

Frantic Assembly and Theatre Royal Plymouth in collaboration with Royal & Derngate Northampton

# SHAKESPEARE'S OTHELLO



## A Comprehensive Guide

for students (aged 14+), teachers & arts educationalists.  
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**franticassembly**

**THEATRE ROYAL**  
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# WHY OTHELLO?

## An Unhealthy Obsession

Several years ago director Tom Morris took us out for lunch and told us that we should 'do Othello'. The idea came as a shock. We were very much in a groove of devising new work with living writers. We thrived on having an idea and working with fellow collaborators to make it come to life. Why would we 'do Othello?'

'Because it is full of sexual jealousy, the destruction of friendships and back stabbing. All of the things you are obsessed with!' came Tom's response.

Thanks Tom.

After some thought we realised that there was no point denying it. We were obsessed with those things. But that did not mean we were going to rush into a production of **Othello**. It might well be right up our street but how were we, as a small touring company, going to realise such a massive task?

It has taken a long time for **Othello** to come to fruition. It sat for many years on a back burner. Way back! Everything had to be right for us to embark on this task but that was never just an issue of getting the funding together. We had to have our reason for doing **Othello** and that was all about having something new to offer.

That inspiration came about, as ever, by coincidence and chance.



# Two Worlds Collide - Othello and Dark Heart

While the idea of doing **Othello** sat at the back of our minds we were introduced to a book called 'Dark Heart' by journalist Nick Davies. 'Dark Heart' was a journey through the underbelly of UK society, of deprived council estates, child prostitution and drugs. It is a disturbing and sobering read.

At the time we were reading the book we were both working on an advert set in a pub. The pub was an elaborate mock up in a massive film studio. In between takes we all had to stay in our sections of the pubs while the production team assessed camera angles and lighting. It was then that 'Dark Heart's' stories of rough pub life came back.

Being constricted to our positions in the 'pub' it struck us that this was like the natural structure of a pub. It seems that young men enter a pub at a certain age and appear to belong in a certain area of the pub; young guys hanging

around the fruit machine; higher status guys strutting around the pool table; bulls hanging around the bar and the old men sitting in the corner. This is a social structure. You graduate through age and deed. This is when **Othello** crept back into our consciousness. All through the mock pub performers were laughing and joking trying to pass the time between takes. By the door stood a couple of performers playing bouncers. They could not move from their post and could only look on enviously as the other groups were having fun. It became fascinating watching these people who protected the values of the pub but were ever defined as outsiders. They were powerful enforcers but could not get involved with the people within. Imagining such a person as a black man, and the world of **Othello** started to unfold in front of our eyes.

There were early conversations purely about 'Dark Heart' and whether it could inspire a production for us. Instead it opened up **Othello** and made it seem possible and exciting.



# HOW ARE WE GOING TO DO THIS?

## Truthful Delivery

The experience of reading Shakespeare is often thrilling. The riot of imagery, the dazzling plot structures and narrative twists, the precision of observation regarding matters of the heart and mind, the masterful switches between poetry and prose. If these things are held to be true, why is it that the act of seeing the very same plays performed live can often be only a chore and, at best, an exercise in sitting in the dark with strangers? There are a whole host of possible reasons why but one major contributing factor is, we believe, the effects of received pronunciation (RP) on a modern audience. This is not to say that RP is an automatic dagger in the heart of a production but the use of RP often stands in direct opposition to an audience's understanding of the play. Actors frequently hide behind the inherent rhythms and get away with a multitude of sins, covering up incomprehension with something that only sounds right. Sounding right is very different to actually being right. There is also the argument that a modern audience just doesn't listen to RP after a while. As beautiful as the form is, it can often lull an audience into some sort of reverie that can stand in the way of true engagement and inquisition into the finer details of a given scene or speech. Combined, such an actor in front of such an audience can only result in a deathly night out at the theatre.

Watching Baz Luhrmann's audacious and dazzling film version of 'Romeo and Juliet' is proof that the rhythms of Shakespearean speech are not only realised by way of RP. In it, the fiercely modern inflections used by the actors set the text alight with both urgency and poignancy. Yet this is no

'street' version of Romeo and Juliet. Yes there are some edits involved but the language on the screen is easily followed on the page of the actual play. This film was inspirational for us, bringing together the original with the modern in a way that was both honourable and contemporary.

As a company, Frantic have consistently tackled the modern notions of existence and the questions that face us as a contemporary culture. As well as the movement element inherent in the work, there is also the consideration of language and how it is used in communicating with an audience. In much of the earlier work, use of direct address was a strong indicator of the company's intention to make a direct link with the audience in terms of speech and language. In choosing to present a Shakespeare play, the challenge then is how to stay true to the language as written whilst at the same time refusing to use a form that, for many people, renders Shakespeare unwatchable, obsolete, boring, irrelevant, elitist.

It is difficult to say which came first but there seemed to be a general gravitational pull towards the North in keeping with our reading of 'Dark Heart' and simultaneous research into the race riots of 2001. In time-honoured tradition, our decision also came from knowing what we didn't want our version to be. An east end London pub version of **Othello** seemed like a well worn idea without either of us ever having seen or heard of such a version. Such is the way of creative decision making at times. We had seen Restoration plays done in Yorkshire accents and been bitterly



disappointed at the way in which the rich poetic cadences and stresses of the dialect had been squashed and flattened to create a consistently comic 'effect' - a dumbing down of language that rendered each and every character easily written off as simple and without consequence. This 'Last of the Summer Wine' effect was a great yardstick for us in how not to use northern dialect. Right up until the last minute we withheld the right to change our minds regarding the setting of the play in the North. It was during auditions for the project that the true potential of the dialect came to light. A good number of the actors who auditioned for us brought such light and intrigue to the speeches - even after hearing the same speech dozens of times on certain days! Profound pronouncements on the human condition seemed to sit beautifully and honestly within the sound of the accent. The language became fresh and full of surprises. The flattening of the vowels suggested an earthiness that we were in desperate search for - a riposte to the idea of Shakespeare being only intelligible to those educated in literature. Here at last was the means by which we legitimately set our **Othello** outside the courtly world normally associated with the play. Our characters could be tough, working class people, readily prepared to communicate ideas of love, jealousy and loyalty in a way that kept them tough and working class. Most regional dialects lend themselves beautifully to swearing, damning phrases and general heightened uses of language. To this end, **Othello** becomes a play to relish - its powerful narrative is driven by passionate emotions, relentless activity and sparky dialogue.

In rehearsals for the show, the cast have been faced with the twin task of understanding the intention and meaning behind the original text and then finding the means of conveying that through an accent that, for most, is not their own. As we near the end of the rehearsal period, it strikes us that this has been a fantastic process. The performers have put each line through not just one, but two thorough and detailed processes, both with the aim of creating clarity and understanding in order to convey meaning. At times this has proved frustrating for the company. There are only so many times you can be corrected on your pronunciation of the word 'grow' before the brain starts to collapse and the ears start to fold in on themselves. The result we have witnessed is a capacity to truly drive the narrative forward as actors, firm in the belief that they understand what it is they are trying to communicate. Such knowledge also supports thoroughness in other areas of rehearsal. Dissecting the psychological implications and impulses of the play is both rigorous and thrilling with such a firm understanding of the text. That Shakespeare's plays are remarkable in their relevance to contemporary life is a no-brainer but for our actors to discover the contemporary in the speech patterns of the language itself has been a thrilling venture.



# The Seven Sins of England

There was always a massive dilemma facing us on this project. Would it be possible to have a clear and intelligible Shakespearean vocabulary and retain the energy and contemporary sensibility needed to tell the story of **Othello** and of this pub caught at the frontier of the racial tension in West Yorkshire in 2001?

Advice from peers was mixed. 'Don't mess with the text. It will bite you.' 'Do it without words!' 'The meaning is in the rhythm. You cannot succeed without knowing that'.

Generally we managed to convince them that the project was a good idea but their advice gave us little conviction in what we wanted to achieve. It was through watching a documentary/film on Channel 4 that we had our moment of epiphany.

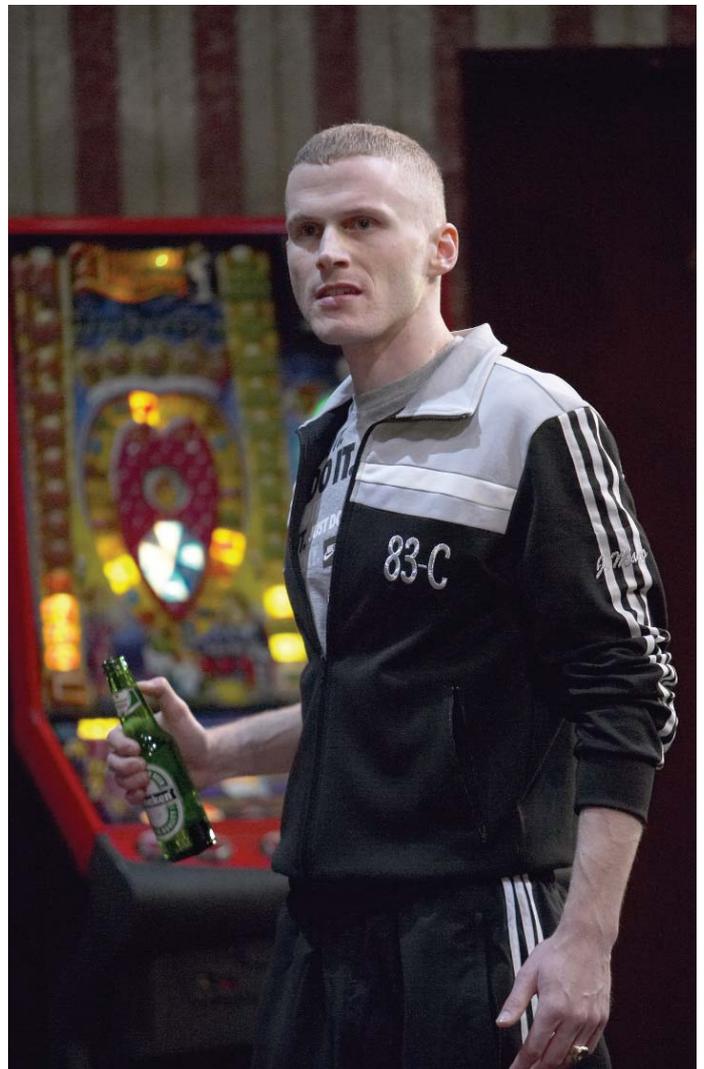
'The Seven Sins of England' looked at apparently modern sins, namely binge drinking, rudeness, violence, slaggishness, etc. and then used text from the 16th Century onwards to show that this type of behaviour had always been around. The text was taken from council notes, from tourists' diaries, from all kinds of works concerned with the working classes 'at play.'

