



# OTELAS OTHELLO

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## INTERVIEW WITH OSKARAS KORŠUNOVAS

***Othello* is the seventh of Shakespeare's plays you've directed. Why do you always come back to this author? Why this play today?**

**Oskaras Koršunovas:** Theatre is a tool that helps me to better know myself and the society I live in. The desire to gain this knowledge drives me to choose the plays I direct very precisely. William Shakespeare is one of those playwrights who, in their works, created perfect matrices for the modern world. Trying to adapt those models reveals that no modern play can talk about the reality of our contemporary world as well as he does. He elevates the contemporary to a higher dimension and allows us to understand it in more universal terms. He's a perfect fit for me, as I always tend to direct classic plays as if they were modern and modern plays as if they were classic. *Othello* can be seen as a new sequence in my previous work, *Eglė žalčių karalienė (Eglė, queen of the serpents)*, about an old Lithuanian myth in which a sea serpent kidnaps and marries a young peasant and is then killed in reprisal by her brothers. What I'm interested in is the question of the other, of the hatred towards the other, the hostility towards "him" or "her." This question allows us to realise that William Shakespeare's characters and world are resolutely modern. It also allows us to examine the current rifts between the natives living among the ruins of the welfare states and the refugees kept away from the opportunities developed countries offer by the powerful military forces operating along continental borders. Those similarities between William Shakespeare's time and ours shone a new light on our direction and tied our adaptation closely to contemporary world problems.

**The character of Iago has a very specific role in your adaptation. What place did you give him in your dramaturgy?**

Yes, Iago is a very important character, because he establishes a direct connection between William Shakespeare and pop culture and media headlines. Iago plays a central part because he stands apart not only thanks to his brilliant intellect, which covers all the knowledge of the Renaissance, but also thanks to his ability to manipulate, to create new strategies, to win the struggle for power not through war but through deceit and betrayal. Those abilities, which correspond to the art of politics as defined by Machiavelli, tend today to predominate in our culture, just like the skills of certain media personalities, celebrities, and other icons who "influence" our ways of life, our actions, and our decisions. Iago is the creator of a social network whose end is fatal for all, including himself. That's why he deserves more exposure in the play.

**The play asks the question of alterity in all its forms, and tackles issues of racism, sexism, and prejudice. What do you think *Othello* is fundamentally about, and what did you want to say about our world through it?**

*Othello* is a unique play. It marks the beginning of a global modernity, of an era called by contemporary authors "the postmodern global Empire," which is now quickly falling to pieces. It's the destruction of old walls and the building of new ones. It's a time where rigid structures of power become more fluid networks. Modern crises have shown us that there is an urgency to rethink the consequences of modernity on our minds, on our mentalities. We have to think critically and to understand William Shakespeare himself as the bearer of this modern imperialistic ideology, which treats domesticated Othello differently from the barbaric and wild Caliban of *The Tempest*. The stakes are important here, and the history of the various adaptations of *Othello* says a lot about evolving points of view regarding race, gender, and nationality through the centuries. In *Othello*, Shakespeare is much more subtle than in *The Tempest*, because external imperialistic problems have become internal problems, the problems of the conquered world. The other no longer needs to be killed, he must be domesticated. Yet any attempt to go further ends in tragedy. Othello can't speak in his own voice, can't follow his own vision, he isn't allowed to love. He is often treated like a noble but unreasonable human being. We wanted to invite him to express himself here.

Directing *Othello* allows us to pay attention to the whole range of discourses produced in our contemporary model, such as postcolonial and cultural studies, the critique of metanarratives, or binary dichotomies and other post-imperialist topics. And those topics seem to be even more urgent today, in these times of global crises. We need to learn a lot so as not to repeat our mistakes.

**People fall for manipulation easily, and our societies seem to be controlled by fear. Do you think that theatre can be an effective art form to fight those evils?**

I think that theatre must destroy walls and allow others not to remain “others,” not to be simply different but to also become, in many ways, the same. And theatre is the perfect place for unexpected words, for unforeseen stances, it’s a permanent participatory experiment, a sort of democratic experiment. Theatre is therefore a chance. It’s now or never. But it’s also a sort of manipulation, but a good manipulation which aims to heal us, not only physically but spiritually. To heal from prejudices, fear, and manipulation. This sort of healing process must start now.

**There seems to be an invisible thread connecting the plays you’ve chosen to direct, in particular between *Tartuffe*, which you presented in 2018 at the Festival d’Avignon, and this *Othello*. Would Iago be a sort of English counterpart to *Tartuffe*?**

No, I don’t think that there’s such a link. Molière and Shakespeare are different. *Tartuffe* is first and foremost a play about the power of domestic manipulation. It’s mostly a comedy, even if the consequences of what happens can be tragic. Shakespeare says that “*all the world’s a stage*” and that our actions and decisions can lead to global problems or cause changes on a planetary scale. Molière’s *Tartuffe* is a master of bedroom intrigue, which can lead to larger events, but Molière never loses sight of the comic, human, and intellectual side of those situations. As for Shakespeare’s Iago, he is a megalomaniac who wants to gain full power, here and abroad. The forces that appear in the play are at once instinctive and total, they bring together physical passion and global power. Molière’s *Tartuffe* undergoes a transformation, it starts as a comedy and turns into a tragedy, whereas Shakespeare’s *Othello* is a tragedy through and through.

**What will the atmosphere of your *Othello*, with its very young cast, be like? How did you approach the role of Othello, and the thorny problem of his skin colour?**

In our show, the choreography plays an important part in the scenography, which is inspired by different techniques to make the show as dynamic, vibrant, and lively as the world of today. As it’s a very physical performance, I decided to call on young actors. Youth, theatre, and passion inhabit the stage. The subject of Othello’s skin colour is extremely subtle, as is the couple formed by Othello and Desdemona, as is the current situation of love in a time of so many crises. While rehearsing, we decided to surprise the audience when it comes to the main characters, which is why we won’t go into details here...

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