

OTHELLO

A LAST MINUTE GUIDE: Preparing for the Broadcast

GETTING STARTED

In order for your students to enjoy the broadcast and have a positive experience watching the play, it is essential that they are prepared. If you haven't had a chance to look at one of our Teacher Packs, but are keen to make the most out of the broadcast for your students, this short guide should help you to introduce the text.

BEFORE WATCHING

If you've got limited time, but want your students to feel prepared, we suggest that you focus on the following:

- Understanding the plot of the play.
- Knowing the characters and their relationships.
- Introducing the context of the play's opening scenes.

This guide has been designed to give you some ideas for quick ways of giving your students this background.

In this production of Othello there are two scenes containing content which some younger students may find disturbing. As you will know the play centres around the relationship between Iago and Othello. In this production the fact that Othello and Iago are both soldiers operating in a time of war has greatly influenced the choices made by the cast and director. The two scenes we want to alert you to contain some violence and one includes a plastic bag being placed over Iago's head as Othello tries to make him confess that he is lying about his wife's betrayal.

You can view both of these scenes at the link below so that you can judge whether this content is suitable for your students or not. This link will expire after 17 March 2016.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GXQCDn4o4Lk>

The two scenes both happen in the second part of the broadcast, which takes place between 10.15am and 12pm, so it would be possible for your students to watch the first part and then re-join the broadcast to watch the end and take part in the Q&A session at 1.18pm.

UNDERSTANDING THE PLOT

In order for students to enjoy the production it helps to have an overview of the plot before watching for the first time. The visual storyboard at the end of this guide will help you to do this.

- Using the storyboard, ask students to rearrange the images and descriptions into the order they think they happen in the play.

- Alternatively, you could organise students into small groups. Provide each group with a different box from the storyboard and ask them to create a tableaux image for their section. Look at each of the groups' tableaux images, and ask students to arrange them in the order they think they happen in the play.

If you have a little bit more time, you may want to use the Othello Teacher Pack 2015 which contains a version of the story in 20 minutes which will also make your learners more comfortable with the language.



SYNOPSIS

A full synopsis of the play is available at: <http://www.rsc.org.uk/othello>

KNOWING THE CHARACTERS

The following activity focuses on the characters of Othello and Iago and invites students to think about their relationship at the start of the play.

- Organise pupils into pairs and provide them with the list of facts about Iago and Othello in the Resource materials.
- Ask each pair to look at the facts and to imagine what the relationship between these two men might be at the start of the play and how they might feel towards one another.
- Encourage each pair to create a short speech in which Othello and Iago each explain how they feel about the other.
 - Their speeches should not be long, but should try to imagine all the things that they would feel.
- Explain to pupils that in Shakespeare's plays speeches like these, Soliloquies, are often used to help the audience understand how the character feels and in this play both Othello and Iago use Soliloquies.



To introduce the settings of the play you may also want to ask students to research Venice and Cyprus at the time Shakespeare was writing.

- In the broadcast production students will see two very different settings in which the characters behave very differently. You may want to challenge them to think about how they would design these two settings to create a contrast for the audience.
 - Venice: a European court
 - Cyprus: a war zone
- Ask students to think about what kind of different behavior they think they might see in Cyprus. How might two seasoned soldiers like Othello and Iago behave in that setting, as opposed to Venice?
 - You might also want to ask students to think about the female characters in these contexts. This is the first time Desdemona has traveled with Othello 'to these wars', how might she change?

THE OPENING SCENE

The following activity will introduce students to the opening scene of the play. This scene starts with Iago and Roderigo, outside the house of an important Senator, Brabantio.

- Ask students to think about why a play called 'Othello' might open with other characters talking about Othello, instead of by showing him or letting him speak for himself?
- After working on this scene, reflect with students on what impression they have of Othello following this scene? What kind of character do they expect to meet in scene 2?

The following activity will help your learners to explore the action in the scene, thinking about why Shakespeare opens the play this way and what it tells about the action we are about to see unfold.

