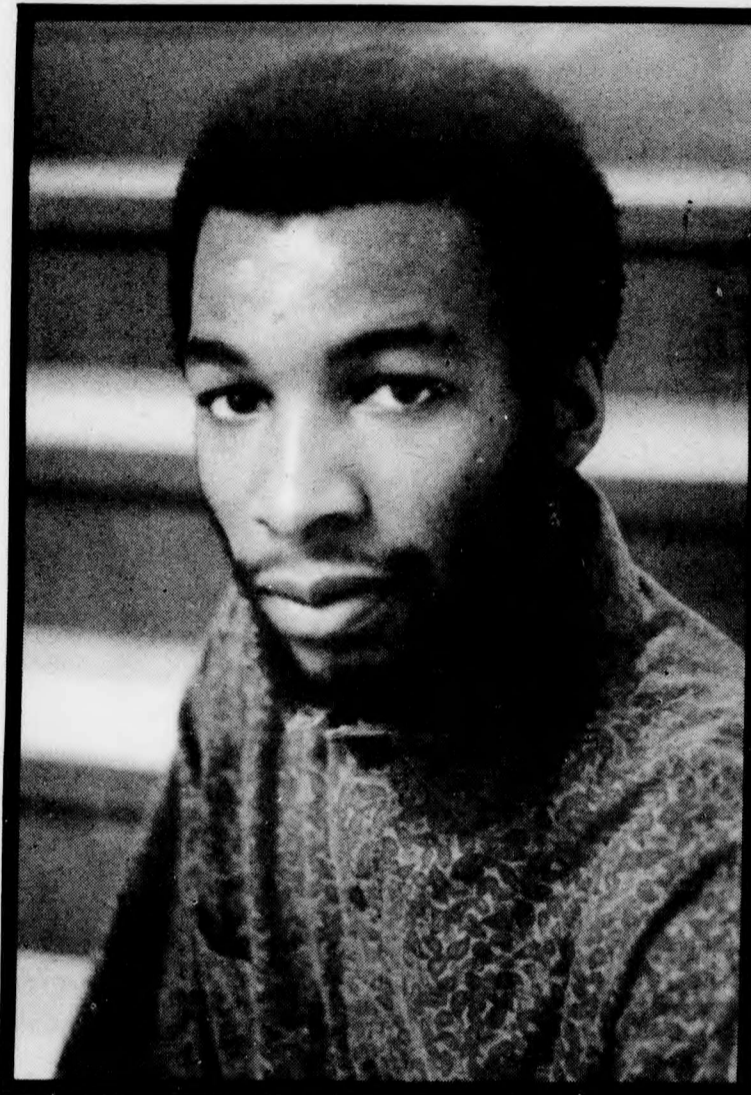


Othello



by Mikel Koven

An African immigrant will murder his wife in a jealous rage. It will happen November 20. Actually, it will happen to the same woman every night for four nights. The killer may look and sound different, but he will always be her husband, just as he has been for 400 years, and his name will always be Othello.

Theatre York's first production of the year, *Othello*, opens November 20 and runs until the 24. There is always a sense of cliché when mounting Shakespearean plays because they have become so ingrained in our society that we are born reciting "to be or not to be."

What will be different about this production is the return to the first folio version rather than using the standard literary text grammatically corrected by scholars. This is the original script in which Shakespeare gave his actors the clues they needed for performing the roles, not through stage directions, but through punctuation.

Modern scholars, restructuring the plays to conform to a specific meter, have altered their passion. However, director Neil Freeman, following the first folio, showed how Shakespeare structured his work by making "sane" speeches even, and passionate speeches erratic. The result of hearing the first folio version is, well, dramatic.

Othello promises to be dramatic and passionate.

Shakespeare seems to alienate a lot of non-theatre and non-English majors. The language seems as far from English as Chinese. Freeman's version, he promises, will alienate very few.