The premise of the film was not without its flaws and it did seem to turn into a completely different and contradictory film at the end but it employed a brilliant technique in putting this text across. For each sin there was a figurehead who was seen to exemplify those virtues. These were real people, filmed in apparently real contexts delivering these 400-year-old lines of text. The effect was exhilarating.

Here were people who felt and looked at home in the world of rough pubs and clubs spouting sub Shakespearean text with utter clarity and authority. Neither the text nor their contemporary credibility was compromised. They had achieved exactly what we were looking for.

The film was set in Romford and did not exactly show us how to do it. Merely that it could be done. And this was all we needed to convince us that the battle was just.

We have worked with voice coach Sally Hague on the accents but also on the technicality of getting the meaning across through voice while retaining a credible accent. This has been a fascinating development for us. Our insecurities meant that we feared that Sally might turn up and unpick our intentions with accent and voice. Of course she embraced the idea, seemed enthused by it and helped us massively towards our goal of creating this contemporary but comprehensible delivery of Shakespearean text.



# The Adaptation



Our textual version of **Othello** is a curious beast in that it is the eventual product of many influential sources. Our ambition was always to create a contemporary version of the play that would run without interval and after an early reading of the Arden edition we believed that this was possible simply by taking out elements that challenged a modern interpretation. The first drafts we created were the result of a purely textual exercise. Reading and re-reading the play over a number of months we ear marked first sections and then lines and then references or words that might go. It is at this stage that sections such as the Willow song fall under the red marker pen. During these early stages we also realised that the political framework of the original was neither useful nor interesting for us. Getting rid of this might have been a terrifying prospect had we not already had the Northern pub idea as a result of reading the book 'Dark Heart'. The socio-political content of the book was a vital impulse in creating the show and so the context of the Venetian military gave way to the fractious racial politics of early twenty first century Yorkshire.

Once we had this we treated the text like a film script, looking at ways in which we might convey moments or sections of the play in either physical or visual ways. This forced us to examine the play in more imaginative ways. It also exists as an exercise in economy - how might Act 3 Scene 4 (lines 108-150) operate as a visual sequence rather than the rather lengthy textual scene, for instance. Film is a fantastic exercise in focus, each shot being carefully selected by the director to pinpoint the attention of the viewer in a very specific place. It was at this early stage that we talked about the use of 'IagoVision' in the show as a way of achieving moments of very specific focus on events and action.

Our next stage was to look at the structural elements of the play. In creating a version without interval we had to see how the rhythms afforded by the five act structure might be

replicated in what is essentially a single act. The original **Othello** operates on both short and long time structures and this has often proved problematical for both academics studying the play and also theatre makers. Adapting our version in the pub we decide to operate on only a short time structure in order to take full advantage of the incredible momentum that occurs through acts three, four and five - one of the most exhilarating sequences of events in any Shakespeare play. As the heart of the play, we held on to the lengthier scenes between Othello and Iago, using them as fixed points around which the rest of the scenes built up to and fell away from.

From here we took on the task of watching some of the film versions of **Othello**. These are many and varied in terms of style and watchability. However, we always maintain that one vital path to knowing what it is you want to do is to know what it is you don't want to do. To this end, sitting through some truly excruciating versions of **Othello** was a valuable exercise. These films ranged from Oliver Parker's 1995 version starring Kenneth Branagh and Laurence Fishburne (the first actor of actual African descent to portray the Moor in a major studio release) to 'O', a modern reworking that places the 'action' in and around an American high school basketball tournament. Out of all of these, the most surprising was the Orson Welles version. Funding problems meant that the film was shot over a long period of time on sporadic occasions until the money ran out. Shooting was then suspended and everybody resumed life outside the project until enough money was raised to begin again. After four years following this pattern, the film was finally completed and went on to win the Cannes Film Festival Palm d'Or. The success of the film lies in the strong, bold visual style Welles created and the brave, sparse adaptation he made of the play. We downloaded the screenplay and studied it as a text and it was this that provided many key ideas and approaches to our own adaptation. From it, we could see how Welles used

evocative imagery to provide short cuts to plot development. He also employs voiceover which we realised was not an option to us but the places where it was used in the film were informative in seeing where the action needed moving forward. It also flagged up moments where Welles saw fit to make substantial cuts to character exposition of events in favour of a voiceover. Another valuable viewing was of the RSC version directed by Trevor Nunn featuring performances by Ian McKellen as Iago and Willard White as Othello. It was liberating to realise that even institutions such as the RSC felt it necessary to adapt the play in order to make it work for a modern audience.

With several alternative versions of the play floating around on our desk we somehow put together our own hybrid that we then took into a workshop period with several actors. Over two weeks, one in a pub in Finchley and another in the rehearsal room of the Lyric Hammersmith, we tested a number of key scenes in our adaptation. As well as trying out the words for their capacity to carry the development of characters and events, we also used the time to try out alternative uses of the scenes we had constructed in creating physical and visual sequences. Most of our hopes and suspicions were confirmed during this period, though without being able to test the entire adaptation we still had to employ a certain amount of blind faith following the research period.

The adaptation was completed and then fine-tuned in the following months and a rehearsal draft was completed a

few weeks before rehearsals began. This was sent out to a handful of Frantic allies who responded to our adaptation in their own inimitable ways. However, the most radical development stage of our adaptation occurred in the second week of rehearsals. It was in this week that we sat around a table in the rehearsal room with the performers and began to take a scalpel to the adaptation scene by scene in chronological order. It was a fascinating process and one quite new to us as directors, being so responsible for the text and its ability to withstand scrutiny. It is one thing to support and encourage the writer of a play in the practise of its development but it is something quite different to actually take that role too! Our cast were our biggest critics and most excellent supporters and every day saw us challenged and amazed by the collective effort to make this adaptation do everything it should. Structurally much has stayed the same but the last stages of this adaptation have been about character details. In some instances, the cast have come to us with lines we have omitted that they feel essential to their performance. Many of these have made it into the final version. In other instances, the cast have embraced the idea of thinking about the show on a physical and visual level as well as textually - understanding that a modern audience are adept at understanding these theatrical techniques. In communicating this story of **Othello**, we have all found that, on occasion, actions do speak louder than words.



# West Yorkshire 2001

The setting of our **Othello** in a Northern pub came as a direct result of our reading Nick Davies' harrowing book 'Dark Heart' and in particular a section which describes conditions on a council estate in Leeds. Following this, we began to research the events that culminated in the violent urban protests on the 5th of June in the Harehills area of Leeds. Prior incidents in Lancashire the previous month are often associated but for our purposes we focused on the activity in West Yorkshire and began to examine what it was that triggered unrest there.

Situated on the inner north east side of Leeds, Harehills is the home for many of the city's working class Pakistani community. Trouble began following the arrest of a Bangladeshi man on suspicion of either driving a stolen car or having a stolen tax disc. The arresting officer used CS gas in the event of arresting the man, an event witnessed by several bystanders. This led to a night of arson and violent disorder in the Harehills area. Whilst the protestors later maintained that their actions were in response to suspected racism within the West Yorkshire Police, the event became notable for much more.

One was the reporting of the incident. The Yorkshire Post was heavily criticised for its coverage of the event. The paper depicted the Asian men responsible for the violence as grotesque, primitive and barbaric. Flashes of violence between white and Asian groups flared up, or were suddenly newsworthy. White residents in the area were suddenly all too ready to speak to local and national TV crews about 'them' and the problems they believed 'they' caused. Theories began to fly - that the whites who spent all their money down the pub were jealous of the young Asians who saved hard and drove around in flash cars, that there was still bad feeling following the infamous trial of Woodgate and Bowyer of Leeds United for attacking an Asian student outside a nightclub in the previous year.

What became apparent was that racism between the two Harehills communities (and to an extent, parts of Yorkshire and Lancashire) was becoming incredibly assertive. In 2001 it seemed that the policy of 'cultural diversity', championed by Roy Jenkins in his key speech as Labour Home Secretary in 1966, had been rejected outright. If the intention of that policy was to bring people of different cultures together then here was refusal of the strongest kind. What complicated the issue in 2001 was that there seemed to exist a strategy of consenting apartheid between the conflicting groups. Such conditions were believed to be powerful structures that enforced and maintained segregation. Commentators at the time were also keen to point out that a common misconception regarding the

flashes of violence between different groups was that this was an issue of race. Instead, it was suggested that this was more accurately an issue of religion rather than colour. Such thinking was supported when it was disclosed that two of the men who went on trial for the violent disruptions in Harehills were not Asian. One man was Afro-Caribbean, one white and all the rest were British Asians.

So things were incredibly complex at this time in West Yorkshire. We began to imagine just how different the scenario might be for a black male in this same community. Throughout the 80's and 90's, British youth had been appropriating and replicating black culture, most notably through fashion and music, to the extent where even dialect began to be affected. We all know now that this cultural pattern and impulse was to continue growing. Today we are witness to much the same scenario. The wholesale appropriation of rap and hip hop music by white youth is only as remarkable as how improbable it seems that, say, bhangra music will ever achieve such status amongst the same group.

