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Shakespeare’s great tragedy begins under the cover of night in the city of Venice, a city-state famous for its military might and as a center of trade. Roderigo, a gentleman who has tried to woo Desdemona, the lovely daughter of Senator Brabantio, has just learned that she has secretly married Othello, a heroic Moorish general in service to the Venetian state. Iago, Othello’s ensign, speaks of his hatred for the Moor, and convinces Roderigo to wake Brabantio and inform him of the elopement. The enraged Brabantio sets out in search of his daughter and calls for officers to arrest the Moor.

Feigning friendship and concern, Iago warns Othello of Brabantio’s reaction. Cassio, a lieutenant recently promoted by Othello to the position Iago had hoped for, arrives with an urgent message from the Duke: Othello’s assistance is needed to thwart a Turkish invasion of the Venetian-controlled island of Cyprus. In the Senate chamber, Brabantio accuses Othello of seducing his daughter with witchcraft. Othello, in his defense, explains that he won Desdemona’s heart by telling her stories of his adventures. When Desdemona is summoned to the Senate chamber, she confirms her love for Othello and tells her father that her allegiance is now to her husband.

Seeing no crime done, the Duke attempts to pacify Brabantio, and then turns his attention to the imminent Turkish threat and orders Othello to Cyprus. Othello welcomes the command, and Desdemona requests permission to go with her husband. It is arranged for her to travel with Iago the following day, as her husband asks to have her handkerchief copied. In a private meeting arranged by Iago, Desdemona promises Cassio that she will intercede on his behalf with her husband. As Othello returns with Iago, Cassio quickly takes his leave. Iago comments on Cassio’s abrupt departure, stating that Cassio seems to be attempting to avoid Othello. Desdemona pleads enthusiastically for Cassio, and vows to never cease until her husband pardons his friend. Othello is sympathetic to her petition. As Desdemona and Emilia (Iago’s wife) depart, Iago plants the seeds of doubt in Othello, insinuating that Cassio and Desdemona are having an affair right under Othello’s nose. As Desdemona returns to call Othello in to dinner, Othello’s doubts of her fidelity are already beginning to take hold. Seeing her husband upset, but not knowing the cause, Desdemona offers him her handkerchief, her treasured first gift from the Moor. As she refuses it, it falls to the ground, and Emilia picks it up and gives it to Iago.

Desdemona is having an affair right under Othello’s nose. As Othello returns with Iago, Cassio quickly takes his leave. Iago promises to provide Othello with additional proof of his wife’s affair. As Othello conceals himself and listens, Iago and Cassio talk about a woman. Cunningly, Iago talks to Cassio about Bianca. Othello, however, assumes they are discussing Desdemona, and is now fully convinced of her guilt. He vows to kill Desdemona and Iago vows to kill Cassio. Letters recalling Othello to Venice are brought by Lodovico. When Desdemona speaks to Lodovico about Cassio’s recent troubles, Othello becomes furious, strikes his wife, and sends her away.

Meanwhile, Iago convinces the gullible Roderigo that Desdemona’s love for the Moor will soon wane, jealous plot by giving him Desdemona’s dropped handkerchief. She dies at Iago’s hand as she defends Desdemona’s honor.

Cassio—An honourable lieutenant promoted by Othello to the very post which Iago had hoped to gain.

Roderigo—A gullible gentleman of Venice, who seeks to marry Desdemona. When his advances are rejected, he is easily manipulated and becomes a pawn in Iago’s plot against Othello.

The Duke of Venice—Leader of the Venetian government and one of Othello’s greatest supporters.

Brabantio—A Senator of Venice who goes into a rage when he discovers that his only daughter, Desdemona, has secretly married Othello, a Moor.

Lodovico—A Venetian Senator and Desdemona’s cousin.

Montano—The high-ranking Cypriot.

Bianca—A courtesan in love with Cassio.
William Shakespeare, widely recognized as the greatest English dramatist, was born on April 23, 1564. He was the third of eight children born to John Shakespeare and Mary Arden of Stratford-on-Avon in Warwickshire, England. Shakespeare's father was a prominent local merchant, and Shakespeare's childhood, though little is known about it for certain, appears to have been quite normal. In fact, it seems that the young Shakespeare was allowed considerable leisure time because his writing contains extensive knowledge of hunting and hawking. In 1582 he married Anne Hathaway, the daughter of a farmer. She was eight years his senior, and the match was considered unconventional.