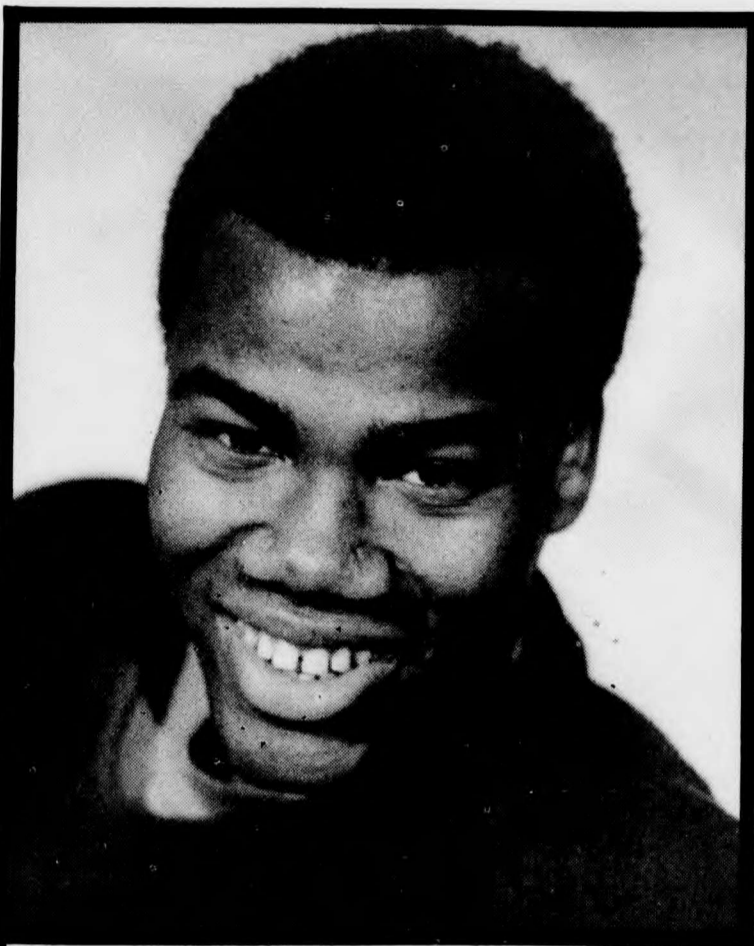
Othello will be played by two fourth-year performance majors, and Freeman insists it will be an exercise for the actors. The passion, the drama and accessibility of *Othello* will be conveyed by Ephraim Hylton and Michael Edwards, both playing Othello.

Excalibur spoke with them about the problems of the Shakespearean language, the problems of being an outsider like Othello, and theatre in general.

EXCAL: The two of you are playing Othello, alternating nights, in Theatre York's production. How do you find working with Shakespeare?

EH: For me it was . . . a little difficult, but we had experience with the language last year because we were working with *Women Beware Women*. So getting in touch with the language was a little easier this time around. And with certain clues that Neil [Freeman] gave us with the script, it just came.

ME: Even more than that, when he pulled out the first folio, and he pulled out the overhead, and just lectured and lectured on how to approach the script of the first folio, it cuts in half the intimidation of the text. He is using tech-



Ephraim Hylton and Michael Edward, two fourth-year performance students doing Shakespeare.

niques that we were using last year so we can approach it in a modern way. From our own guts.

EH: Using the first folio and the techniques that Neil gave us, we were able to get to the human elements of the characters. They weren't just characters anymore, not just cartoon characters, they came to life. You could see, or try to feel, what they were saying and why they were saying it.

Neil had us go really primal with the role so we understand it in ourselves. Then he had very strict rules of text to follow. Shakespeare has it written down, how he wanted the play performed, in the punctuation. And we have to learn how to obey that. As well as how it comes from [ourselves]. It is a question of coordination.

EXCAL: Is it difficult to alternate nights playing the same role?