It seemed entirely likely that a black male in this possibly racist white community might slip under the radar, black not really being enough to suggest Other. When white kids are standing on street corners singing along to rap and hip hop tracks, most of which are fixated with ideas and notions of black experience and identity, the argument goes that a sophisticated form of understanding emerges. Add to this the age old idolatry factor that goes hand in hand with music stars and suddenly the black male is easily recognised not just as un-Other but actually a figure of aspiration. During a spell of racial unease like the one existent in Leeds during 2001 then, it is neither impossible nor improbable that a black male might exist in a unique and almost privileged position. Until, of course, he attains a white girlfriend...

Our time and setting for **Othello** is abundant in issues and complexities that have proved to be incredibly invigorating in the rehearsal room. Much of our discussion as a company will have no place or recognition in the final version. However, it has allowed for a rich process and, hopefully, a firm sense of time and place for our eventual audience.

# The Violence



We are desperate to capture the disgusting impact of real violence. We are not interested in the sanitised TV version and we are eager to avoid the clichés of stage fighting.

We are aiming for our heightened and choreographed physicality to have that impact mentioned above. The difficulty is how we can make something that obviously looks unreal feel so real.

Our issue with stage fighting is that at times it can appear to be the accepted and ONLY way to portray violence and the effect of violence on stage but it is no more real than our choreography. It is equally contrived and choreographed. Once our eyes have become attuned to the general concepts of stage fighting we can usually see the moves coming from a mile off. Done badly it is moth eaten and laughable.

We have worked with a Fight Director who categorically told us that for a fight scene to work it absolutely has to be real but what he actually meant was it had to exist within the agreed reality of stage fighting. He was telling us that our fancy choreography had no currency within this macho strand of theatre. I did not believe him then and I don't believe him now.

Maybe this belief is born out of a frustration with bad stage fighting. Maybe there is the perfect stage fight out there but my point stems from the fact that, as an audience, we KNOW that this is not real. We might need something more than an approximation of reality to really jolt us in the way real violence does.

Discussions through the research and development of this project have told us that most people are shocked by real violence. Nearly everything about it disturbs us. Why is this? Television and film are full of it yet we hardly flinch. It is important to note that real violence sounds nothing like its TV and film impostor. It often looks nothing like it too. It is faster. It is messier. It is more efficient and it is less efficient. And yet the TV and film version still seems to inform the theatrical version.

Simply, our aim is to try something different in an attempt to capture what appears to be missing from most staged violence, namely that gut response, that sickening feeling that makes us want to be anywhere else but here.

Our chosen approach is, in our opinion, no more or no less real than stage fighting. It may even be a hybrid of stage fighting and our more heightened physical language. Our point is that it does not matter how real it looks on stage. It is about making it feel real for the audience. As ever it is not about the type of punch but the power of the impact.

# CHARACTERS - WHAT'S NOT BEEN SAID?

There is no point giving you a York notes style breakdown about the characters within **Othello**. There is already so much in print that will tell you exactly where Othello came from, all about his epilepsy and the crucial resonance of the Willow song in a post modern world.

There is no point in us adding to that or alluding to any world outside the one we have created for this production.

This is not a character study to help with a general understanding of **Othello**. It is intended as an insight into a very partial and personal understanding of these people. To that end we have asked the performers to share their thoughts on what they feel is integral to their character within the specific context of our version.

Something changed in Othello when his father left him. He became a very angry young boy. Whenever other boys would make fun of the fact that he didn't have a dad, it would always end up in a big fight. Many times he was suspended from school. On one occasion he was sent home for hitting a girl when she cussed him for not having a dad. This was the first time and only time his mother ever hit him. Othello promised never to hit a woman again and his mum made sure he learnt how to respect women.

He came to Yorkshire through football and labouring. Brabantio was one of his coaches who, when he was considering moving on, took him for a drink in 'The Cypress' and convinced him to stay. Othello and Brabantio might have a lot in common.



## **Othello by Jimmy Akingbola**

Othello was born in North London a 20mins walk from Arsenal Football ground. His dad was from Ghana and his mum was born in the UK but her parents were Nigerian. When he was 8yrs old his mother divorced his dad. His dad went back to Ghana and they never saw him again. Othello's mum brought him up as a single parent till she died of cancer when he was 14yrs old. She taught him everything and gave him so much love that he never really missed his dad. She told him positive stories of his dad and described him as a proud man and a gentleman. She loved him even though they could never be together.



## **Iago by Charles Aitken**

Iago is the Mike Skinner of this world. A geezer who loves a booze up, a punch up, and scoping out birds. He's one of the boys. What sets him apart from the rest of the lads is his keen intellect and awareness of all that's going on around him. He clocks everything and everyone, down to the smallest detail and nuance of gesture, allowing him to see to the heart of people, to read their true desires, natures, and motivations.

Iago uses this ability to bolster his reputation and standing in the pub. On the surface, it makes him the most trusted of the boys - the guy who can always be relied on to say it how it is. It's this bold truthfulness that initially attracts Othello - a man surrounded by yes men and people who are either too impressed or intimidated to speak their minds. Iago isn't afraid to, and this makes him an

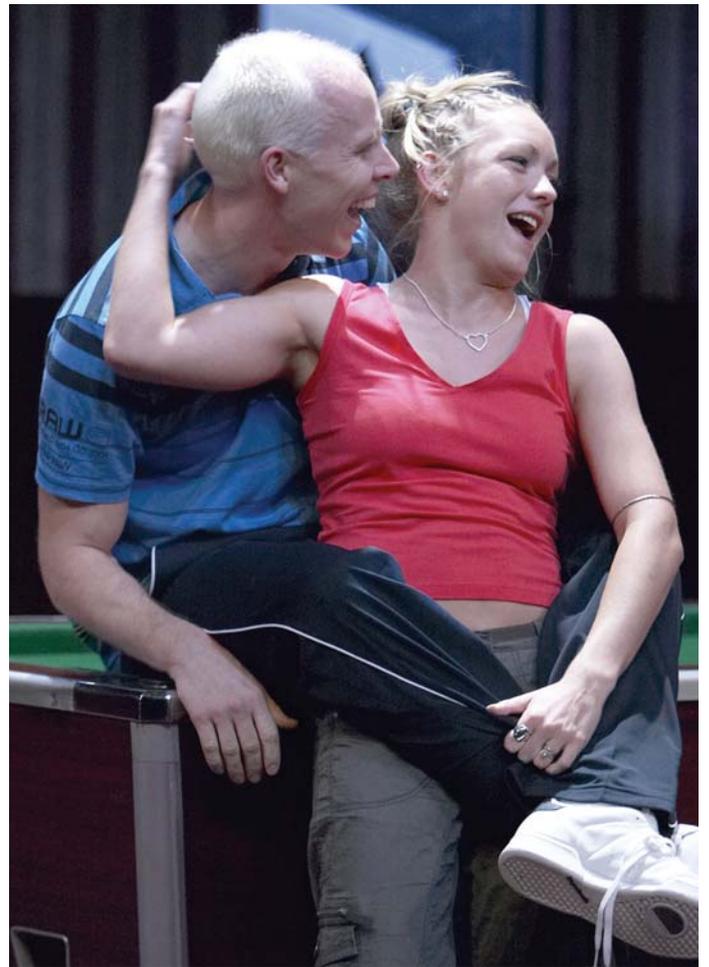
invaluable confidant. Under the surface however, Iago uses his almost superhuman powers of perception to manipulate people, anticipating and molding their thoughts to his ends. Unfortunately, like most super powers, Iago's gift is also his curse. His mind never rests, he sees threats and offenses everywhere. Iago is highly ambitious and proud and wants to be top dog at Othello's side. Anyone who he perceives to be a threat to this will need to be dealt with.



### **Desdemona by Claire-Louise Cordwell**

Leeds born and bred, she is very family oriented. The death of her mother when she was 11 was a big loss.

She has a wonderful capacity to love and is very true and loyal to all she holds dear to her. When the play starts Des is 17 and a half. She is smart and has a naïve fearless quality about her which she uses to her advantage when dealing with the politics of the pub - getting away with things maybe others can't. She is ballsy and genuine. She admires and loves Othello despite the prejudice of her family.



### **Michael Cassio by Jami Reid-Quarrell**

"Reputation!" is high on Michael Cassio's list of priorities though he may not be aware just how much until he loses his. The position of Second or Lieutenant to Othello has been hard won through the efforts of befriending, defending and fighting alongside Othello in the early days of his leadership campaign on the estate.

This cherished social position is compromised in his eyes by his involvement with Bianca, the allegedly 'loose woman' of the estate and the butt of others' jokes. In fact, behind closed doors they have a true affection which belies Michael's public attitude to her.

Cassio has the lethal combination of suppressed anger and a problem with alcohol - one may have given birth to the other through family history - and he has to watch his drink though he loves a good boozing session. He has only confessed to Othello that he can't handle his drink though it is actually common knowledge among his friends.



### **Roderigo by Richard James-Neale**

Roderigo is a very often presented as a weak, bumbling idiot, ensnared into Iago's scheming through the exploitation of his insecurities. He harbours a burning, unreciprocated infatuation for Desdemona, which is frowned upon by her father. He is crippled by a lack of self worth, all of which Iago uses for his own ends.

Understanding Roderigo's background and environment provides reasoning for his wayward and extreme actions. In our setting, he would have to be a survivor. You can't knock around in a pub full of bulls like Brabantio and Othello if you are a spineless, pathetic crybaby. If he wants something, he takes it. If he doesn't like something he breaks it. The only laws that matter are those that govern this pub, the place where he can find his place in the world. I think that he is about 19 and therefore the reason he is at the bottom of the pile is probably due to his age and immaturity in relation to the older, physically stronger generation. Without any real job prospects, his wealth probably comes from the rather more profitable employment of selling drugs to other young people on the estate. He wants to be a part of something bigger than himself and believes he can find that and be accepted at the pub through his bond with Iago. We all know a Roderigo. He is the runt in the litter, spitting on the floor in Wetherspoons. The guy who never gets the girl. The kid at school with the black eyes and scraped knuckles from fighting who was expelled from school after school until he just stopped going. The hoodie who will mug the old lady while his mate films it on his mobile.



