Dame Janet Suzman | Othello the Outsider

- Welcome back everybody. Today the issue of racism is again, centre stage. Dame Janet Suzman joins us today to discuss how Shakespeare's genius in "Othello" is as relevant today as when it was first written. Dame Janet Suzman DBE, is a South African British actress, who enjoyed a successful early career in the Royal Shakespeare Company. She has always kept strong links with the country of her birth, South Africa, where she began her directing career with a production of "Othello", with John Kani, seen as a protest play in 1987, at the Market Theatre. Her long career began with the groundbreaking "War of the Roses", when Peter Hall established the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1964.

She played major roles for the RSC for the next 10 years, culminating in "Cleopatra". Performance include "Nicholas and Alexander", Academy Award and Golden Globe nominations, "The Draftman's Contract", "A Dry White Season". Her TV series include "Clay Hanger", "Mount Batten", "The Singing Detective". She wrote "The Free State" based on the Cherry Orchard, celebrating Nelson Mandela '97. She directed Kim Catrell in "Antony and Cleopatra" for Liverpool Playhouse and Church's Side. Plays in London include "Heather Gabler", "Hello and Goodbye", "Three Sisters", "The Greeks", and two evening standard best actress awards. She was made a dame 2011, given the freedom of the city of London, is currently chair of the British Committee for the reunifications of the cost and marble and is an honorary life fellow of the Shakespeare Association of Great Britain.

She has a handful of honorary doctorates, including Cape Town, Warwick and London Universe. Janet, thank you so much for joining us today and we are so looking forward to your presentation and it now gives me great pleasure to hand the floor or the Zoom screen, over to you. Thank you.

- There we are, there we are. Well, hello everybody. I haven't talked about this play since 1995, so if I ramble a bit, I hope you'll forgive me. I hope I won't too much. You know, when you look at that optical trick of two profiles facing each other, are they faces or is it a vase that you see? One way and you see one thing. Switch your attention and you see another. Now, the picture you saw just before we all started yaking at you, was a picture of the Channel 4 TV production of "Othello", which I did in Johannesburg in this 1987 year, when it came to me that that particular play simply had to be done at that time and in that place, in apartheid South Africa.

Suddenly, I couldn't see the play except through the prism of the apartheid system, and actually I still can't. I see the bars, and once again today, it seems to me where in yet another black, white crisis. So I thought that you might be interested in hearing of the journey we took all those years ago. The chief reason for me is that Shakespeare's insights into the desperate vulnerabilities of a black person in a largely white society still and perhaps always will, God help us all, go on ringing loud bells, just as his shylock, then as now, has to defend his humanity by a rhetorical hath not a Jew eyes, organs, dimensions.

So as his deceived hero in this play, forced to wonder whether it's because he is black, that bad things are happening to him. For me anyway, being born in South Africa, where race awareness was actually drip fed into our infant veins, my outrage seems not to have diminished. So be it. Now the year I take us back to as, as I said, 1987, April. April, oh the cruellest month, certainly not spring in Johannesburg, and that's the town I was born in, a full three years before Nelson Mandela walked out into the sunlight.

Do you know in totalitarian regimes, actors become more than someone whose job it is to convey the dramatised thoughts of a writer. They themselves, become activists, provoked to make moral choices of their own, an unfamiliar pastime in the softer existence of their unthreatened colleagues. The effort is always towards finding a piece of work that reflects the quality of that life, as to do otherwise, would be to abrogate all personal responsibility, in a profession supposedly devoted to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body at the time his form and pressure.

And so the performer becomes the writer very often. So it was in South Africa, in those mean, mean years, and many of the best plays done on the country stages were improvised with this in mind. Better sum up the whole thing really, as Hamlet's exhortation to the travelling players in "Hamlet" to hold the mirror up to nature, the fact that nature was much scarred in that country is the reason why we went there. Now, the act time referencing obviously, is John Kani, known not only in South Africa, but in New York, where he's won awards and represented his beleaguered country so well. He started his acting life under the direction of Athel Fugard, in Port Elizabeth, who founded a black theatre collective in the '60s called The Serpent Players. Athel remains the prime influence I would say, in the development of John's acting life.