- Organise students into pairs and provide them with the edited copy of the opening scene.
- Ask each pair to read the scene together, swapping reader at each line.
- Reflect with the group on whether or not they noticed anything while listening to each other read. What is the tone in this scene? They both feel angry but who are they angry with and why? What are the differences between them?
- Invite students to form a circle and invite two volunteers to read the scene again. Ask the rest of the students to repeat or echo any words they hear that are about:
 - Money
 - Status
- Ask students to think about who was speaking when they echoed the most words. Was it Iago or Roderigo or was it even? What do they think the history is between these two men and why?
- Encourage students, in their pairs, to look at the first line of each character and to create a still image, or freeze frame, for both of them.
- Allow students to share their still images depicting the characters' first lines. Ask students, as a group, to think about what these lines show us about them. What do they think Iago wants to get out of this meeting with Roderigo and what does Roderigo want?

WATCHING THE BROADCAST

This broadcast is live and it cannot be paused or stopped. This means that the production has to be watched as it happens on stage. Whilst they watch, encourage students to look at how Othello and Iago change as the play progresses.

Both of the scenes which we have warned about take place in Part 2 of the broadcast and are from Act Scene 3. If you do choose to watch these parts with your students we have included some notes below that it might be helpful to work through with them beforehand.

- The beginning of the scene sees Othello and the other soldiers torturing someone. This reminds us that we are in a violent war zone and we even see Othello behaving very differently here to the way he behaves in the court at the beginning of the play, reminding us that he is a soldier in a time of war and this can change people's expectations.

As they will know from looking at the story, Othello and Iago are both soldiers. In Act 3 Scene 3 Iago is finally able to convince Othello that Desdemona could be betraying him and succeeds in turning Othello against Desdemona. Because he was such a sensible and clever character at the start, this can be quite hard to believe.

- One of the ways that the actors and director of our play have made this more believable is to make this scene quite violent. In it, you will see Othello torture and hurt Iago to force him to tell the truth. Even though we (the audience) know that Iago is still lying, this can help to understand why Othello might believe his friend and fellow soldier.

If you are choosing not to watch Part 2 of the broadcast, following our guidance, then you may want to use the below activity with students during that time, to look at the story in more depth before re-joining the broadcast for Part 3 or for the Q&A at 1.18pm.

THE HANDKERCHIEF

One of the things Iago is very good at doing in this play is controlling other people. He even manages to make Othello think Desdemona has stopped loving him and is in love with Cassio.

One of the reasons Othello starts to believe this is because of a handkerchief. The following activity will explore why and how the handkerchief is used in Iago's scheme.

- Organise pupils into groups of three or four and provide them with the quotes about the handkerchief in the Resource materials.
 - Explain that the first two lines come from Othello and describe how he was given the handkerchief and then how he gave it to Desdemona.
- Ask pupils to read the lines aloud in their groups and to try and to create two short scenes which show:
 - Othello being given the handkerchief
 - Othello giving Desdemona the handkerchief
- Allow one or two of the groups to share their short scenes and ask pupils to reflect on what they think the handkerchief means to Othello. How do they think he would feel if Desdemona lost it? Or, if she gave it to someone else? What might that mean?
- Ask pupils to look at the next three lines from the resource and explain that Desdemona does lose, or drop, the handkerchief and that these lines look at what happens to it next.
- Ask pupils to work in their groups, reading the lines aloud and creating three short scenes which show what happens to the handkerchief next, showing:
 - Emilia finding the handkerchief and taking it to Iago
 - Iago deciding to use the handkerchief to set Cassio up
 - Othello seeing Cassio with the handkerchief
- Invite one or two of the groups to share their short scenes, showing what happens to the handkerchief next.
- Reflect with pupils on what Othello might think when he sees Cassio with the handkerchief. As Iago is trying to make Othello believe that Desdemona is now in love with Cassio, why would this plan help to convince him? What does it show us about Iago? What does it show us about Emilia?

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The Royal Shakespeare Company
 3, Chapel Lane
 Stratford on Avon
 Warwickshire
 CV37 6BE
www.rsc.org.uk

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RESOURCES

Iago and Othello

Facts about Iago	Facts about Othello
Iago has served in the army with Othello for years and thinks he should be promoted soon	Othello has just promoted the young Michael Cassio to be his lieutenant
Iago is married to Emilia but suspects her of being unfaithful	Othello has married the daughter of an important Senator, Desdemona, without her Father's permission
Iago is friends with Roderigo and Roderigo gives him money to get information about Desdemona, who he is in love with	Othello trusts Iago a lot, calling him 'honest'. He has even told him about his secret marriage
Iago knows about Othello's secret marriage but is planning to tell Desdemona's Father about it at the start of the play	Othello is the General of the Venetian army and a very important man in Venice.