It is believed that Shakespeare left Stratford-on-Avon and went to London around 1588. By 1592 he was a successful actor and playwright. He wrote approximately 38 plays, two epic poems, and over 150 sonnets. His work was immensely popular, appealing to members of all social spheres including Queen Elizabeth I and James I. While they were well-liked, Shakespeare's plays were not considered by his educated contemporaries to be exceptional. By 1608, Shakespeare's involvement with theatre began to dwindle, and he spent more time at his country home in Stratford. He died in 1616.

Most of Shakespeare's plays found their first major publication in 1623, seven years after Shakespeare's death, when two of his fellow actors put the plays together in the First Folio. Other early printings of Shakespeare's plays were called quartos, a printer's term referring to the format in which the publication was laid out. These quartos and the First Folio texts are the sources of all modern printings of Shakespeare's plays.

Sources and History of Othello

"It happened that a virtuous lady of wondrous beauty called Desdemona, impelled not by female appetite but by the Moor's good qualities, fell in love with him, and he, vanquished by the Lady's beauty and noble mind, likewise was enamoured of her." This was the seed from which Othello, the "greatest of domestic dramas," sprang. The passage comes from Giraldi Cinthio's short story "Il Moro Di Venezia" (or "Un Capitano Moro"), from an Italian collection of stories, Gli Heptameron (1565). Shakespeare and many other English dramatists were reading this popular work at the beginning of the seventeenth century. [Selections from this story can be found on p.10 of this study guide.] Shakespeare found his plot and the suggestions for his characters in Cinthio's narrative though he took many liberties in his adaptation. Although Desdemona is the only named character in Cinthio's work, the parallels between Cinthio's other characters and Shakespeare's are quite clear. "The Moor" from the short story became Othello, "The Ensign" became Iago, "The Squadron Leader" became Cassio, and "The Ensign's Wife" became Shakespeare's Emilia. In addition, it is believed that Shakespeare also borrowed details from the French novelist Belleforest, and background material from various historical references of the day. Scholars estimate that Shakespeare penned this great tragedy sometime between 1602 and 1604.

Some of Shakespeare's interest in writing this play is also believed to have come from the presence of a Moorish embassy in London. In August of 1600, the ambassador of the King of Barbary and his retinue arrived in England for a "half-year's abode in London." Their Muslim customs and manners were considered strange in the eyes of the locals, and the ambassadors caused quite a stir in London. The first audiences to see Othello performed no doubt would have the image of the Barbarians, as they were called, fresh in their minds.

The play was performed at court of King James I in 1604. The titular role was played by Richard Burbage, who was also famed for originating the roles of Hamlet, Richard III and King Lear. Subsequent public performances at the Globe Theatre were numerous and attest to the play's popularity at the time. Othello was first printed in the First Quarto in 1622. Since that time, Shakespeare's tragedy of the Venetian Moor has had an active performance history. Iago and Othello are both considered coveted roles by classical actors. During much of the play's early history, and even recently, Othello was most often played by a white actor in dark make-up. Sir Laurence Olivier and Orson Wells are two of the most famous caucasian actors to perform the role in "black-face." In 1833, Ira Aldridge was the first black man to play the role on the London stage. Since then many black actors have played the role, including actor-singer Paul Robeson, whose 1943 production ran for nearly 300 performances, and still holds the record for the most performances of any Shakespeare play ever produced on Broadway.

The issues of racial and cultural sensitivity seems inextricably tied to this play, and, particularly for American audiences, can be very provocative. Trevor Nunn's 1999 production featuring Ian McKellen as Iago, for example was set against the backdrop of the post-Civil War South. More recently however, directors and actors have attempted to focus on Othello as a piece not about bigotry against blacks or Muslims, but rather as a comment on otherness; Othello is an outsider in Venice, regardless of race. This is most apparent in cross-racial cast productions such as Patrick Stewart's 2000 performance as a lone white soldier in a world of black and Middle Eastern politicians, generals and diplomats.