### **Bianca by Minnie Crowe**

Bianca is 19. She's a bit of a loner, although she's not particularly happy about it. She's not quite found her place in the pub yet, and hasn't formed the relationships she would need to have some sort of status in this environment.

In Shakespeare's list of characters, Bianca is referred to both as a 'courtesan' and in other editions, as 'Cassio's Mistress'. In this world, she's not exactly a prostitute, but her relationship with Cassio isn't recognised as boyfriend and girlfriend by the rest of the people in the pub. She's not a sad figure; she enjoys sex and male attention but no more than any of the other girls. Calling her a strumpet is an easy term of abuse.

She's not had a lot of family support, unlike Desdemona; she's been in and out of care and does crave attention. She never quite gets what she wants from Cassio - he always leaves her slightly unsatisfied, but she hangs on in the hope that at some point she'll become his legitimate girlfriend.



## **Brabantio / Lodovico by Marshall Griffin**

### **Brabantio**

His acceptance and championing of Othello inadvertently paves the way for Desdemona's choice of husband.

I see Brabantio as a tragic figure and I feel he is not dissimilar to the character of Eddie Carbone in Arthur Miller's 'A View From a Bridge.' He wants a better life for his daughter and has probably invested a lot in her future. No one around will ever be good enough for his 'Gentle Mistress'.

I think Othello and Brabantio had a very good relationship but Othello is probably the last person he thought Desdemona would ever end up with. He certainly wasn't conscious that Othello would take his own daughter away and he feels greatly aggrieved and dishonoured by this act.

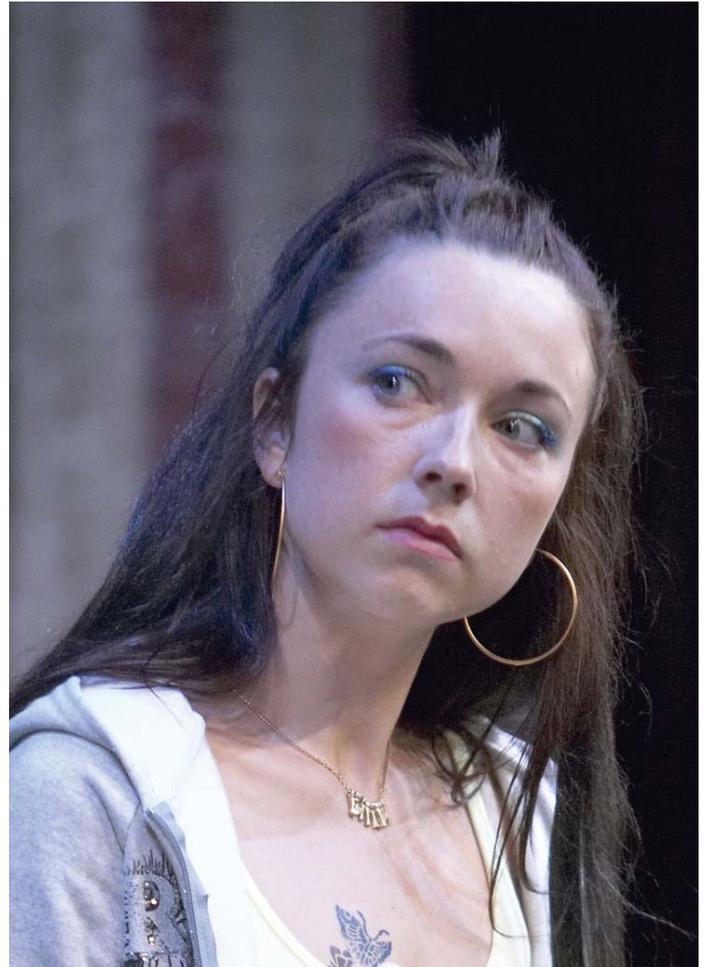
When he draws on witchcraft and racist taunts to discredit Othello, it is a futile attempt to cover his own painfully public humiliation. He represents a different generation from the boys who rule the back room of The Cypress and his presence in the pub back room is barely tolerated.

They never asked for Othello but he is far more exciting, stronger and youthful replacement for Brabantio.

### **Lodovico**

Lodovico is Desdemona's cousin.

He is accepted in this world, as he is pretty useful. People like Lodovico. His powers of diplomacy are indispensable as is his ability to join in/sort out trouble, as he is quite handy. He is a fixer and when he's not around he's up to something - he has his fingers in many pies. He is fiercely loyal to Desdemona. He's not afraid to get stuck in. He would make a good leader but does not want the crown.



## **Emilia by Leila Crerar**

The pub is Emilia's world. It's all she has known since she left home at 15. She was once top girl, like Desdemona is now.

Emilia's friendship with Desdemona empowers her. Together they are a force to be reckoned with. After Iago loses his position as Othello's right hand man, Emilia's marriage falls apart. He accuses her of sleeping with Othello. Iago has lost his manhood, and Emilia wants him to get it back. She is desperate to have his love again and will do anything to achieve this, including selfishly turning a blind eye to her husband's actions. Actions that directly lead to the death of her best friend.

Throughout the play Emilia battles with the struggle between loyalty to her husband, and loyalty to her best friend. After witnessing Othello abuse Desdemona (she herself may have been abused by Iago) she can't contain her disgust and anger towards this world, where there is one rule for men and another for women. She cries for revenge to be taken on men who treat their women like dirt but her revenge is never taken. As she tries to finally speak the truth she is struck down.



### **Montano by Eddie Kay**

Although he has a desire for violence and would only ever back down to Othello, he is of a playful nature. He will always have your back. Very respectful of the opposite sex. His aggression is disguised by his ability to charm. He works on an ice cream van with his Dad. Loves his beer and hanging out with the boys. Likes the single life and as little commitment as possible. His independence gives him the freedom to do what ever he wants. You don't want to be on the wrong side of this one.

# THE REHEARSAL ROOM

## Free exercise - day 2 playing in the place

by Jamie Rocha Allen

On the Tuesday of our second week of rehearsals, the directors wanted to give the actors a chance to improvise the life of the pub. The basic set was laid out, the cast were then invited to explore the space for themselves, and the importance was on making sure it was about the actor in the space and not getting caught up in trying to recreate scenes from the play. If they came into contact with others, that was fine, but the point was to see these individual characters in the pub.

The following list are the things that struck me from the improvisation, which lasted about 20 mins.

1. Boys playing killer.
2. Girls playing, boys making sexist remarks.
3. Black cue for the girls, Othello came up with the line - 'She's done that before'.
4. Couple (Cassio and Bianca) play pool lovingly then quickly splitting apart when the boys come in, one of the boys flirting with his girlfriend and he has to live through it.
5. Desdemona and Othello having sex on the table while the others play pool around them.
6. Everyone playing pool until Othello kicks them all out.
7. Brabantio/Lodovico shadow boxing. Fronting up to Roderigo and then instead of attacking him just leaving him shaken up.
8. Moment between Iago and Emilia on the couch that was tender and beautiful, then turned sour, but it seemed to climax amazingly with the music and then the clank of the pool balls rolling out of the machine.

After this everyone sat around to discuss what came out of the improvisation.

1. Girls being able to manipulate Roderigo when the rest of the guys are gone.
2. Brabantio not wanting Roderigo in the pub.
3. Othello enjoyed the fact that Roderigo was being bullied and didn't really care that Desdemona's dad was in the pub.
4. Desdemona didn't really care that her dad was in the pub at the same time as her.

5. Links between Brabantio and Lodovico, making a virtue that its played by the same actor.
6. Girls felt compelled to be sexy, but the directors emphasised the need for them to be comfortable in the pub for themselves.
7. Montano is the peacekeeper, and the only character that's able to cross over from the boys to the girls.
8. Othello is the outsider as he is from London, and black. He can placate people because people know that he's kicked a few heads in, in his time.
9. Importance that Desdemona and Cassio go back a long way, the fact that they embrace as lovers even though they are friends, should be normal to everyone.
10. Bianca being around but not seen and because Iago takes no notice of her she sees him for being exactly what he is.

This was a really useful exercise, which threw up some information for the actors and the directors. It's always so much more useful to see the little subtle interchanges that make up relationships rather than talking about them. What was good about this exercise, was how early into the rehearsal process it came about. It meant that the actors didn't have time to bring any of the work that they had done to the improvisation. They were acting from pure instinct and discovering things that they didn't know, and because this improvisation happened before any real detailed rehearsal of the play, the actors weren't tempted to try and recreate any of the scenes from the play, meaning that what we saw were characters just existing in their space and any of the exchanges between characters were completely in the moment and showed really simple relationships that gave a lot to us when we went on to rehearse scenes with those characters in.

Writing this near the end of the rehearsal process it's amazing looking back on how influential this improvisation was in all the work that has come so far. Two sections of movement came directly from what the actors created on that day and countless scenes have been influenced by it. It was possibly the most fruitful exercise that the directors set up, and has remained a point of reference up to the end of the rehearsal period.

# Mock Baroque



In our adaptation of **Othello** there is the stage direction  
*Iago plants the handkerchief on Cassio.*

Originally this was to be a fairly pedestrian moment where Iago wandered through the pub, perhaps employing a little 'IagoVision' before settling in on Cassio to surreptitiously plant the handkerchief about his person. So far, so plot driven.

When asked to imagine the archetypal image of a Shakespeare play, one often thinks of men in tights and somewhere a little further down the list comes the period dancing. Now, we are not exactly sure how many Shakespeare plays actually feature a period dancing section - we suspect it is probably a lot less than the average punter might think. Nevertheless, the opportunity to play with the form was too much to resist.

