

Production Notes

From the Dramaturg

Fran Teague

In another Shakespeare play, a coldly logical character observes:

*Lovers and madmen have such
scething brains,
Such shaping fantasies, that
apprehend
More than cool reason ever
comprehends.*

Apprehension—the taking in of information—differs from comprehension—thoughtful understanding of that information. After all, the speech concludes, “in the night, imagining some fear, /How easy is a bush supposed a bear.”

Many years ago, I saw a production of *Othello* with an audience who had little knowledge of the play. Their weak apprehension led them to think the play was a comedy about a braggart soldier and the clever servant who tricked him. For most of the evening, they laughed with Iago, the smartest guy in the room, as he tricked everyone. As the play drew to an end, they became uneasy, realizing that their apprehension had made them mis-comprehend what was happening. The closing moments of the play were received with gasps of horror and disbelief. I have rarely had a more uncomfortable evening in the theatre.

The characters in this play apprehend a great many things, but struggle to comprehend them. Iago, for example, apprehends every scrap of gossip he can, but he comprehends what he hears (or invents) through his own desire to destroy. Whether he is a lover or a madman, his faulty comprehension drives him. Cassio, as well, fails to comprehend that the advice Iago gives him will lead him to danger. Emilia fails to comprehend her own husband;

once she realizes what she has unwittingly done, she is marked for death. Most cruelly, Othello apprehends the “proof” he requires without thoughtful understanding. He becomes a tool for Iago to use viciously, and the play ends violently, tragically, for him and the innocent Desdemona.

In an ideal theatre, the audience watching the play would ask themselves what they apprehend in the world around them. Do we swallow half truths, allow desire to shape our judgment, act without comprehension? If we watch the play and assess its characters on appearance, preconceptions, or what others say, then we too lack comprehension.

From the Director

Kristin Kundert

In academia, it is common for the majority of actors in a theatre department to identify as female. Meanwhile, in most scripts, it is common for the majority of roles to be written for actors identifying as male. It is especially true of Shakespeare’s works. For example, the text of *Othello* calls for a minimum of 15 males and only 3 females. Casting our production as Shakespeare intended would be challenging, as we simply don’t have enough men audition. Additionally, as a professor of acting, I see our productions as laboratories for our teaching, and as the majority of students in acting classrooms are female, it doesn’t seem fair or prudent to cast Shakespearean productions traditionally.

In an effort to deal with this dichotomy, in my research I looked for examples of women rulers and soldiers in Renaissance Italy. I found that there were indeed women warriors and governors. Of course, the number was limited but the examples allowed me to feel secure in switching some of the roles that were written for men to women. In the case of Roderigo, we have switched pronouns to the gender neutral “they” instead of him or her. Ultimately, our cast consists of 16 actors—8 females and 8 males.

In the past I have addressed the gender and casting issue by updating the play to a more modern time period where audiences would be comfortable with women in power positions. In the case of *Othello*, updating the period as a solution to the casting challenges raises other issues. If the play were to be set in a modern period, the themes of racism and misogyny are brought to the forefront. While these “isms” are present in the text and not to be ignored, I don’t feel that this is what Shakespeare was addressing with *Othello* given circumstances of the time. In her dramaturgical notes, Dr. Teague speaks of apprehension verses comprehension as a central idea in the text. In the scene where the Duke and Senators are evaluating reports of the Turks attack on Cyprus, they go beyond apprehension to comprehension and model for the audience a solid means of listening and evaluating. I believe that this is the central issue in the play and one that remains crucial for audiences in 2018.

From the Scenic Designer

Michael O’Connell

The eight-pointed star pattern on the floor for this *Othello* is a classic Islamic decorative motif. This particular variation is from the sidewalks surrounding the Palazzo Ducale (Doge’s palace) in Venice, Italy. From the 14th well into the 18th century the city-state of Venice, continually in conflict with Turkey, militarily and financially dominated the Aegean and eastern Mediterranean (including Cyprus). Venice became the primary conduit through which the wealth and culture of the middle east flowed into Europe. For Shakespeare and his audience, Venice and Cyprus were the furthest footholds before Christian Europe gave way to Islam and the middle east, impossibly wealthy, powerful, distant, and exotic settings for a story of passion and betrayal.