Dear Educators,

To wrap up this season's focus on temptation, we are ending the year with Shakespeare's great domestic tragedy *Othello*. This play is packed with themes of war and peace, racism, jealousy, and honesty, and it provides a strong base for student discussion on a variety of issues. This study guide contains some background information on the play and several activities to try with your students, but it can only scratch the surface of this dark and complex play. I hope that you all enjoy it.

Looking forward to next year, our Artistic Director George Mount has chosen the theme "Bloodlines." We will be examining what it means to be a family, and all of the love, joy, pain, and anxiety that goes with that. We will be starting off the season with the hilarious story of lost twin sons in *The Comedy of Errors*, followed by the story of a struggling *Mother Courage* who strives to keep her family together in a time of war. We'll explore family feuding through both the bloody *Titus Andronicus* in January, and the classic *Romeo and Juliet* in May. In between those two sweeping Shakespeare plays is a George Bernard Shaw comedy, *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, that explores what happens when a daughter finds out what her mother really does for a living.

Student matinees for these shows are now on sale, and we hope you will join us for another year of classic theatre at Seattle Shakespeare Company.

Best,
Michelle Burce
*Education Director*

[www.seattleshakespeare.org/education](http://www.seattleshakespeare.org/education)
206-733-8228 ext. 251 or education@seattleshakespeare.org
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Students are asked to create Facebook-style profile pages for a character of their choice, drawing information from the play and generating new information.
On a dark night in Venice Iago speaks with Roderigo, who is angry about a swift and secret marriage ceremony between Othello, a high-ranking soldier, and Desdemona. Roderigo is in love with Desdemona and Iago is upset because Othello overlooked him for a promotion that was instead given to a young officer named Cassio. The pair go to Desdemona’s father, Brabantio, and inform him of the marriage. Brabantio is furious.

Meanwhile, news arrives in Venice that the Turks are going to attack Cyprus. Othello is summoned by the Senate council. Brabantio arrives and accuses Othello of seducing Desdemona. Desdemona defends her new husband by explaining how truly she loves him. The Duke of Venice orders Othello to command the military operation against the Turks in Cyprus. Desdemona joins him along with Cassio, Iago, and Iago’s wife, Emilia, who is also Desdemona’s maid. Iago persuades Roderigo to travel in secret to Cyprus promising that Desdemona will tire of her new husband.

When the group arrives in Cyprus, they find that the Turkish fleet has been destroyed in a storm and a celebration is planned. Iago encourages Cassio to drink until he is quite drunk, then persuades Roderigo to pick a fight with the inebriated lieutenant. When Othello learns of Cassio’s involvement in a drunken brawl, he strips Cassio of his title and gives it to Iago. Cassio is distraught over his damaged reputation and Iago encourages him to talk with Desdemona about convincing Othello to reinstate him.

Now that Cassio is having private conversations with Desdemona, Iago convinces Othello that he should be suspicious of the pair. Desdemona senses Othello’s unrest and attempts to dote on him with her strawberry embroidered handkerchief, which was his first gift to her. He bats away her gesture and the handkerchief is left in Desdemona’s chamber. Emilia sees the handkerchief and gives it to Iago who has been pestering her to steal it. Iago plants the handkerchief in Cassio’s room and tells Othello that he spotted Cassio with the handkerchief. Cassio, meanwhile, has given the handkerchief to Bianca, who he is courting. Othello grows more obsessed with the idea of Desdemona cheating on him with Cassio. Iago suggests Othello watch from hiding as Iago questions Cassio about the handkerchief. As Iago asks Cassio about Bianca, but Othello, hearing only part of the conversation, assumes Cassio is talking about Desdemona. To make matters worse, Bianca storms in and throws the handkerchief back at Cassio for she knows it was owned by another woman. Othello demands that Iago kill Cassio while he kills Desdemona.