ME: We made a pact with ourselves that we were not going to watch each other rehearse. I'm interested in seeing what he does. But it is difficult. You don't feel total ownership.

EH: Mike and I decided at the beginning that we were going to do this role to the best of our abilities. Competition, good competition, constructive competition, not looking at each other enviously, but trying to figure this man out, this man called Othello.

It was a good idea between the two of us when we started rehearsals that we'd stay away from each other's blockings. That way we can discover this man independently. I wouldn't be in a room, seeing Michael doing a scene, and then try and do it differently, just because he did it that way. At the same time, that may

have been the way I would do it in the first place. It could be destructive that way. So we decided at the start, to discover this man on our own.

ME: It is a brilliant enough role, that competition is secondary. You are doing *Othello*, you are not competing. You are working on this complex role.

EH: It is the ultimate challenge for any actor. Although it is one of the simplest plots in Shakespeare, a very domestic plot, it has so much to do with character, human creation of life. This has nothing to do with kings, and thus the earth goes chaotic, this is about a man who thinks his wife is [unfaithful].

It is not about a black man, as most people read the play. Most read it as a story about a black man, who lived long ago, and married this white woman, and he thinks she betrayed him, goes crazy and just kills her. That's not what the story is about. I'm trying to tell a story, not about a black man who goes crazy, there is something more. The script gives clues to that.

ME: It is about a man striving for perfection, an outsider striving for perfection in a world that is not his own. I don't feel indifferent to him. "Am I an outsider, being black, and striving to succeed in a white world? Where is home?" Othello doesn't seem to have a home. I come from Jamaica, and I feel I can tell my story through him; because we are all striving for perfection, in [our] relationships, in [our] political life, in everything.

EH: This man has a lot which I too can relate to. That is why I think that this is one of the best Shakespearean plays for me. The challenges are

humongous. It's great. You are able to tell your story through this man. It is a love story! It's not about a black man, it is a love story.

ME: This is *the* Shakespearean play! The one that Shakespeare waited to write! Olivier waited to play it, Shakespeare waited to write it!

EXCAL: What is it like being a black actor watching a white actor playing a black role?

EH: I don't think there is such a thing as black roles and white roles. I really want to get away from that. I think that theatre transcends all colour barriers. It transcends all sex barriers. And it allows human beings to talk to human beings. That is why theatre is so effective. Because it is one human being going through something, that you can identify with. And that is what is so special about theatre.

ME: I disagree. There are black roles and white roles. Not so much based on hate, as to represent life, and the way people relate, the way they go home. There is a level, when theatre does transcend. A white man playing Othello, Olivier playing Othello, I don't say "damn him!" I want to see how he handles the human being. If he can't or doesn't, I feel justified. But if he does, then tears come to my eyes.

EH: What theatre is about is human beings put into a certain circumstance, a certain environment. It is how they handle the situation . . . It goes beyond the colour.

ME: It is human experience.

EH: You know what I'd like, Olivier playing Othello, I would prefer if he didn't blacken his face at all . . . If he wants to create this difference, between Othello and the rest, why not have Othello white and the rest black.

ME: There is a difference between black and white that has to be recognized. The story of that is very interesting, and has to be told. Segregation is wrong, but that is the way history is [formed].

EH: Segregation could also come if a white man comes into a black community, and they ignore him. That is segregation.

ME: [It is] the neatness of the difference of race, in the loving sense.

EH: That's what makes life interesting.

ME: There are roles where you lose your integrity, in the garbage can, they're shit. But, we are talking about human beings, the other thing that's shit is a black man playing a white man. Even if it is a black role. Go home and bring your home forward.

EH: You bring your upbringing to the theatre world.

ME: Not denying it.

EH: Never deny it, who you are, where you come from. I don't think anyone can afford to do that.

Othello runs until November 24 in Burton Auditorium. Matinees are on the 22 and 24 at 1 p.m., and evening curtains are at 7 p.m.