It is, however, the play's universal themes of jealousy, trust, innocence and naiveté, as well as its broad scope of human emotion that have made Othello one of Shakespeare's most challenging and popular plays. It is performed frequently, and been the source of numerous films (including the 2001 "O" set in a wealthy New York high school), operas and ballets. Verdi's Othello is a staple in the repertory of many opera companies. As each production interprets the play through its own cultural and historical lens, Othello continues to captivate audiences and resonate on many personal as well as social levels.

Famous Othellos

EDMUND KEAN (1789-1833) was considered one of the greatest English actors of his day. Most famous for his tragic roles, he played both Iago and Othello frequently. In March of 1833, while performing Othello to his son Charles' Iago, he collapsed on stage. It would be his last appearance on stage.

PAUL ROBESON'S performance as Othello in 1943 was considered a novelty at the time, and brought people from all walks of life to the theatre. He was the first black American actor to perform the role, which had traditionally been reserved for white actors in heavy make-up. Robeson described the play as "a tragedy of honor rather than jealousy."

About the Playwright

A Man of Many Words

Shakespeare used over 20,000 different words in his plays and poems. Of these, 8.5% (1,700 words) had never been seen in print before Shakespeare used them.

To give you a sense of just how extraordinary this is, consider that the King James Bible uses only 8,000 different words. Homer is credited with using approximately 9,000 different words in his works. Milton is estimated at using 10,000 different words in his works.

Left: Promotional artwork for Edmund Kean as Othello.
Right: Paul Robeson and Peggy Ashcroft as Othello and Desdemona.
Director’s Thoughts on Othello

“I am not what I am.”

Othello was the last of Shakespeare’s great tragedies that I had not yet directed, and it was not until a few years ago that I added it to my director’s wish list. The others called out to me sooner, perhaps because they spoke of things I was dealing with in my own life. My interest in Othello derived more from a frustration of never having seen a production that aroused my emotions in the way the play did when I read it, and I have, over the past few years, spent some time pondering the reasons why. And so, I embarked on this project with a singular goal: to tell the tale in a way that would move you. It’s been a tough self-assignment, for though many scholars maintain that it’s Shakespeare’s “most perfect play,” they are claiming that from a dramaturgical point of view. It is in the actual playing of it that its difficulties bubble to the surface like a messy cauldron.

As I joked to my cast on the first day of rehearsal, if one had to distill the play down to one sentence, one could say it’s a tale about the downside of trust. And while that is true, it is, as all Shakespeare’s plays are, about much, much more. I do want to say what I think it is not. I do not feel it’s a play about racism. It is no more about racism than Romeo and Juliet is about street gangs. Racism is there, it’s inherent in the plot, just as the jealously is, in almost every case, their innocence or naiveté.

In our first conversation about the play, Bob Cuccioli said to me that he felt like Iago was an “emotional pyromaniac.” It is an apt and astute label. Iago constructs pyres from half-truths and careful manipulations, and then ignites emotional conflagrations that he watches from “behind the yellow tape” like a turned-on arsonist. In the final scenes of the play, we watch horrified as his “flames” consume everyone in their path.

The questions the play provokes are vast. Is Iago innately evil or just a very, very bad man who has become that way because of circumstance? What are those circumstances, and are they also his motives? Is Iago amor al or immoral? Is this Iago’s play or Othello’s? Is it Iago’s play but Othello’s tragedy? Is the “blindness” that Othello exhibits tenable? Why are all these characters so gullible and easily manipulated by Iago? The answers are as varied and debatable as anything in Shakespeare’s most complex works, but as one discusses the confusion of issues and themes in the play — appearance versus reality, society’s treatment of outsiders, racial prejudice, the nature of evil, the importance of reputation and honor, and the treatment of women, the nature of jealousy, class/status bigotry, the art of deception, sexual and identity insecurity, etc., etc. — one starts to glean answers. And in the end, out of all of Shakespeare’s great epic tragedies, I think this one is the closest to our everyday understanding, and therefore, our hearts. It is, essentially, a domestic tragedy. The character’s foibles and strengths are those we all share and understand. Their dilemmas and fears not far from our own. None of us gets through life without having been a victim, at some time or other, of a master manipulator. And those who manipulate, rarely, like Iago, seem to have a single, tangible goal. Yes, they may be bilking us for money or using us for concrete gains, but there often seems to be a secondary “pay-off” for them — one far more mysterious to us, unsettling in its obscurity, and chilling in its visceral nature.

