



# OTHELLO ASTROLOGIST

## INTERVIEW WITH OLIVIER PY

***Othello* is often described as a play about jealousy. In what state of mind did you approach it?**

**Olivier Py:** First by paying close attention to the poetic grandeur of the characters: Iago and Othello. Poet and translator Yves Bonnefoy curiously wrote that Othello was a sort of Rimbaud... If the association isn't obvious, it is no less enlightening. Othello, like Rimbaud, faces the question of the ideal. He "*carried out the magic study of happiness that no one eludes.*" In *Othello*, this ideal has a name: Venice. Othello still has the energy, thanks to his youth and beauty, to formulate what makes the ideal attainable. It's beautiful, so beautiful that it's unbearable for the average man, namely, Iago, you, and me. Iago is an allegory of jealousy. He can even say something like "*I am not what I am!*" Isn't it interesting to confront it to *Hamlet's* "*To be or not to be,*" which I'm directing for the dramatic series in the garden of the bibliothèque Ceccano this year? Here's a man who experiences the erasure of his own being. Perhaps it's a circumlocution to express the jealousy he feels...

**Iago expresses this jealousy in incredibly ways, and turns out to be able to manipulate words for evil...**

He's a theoretical being. He can formulate what he's excluded from. The character of evil is most often theoretical: doesn't Aaron, in *Titus Andronicus*, say "If one good deed in all my life I did, I do repent it"? This is the breaking point, the crime against humanity. Iago is truly sublime. When asked why he drove Othello to murder Desdemona, he says "From this time forth I never will speak word," while up until then he's been constantly expressing his pain. At the end of the play, he faces the mystery of evil, his own mystery, and it drives him to silence. It's a metaphysical theme. Ever since we started working at the Avignon-Le Pontet prison, the inmates have been attracted to this play. I've rarely seen them in such a state of emotion because of questions of crime, of injustice. Like Woyzeck in Georg Büchner's eponymous play, Othello is both guilty and innocent. He doesn't deny his action, but his guilt. When it comes to Iago, it's different: it's society that's guilty.

**Othello is the Moor, the man of colour...**

But you have to ask the question: is Othello black? He's a Moor. Yet, although he says a few times that he is black, it's impossible to know if he's not speaking of his soul, or his hair... The character who inspired Shakespeare wasn't black at all! Just as Nathalie Garraud did the last time *Othello* was performed at the Festival d'Avignon in 2014, I chose the term *Arab*. The inmates are very sensitive to the theme of racism, all the more so because the character has to pay for his success. He's integrated, but still a victim of racism. It's an idea that's very powerful in the play. I'd rather him be a "*métèque*," an immigrant, than a "barbarian," and although he is physically indistinguishable from anyone else, some believe he must be destroyed. There's also another theme we discussed at length with the inmates, the question of violence against women, and many were reluctant to say the insults addressed to women in the play.

**The object of Desdemona's supposed betrayal is the famous handkerchief...**

When Othello describes the handkerchief, he's actually speaking about the concept of truth. What is truth made of: dreams, legacies, fantasies? The whole tirade about the handkerchief is a meditation about the real. If the translator remains faithful to the text, he can create this sort of effect: a parallel between truth and the handkerchief... If he decides it's but a syntactic flourish, if he focuses less on the signifier than on the signified, he can lose some of the metaphysical phrasing. The handkerchief is theatre. My theory about all the works of Shakespeare is that they're all meta-theatre. I think there's a question about meta-theatricality in every line. Even the simplest ones: "Let's leave," or "He enters"! The whole text is woven around its capacity to make theatre the most extraordinary tool for metaphysics humankind has ever known. It works with *Hamlet*, with *Othello*, with all of Shakespeare.

**Your actors all have their own stories. With the benefit of experience, how do you perceive their commitment to such a theatrical journey?**

I struggle to speak of it other than from my personal point of view. I've always said the work I was doing wasn't therapeutic, or social in nature; if there was therapy or social integration, it was more on my end! It's an intimate journey, which certainly changed me and made me understand how the world creates scapegoats. What's present in *Othello* can be found in social pressure, which acts like the gods used to in our modern tragedies. Those inmates all have a particular relationship to rivalry; it's something inescapable in their psychological experience. *Othello*, both the play and the character, speaks to them directly: the idea that another being could, in his existence, deny theirs. Prison isn't the loss of freedom, an electronic bracelet would be enough if it were. It's a revocation of existence. With a tragedy like *Othello*, which speaks of racism, crime, guilt, and manipulation, those actors, who've experienced much more traumatic events than we have, understand the play better than I do! The relationship to words is something they have to deal with daily. When caught in the legal system, only words matter...

**With *Othello*, as with some other of your stage creations, you talk of “transaptation.” How does this neologism describe your specific approach to Shakespeare?**

I've brought together two questions: translation and adaptation. We should see the fact that we have to translate as an advantage over the original text. Translating a play, by Shakespeare for instance, means bringing new questions to it. I've learned a lot about that from Yves Bonnefoy, who helped me understand that this transition from one language to another has to be a work of hermeneutics. If you work on a text in your native tongue, it's something you can't do. It's amazing, in the sense that the number of translations only grows as you read, explain, and interpret the text. The translator gets closer to Shakespeare by getting farther. As a translator, I'm like a prisoner in love. The works of Shakespeare become a hypnotic prison for me; I'm always discovering new questions. And since I'm doing the direction as well and, like many directors, do my own changes, this word of “transaptation” seemed particularly apt.

**What's the relationship between English and French, then?**

French, as Yves Bonnefoy wrote, is metaphysical. I see English as ontological. With always this impression of sitting down with a play that's always the same and always different. I appreciate Yves Bonnefoy's translation, but mine is radically different from his. *Othello*, it's true, is less conducive to adaptation. The play is more focused, more linear in terms of plot. In other words, it offers fewer problems. But it's not always a question of length. When I directed *King Lear*, I made no effort of adaptation: no cut, no line moved around, nothing! When I'm translating a play, I end up with several texts. For *Hamlet*, I had five different translations. None of them look like the ones I'd read before, and all seem faithful to me.

Interview conducted by Marc Blanchet the 21<sup>st</sup> January 2020 and translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cléach