We set the cast a physical task along the same lines as the one we set during the making of 'Dirty Wonderland'. The culmination of that show took place in a ballroom and in rehearsals we asked the cast to create a sequence that might look like a sequence of ballroom steps but was not actually any identifiable ballroom sequence. The form was to be emulated rather than actually presented. We did the same with Mock Baroque - the title being a cheeky opportunity for word play. The cast were put into pairs and asked to create a short string of material that was similar in feel to period dancing but not any actual known steps. Several people were encouraged to think laterally by placing cigarettes and beer bottles in their hands lest we forget the setting of our own version. Very quickly we had a substantial amount of material that began to sit beautifully within our world.

Period dancing is by definition the act of courtship and in this way is immediately reflective of our pub setting. Certainly, the devices and strategies employed by the contemporary boy or girl by way of dancing are very different in style but the intention is the same. Running the material as a group we loved the way in which the characters attempted decorum. We were also intrigued by how the act of curtseying or bowing in the formal manner was made fascinating simply by the addition of a cigarette in the hand.

The formal construct of period dancing provided us with the perfect labyrinthine set up for Iago in his attempt to reach Cassio and plant the handkerchief. The period dance is constantly in a state of flux with everybody strictly committed to follow the set patterns that bring people in close proximity to one another in one moment and miles apart the next. Like a thrilling game of cat and mouse, Cassio swings himself near Iago, totally unaware of the plans to set him up.

Mock Baroque also gave us the opportunity to create a moment where all the characters are connected, the moment in the back room where the hot tune of the moment suddenly plays and everything kicks off. This is one of those impromptu party moments that occur when a particular type of song is heard and the compulsion to dance takes hold of bodies that wouldn't normally be seen dead on a dancefloor. Beyonce's 'Crazy In Love' is probably the best modern example of this but Hybrid's 'Dogstar' serves us beautifully - a big, beefy sound that counterpoints the delicate nature and posturings of the period dance.

# The Pool Boys

Cassio is getting more and more drunk and is losing control fast. Iago is manipulating him and encouraging him to have 'one more cup.'

We wanted to create a scene that captured the swagger and confidence of the guys as they played pool but also the feeling of losing control and becoming drunk and confused. All of Cassio's lines are about how he is not drunk ('This is my right hand, and this is my left. I can stand well enough and speak well enough. I am not drunk'). We wanted the room to conspire and tell a different story.

We set the performers off with a choreographic task. They were to work in a three and manipulate and move each other using one pool cue. They must try to keep in contact with it as much as possible and find ways of moving and lifting the others.

We did not give the performers the context for how we would use this material. Doing so can mean that you end up with 'drunken' material as the performers limit their imagination to moves that feel right within the context. Keeping it a pure choreographic task throws up more imaginative movement.

Once they had some material we could then start to shape it towards the context of being drunk and out of control.

(It is always more interesting watching someone trying not to appear drunk or out of control rather than someone indulging in being completely drunk)

Once this choreography succeeded in whipping Cassio into a state of confusion we then brought the set into play. As he leans on it to steady himself it consumes him and sends him off in another direction. The walls undulate and offer Cassio no support. The solid pool table revolves and spins away from him when he needs its strength most.

(This is exactly why we insist on having the set so early. It means that it can play a massive creative part in the work and not just frame the performance).

This takes some mastering as the performers have to be safe and the set has to return to a solid state once the drunken episode crashes back to a sobering reality. There are crew behind the walls helping with the undulation and they need to be completely safe and sure in what they are doing. This means that while the effect we are aiming for looks like chaos, the rehearsal process has to be measured and secure. We need all of this drunken mess to be the same precise drunken mess every night.



# Extracts from the Assistant Directors Diary

by Jamie Rocha Allan

## WEEK ONE, DAY 1, MONDAY

Meet and greet over tea and coffee. First read through for the creatives and cast only, getting the cast used to the script without the presence of other people in the room.

Feedback from the cast about the play, talking about the things that have been cut out, what do the cast feel about the piece now that so much of the story is missing. The directors wanted to make sure that they felt comfortable with the cuts that been made, and the story was clear. What's great is that the directors are really open to people's ideas and comments.

The directors led a discussion about how the physical can tell the story of the text, whether it's the best way to present the story. The directors moved onto giving examples of how the physical/visual can be used to fill in the gaps of the text that has been cut. Then we moved onto talking about how the directors were thinking about changing the handkerchief to being a cap that Othello gives to Desdemona.

There was an interesting discussion about not making the show contemporary in terms of making it 'youth'. The main aspect is using broken bottles as knives so the play isn't then labelled a 'knife crime' play.

## WEEK 2, DAY 10, FRIDAY

The morning was spent revisiting all the physical sections that had been created, and then the rest of the day was spent back around the table finishing off working through the play. While the cast were doing this I was set the task of going through the script making sure that all the characters' names were of the same type face, size, and in bold. After I finished this I joined the team at the table to continue on the script work, it seemed to be really good for the cast to be thinking about the play as a whole story, because often during rehearsals actors concentrate on the scenes that they are working on, and have a shock on the first run-through that they need to fit together to form the whole. When we reached the final section of the play where Desdemona is killed and the truth is revealed, a strange atmosphere descended on the room. Because the actors had been working through the whole play, they had a chance to see the journey of all those involved. It led to a really interesting discussion about crimes of passion, and honour killings. What goes through the mind of an uncle/brother/father when he murders a loved one? Is it a violent struggle or something far more delicate and complex? The normal atmosphere in the room, which is one of

fun and lots of jokes, was replaced with a much more sombre atmosphere.

## WEEK 4, DAY 16, TUESDAY

One of the scenes that we looked at was between Emilia and Desdemona in the toilet of the pub, the girls were finding it hard to imagine the space, so the directors did the only sensible thing and sent them off to the toilets of the theatre we were rehearsing in to practice. It was only after this that the scene really started to take shape; again it was another example of how instantly the practical can explain something. What would have taken hours to explain to the actresses about what that kind of space offers became obvious in ten minutes of just running the scene in the toilet.

## WEEK 5, DAY 20, MONDAY

The first day in Plymouth, we all get our first chance to see the set that the cast will be performing on, and what a brilliant set it is, it's so exciting to see in 3D the things that have been bits of tape in the rehearsal room for the last month. The cast were given a tour of TR2, the space we are rehearsing in and then sent off to go and warm up as the directors began to play with the wall and see what different configurations they could get out of it, and try some that they had already planned. There's a lot to be worked out, but we have two weeks to do it in. Once you move onto your set there's always a sense of starting again as you try and transplant the work and staging that's been done in the rehearsal room.

Already the directors seem to be coming up with some really interesting ways of using the walls, they made the panels undulate which can be used for a scene where somebody gets drunk and the whole room, including the people in it react in the way in which he sees them. A few of the cast were let loose on a free standing brick wall that serves as the wall of the car park, just by giving them space to play, they came up with some really interesting ways of entering over the wall.

## WEEK 6, DAY 26, MONDAY

The day started with a reworking of the Mock Baroque. After the director (Steven) had watched the video of the run on Friday, he decided that the dance needed to be re-blocked in the space, and added in a few new moves. Next we worked on showing pub life to the audience during the overture; much of this had been done already so now it's just a question of tidying up and working on the links

between sections. We continued working on the overture after lunch, again this was a layering process, taking what was already there and adding people in or changing sections of the staging to better fit the set. A lot was learnt by the directors by watching the run, seeing all the scenes, set changes, music in sequential order is the only way for you to try to get an idea of the overall story arch.

What's really brave of the directors is to never stop pushing to make changes, always looking for the best way to present the story. Of course you have to know when to set things, but little changes in the staging make all the difference. In one sequence the director moved a dance sequence between three actors, from all three facing out front to a couple of them performing sections facing the wall. Just little touches like this dirties up the clean lines of what could look like a conventional dance sequence, and its feral scruffiness fits completely in this world. The fight at the top of the overture was slightly changed to make it look a little less slick, and a bit scrappier, which completely fits the world that the directors are trying to create. I really admire how the directors are always pushing and keeping an eye on making sure that everything is of the world they are trying to create, it's this kind of cohesion that will make this show really different to other shows with dance/movement. The end of the day was spent running the Mock Baroque again, just to run it in the space.

## **WEEK 6, DAY 30, FRIDAY**

The morning was spent looking at the scenes that came up as needing work from yesterday's run; these included the Mock Baroque, the practicalities of moving the walls when Cassio is drunk, and the Charlie Brown sequence. At this stage the directors seemed to realise that what was most important was working on fitting the movement sequences into the space effectively. The afternoon was spent doing a run that was attended by a small audience of people working on the show.

This run was the first time that all the elements seemed to come into play, as the actors looked comfortable on the set, the movement sequences fitted the space, the props were nearly all there, bottles were broken, and blood leaked, but more importantly than any of these things we began to believe what the characters were saying to each other, and what was presented was a whole story from beginning to end, not just a series of scenes. How and why this change happens is difficult to explain, but what's obvious is that six weeks of rehearsals is starting to show in the work that the actors are putting on stage. This isn't to say that the run was perfect, far from it, but it had shape, and a through

line that puts us in a great place to begin the tech next week. This is a difficult time for the actors, as the days are no longer about them, the artists who need to be lavished with the directors attention are the stage managers, and the lighting and sound designers.

Even though this is the end of six long weeks, its only the beginning of the process, and with this is mind we look ahead at the challenges to come.

**The whole diary will be available to download on the Frantic Assembly website.**

# Physical Training

As with every Frantic show, it is never really known what the physical content of the show will actually demand of the performer, as the material created for the performance will come from the company members themselves. It is rare that we stand at the front of the room and teach 'steps'. Instead, the performers will be set a number of tasks that we will then film and look at for possible sequences. For **Othello** this working method was the same but in terms of knowing what the physical quality might be, we had a better idea than usual.

