

## Chicago Youth Shakespeare Presents

### *Othello*

By William Shakespeare

#### What's the play about?

Othello is the captain of his university's lacrosse team and he seems to have it all: athletic achievement, a thriving social life, and the love of the most popular girl on campus, Desdemona. Plus, he's named his best friend and frat brother Michael Cassio to be his co-captain and right-hand man. Enter "honest Iago," a fellow frat brother and a trusted confidante of Othello's. Secretly consumed with hate and driven to bring Othello down by any means necessary, Iago weaves a web of lies that may just change life on campus forever.

**\*CONTENT WARNING:** *This production contains depictions of violence (sexual, physical, & suicidal), alcohol consumption by minors, and racially-charged language.*

#### Cast of Characters

Set in a modern-day fraternity house at an unnamed university

**Othello** - Frat star and captain of the Lacrosse team

**Iago** - Everyone's trusted bro and "Go-to Guy," harboring some serious secrets

**Desdemona** - Othello's faithful girlfriend and model student

**Emilia** - Iago's girlfriend and BFF to Desdemona, always speaks her mind

**Roderigo** - Frat star wannabe and Desdemona admirer/possible stalker

**Cassio** - Othello's faithful sidekick - especially on the lacrosse field

**Brabantio** - Desdemona's dad, the overbearing type

**Montano** - One of the younger LAX/Frat bros

**The Duke** - Frat House Director, a little old and out-of-touch

**Lodovica** - Dean of Students, caring but a little out of the loop

**Bianca** - A girl we see around a lot with Cassio, has a bit of a bad reputation, but a big heart



*Montano, Othello, and Iago argue following a fight at the frat house.*

## Where did the play come from?

*Othello* was first written by Shakespeare in 1603, and was first performed in late 1604, but is not itself an original story: it borrows its plot structure and most of its characters from Cinthio's simpler tale *Un Capitano Moro* ("A Moorish Captain"). *Othello* came among a long streak of Shakespeare's greatest works, coming a few years after *Hamlet*, and just a little bit before *Antony and Cleopatra*.

## Why set the play in a frat house with college students?

At CYS, our mission has always been to present Shakespeare's work in a way that makes it relevant to Chicago's teenagers and accessible to a diverse and creative community of young artists. When we sat down to discuss *Othello*, we decided we couldn't ignore how the issues that are embedded in Shakespeare's text are still issues our students are confronted with every day. **Racism, sexism, relationship abuse, expectations of masculinity -- these are all issues that our students see on the news and encounter in their lives** and the lives of their friends and loved ones as they navigate through a complicated and often unfair world.

We decided we needed to set the play in an environment where systemic racism would be ingrained into the culture, where a "Boys will be boys" attitude would be normalized, and we would be confronted with just how difficult it can be to be a young person in a high pressure social environment. In setting our play in an athletics-based fraternity setting, we don't mean to generalize these groups, but to point out the dangers facing these environments when left unchecked, especially for young women and young people of color.

**We hope a new look at this classic text will raise questions about our personal prejudices, our ingrained biases, and how our interactions carry a world of consequences for the people around us.**



*Iago and Emilia playfully bicker over Desdemona's handkerchief.*

### Did you know...?

The following facts give a little insight into the world in which we chose to set *Othello*.

Do any of these facts surprise you?

- A CDC Report found among victims of contact sexual violence, physical violence, or stalking by an intimate partner, nearly **23% of females and 14% of males first experienced some form of violence by that partner before age 18.**
- Nearly half (43%) of dating college women report experiencing violent and abusive dating behaviors.
- Only 33% of teens who were in a violent relationship ever told anyone about the abuse.
- According to a study done by Princeton, research shows that white and higher-income students are much more likely to join fraternities and sororities—**77 percent of sorority members and 73 percent of fraternity members were white at the school**, compared to only 47% of the student body.
- According to a Harvard study, 4 out of 5 fraternity and sorority members are binge drinkers. In comparison, other research suggests 2 out of 5 college students overall are regular binge drinkers.
- Interracial marriage wasn't made legal in America until 1967.
- **In 2000, 31% of Americans said they would oppose an interracial marriage in their family.** That share dropped to 9% in 2002 but climbed again to 16% in 2008.



*Othello listens as Iago gives him advice.*

## Discussion Questions:

- Why do you think Iago is able to convince Othello that Desdemona is unfaithful?
- Iago tells us that he hates Othello, but one of the only concrete reasons he gives is the rumor that Othello had a relationship with Emilia. What do you think motivates Iago's hatred? Do you detect any other feelings he may have for Othello?
- Othello starts off as a likeable character, but makes a lot of terrible decisions throughout the course of the play. Do you think Othello is redeemed at the end of the play? Do you blame Othello for what he did or Iago?
- Women in Shakespeare's time had far fewer rights than modern women, but women still struggle in today's society to achieve true equality. Were there moments in the play that you felt the sexism you were seeing is something you might see today? Or did the female characters feel like they were stuck in the past?
- CYS chose to set this play in a fraternity house on a modern college campus. What other modern settings do you think would make sense with *Othello*? Why?
- Why is this an important story to tell today? What message do you think *Othello* helps to get across to a modern audience?



*Desdemona, Bianca, Emilia, and the Duke watch the lacrosse game.*