On the Issue of Racism:

“I think this play is racist, and I think it is not. But Othello’s example shows me that if I insist on resolving the contradiction, I will forge only lies and distortion. As this exploration of texts has shown, the discourse of racial difference is inescapably embedded in the play just as it was embedded in Shakespeare’s culture and our own. To be totally free of racism, one would have to invent a new language with no loaded words, no color discriminations, and no associations of blackness with evil, whiteness with good. White and black are opposed in the play’s language — in what we hear — and in what we see during performance. When Shakespeare tackled Cinthio’s tale of a Moor and his ancient, he had no choice but to use this discourse. Shakespeare, and we, are necessarily implicated in its tangled web.

The wonder of Othello is that Shakespeare was able to exploit the full complexity of that discourse, showing expectations gone topsy-turvy with a white villain opposed to a black man of heroic proportion. Even though the predominant typology of white over black is only temporarily subverted in fits and starts within the play, that subversion is itself an incredible artistic triumph.”

—Virginia Mason Vaughan

—Bonnie J. Monte
On the surface, Othello is often seen as merely a play about a jealous outsider who is gullied by a manipulative villain. One loses a great deal that this masterpiece has to offer by cramming it into these simple (and somewhat erroneous) terms. Certainly, one cannot examine Othello without considering the issues of race and the cultural outsider. But this is a deeply human and personal tragedy. Unlike Shakespeare’s other great dramas in which domestic strife leads to national turmoil, Othello’s unheavals are wholly domestic, with themes of jealousy, trust, and honesty echoing throughout the play.

**The Outsider:**

Othello is an outsider in the world of Shakespeare’s play. He is a Moor in a world of Venetians. He is black (or tawny in some productions) in a world of white men and women. He is a soldier in a world of nobles. His cultural ways, curious to the Venetians, also are considered frightening or the cause for suspicion. Othello, though, has a desire to belong. In his newly adopted world, he serves faithfully the government of Venice and falls in love with the fair Desdemona. As a military man, he claims to be unskilled in the art of oration as he pleads to the Duke. His unease in the ways of love and courtship in this strange land require him to use Cassio as a go-between with Desdemona. The vulnerability born of being an outsider, is an important ingredient that allows Iago’s manipulations to destroy him.

Othello is not, however, the only outsider in Shakespeare’s tragedy. Desdemona is banished from her father’s home after he discovers her marriage to Othello. Cassio is an outsider in the Venetian army. Though promoted to lieutenant, he is a Florentine, and his weak brain for alcohol places him as an outsider in the soldiers’ celebrations. Roderigo is an outsider in Cyprus, having followed the Venetian army at the prompting of Iago. Bianca is an outsider in a man’s world without any contact (until after the attack on Cassio) with either of the other two women in the play. Possibly the most compelling outsider in the play, however, is Iago. Unlike the other characters in the play, Othello’s disgruntled enigmatic cast becomes his role in the process. As an observer and manipulator, he keeps a calculated distance from others as he seems to be closest to their hearts. His role as the outsider not only spurs his rage, but is also essential to the successful completion of his plots against Othello, Desdemona, and Cassio.

**The Green-Eyed Monster:**

Most often, academics refer to Othello as the “jealous Moor.” Based on all that is said about him in the play, however, this label seems inappropriate. He is not a jealous man, but rather a noble, level-headed, honest, loving and respected man whose one bout of jealousy brings about his ultimate destruction. The theme of jealousy, though, remains a constant throughout the play. Bianca is jealous of Cassio’s love for Desdemona (who does not exist). Roderigo is jealous for the love Desdemona shows to Othello, as well as the love he believes she shows to Cassio (which does not exist). Emilia seems jealous of the loving and true relationship Desdemona shares with Othello early in the play.

