

The Play's the Thing!



Wayne Blair
takes on
Shakespeare's
toughest role.

For Wayne Blair, the beauty of being an actor is the opportunity it provides him to become someone else for a while – the freedom to slip out of his own shoes and into someone else's.

For the past few months, Wayne has had some pretty big shoes to fill – he has been playing the lead role in Bell Shakespeare's production of *Othello*. This is the first time the company has staged *Othello*, and Wayne is only the second Aboriginal actor to play the role (Tom E. Lewis starred in the Darwin Theatre Company's production of the play in 2006).

A tale of politics, power and passion, *Othello* is one of Shakespeare's greatest works. The character of Othello, the Moor of Venice ("Moor" is an old-fashioned term used to describe a Muslim person from North Africa), also remains one of the theatre's most challenging and demanding roles.

The tale of *Othello* is quite a dramatic one. Othello is a talented general who becomes the victim of another man's jealousy and his own self-doubt. Treachery, murder and suicide abound, as one man's life falls apart before the audience's eyes.

Although the play was written over 400 years ago, there are many issues within it that are just as relevant to today's society as they were in Elizabethan times, even within our own community. Not least of these are the issues of racism and tolerance – Othello is a black man succeeding in a white world that ultimately turns against him.

"Othello is good at what he does, and so the white characters look up to him," Wayne explains. "The fact that Othello is black doesn't really come into it until he marries a white woman – the beautiful Desdemona."

Othello's marriage to Desdemona creates jealousy within the heart of the play's villain – the fiendish Iago. Iago is envious both of Othello's position as commander of the Venetian armies and of his marriage, and so he goes about undermining him in a calculating and malicious manner. His cunning ploy leads Othello to wrongly suspect his wife of an affair and to question his own self-worth.

"We're all insecure," Wayne says. "And when you become surrounded by others' insecurity it can affect your own confidence."

"Because of Iago, Othello starts to second-guess himself – he questions himself, which eventually leads to his downfall."

Like any good Shakespearean play, *Othello* ends in tragedy. Fuelled by suspicions of his wife's infidelity, Othello murders Desdemona in her bed. When he then learns that his suspicions were wrong, Othello takes his own life. That's quite a scene to play out in front of a packed audience eight times a week.

"It's a very emotionally demanding role to play," Wayne says. "I have to purge quite a lot on stage, and it can take quite a while for me to come down from it all afterwards. But going through this has taught me that it's important to look after your spirit and your heart, because it's these that make you strong."

"Performing a role like this can really take it out of you physically as well. I've really had to look after my voice – I basically had to drop my voice down an octave for the role. Let's just say I've been taking lots of honey and eucalyptus."

Once *Othello* wraps up its run in Orange this month (the show also ran in Canberra, Melbourne and Sydney throughout May, June and July) there'll be no time to rest for this talented and hard-working actor. Wayne then has to go on to prepare for his next role in Sydney's Belvoir Street Theatre's production of *Jesus Hopped the A Train* – a play set in

New York that follows the story of two inmates in a prison on Rikers Island.

But for now, Wayne can bask in the glow of knowing that he has succeeded in making this most difficult of roles his own. In some ways, there are parallels between this acclaimed actor and the doomed Moor – both are black men succeeding in a white world. But it is here that the similarities end. For unlike the doubting Othello, Wayne Blair has his spirit to keep him strong.

Othello shows at the Orange Civic Theatre in Orange, NSW from August 2 – 4, 2007.

For more information, head to www.bellshakespeare.com.au or call 02 6393 8111.

For information about *Jesus Hopped the A Train*, head to www.belvoir.com.au





PREPARATION BEFORE READING

Wayne Blair is currently acting in the lead role of Bell Shakespeare’s production of Othello, one of Shakespeare’s greatest works.

Othello tells a story of politics, power, passion, jealousy and self-doubt.

ACTIVITY 1: READ THE PLAY’S THE THING ON PAGES 4 AND 5

1. Which role is Wayne Blair currently playing?

2. Briefly summarise the plot of Othello.

ACTIVITY 2: CREATE A POSTER

Create a poster or book cover for Othello. Cut words and images from newspapers and magazines or draw them to show the main themes and ideas from the play.

ACTIVITY 3: CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS – IAGO AND EMELIA

Create a piece of art to depict either Iago or Emilia, based on the following descriptions from Othello.

These two texts examine the use of metaphor when exploring the idea of jealousy.

IAGO

O, beware, my lord, of jealousy;

It is the green-eyed monster which doth mock

The meat it feeds on; that cuckold lives in bliss

Who, certain of his fate, loves not his wronger;

But, O, what damned minutes tells he o'er

Who dotes, yet doubts, suspects, yet strongly loves!

EMELIA

But jealous souls will not be answer'd so;

They are not ever jealous for that cause,

But jealous for they are jealous: 'tis a monster

Begot upon itself, born on itself.





ACTIVITY 4: RESPONSE TEXT: REVIEW

Read the review of *Othello* below.

Notes have been included to explain how the review has been structured.

MX Melbourne

7 June 2007

Suzanne Yanko

<p>positive judgement</p>	<p>The buzz about Bell Shakespeare's first production of <i>Othello</i> is that the company found an Aboriginal actor (Wayne Blair) to play the title role of the Moor of Venice, a man who is hated for his skin, envied, but also respected and loved – especially by his wife Desdemona (beautifully played by Leeanna Walsman).</p>
<p>character description</p>	<p>So tender are the scenes between these two that it's hardly believable Othello could be brought to jealousy and murderous rage in such a short space of time.</p>
<p>themes</p>	<p>This, of course, is thanks to arch-villain Iago (the well-cast Marcus Graham), who has the most words – and possibly the most enigmatic character – in the play. In a heartrending scene, he sows seeds of doubt in Othello's mind. Blair's reaction – his expression changing slowly and subtly as he is brought to fear his adored wife's infidelity – is deeply affecting. This scene alone justifies the decision to give him the lead.</p>
<p>positive judgement</p>	<p>The three central characters are well supported by the cast, especially Anni Finsterer in the complex role of Iago's wife and Desdemona's lady-in-waiting. The only difficulty is Emilia's naivete – you would think years of marriage to Iago would make you wary.</p> <p>But this is how Shakespeare tells it, and, as on most occasions, Bell is faithful to the Bard. The set is spare, allowing the drama to take centre stage. A few musicians and some 44-gallon drums add punch to this long, gripping play.</p> <p>www.bellshakespeare.com.au</p>

Using this review as a guide, write your own review of a play or film you have studied in class or one you have enjoyed yourself.

Follow the same pattern as the review above.