Act 1 Scene 1 Extract

Enter Roderigo and Iago

- RODERIGO** Never tell me! I take it much unkindly
That thou, Iago, who hast had my purse
As if the strings were thine, shouldst know of this.
- IAGO** But you'll not hear me: if ever I did dream
Of such a matter, abhor me.
- RODERIGO** Thou told'st me
Thou didst hold him in thy hate.
- IAGO** Despise me
If I do not. Three great ones of the city,
In personal suit to make me his lieutenant,
Off-capped to him, and by the faith of man,
I know my price, I am worth no worse a place:
But says he,
'I have already chose my officer.'
And what was he?
One Michael Cassio, a Florentine –
That never set a squadron in the field
Nor the division of a battle knows
He – in good time – must his lieutenant be,
And I – bless the mark! – his Moorship's ancient.
- RODERIGO** I would not follow him then.
- IAGO** O, sir, content you:
I follow him to serve my turn upon him.

Visual Storyboard



One night in Venice Iago meets with Roderigo. Iago is in a bad mood because Othello has promoted a man called Cassio to be his second in command, a job which Iago hoped to get. Roderigo is in a bad mood because he is in love with Desdemona, but she has just married Othello. Roderigo and Iago are both jealous, they promise to help each other get what they want. They start by going to see Desdemona's Father and telling him that she has run away with Othello. Her father, Brabantio is outraged.



Othello and Brabantio both go to the Senate, where Brabantio complains to the Duke about what Othello has done. The Duke allows Othello and then Desdemona to explain and supports them, even though Brabantio rejects his daughter. The Duke then sends Othello, with the army, to Cyprus to fight against the Turks. Desdemona asks to go with him and Othello appoints Emilia – Iago's wife – to be her maid and come too.



On the journey to Cyprus their ships are blown around in the storm but it passes and they all arrive safely. As everyone lands Iago sees Cassio kiss Desdemona's hand, and sees it as an opportunity to get his own back on Othello and Cassio at the same time by convincing Othello they are having an affair. Iago sets his plan in motion by telling the love-sick Roderigo and encouraging him to pick a fight with Cassio.



The Turkish ships were all destroyed in the storm and so the soldiers have a party at the camp to celebrate. During the party Iago encourages Cassio to get drunk and then Roderigo fights with him. Other try to break up the fight and Cassio behaves violently. When Othello finds Cassio drunk and fighting he takes away his new promotion.



Cassio, upset about his actions and losing his promotion, goes to see Iago. Iago comforts him and tells him to go and talk to Desdemona about it, because she might be able to help. Once he's gone Iago tells the audience this is part of his plan to try and convince Othello that there is something going on between Cassio and Desdemona.



Iago warns Othello about his suspicions, saying 'look to your wife; observe her well with Cassio' and making him ask questions. After a while Othello starts to believe Iago might be right but says that he needs proof. Othello pushes Desdemona away as she is trying to comfort him, and she drops her handkerchief. Emilia picks it up, telling the audience that Iago has asked her to take it many times, and then gives it to Iago.



Iago tells Othello he has seen Cassio with the handkerchief, and so Othello asks Desdemona about it. When she does not have it he starts to believe that Iago might be right. Iago then persuades Othello to spy on Cassio with him and they see Cassio with Bianca, who is in love with him. Iago manages to convince Othello that Cassio is talking about Desdemona rather than Bianca.



Lodovico arrives from Venice and orders Othello to return, leaving Cassio in charge. Desdemona is really pleased to hear that Cassio will get his position back which upsets Othello and he hits her. Seeing this shocks Lodovico. Roderigo is also upset with Iago and wants to go home as he is making no progress in winning Desdemona back. Iago persuades him to kill Cassio.



Roderigo and Iago set a trap for Cassio at night and Roderigo attacks him. Iago watches and does not help as Roderigo wounds Cassio and Cassio then kills Roderigo. Othello then arrives to find Iago with the wounded Cassio and thinks Iago has done it. Othello then goes to find Desdemona to finish what Iago has started. When he arrives at their bedroom he strangles Desdemona.



Emilia arrives and sees what Othello has done, as Desdemona wakes for a moment and says she has 'done this deed' herself. Lodovico, the governor and Iago arrive and Emilia breaks down, realising that Othello has killed Desdemona for no reason and she confesses that she took the handkerchief. Iago stabs Emilia to keep her quiet and is taken prisoner before Othello kills himself, realising what he has done.