desdemona exits with Othello on her arm, and as she turns to go she calls the dog, which comes to heel on the other side of her body. Husband and dog at her sides, she sweeps offstage. Cassio is verbally, Othello is visually, related to the obedient animal. There is much more that could be said about the performance of gender, and particularly the staging of Desdemona in this production, but for the purposes of this short essay, I want here to note that even as the 1987 South African *Othello* relies on Kani’s Africanness to make its mark, so the meaning of that authentic black masculinity bears a troubled relation to the gender dynamics that work along with it to give the play its political bite, its protest credentials.

Suzman’s is an extremely interesting and worthwhile production of *Othello*, if complicated by the liberal politics that went into the writing about it. This production was clearly an important work of theater for the time, and remains important for Shakespearean performance histories. But it also is central to another, ongoing, and in some ways bigger question that runs through the reception history of the plays. That question is the question of what Shakespeare can mean in southern Africa, given a complex nexus of inheritances: the mission school roots of English and its canon, Shakespeare’s central role, the role of English as a language of social and economic mobility then (and now),

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**Othello’s** engagement with the meaning of difference cannot be reduced either to one meaning or one difference. What difference means will depend not just on the interpretation of the play, but on the time and place of that interpretation. In the case of this production, Kani carried on his shoulders not only the meaning of Shakespeare as a literary icon, but the weight of apartheid racism and white liberal patronage as well. Perhaps this aptly sums up the limitations of the modern reception history of *Othello*: the play can always exceed what it has meant up till now, but its incarnation in apartheid South Africa rendered certain dominant elements of Shakespeare-related performance in that context plain to see. These include that the tradition Shakespeare is most often understood as representing does not sit easily with “authentic” blackness, particularly when it is constructed as a version of the “African” who is culturally and linguistically Other to that very tradition. Also inescapable is the privilege
of whiteness in staging, receiving, and interpreting the play. Central, too, are the power and the contradiction of invoking Shakespeare-the-icon to protest apartheid’s version of racism, not necessarily in anything to do with what the play actually means but in its literal embodiment in the body of the actor on that stage at that time.

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NOTES


6 Daileader, 23.

7 Perversely, it is difference that gives Iago his power: “I follow him to serve my turn upon him”; “I am not what I am” (1.1. 43–67). Othello and Desdemona are obviously different, he by his appearance, she by her behavior. Iago is secretly different. It is the hidden quality of Iago’s difference that makes it so dangerous. This is a further meditation on the operations of social norms, and where they become pernicious.


12 Quoted in Daileader, 214.


14 Ibid., 99.
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15 Ibid., 25.


21 Suzman, “Classic Theatre Pieces,” (see note 19).

22 Janet Suzman, Director’s Notes 1987, reprinted in DVD sleeve notes, Othello 2005, 7.


24 Ibid., 270.

25 Ibid., 257; see also Suzman, “Classic Theatre Pieces,” (see note 19).


27 Suzman, “Classic Theatre Pieces,” (see note 19).

28 Suzman, “Shakespeare in the Twentieth Century,” 15. She also calls it “gorgeous”; see below.


30 Suzman, Director’s Notes, 7.


33 Ibid., 270, 271, 285.

34 Ibid., 271.

35 Ibid., 276.

36 Ibid., 275–76.

37 As noted below, Suzman references Olivier’s performance by having Kani make his first appearance with a rose, as did Olivier. Hodgdon suggests this reference foregrounds the difference between a blackface Othello and Kani, making the latter’s Othello more authentic, the “real thing” (“Race-ing Othello: Re-engendering White-Out,” in Othello: Contemporary Critical Essays, ed. Lena Cowen Orlin [New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004], 190–219 [195]). This certainly seems to have been Suzman’s intention.


Barbara Hodgdon suggests that when white audiences are upset by putatively accented Othellos, it is because seeing a black actor in the role speaking as a black person speaks (however that is) “threatens to turn Shakespeare ‘black’” (204). For Seeff, the varying reception of black actors in the title role of Othello, especially the discussion about Kani’s speaking of the part at the time, reveals the play’s true value—it’s ability to challenge its audience to recognize context-specific structural oppression.


Suzman dispenses with the “Attendants” of the stage directions and makes the scene a private one, with the besotted lovers and Cassio alone onstage. This emphasizes his position as the third point in a potential love triangle, as he is clearly in love with Desdemona, who is equally as clearly oblivious to him and entranced by Othello.

Contributors


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Protests in #Minneapolis turned violent following the release of footage showing the death of #GeorgeFloyd. People are tired of peaceful protesting and are looking for answers and retribution. It breaks my heart to be in a country that has so much promise, but still takes the lives of innocent black men. Even if he was the person they were looking for, death is a disproportionate response to the "crime" they thought he committed. There are no excuses for what they did to George. South Africa is facing a backlash after rioters in and around Johannesburg targeted immigrants from other African countries this week, torching their shops and leading to at least 10 deaths. Now, angry citizens and governments across the continent are lashing out at South Africa and its businesses, denouncing what they call "xenophobia." Now, some Africans find themselves in the unfamiliar position of protesting the actions of the same communities in South Africa that they once stood with in solidarity. The only time we’ve seen this type of cooperation of African countries in terms of backlash, said Tunde Leye, a partner at the Nigerian political research firm SBM Intelligence, was in terms of support of the anti-apartheid movement. Authentic Protest, Authentic Shakespeare, Authentic Africans: Performing Othello in South Africa. Article. Sep 2012. 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?