The most jealous character in the play, however, is Iago himself. One may see him as simply the “villainous enigmatic,” but it is his chronic and obsessive envy and jealousy that sparks his villainy. Some of people tango suggest (or outright states) that he is jealous of:

- Othello for his position as general
- Cassio for being promoted by Othello to lieutenant
- Othello for the love Desdemona bears him

He seems obsessed with these jealousies and, in fact, they are the fuel in the engine that drives the play. These jealousies even lead to further false suspicions, including his belief that both Othello and Cassio have slept with his wife.

As one looks more deeply into the play and its characters, one sees a rich and compelling examination of the human psyche, heart and soul—one that rivals Shakespeare’s other great tragedies.

**Commentary and Criticism**

SHAKESPEARE’S GREATEST TRAGEDY? “Between about 1599 and 1608 Shakespeare wrote a series of tragedies...which by universal consent...established him in the front rank of the world’s dramatists...While the four or five tragedies that begin with Hamlet (including Julius Caesar, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth, Antony and Cleopatra) are usually seen as the peak of his achievement, many critics have praised either Hamlet or King Lear as his greatest play. Why not Othello? This, the third of the mature tragedies, contains arguably the best plot, two of Shakespeare’s most original characters, the most powerful scene in any of his plays, and poetry second to none. We can fairly call it the most exciting of the tragedies—even the most unremarkably exciting—so why not the greatest?”

THE ARDEN OTHELLO

Edited by E. A. J. Honigmann, 1997

SHAKESPEARE’S VIEW OF HUMAN NATURE “The beauties of this play impress themselves so strongly upon the attention of the reader, that they can draw no aid from critical illustration. The fiery openness of Othello, magnanimous, artless and credulous, boundless in his confidence, ardent in his affection, inflexible in his resolution, and obdurate in his revenge; the cool malignity of Iago, silent in his resentment, subtle in his designs, andstudious at once in his interest and his vengeance; the soft simplicity of Desdemona, confident of merit, and conscious of innocence, her arts perseverance in her suit, and her slowness to suspect that she can be suspected, are such proofs of Shakespeare’s skill in human nature, as, I suppose, is vain to seek in any modern writer.”

GENERAL REMARKS ON OTHELLO

Samuel Johnson, 1765

Othello as a “romantic hero” “Othello is, in one sense of the word, by far the most romantic figure among Shakespeare’s heroes. He does not belong to our world, and he seems to enter it from do we not know whence—almost as if from wonderland. There is something mysterious in his descent from men of royal siege; in his wanderings in vast deserts and among marvelous peoples; in his tales of magic handkerchiefs and prophetical sibyls; in the sudden vague glimpses we get of numberless battles and sieges in which he has played the hero and born a charmed life; even in chance references to his baptism, his being sold to slavery, his sojourn to Aleppo.”

SHAKESPEAREAN TRAGEDY

A.C. Bradley, 1904

THE OUTSIDER—“(Othello) is a man apart. A renegade from his own faith and an outcast from his own people. He is, indeed, the valued servant of the Venetian state, but is not regarded as an equal with its citizens...The (Othello) is a man apart. A renegade from his own faith and an outcast from his own people. He is, indeed, the valued servant of the Venetian state, but is not regarded as an equal with its citizens...”

SHORT STUDIES OF SHAKESPEARE’S PLAYS

Ransome

THE ISSUE OF JEALOUSY “Othello does not kill Desdemona in jealousy, but in a conviction forced upon him by the almost superhuman art of Iago—such a conviction as any man would and must have entertained, who had believed Iago’s honesty as Othello did. We, the audience, know that Iago is a villain from the beginning; but, in considering the essence of Shakespeare’s Othello, we must perplexingly place ourselves in his situation, and under his circumstances. Then we shall immediately feel the fundamental difference between the solemn agony of the noble Moor, and the wretched fishing jealousy of Leontes (from The Winter’s Tale).”