With all the pieces in place, Iago acts quickly to complete his plan. He convinces Roderigo to kill Cassio. Roderigo attacks Cassio and a struggle ensues in which Cassio is injured. Iago arrives, appearing to aid Cassio by wrestling Roderigo away and killing him. Concurrently, Othello enters the chamber where Desdemona is sleeping. She wakes and pleads for her life. Othello does not want to listen and smothers her with a pillow. Emilia arrives and, when she sees that Desdemona is dead, cries for help. Iago, a bandaged Cassio, and other officers run into the chamber. When Othello holds up the handkerchief as proof of Desdemona’s infidelity, Emilia is dismayed. She demands that Iago explain. Iago grabs Emilia and stabs her to keep her silent. In her dying breaths, Emilia reveals the truth behind the stolen handkerchief. Othello cuts Iago and demands to know his reason, but Iago vows to remain silent. Devastated, Othello turns to the crowd, draws his sword and kills himself on the bed beside Desdemona.

**CHARACTERS**

**OTHELLO**, a general in Venice's military

**DESDEMONA**, daughter to Brabantio and wife to Othello

**IAGO**, Othello’s ensign (rank immediately below lieutenant)

**MICHAEL CASSIO**, Othello’s lieutenant

**EMILIA**, wife to Iago and Desdemona’s maid

**RODERIGO**, a Venetian gentleman

**BIANCA**, mistress to Cassio

**BRABANTIO**, a senator

**DUKE OF VENICE**, the official authority in Venice

**MONTANO**, governor of Cyprus before Othello

**LODOVICO**, kinsman to Brabantio

**GRATIANO**, brother to Brabantio

**SENATORS, SAILOR, MESSENGER, HERALD, OFFICERS, GENTLEMEN, MUSICIANS, and ATTENDANTS**
THE VENETIAN-OTTOMAN WAR

Many of Shakespeare’s plays set outside of England take place in the Mediterranean. These are either Italian cities that were famous during Shakespeare’s lifetime or ancient cities made famous by the writings of classic Greeks and Romans.

After just three scenes, Othello’s characters move from Venice to Cyprus. They have been sent to defend the island as part of the Republic of Venice’s war with the Ottoman Empire. However, upon arriving they immediately learn that a storm has destroyed the Ottoman fleet. For the rest of the play, the Venetian-Ottoman war is a nonissue. Why set a story within the context of a specific military conflict when it has no impact on the bulk of the plot?

Othello was written in 1603, following the coronation of King James I. During the life of Queen Elizabeth I, Shakespeare’s theatre troop had been supported by the Lord Chamberlain (a government position responsible for coordinating entertainment and special events for the royal court). When James ascended the throne he became a direct supporter of Shakespeare’s troop and they changed their name from “The Lord Chamberlain’s Men” to “The King’s Men.”

James had a keen interest in the Venetian-Ottoman War. In 1595, he had composed a poem about the famous Battle of Lepanto, which had taken place in 1571 following the capture of Cyprus by the Ottomans. The poem was read as part of the new king’s coronation celebrations in 1603.

Shakespeare would incorporate James’s interests into his work again with the inclusion of witches and Scottish setting of Macbeth. Ultimately, although specific, the setting of Othello amidst the Venetian-Ottoman War has little impact on the content of the story, allowing director’s to set their production in a wide variety of times and places.

See Placing the Production on pages 5–6 to learn about the director’s choices behind this production of Othello.

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PAST PRODUCTIONS OF OTHELLO

1660
The Puritan ban on theatre in England is lifted and Othello is performed twice that autumn. Desdemona is played by Margaret Hughes, credited as the first female professional actress in England. Previously female characters had been portrayed by teenage boys.

1745
Actor David Garrick plays Othello in blackface which had been established as tradition for the role.

1833
Ira Aldridge becomes the first African American actor to play Othello. Born in the United States and confronted with the racism which impeded his aspiration to be an actor, he had emigrated to England and was working as a dresser in the Covent Garden Theatre. He stepped in to play Othello for an ill Edmund Keane and became a sensation. He went on to play Othello, Hamlet, and King Lear in a career that spanned England, Germany, Ireland, Poland, and Russia.