This was due to the setting of the show in a Northern pub. Immediately this demands that the performers inhabit a very specific physical characteristic, one that identifies most of the characters as being strictly working class and spending most if not all of their social time with one another in a single room where drink is cheap and the police turn a blind eye. In this, a main consideration of the physicality in **Othello** is one of authenticity. In the rehearsal room we had a number of DVDs that we encouraged the company to watch for this purpose. Chief among these was the Channel 4 docu-drama 'The Seven Sins Of England' which features a cast of non-actors in a number of real environments - a pub, a nightclub, a high street on a Saturday night, a cage fighting tournament. Other DVDs were 'This Is England' and 'Made In Britain', both of which have a fantastic physical authenticity. It was vital for us that the company ground themselves in the physical day-to-day reality of these people. Without this physical grounding we would have no capacity to explode the physicality into the more hyper-realistic movement sequences. Such heightened moments are only successful if they are seen to emerge and then return to a believable everyday physical environment.

Even the most conservative production of **Othello** faces the task of presenting an awful lot of fighting. For us, this came with the additional challenge of being super-brutal.

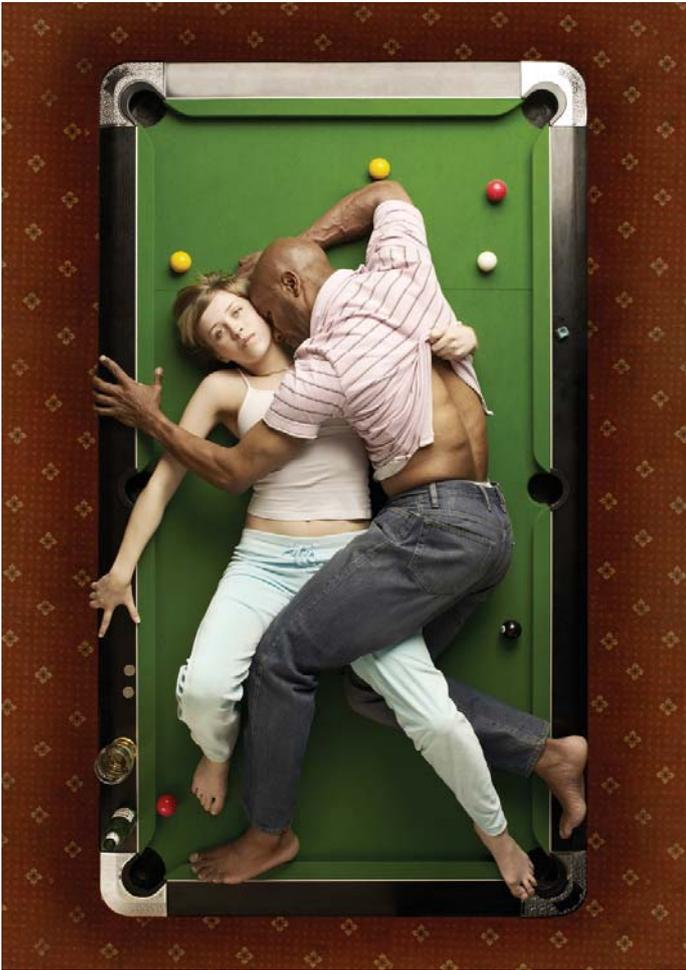
No swords for us, just fists, bottles and pint glasses. This meant that we had to develop a movement quality for the show that was reckless - not an easy task when health and safety have to be paramount in everybody's mind! The job becomes even more challenging given our own thoughts about most examples of stage fighting we have seen. Our pub world is shattered if, at any point, anyone is seen to nap a punch or twist somebody around and away from the audience in a headlock in order to deliver that archetypal fist to the face.

To this end, the **Othello** company have undergone a physical training that looks to combine precise strength building exercises with extensive work on core stability and yoga. In this way, they are able to understand and develop physical strength at the same time as learning how to achieve control and precision - essential elements for safe fighting sequences that do involve considerable risk.

Coming up to the final week of rehearsals and we have most of the fights set. Interestingly, it is not the fight sequences that have caused most injuries. A physical section near the beginning of the show involves almost all the characters in a physical celebratory lap of honour around the pub after a victorious battle with the Turks. A human tumble of limbs being lifted and thrown around the room, the making of this section has been the most difficult. Involving eight of the nine performers, choreographing the sequence takes a long time. Each move requires a lot of physical exertion and the continuous need to run each moment again and again and again means that muscles tear and strain easily. Slight mistakes can suddenly mean a whole load of weight crashing into a part of the body that wasn't expecting to receive anything. Creating this sequence has taught us a lot about the importance not just of warm ups and training but also planning rehearsals. After a long session working on this sequence we allowed the company at least two days before attempting it again.



# THE IMAGE



Images are very important to us. We use them as inspiration and to help us articulate our ideas. They are so immediate and powerful and have a massive bearing on what gets created within the rehearsal room.

Of equal importance is the image for the poster.

The peculiar task of finding the perfect image is creating something that completely captures what it is you want to achieve, says enough about what people know about Othello yet says enough to suggest we have given it our own particular twist. It also has to be sexy enough to capture the imagination of the uninitiated as well as not being provocative and risk alienating the more conservative. All of this long before you have started rehearsals.

We also have to like it a LOT as we will see it everywhere from the moment our publicity material goes public. It is our calling card, our representative, our champion. We have to believe we will still be happy with this image several months down the line when the tour is coming to a close.

We think long and hard about this choice.

We decided that the image had to suggest something of our context (the pub) therefore the pool table became the focus. We knew that table would also double as Othello and Desdemona's bed. We also knew that we had to feature an Othello figure.

We quickly had the idea of shooting Desdemona and Othello from above thinking that the green of the pool table would be a strong framing device. We also knew that we wanted to ask Perou to take the photo as we felt he could achieve the right mix of attitude and sexiness we were aiming for.

We wanted a strong, muscular Othello. We wanted a young Desdemona. We trawled agencies and asked friends and colleagues in our search for Othello. We asked our contacts at the BRIT school in Croydon if they could help us find a Desdemona.

Having found our perfect models (after looking through some hastily arranged photos) we started thinking about the practicality of the shot itself. The pub and the pool table had already been sourced. It was now all about how we could 'float' Perou above the pool table to get the shot.

The way of doing it put Perou's life in danger, probably the lives of the models too, threatened to destroy the walls of the pub and broke nearly every sensible health and safety at work rule you can think of. But we got the shot. And we were all very happy! (See Bibliography of Inspiration)

We then had a moment of doubt. There was plenty of sex and attitude in the image but there was no suggestion of movement or physicality so we decided to set up another. You will find this image on the back of the flyer. It presents a wonderfully dynamic Othello or an unfeasibly strong Desdemona. (It is also a testament to the wonders of Photoshop!)

Picture the image with Othello holding his weight up on one arm (Photoshop-ed out). Picture one of the Artistic Directors (Photoshop-ed out) holding his feet at the correct height as the model uses his considerable strength to maintain the desired level. The results look effortless but we feel they successfully suggest an inherent physicality to the production.

The typeset for the title was also well considered as we were at pains to suggest that we were still using the original text. In this classic font the word Othello at the top of the image, we hope, allays the fear that we are going to butcher and paraphrase this beautiful text.

# THE HANDKERCHIEF



You will not believe how much we have struggled with this. The handkerchief was by far the most stubborn and difficult element in our transposing of **Othello** to a pub in West Yorkshire. How could a handkerchief have the same resonance in this near contemporary environment as it does in the original context of **Othello**?

We thought the object that Othello gives to Desdemona, that she then drops, that Emilia picks up and gives to Iago, who then plants it on Cassio and then convinces Othello it is a sign of Desdemona's infidelity (are you still with us?) could still be a token that has a real emotional connection to Othello.

What we wanted to avoid was any back-story about how it had once belonged to his dear old Mother! Its significance had to come purely from the fact that it was a gift of love from Othello to Desdemona and represented their union.

Our initial thoughts were to swap it for a baseball cap. This could be Othello's own cap that he bestows upon Desdemona. It would be a sign that she was his girl. In a play riddled with jealousy it almost became the perfect substitute. It would allow us to play with Emilia's motivation, giving her a moment alone with the cap, potentially trying it on to see what it would be like to be Othello's girl (thus adding credence to Iago's paranoia).

It was almost perfect.

When it came to adapting the text the substitution of 'cap' for 'handkerchief' there was a whole raft of problems. Ignoring the obvious issues of Cassio wiping his beard with it and Othello asking for it when he has a cold the biggest problem was the rhythm of the text. The three syllable word 'handkerchief' has such a presence within the last half of the play it was resisting any attempts to replace it.

We realised we had to work with the word but rethink how the object might be used.

That is how we came to consider it a bandana, as an object that is worn rather than merely something you would blow your nose on!

Committing to this means that we have to find a balance between how much Desdemona is seen wearing it. We, as an audience should recognise it as hers and know of its place in her and Othello's relationship. Emilia and Iago also know this. Cassio and Bianca, crucially, must not recognise it.

We will not know this balance until we can see the whole show. It is a moveable feast. Only when we can take in the whole rhythm of the show will we know exactly what kind of presence the 'handkerchief' can have.

# THE MUSIC - WHY HYBRID?



We first discovered Hybrid in 1998 during rehearsals for 'Sell Out'. One of the cd's we used as warm up music was the Renaissance series that featured two tracks by the band, 'Finished Symphony' and 'Theme from Wide Angle'. Around this time we began to understand what it was that rendered a track a 'Frantic' track, using the term 'bedroom cinematic' to describe the kind of music that had a huge sweeping sound yet retained a quality of the personal. Often in a minor key, this description was a way of describing what it was that Hybrid make. As two graduates of Swansea University we also felt a strange affinity with the Swansea duo.

The Hybrid sound is quite unique within modern music making. Like most artists we have collaborated with (Imogen Heap, BT, Lamb, Goldfrapp) Hybrid are their own producers. This means that they themselves are the ones who will spend hours in the studio deciding exactly what sounds they create as well as writing the songs. Hybrid manage to combine two very distinct musical forms that, on paper at least, shouldn't marry quite so successfully. On the one hand they are pioneers of electronic dance music, particularly breakbeat. Often quite dark in tone and with the drums and percussion always high in the mix, this element gives the band a driving, dangerous, edgy quality. Then there is the orchestra. Hybrid create huge, soaring string arrangements and then record them with full seventy-two piece orchestras to create a sound that is stirring, dramatic and emotionally charged. One of their very first tracks called 'Symphony' is probably the best place to start from, a nine minute epic that set out their creative stall - an ambitious yet sophisticated dance piece that takes the form of the symphony and elegantly transposes it to a modern musical setting.