LECTURES ON SHAKESPEARE

Corderie

LOVE AND HONOR “The struggle in Othello is not between love and jealousy, but between love and honor, and Iago’s machinations are exactly adapted to bring these two latter passions into collision. Indeed it is the Moor’s very freedom from a jealous temper, that enables the villain to get the mastery of him. Such a character as his, so open, so generous, so confiding, is just the one to be taken in the strong toils of Iago’s cunning.”

Othello: The Aldus Edition

Introduction by Henry Norman Hudson, A.M.
There was once in Venice a Moor, a very gallant man, who, because he was personally valiant and had given proof in warfare of great prudence and skilful energy, was very dear to the Signoria, who in rewarding virtuous actions ever advanced the interests of the Republic. It happened that a virtuous Lady of wondrous beauty called Desdemona, impelled not by female appetite but by the Moor's good qualities, fell in love with him, and he, vanquished by the Lady's beauty and noble mind, likewise was enamoured of her. So propitious was their mutual love that although the Lady's relatives did all they could to make her take another husband, they were united in marriage and lived together in such concord and tranquillity while they remained in Venice, that never a word passed between them that was not loving.

It happened that the Venetian lords made a change in the forces that they used to maintain in Cyprus; and they chose the Moor as Commander of the soldiers whom they sent there. Although he was pleased by the honour offered him... his happiness was lessened when he considered the length and dangers of the voyage, thinking that Desdemona would be much troubled by it. The Lady, who had no other happiness on earth but the Moor, then the Moor should not have her either. Turning over in his mind diverse schemes, all wicked and treacherous, in the end he decided to accuse her of adultery, and to make her husband believe that the Corporal was the adulterer...

Wherefore he set himself to wait until time and place opened a way for him to start his wicked enterprise.

Not long afterwards the Moor deprived the Corporal of his rank for having drawn his sword and wounded a soldier while on guard-duty. Desdemona was grieved by this and tried many times to reconcile the Moor with him. Whereupon the Moor told the rascally Ensign that his wife impertinently made his confidence in him so much for the Corporal that he feared he would be obliged to reinstate him. The evil man saw in this a hint for setting in train the deceits he had planned, and said, "Perhaps Desdemona has good cause to look on him so favourably!" "Why is that?" asked the Moor. "I do not wish," said the Ensign, "to come between man and wife, but if you keep your eyes open you will see for yourself." Nor for all the Moor's inquiries would the Ensign go beyond this; nonetheless his words left such a sharp thorn in the Moor's mind, that he gave himself up to pondering intensely what they could mean. He became quite melancholy, and one day, when his wife was trying to soothe his anger towards the Corporal, begging him not to condemn to oblivion the loyal service and friendship of many years just for one small fault, especially since the Corporal had been reconciled to the man he had struck, the Moor burst out in anger and said to her "there must be a very powerful reason why you take such trouble for this fellow, for he is not your brother, nor even a kinman, yet you have him so much at heart."

The Lady, all courtesy and modesty, replied: "I should not like to see you with anger or displeasure, and I shall never say another word on the subject."

The Moor, however, seeing the earnestness with which his wife had again pleaded for the Corporal, guessed that the Ensign's words had been intended to suggest that Desdemona was in love with the Corporal, and he went in deep depression to the scoundrel and urged him to speak more openly. The Ensign, intent on injuring the unfortunate Lady, after pretending not to wish to say anything that might displease the Moor, appeared to be overcome by his entreaties and said, "I must confess that it grieves me greatly to have to tell you something that must be in the highest degree painful to you; but since you wish me to tell you, and the regard that I must have of your honour as my master spurs me on, I shall not fail in my duty to answer your request. You must know therefore that it is hard for your Lady to see the Corporal in disgrace for the simple reason that she takes her pleasure with him whenever he comes to your house. The woman has come to dislike your blackness."