1930
Paul Robeson becomes the first black actor to play the part in England since Ira Alderidge. He plays the part again on Broadway in 1943 and a third time in 1959 in Stratford Upon Avon.

1964
Laurence Olivier plays Othello in blackface, both in England and Americans. Other actors such as Anthony Hopkins and Michael Gambon have played the part as well in blackface.

1982
James Earl Jones plays Othello to great acclaim on Broadway.

1989
Willard White plays Othello in England and America in a production that co-starred Ian McKellan as Iago.

1997
Patrick Stewart plays Othello in a racially-inverted production which was performed in both England and the United States.

1999
Ray Fearon plays Othello for the Royal Shakespeare Company and is the first black actor in 40 years to do so.

2007
Chiwetel Ejiofor plays Othello for the Donmar Warehouse in London.

2013
Adrian Lester plays Othello for the Royal National Theatre. In 2012, he had played Ira Aldridge in Red Velvet, a play about the actor.
DOMESTIC TRAGEDY

*Othello* is frequently grouped with three other great tragedies — *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *King Lear*. However, *Othello* distinguishes itself from the others with its tight narrative, domestic focus, and lack of supernatural visitations.

*Othello* is considered a domestic tragedy because its main plot line centers on a very domestic sin — was Desdemona unfaithful or not? This contrasts with Shakespeare's other tragedies and their focus on very public sins: Macbeth killed King Duncan, Claudius killed King Hamlet, and King Lear divided his kingdom between ungrateful daughters. In these tragedies, the sins examined and the punishments enacted are grand in scope and have grand consequences. Othello himself is very different in station for a tragic hero. Whereas our other title characters are kings or princes, Othello is a general. He is of high status, but his tragedy does not become the tragedy of an entire kingdom, it is instead confined to his personal life and family.

The structure of the play is also narrower. There is no well-developed parallel plot, such as Gloucester's story in *King Lear* or Macduff's efforts to help Malcom reclaim the throne in *Macbeth*. In *Othello*, the plot is largely confined to Othello, Iago, and Desdemona — with Roderigo, Cassio, and Emilia mainly serving to advance Iago's plot and the primary action of the story.

There is no supernatural element in *Othello* to drive the protagonist's action as the ghost does in *Hamlet* or witches in *Macbeth*. Instead there is a villain mastermind in the character of Iago, one of Shakespeare's villains who seems to enjoy the downfall of other characters. He follows in the tradition of several other Shakespearean villains, notably Don John (*Much Ado About Nothing*), Aaron (*Titus Andronicus*), Richard III, and Edmund (*King Lear*). These characters are modeled after the stock character Vice from medieval morality plays, who were personifications of negative influence on the human soul and commonly addressed audiences directly to share the details of their malicious plans.

While the medieval Vice character was often comical, Shakespeare makes him the author of severe tragedy. Misled by Vice, it is the protagonist or their allies who unwittingly drive the play's action to a tragic end. Just as Othello's most abhorrent and disturbing action, Desdemona's murder, is carried out not by the story's villain but by its protagonist.

In absence of subplots, supernatural visitations, and the grand affairs of kings, *Othello*’s effect becomes more visceral because it is a tightly-focused, domestic tragedy. Fear of infidelity, jealousy, and domestic violence are all present in our society. In the United States, intimate partner violence accounts for 14% of all homicides. Even after 400 years, the themes in *Othello* still play out in daily lives locally and across the globe.
In preparation for *Othello*, director John Langs did a lot of thinking about war, and about the endless conflicts that our country seems to end up in. *Othello* is a beautiful and dark play about a soldier who has seen too much. It’s a war play. It looks at what happens to people who have seen too much and who are marked by violence. In the play, Othello has a fit of what Iago calls epilepsy, but in our production it’s much more akin to PTSD.