When you look at this distinctive capacity to fuse the modern with the classical, our decision to use Hybrid to score our show becomes a bit of a no-brainer. The symphonic element of the music is in direct reference to the use of a classical text. At the same time the breakbeat element is suggestive of a modern, urban landscape - the perfect sonic setting for our pub. We have patiently waited for years to produce a show that would do justice to the scale and feel of Hybrid's back catalogue. Because their sound is so grand and frequently features hard driving rhythms, it is a sound that could easily dwarf a

performance and performers. In choosing to produce **Othello** as a mid scale touring show, we felt confident that the combination of the pub setting, a cast of nine and an explosive storyline would prove to be an excellent match for what Hybrid produce.

When we finally approached the band and informed them of our intention to present a modern version of **Othello** they instantly signed up to the project and provided us with a vast array of previously unavailable tracks. They asked us what the mood and feel of the piece might be and from there provided us with music that fell into two distinct categories. On the one hand we have arrangements of existing Hybrid tracks but in various forms. The track 'Just For Today' for instance has been given to us in various guises including a version of just the string arrangement and one that has everything there except the drums. The other tracks are from film soundtracks that Hybrid have created and, as such, provide us with an excellent creative tool. Most of these tracks are short and are singular in mood from start to finish. They provide us with very precise musical backdrops that can sustain even the shortest significant moment in the play.

At the time of writing, the **Othello** soundtrack features music from all three Hybrid albums and so stands as a comprehensive reflection of the band's history too. As well as soundtracking textual scenes in the play, their music is also used to score the physical sequences in the show. In addition, Hybrid music will also be discernable to the audience as the music that is playing in the offstage bar throughout the entire play. In this way, Hybrid provide us with an entire world that extends beyond the back room we present on stage.

# The Pool Table

There was something so rich about the physicality of men exchanging banter or showing off around a pool table. It gives a focus and direction to their movement. It takes little imagination to see pool cues become batons, used to articulate and enforce a point. Or to become weapons to threaten or punish. We also loved the aesthetic of the pool table. The deep green baize, the bright red and yellow balls and, of course, the metaphorical potential of the white and black ball.

We were certain that the pool table would give our world a focus too. We were adamant that a pool table and all of the physical potential that comes with it would be our starting point for describing our world of **Othello** of potential collaborators.

Then Steven Hoggett went to work on *Black Watch* for the National Theatre of Scotland. He broke it to me that they were going to use a pool table as the initial focus of that show but assured me it would not compromise our show as *Black Watch* was only going to run for a few weeks and would only be seen in Scotland. Since then *Black Watch* has materialised into the deserved theatrical hit of this century so far and has been seen by hundreds of thousands of people all over the world!

**BUT WE THOUGHT OF THE POOL TABLE FIRST!!**

The pool table was so right for our world that we felt we had to persevere.

In *Black Watch* it became an Armoured Personnel Vehicle. For us it was to be the bed that Othello and Desdemona make love in and the bed that they die in. We have also played with the idea that it becomes the table that generals move mock battalions around on to formulate battle strategies. It is also the source of weapons (pool balls, pool cues).

Practically it gives us a platform, ledges and all kinds of possibilities for dynamic physicality. At times it is your best friend as you struggle to conjure ideas. It is also very seductive and we had to be careful of just having people jumping all over it just because we could.

The pool table had to reinvent itself from time to time, for example, to become a bed. It also had to support the pure naturalism of a scene. It is, after all, a pool table and all those logical sounds and shapes of playing pool go a long way in setting the context for our world.



# The Walls - 'Strictly not for scene changes'

Laura Hopkins has designed what appears to be a naturalistic setting of a working class pub that has gone to seed.

The walls of this set are articulated and can be moved into numerous configurations. They can even peel completely back to reveal the wall of a car park behind the pub. There is a pool table that can glide and spin. We were under strict instructions that they were NOT to be used merely for scene changes.

Laura's demand was a brilliant challenge. It would have been so easy to fall into that trap. Stupid too, for it was always the same pub. There is no need for it to change. The walls were there to tell a much more interesting story than merely define the physical space.

As soon as Laura made her demand it was clear that the walls were going to help us portray the emotional state of our characters. They would undulate as Cassio got more and more drunk, showing his confusion and uncertainty. They would close around Othello as he begins to lose his grip on reality.

As I write this we are just about to move the rehearsals to Plymouth where the set waits for us. We will work with the set for 2 weeks before we enter our technical set up week and previews.

This is an incredible luxury but it is also one we plan for. We rely on having the set for as long as possible. It is such a valuable collaborator and is never seen as something our story is told in front of. It is itself a crucial factor in the telling of the story.

We are looking forward to getting our hands on the set. It obviously makes things so much more real but it is its ability to offer something so much more than a naturalistic reality that is going to take these rehearsals to another level. Until Laura presented her design with her specific demands we were not sure how we were going to achieve that escape from naturalism that our work needs to succeed.



# THE SCENES

## 1 The Death Scene



Desdemona's death scene is a famously difficult scene. Just as Othello summons up the energy to bump her off she suddenly comes back to life to absolve him of guilt and then die properly.

This problem is faced by all productions. We initially wanted to avoid her coming back to life, to do something different with the scene but found it impossible. Admitting defeat we sought to find something different about the murder itself.

### 1. Desdemona fights back

Our Desdemona is a feisty girl. There is no way she is going to allow herself to be strangled without putting up some kind of fight. We have her offering a fair amount of resistance.

### 2. The final image

Desdemona is draped over an exhausted Othello. They are both lying on the pool table. The pool table has become their love bed and her death bed. The moment is still but then we see that his breath is animating the dead mass of her body. He is suddenly appalled/disgusted/terrified and tries to get out from under her body. He succeeds and stands against the wall to get away from her and what he has done. But even that is not far enough away. He pushes the walls until he is as far away from the pool table as he can possibly get. It is from here that he can get some perspective.

Cold, cold my girl!

## 2 The Overture

We always wanted to tell this story with utmost economy. There were things we thought we could tell visually and have moments where we could pull back from relying on the text. Mostly those moments pushed the scene forward.

We also tried to be economical with the textual exposition. There are several aspects of the text that are merely about setting the scene and giving a taste of the history. We have aimed to condense them into a physical Overture at the start of the show (naturally).

Our Overture had to answer some important questions. Or at least go some way to implying an answer.

Aspects the Overture touched on included Othello's arrival in the pub; The racial tension in the pub; A positive relationship between Othello and Brabantio. Othello's achievement of status; He and Desdemona getting together; Othello's appreciation of Cassio; Tension between Emilia and Iago; Iago taking Roderigo's money and trying to chat up Desdemona for him; Cassio and Bianca.

A successful Overture would mean that we would feel confident pushing on with a text that had reduced from around 28,000 words (the original) to about 13,000 (our adaptation).



### 3 IagoVision



Not so much a scene as a visual theme running through the production. You might notice moments when the focus shifts down to the moments of intimacy on stage. What you are seeing is what Iago is seeing, hence Iago Vision!

We were desperate for our Iago to be an opportunist bent on revenge rather than a criminal genius. We were not interested in an evil masterplan. We wanted to portray a man in pain, a man who feels wronged, lashing out at those he feels have hurt him. He would do this through moments of inspiration and opportunism. We wanted to give a sense of how the world might look to him in these moments.

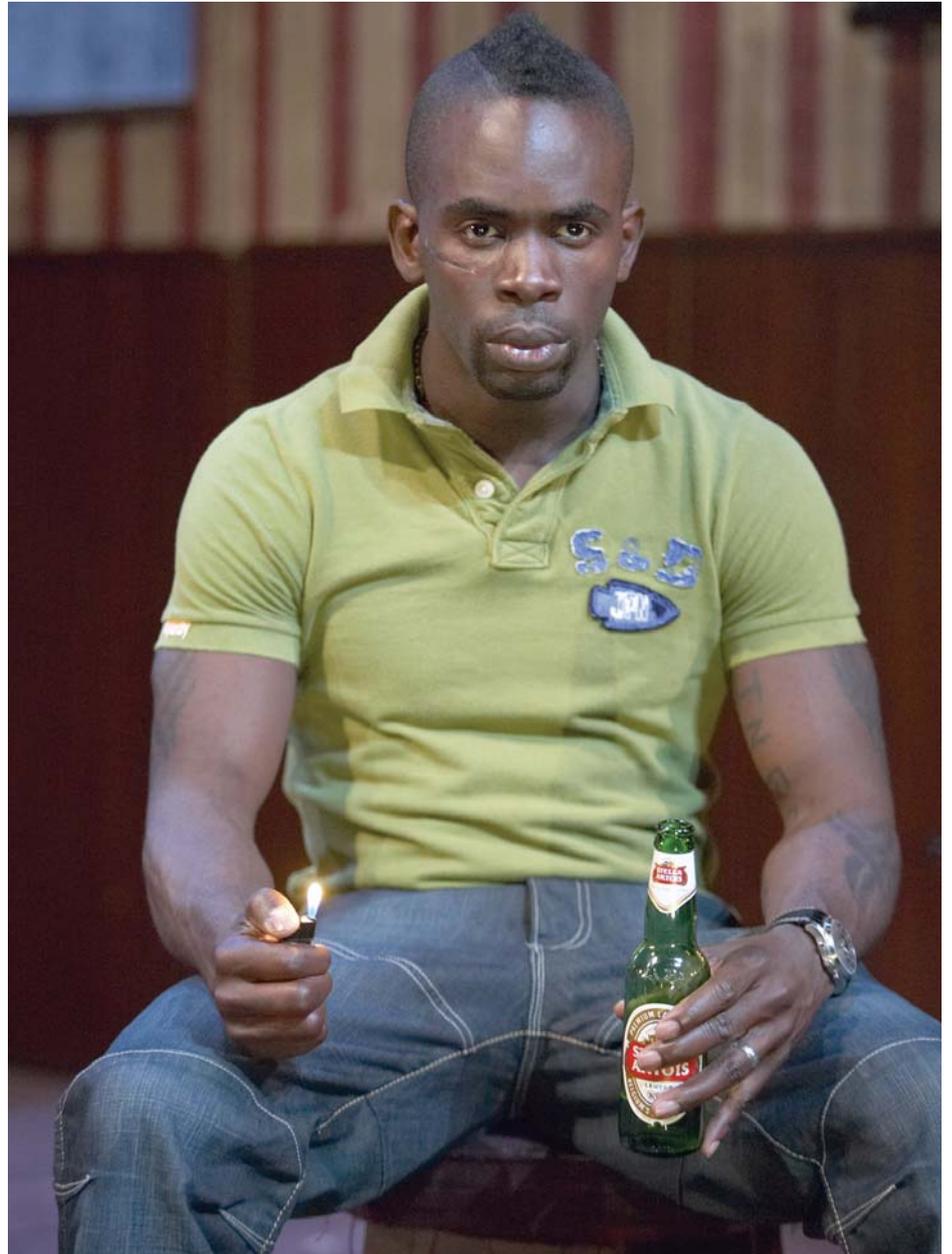
1. There is a moment when Cassio is mucking around with Desdemona after he has returned from the fight. It is platonic but it is provocative. We see the moment when Iago's mind switches on to the potential of how he might exploit that touch between two friends. ('I have it!').