These words struck the Moor's heart to its core; but in order to learn more (although he believed what the Ensign had said to be true, though the suspicion already sown in his mind) he said, with a fierce look: "I do not know what holds me back from cutting out that outrageous tongue of yours which has dared to speak such insults against my Lady." Then the Ensign: "Captain," he said, "I did not expect any other reward for my loving service; but since my duty and my care for your honour have carried me so far, I repeat that the matter stands exactly as you have just heard it, and if your Lady with a false show of love for you, has so blinded your eyes that you have not seen what you ought to have seen, that does not mean that I am not speaking the truth. For this Corporal has told me all, like one whose happiness does not seem complete until he has made someone else acquainted with it." And he added: "If I had not feared your wrath, I should, when he told me, have given him the death penalty he deserved by killing him. But since letting you know what concerns you more than anyone else brings me so undeserved a reward, I wish that I had kept silent for by doing so I should not have fallen into your displeasure."

Then the Moor, in the utmost anguish, said, "If you do not make me see with my own eyes what you have told me, be assured, I shall make you realize that it would have been better for you had you been born dumb."

[For some time the Ensign wondered what to do next, because] his knowledge of the Lady's chastity (made it seem impossible that he should ever be able to make the Moor believe him; and...
do not know what to make of the Moor. He used to be all love towards me, but in the last few days he has become quite another man; and I fear greatly that I shall be a warning to young girls not to marry against their parents’ wishes; and Italian ladies will learn by my example not to tie themselves to a man whom Nature, Heaven, and the manner of life separate from us. But because I know that he is very friendly with your husband, and confines in him, I beg you, if you have learned anything from him which you can tell me, that you will not fail to help me.” She wept bitterly as she spoke ...

The Corporal [who had recognized the handkerchief and tried, without success, to return it] had a woman at home who worked the most wonderful embroidery on lawn, and seeing the handkerchief and learning that it belonged to the Moor’s wife, and that it was to be returned to her, she began to make a similar one before it went back. While she was doing so, the Ensign noticed that she was working near a window where she could be seen by whoever passed by on the street. So he brought the Moor and made him see her, and the latter now regarded it as certain that the most virtuous Lady was indeed an adulteress. He arranged with the Ensign to kill her and the Corporal, and they discussed how it might be done. The Moor begged the Ensign to kill the Corporal, promising to remain eternally grateful to him. The Ensign refused to undertake such a thing, as being too difficult and dangerous, for the Corporal was as skilful as he was courageous; but after much entreaty, and being given a large sum of money, he was persuaded to say that he would tempt Fortune.

Soon after they had resolved on this, the Corporal, issuing one dark night from the house of a courtesan with whom he used to amuse himself, was accosted by the Ensign, sword in hand, who directed a blow at his legs to make him fall down; and he cut the right leg entirely through, so that the wretched man fell. The Ensign was immediately on him to finish him off, but the Corporal, who was valiant and used to blood and death, had drawn his sword, and wounded as he was he set about defending himself, while shouting in a loud voice: “I am being murdered.”

At the moment the Ensign hearing people come running...began to flee, so as not to be caught there; then, turning back he pretended to have run up hearing the noise. Mingling with the others, and seeing the leg cut off, he judged that if the Corporal were not already dead, he soon would die of the wound, and although he rejoiced inwardly, he outwardly grieved for the Corporal as if he had been his own brother.

[Hearing of the Corporal’s death, Disdemona grieved for him; but the Moor] put the worst possible construction [on her grief. He plotted with the Ensign to murder her, they decided to use neither poison nor the dagger, but to beat her to death with a stocking filled with sand and then pull down the ceiling to give the appearance of an accident. The Ensign hit her on the head, and Disdemona cried to the Moor for help, but he said,] “You wicked woman, you are having the reward of your infidelity. This is how women are treated who, pretending to love their husbands, put horns on their heads.”

The wretched Lady, hearing this and feeling herself near to death (for the Ensign had given her another blow), called on Divine justice to witness her fidelity, since earthly justice failed, and she lay still, slain by the impious Ensign...

Next day Disdemona was buried, amid the universal mourning of the people. But God, the just observer of men’s hearts, did not intend such vile wickedness to go without proper punishment. He ordained that the Moor, who had loved the Lady more than his life, on finding himself deprived of her should feel such longing that he went about like one beside himself, searching for her in every part of the house. Realizing now that the Ensign was the cause of his losing his Lady and all joy in life, he held the villain in such abhorrence that he could not bear even to see him; and if he had not been afraid of the inviolable justice of the Venetian lords, he would have slain him openly...