Othello knows that he, Cassio, Iago, and the other soldiers have all been changed by the violence that they have seen, and Othello is looking for what Langs calls a "soft place to land," or a good domestic situation to end up in after the war is over. Perhaps this is why Othello chooses Cassio over Iago as his second-in-command; Cassio is more fit to be in command during times of peace, whereas Iago is more of a war dog. Langs has been working with the actor playing Iago to try to find the human motivation for his villainy, and much of that motivation comes from the trauma of war, the lack of a peaceful place to end up after the war, and the "Agent of Chaos" role that Iago likely played during the war that makes him unfit to be in command during peace times.

Our scenic design will be depicting three main places in the story: Venice, Cyprus, and Desdemona’s bedroom. Venice will have the feel of a very refined Washington D.C., with the look of military crispness, and full of refined soldiers and senators. Desdemona is a Senator’s daughter, and knows everyone in Venice except for the mysterious general Othello. Cyprus, by contrast, is a more elemental space. It is a wild, sweaty, hard space for the soldiers to go. Desdemona thought it would be an adventure, but her romanticized images of war are replaced by the gritty coastal desert of Cyprus.

This production of *Othello* is not being set in one particular time period, but has a specific mood and feel. The weapons are swords and daggers, but Desdemona will feel like she belongs to the Kennedy dynasty. The projections used throughout the show will not be showing specific scenes, but will instead give the viewer a peek into Othello’s mind-scape and the overall mood of the play. Langs envisions that this production will feel like a poem or a prayer, and the violence that takes place profanes that sacred space. The soldiers try to come back from war and transition into a time of peace, but they are so scarred by the war that they cannot leave the violence behind them.
PLACING THE PRODUCTION
PRE-SHOW REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Before watching the show, have students reflect on the following questions, either in a large group, small group, or individually in a journal.

How important is it to have a good reputation? Consider both your reputation with people you know, and your online or more public reputation.

When was the last time someone acted outside of your expectations for them? For example, when someone you respect did something bad, or someone you dislike helped you out? Was this a public figure or a close friend? Did your views of this person change because of this?

How do people behave differently when they are away from home — either on vacation, or traveling for another reason? Why might people act differently when they are out of their normal environment?

Have you, or anyone you know, ever been judged based on their race? Take a moment to watch this social experiment online: www.youtube.com/watch?v=ge7i60GuNRg

How big of a problem is racism in our society today?

POST-SHOW REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Here are some questions to discuss with students after the play. Some possible answers are included, but answers may vary and students are encouraged to come up with their own interpretations of the play. There are many correct answers, as long as they are backed up by events from the play.

Besides the Renaissance setting of Shakespeare’s *Othello*, what other time and place settings could be used to highlight the themes and tragic events of the play?

- The play could be set during the Civil War, and Othello could be a Union soldier. This would highlight a lot of the racism that he faces.
- The play could be set during 1960’s Vietnam, with the civil rights movement as a backdrop.
- The play could be set in a high school where a new kid or an outsider of some sort is disliked by the other kids who have been there for a long time. Othello could be great at football, and so inspire jealousy from others.

Do you think Othello started out as an inherently jealous person? What makes a jealous person? Who else in the story could be considered a jealous person, and how are they similar to or different from Othello?

- No, Othello did not start jealous. He was pushed there by Iago.
- Yes, Othello was a jealous person. You can tell because he never talked to his wife about her affair with Cassio, but instead just assumed she was unfaithful.
- Iago was very jealous of Cassio’s promotion, but was much more cool and calculating than Othello.

Was it possible to stop lago from carrying out his plan? What, if anything, could each character have done differently in order to prevent the tragedy?

- Othello could have trusted his wife, or talked directly with Cassio and Desdemona.
- Desdemona could have intervened with Othello earlier, or gone to someone she trusted to help her.
- Cassio could have come clean with Othello, or left Cyprus and Othello’s service.
- Emilia could have done a lot, since she knew Iago’s role in the tragedy and was never under suspicion from Othello.
- Roderigo could have gone to Othello as soon as he was being taken advantage of by lago.