2. When everyone runs out to fight and Iago is left behind looking after Desdemona and Emilia. Iago informs us that he believes Othello has slept with Emilia. ('It is thought abroad that 'twixt my sheets he's done my office') He then looks at the women and they now appear voluptuous and sexually provocative. In that moment we see Iago's sexual insecurity and his low opinion of women.

# LAST MINUTE DISCOVERIES

We have just performed our first preview. The first show was a big success but it is clear what we want to tighten up and change. We have had lots of notes and advice from friends and colleagues. The trick is working out what to take on board while being true to your own vision. Mostly the notes have been brilliant and offer an objectivity that can be impossible if you are merely watching something and willing it to work.

Time is short though and we are working frantically (no pun intended) to get things right. We have actors coming forward with suggestions for cuts and insertions. All is welcome. It is a sign of an engaged cast who really care about the work. With that kind of dedication and commitment I think we will get there.



# ESSAY SUGGESTIONS

1. How was music and sound used in the production? For example the world of the pub and the dangers of the world outside?
2. What do the directors achieve by having a naturalistic appearing set that can be manipulated?
3. How is the changing set used to express the emotional state of different characters?
4. How was the lighting used to portray the world of the play, and the various locations contained within that world?
5. The frantic script is a highly edited version of **Othello**, sections of the text have been replaced by movement. Are there moments in the show where the movement expresses what words could not?
6. Many of the relationships in the play are played out through what the characters don't say to each other, and how they act around each other in moments of silence. Examples of this are Roderigo and Iago, and Iago and Emilia. What do we learn about these relationships in those moments of silence?
7. What role does sex and sexuality have on the characters in this version of **Othello**, as opposed to a more traditional production, given the context of the pub?
8. What different performance styles are used in the production? How are the non-naturalistic movement sections used in the play? Would the show work without them? Why have the directors chosen to use them?
9. How do the actions of the boys and girls differ when they are together and when they are in their separate groups? What does this tell us about their relationships with their group and those of the opposite sex? For example, what is Cassio's attitude towards Bianca when they are alone as opposed to when the boys are in the pub?
10. Frantic are known for using music in their shows like a soundtrack to a film, and working with individual bands. What are the pros and cons of using music in this way? What effect does this have on the audience?
11. There are moments in the play where the audience views the world through the eyes of Iago, how do the technical elements of the play (lighting, sound set) support these moments and what insights does this allow us into his character? How does this effect the audience's perception of Iago?
12. Is Iago a villain or a wronged opportunist who sets something in motion that snowballs out of his control?
13. Is there anything in the play to suggest that Iago is justified in his grievances with Othello?
14. Discuss the role of communication and the lack of it in Frantic's **Othello**. How does it affect the relationships between the characters?
15. How does a sense of loyalty affect the characters in the show? Who shows loyalty, and who is undone by it?
16. How does reputation affect the characters in the world of **Othello** that Frantic have created?
17. The audience is one of the few people who are actually witness to the characters true feelings, what stage devices are used by the directors to portray this?
18. The Frantic version of **Othello** is set in a West Yorkshire pub in 2001. What aspects of the original **Othello** justify this setting? What other contexts could the play be placed in and why?
19. What effect do the directors achieve by breaking the naturalistic world of the pub with moments of movement, and using the technical elements?
20. Jealousy is one of the main themes of the play; few characters are not affected by it. Choose a selection of characters and chart how jealousy affects their journey through the play, and how it affects those around them.
21. Give an example of a music led moment in the show, and how it is used to affect the piece.
22. Look at these three scenes, pgs 51-57 Iago and Othello, pg 66 Emilia and Desdemona, pgs 66-68. With these scenes in mind, what do we learn about these characters attitudes towards jealousy? And how have the directors made this apparent in their staging of these scenes?

# AREAS OF RESEARCH

## 1 West Yorkshire Riots & Racial Segregation

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/1702799.stm>

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2002/nov/21/raceintheuk.raceequality>

<http://uk.youtube.com/watch?v=6SVe-tr-ROY&NR=1>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v4aQBG7-kTo&feature=related>

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/leeds/citylife/harehills\\_guide.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/leeds/citylife/harehills_guide.shtml)

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/1372301.stm>

## 2 Dark Heart

Frantic Assembly's production of **Othello** had been heavily influenced by reading 'Dark Heart: The Shocking Truth About Hidden Britain' by journalist Nick Davies (1998).

On a rainy autumn evening a couple of years ago, in a fairground near the centre of Nottingham, Nick Davies noticed two young boys, no more than twelve years old, and realised that while all around them people were preparing for fun, they were setting out with grim determination to do something very different. They were trying to sell their bodies. Davies befriended the boys and discovered that they were part of a network of children who were selling themselves on the streets of the city, running a nightly gauntlet of dangers - pimps, punters, the Vice Squad, disease, drugs - and yet, most mysteriously, they could not be stopped. They seemed to be drawn towards their own destruction.

Propelled into a journey of discovery Nick Davies found himself in crack houses and brothels, he befriended street gangs and drug dealers, he uncovered secret rites and rituals. Davies unravels the threads of Britain's twisted social fabric as, following the trail of the street children through corruption and violence, he travels deeper and deeper into the country of the poor, towards the dark heart of British society.

*Davies, Nick. Dark Heart: The Shocking Truth About Hidden Britain, Vintage ISBN 0-09-958301-1*

## 3 Banged Up

Although not a major influence on the show, 'Banged Up' was a TV series on Five (2008) where they took several bad lads into a prison to share cells with hardened but reformed criminals. The intention was to give the boys a glimpse of a possible future and exposure to the opinions of people who learned their lessons the hard way. But Banged Up was most useful for the various crimes against hair sported by many of the boys and hard men. This was the perfect reference for our designer and for the actors looking to base their look and physicality on something tangible.

# BIBLIOGRAPHY OF INSPIRATION

Anyone who has read one of our resource packs before would know that we like to end it with a bibliography of inspiration. Our reason for doing this is to help demystify the creative process. Inspiration can come from anywhere. It can be completely accidental. It does not have to be academic.

Below are some of the existing works that have been used by us or our collaborators to help make a point or help expand on an idea. Some are integral (The Seven Sins of England) and some are fleeting (Exorcist 3). Our intention is to show you that they are all valid when it comes to making work.

There is a big difference between working on **Othello** and creating a new piece of work like 'Stockholm' with Bryony Lavery. A vast world of **Othello** existed long before we ever thought to make our version. Millions of words have been printed on every aspect of the play. There are also many, very different film versions, each offering many possibilities. All references lead to something that is already in existence. When you are making a show from scratch the things you reference are often random and utterly diverse. That is not to say that we have not found inspiration in unusual places.

The Othello films have also been inspirational. Some have taken the story and have applied it to a contemporary situation (O) and others have retained a classical feel while cutting great swathes of text (Orson Welles' Othello). The risks taken, the bravery, the successes and failures of these films has been of great use to us.

<b>Boomerang, dir. Reginald Hudlin</b>	film
<b>The Seven Sins of England dir. Joe Bullman</b>	film
<a href="http://www.channel4.com/culture/microsites/S/seven_sins/index.html">http://www.channel4.com/culture/microsites/S/seven_sins/index.html</a>	
<a href="http://www.channel4.com/culture/microsites/S/seven_sins/bingedrinking.html">http://www.channel4.com/culture/microsites/S/seven_sins/bingedrinking.html</a>	
<b>Dark Heart by Nick Davies</b>	book
<b>Othello, dir. Orson Welles</b>	film
<b>O dir. Tim Blake Nelson</b>	film
<b>Othello, dir. Kenneth Branagh</b>	film
<b>Hybrid</b> <a href="http://www.hybridsoundsystem.com">www.hybridsoundsystem.com</a>	musicians
<b>Exorcist 3, dir. William Peter Blatty</b>	film
<b>Jurassic Park dir. Richard Attenborough</b>	film
<b>That's Not My Name by The Ting Tings</b>	song
<b>Othello, dir. Trevor Nunn</b>	film
<b>This Is England, dir. Shane Meadows</b>	film
<b>Perou</b> <a href="http://www.perou.co.uk">www.perou.co.uk</a>	photography
<a href="http://www.perouinc.com/diary/?date=2008-04-03">http://www.perouinc.com/diary/?date=2008-04-03</a>	

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