[The Ensign betrayed the plot accusing the Moor of the murder, to the Captain, who told the Venetian authorities; the Moor was arrested, tortured and condemned to exile. Eventually he was murdered by Disdemona’s relatives. The Ensign was later arrested, and] tortured so fiercely that his inner organs were ruptured; [then he was sent home,] where he died miserably. It appeared marvellous to everybody that such malignity could have been discovered in a human heart; and the fate of the unhappy Lady was lamented, with some blame for her father...

No less was the Moor blamed, who had believed too foolishly, grew red in the face at the request “I do not know,” she said, “why I cannot find it...”

Leaving her, the Moor began to think how he might kill his wife, and the Corporal too, in such a way that he would not be blamed for it. And since he was obsessed with this, day and night, the Lady inevitably noticed that he was not the same towards her as he was formerly. Many times she said to him, “What is the matter with you? What is troubling you? Whereas you used to be the gayest of men, you are now the most melancholy man alive.”

The Moor invented various excuses, but she was not at all satisfied ... Sometimes she would say to the Ensign’s wife, “I then] his thoughts twisting and turning in all directions, the scoundrel thought of a new piece of mischief.

The Moor’s wife often went...to the house of the Ensign’s wife, and stayed with her a good part of the day, wherefore seeing that she sometimes carried with her a handkerchief embroidered most delicately in the Moorish fashion, which the Moor had given her and which was treasured by the Lady and her husband too, the Ensign planned to take it from her secretly, and thereby prepare her final ruin. [One day, whilst Disdemona was playing with his child, the Ensign stole the handkerchief; he dropped it in the Corporal’s room.]

[The Ensign] spoke to the Corporal one day while the Moor was standing where he could see them as they talked; and chatting of quite other matters than the Lady, he laughed heartily and, displaying great surprise, he moved his head about and gestured with his hands, acting as if he were listening to marvels. As soon as the Moor saw them separate he went to the Ensign to learn what the other had told him; and the Ensign, after making him entreat for a long time, finally declared: “He has hidden nothing what the other had told him; and the Ensign, after making him...
The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey is one of the leading Shakespeare theatres in the nation. Serving approximately 100,000 adults and young people annually, it is New Jersey’s only professional theatre company dedicated to Shakespeare’s canon and other classic masterworks. With its distinguished productions and education programs, the company strives to illuminate the universal and lasting relevance of the classics for contemporary audiences. The longest-running Shakespeare theatre on the East Coast and the seventh largest in the nation, The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey marks its 49th season in 2011.

The company’s 2011 Main Stage season features six productions presented in its 308-seat F.M. Kirby Shakespeare Theatre and runs June through December. In the summer, an Outdoor Stage production is also presented at the Greek Theatre, an open-air amphitheatre nestled in a hillside on the campus of the College of Saint Elizabeth in nearby Morristown.

In addition to being a celebrated producer of classic plays and operating Shakespeare LIVE! (one of the largest educational Shakespeare touring programs in the New York/New Jersey region), The Shakespeare Theatre is also deeply committed to nurturing new talent for the American stage. By providing an outstanding training ground for students of the theatre, and cultivating audiences for the future by providing extensive outreach opportunities for students across New Jersey and beyond, The Shakespeare Theatre is a leader in arts education. For additional information, visit our web site at www.ShakespeareNJ.org.

The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey is one of 20 professional theatres in the state of New Jersey. The company’s dedication to the classics and commitment to excellence sets critical standards for the field. Nationwide, the Theatre has emerged as one of the most exciting “new” theatres under the leadership of Artistic Director, Bonnie J. Monte since 1990. It is one of only a handful of Shakespeare Theatres on the east coast, and in recent years has drawn larger and larger audiences and unprecedented critical acclaim. The opening of the intimate, 308-seat F.M. Kirby Shakespeare Theatre in 1998, provided the Theatre with a state-of-the-art venue with excellent sightlines, and increased access for patrons and artists with disabilities.

The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey is a member of ArtPride, The Shakespeare Theatre Association, Theatre Communications Group, and is a founding member of the New Jersey Theatre Alliance.