Discuss Emilia’s role in the play. How does she push the action forward? Was she necessary to lago’s plot, or would he have been just as successful without her? Is she a weak or strong character?

- Emilia was necessary to the plot — without her, lago would never have gotten Desdemona’s handkerchief, and Othello would never have known the full truth about his wife’s innocence.
- Emilia was not that necessary. Iago had many tricks up his sleeve to convince Othello of Desdemona’s infidelity.
- Emilia is a strong character, because she finally stands up to Iago.
- Emilia is a weak character, because she stayed silent for most of the play and let lago dominate her.
PRE-SHOW ACTIVITY: POSTER DESIGN

OBJECTIVE:
To show that directors make choices about play presentation.

STUDENT SKILLS:
- Drawing inferences from text and images
- Determining a theme or central idea
- Using precise and sensory words and phrases

INSTRUCTIONS

• Look at Seattle Shakespeare Company’s poster and play description:

Military leader Othello passes over his ensign, Iago, for a promotion in favor of young Cassio. Seeking revenge, master manipulator Iago seeds Othello’s mind with mistrust for his new bride Desdemona. The lies spread like wildfire clouding Othello’s vision for what is true and what is false. The flame of jealousy fills him with self-doubt, destroying his once-happy marriage. With soaring language and psychological depth, Shakespeare creates a highly charged tale that roars to a crashing conclusion.

• Ask students: What do they imagine our production will focus on?

• Note that the poster features both military dog tags and wedding rings. These are both very personal pieces of jewelry, one of love and one of war. This play seems to be focusing on the effects of love and war on someone’s personal life.

• Note the use of the words seeds, wildfire, clouding, and flame, as well as the words roars and crashing. This director seems to be focusing on the impact this has on the world, and the feel of a natural disaster. There are also words that seem to refer to ocean waves, or other huge unstoppable natural forces.

• Then have students look over the plot summary at the beginning of this study guide. There are many pieces of the plot that can be highlighted by how the show is performed, and by which scenes are given the most importance. Here are some suggestions:

  • Focus on the racial tensions in Othello, and the underlying prejudice that many of the characters have about him.

  • Focus on the importance of reputation, and of building a respectable public self and maintaining that good reputation at any cost.

  • Focus on trust, and how people change who they trust and who they should trust throughout the play.

• Ask students: Can they think of other pieces of the story to focus on?

• Once students have decided what the focus of their production will be, have them design a poster and write a short marketing description of their production of the play. They can use images printed from the internet or pulled from magazines and newspapers, or they can draw the posters themselves. Have students think about the words they use to describe the play in a short paragraph. Remember — they do not need to give the summary of the plot, just a taste of what the story is about.

• Have students present their final work to the class by hanging them around the room for everyone to look at. Ask students — do these all look like the same play? Or could they be very different experiences?
POST-PLAY ACTIVITY: SHAKESBOOK

OBJECTIVE:
To consider and construct a character's point of view and inner life.

TIME: 45 minutes

STUDENT SKILLS:
- Draw evidence from literature
- Develop imagined experiences
- Analyze the interaction between individuals and events in a text

In this activity, students each choose a character and create a Facebook-style profile page for them, including friends, status updates, and likes. While students can draw much of this information from the play, they should also generate new information about the character, based on what they already know from the play.

INSTRUCTIONS
- Print out a copy of the following “Shakesbook” blank profile page for each student in class. Students can work individually or in pairs. Ask students to choose a character from Othello and create a profile page for them. Possible choices include Othello, Iago, Desdemona, Cassio, Roderigo, and Emilia.
- Instruct students to fill in all areas of the profile with the following information. Students should draw from information that they know from the play already (Desdemona recently got married to Othello and is madly in love) and imagine additional information that fits with what they already know (Desdemona links to her “Wedding ideas” Pinterest and lists “my hubby” under her likes).
  - Name
  - Basic Information
  - Education and Networks
  - Likes
  - Friends (at least three)
- Students should also choose a cover photo and a profile picture for their character. Cover photos are often representative of something the character likes or a place they have been. Profile pictures do not necessarily have to be pictures of the actual characters — sometimes they are photos that the character feels represents them.
- Fill in the character’s wall with at least four updates. These can be:
  - Status updates by the character
  - Articles shared by the character
  - Messages left by a different character
  - Photos or albums posted by the character
  - Photos that the character is tagged in
- Post these “Shakesbook” pages around the room, and give students a chance to look at all of them. Then lead a group discussion about the process of creating these pages.

POST-ACTIVITY DISCUSSION
- What was the easiest part of creating these profile pages? What was the most difficult?
- What is your favorite element of your profile page that you imagined about your character — something that was not explicitly mentioned in the play?
- Do you feel like your character was fully created in the world of the play? Or did you have to make up a lot of information about your character?
- If your character was actually on Facebook, how do you think social media might have changed the course of the play?
Mission Statement

With the plays of William Shakespeare at our core, Seattle Shakespeare Company engages our audiences, our artists and our community in the universal human experience inherent in classic drama through the vitality, immediacy and intimacy of live performance and dynamic outreach programs.

About Us

Seattle Shakespeare Company is the Puget Sound region’s year-round, professional, classical theatre. The company’s growing success stems from a deep belief in the power and vibrancy of the time-tested words and ideas of Shakespeare and other classical playwrights along with a commitment to artistic excellence on stage. The results have been provocative performances that both challenge and delight audiences while fostering an appreciation for great stage works.

Our combined programs — which include indoor performances, free outdoor productions, regional tours, educator and youth programs — reach across barriers of income, geography, and education to bring classical theatre to Washington State.

Education Programs

In-School Residencies, Matinees, and Workshops

• In-School Residencies bring active, customized curriculum into schools across Washington State. Professional teaching artists plan with teachers to tailor each residency to fit the needs and objectives of the classroom. Seattle Shakespeare Company residencies inject vibrant, active exercises into lessons that unlock the text, themes, and actions of a Shakespeare play.

• Student Matinees bring over 3,000 students annually to our mainstage productions in the Seattle Center. Teachers are provided free study guides, and student groups are invited to stay after the show for a free Q&A session with the cast.

• Pre-show and post-show workshops can be booked to accompany mainstage matinees. These workshops include an introduction to the play itself, student activities, and insights into direction and design choices of our specific production.

Touring Productions

• Fresh and accessible 90-minute productions tour across Washington State each Spring, reaching more than 14,000 students and adults. These nimble productions perform as easily in school gymnasiums as professional theatre facilities. Teachers are provided free study guides and students enjoy free post-show Q&A sessions with the cast.

• Schools have the opportunity to book accompanying in-school residencies with touring productions, led by members of the touring cast and additional teaching artists.

Camps and Classes

• Our summer “Camp Bill” series in Seattle and Edmonds offers young actors a variety of camps to choose from or combine. Camps range from a One-Week Introduction to a Three-Week Production Intensive, with many options in between.

• In our Fall and Spring after-school “Short Shakes” programs, young actors develop their skills and gain hands-on performance and production experience.

• Seattle Shakespeare Company occasionally offers adult classes and workshops to our community featuring guest artists who work on our stage.

In-School Residencies and Camps
Michelle Burce, Education Director
206-733-8228 ext. 251
michelleb@seattleshakespeare.org

Touring Productions
Casey Brown, Education Associate
206-733-8228 ext. 241
caseyb@seattleshakespeare.org

Student Matinees
Lorri McGinnis, Box Office Manager
206-733-8228 ext. 220
studentmat@seattleshakespeare.org

General
Ticket office: 206-733-8222
Administrative offices: 206-733-8228
Fax: 206-733-8202
Seattle Shakespeare Company
PO Box 19595
Seattle, WA 98109
www.seattleshakespeare.org