We all need a guru. Kani is probably one of the most articulate people I know, who speaks English with a vividness that is really quite humbling. He can talk about anything forever and with no stumbling. As a budding actor myself, I met him at a gathering at Athel's house in the '60s. I remember he was very young and very angry, and I remember and he was working at the Ford Motor factory at the time, and I remember he grounded on me for not being able to speak a word of his native tongue, Gauza, and I could only mutter, duly ashamed, that I was the loser. We white people always were. We were never taught black Nguni languages at our schools. Don't let's go there.

Now, in the '60s I was busy learning my craft at Stratford on Haven. Sometimes I can scarcely believe that in 1964, Shakespeare's quincentenary year, while I was learning to love the great heartbeat of the iron big pentameter in the most exalted acting company, Dame Peggy Ashcroft, Donald Sinden, the late great Ian Home, from whom I learned a great deal, Paul Scofield, whom I worshipped , and an acting company of 76 brilliant others, that terrible treason trial was taking its deathly course. When Kani moved in the '70s, from Port Elizabeth to work in the newly founded non-racial Market Theatre in Johannesburg, his gift of the gab served him well in building bridges between black and white communities, that the newly founded Market Theatre wished to serve.

The draining battle to, how should I put it, to retain a hold on human values sat the strength of those who lived in South Africa. What seems ordinary here was always extraordinary there. I don't know, like running a theatre for God's sake, in which the humanity of human beings is meant to be celebrated. Such was the aim of the Market, bounded by a very small group of like-minded people. In '76, led by the spirit of that great Barney Simon, who was a sort of brother, really, in creativity and in taste to Peter Brook and very much admired by him, it was in a way, the advanced guard to the new South Africa.

We dreamed up a non-racial microcosmos and it was turned into reality. Small and imperfectly formed, I would say, filled with the atmosphere that building, of having been inhabited by real people. It had once been a lively Indian market in downtown Joburg, in a designated grey area that means not white, not black and signs saying "no spitting" and "French fresh chickens" in off the carts were kept where they once were on the walls, and within these walls, actors of all colours were able to act on the same stage not allowed outside those walls, and an audience of all colours could mix in the bar and have a drink with those actors afterwards.

It was a kind of magic place, really. How grateful we were for that. In '76, John and I appeared together in a production of Edward Alby's "The Death of Bessie Smith", with another serpent player, the late Winston Joiner. Marvellous actor. The play was one of the inaugural events of the brand new theatre and it made us, John and I, eager to go on binding if we could, something that we could work together on in the future, if there was a future. It was always a bit touch and go. And so anyway, here I was a decade later, and I was back home in from London to visit my parents and I was sitting in that Market Theatre watching my friend John in an adget prop sort of a play, and I watched restlessly. I kept thinking, this is not good enough for you my friend.

You deserve better. And then from left field, I still remember sitting there, rather uncomfortable seat, an idea popped into my head that just wouldn't go away and I started looking around instead of at the stage of the theatre itself. An octagonal Victorian building with a galleried upper floor, which began to morph before my very eyes into the little O of the Globe itself. And the idea was so obvious. I couldn't imagine why it hadn't occurred before. So I took the notion home with me to sleep on it. But it was persistent, it stuck overnight. It grew in stature like a little fat fenchling and was ready to take wing by the morning. A phone call happened and wandering across the sunny precinct of the Market the next morning, I took John's arm to absorb his shock I think. And I put two questions to him. Would he consider playing Othello and would he consider me to direct it? Two huge firsts for both of us.

But I explained as well as I could in that early stage, why I thought we should embark on this. There are many forms protest theatre can take, but excuse me, one that makes use of a past masterpiece to examine a present tragedy was not the usual market fair in those days. The output of the Market was more satirical and homegrown, and as I mentioned largely improvised, where they were mocking the black absurdist comedy of all their lives and stunningly contemporary stuff it was. Susie Wanzu's Dead, Mopa was an Albert, Born in the RSA and most

preeminently I think, The Island probably one of the great plays of the 20th century all came from that stable. But I had cut my Shakespearean teeth on "The War of the Roses", a state of the nation production by the great Peter Hall, if ever there was one. And I learned knowing nothing before about Shakespeare, that he was one of the great political survivors of the age, keeping his head down when all about him were losing theirs in Elizabethan London.

Every play he wrote made vivid comment on the age he lived through. His history plays above all, were set so far back in England's past that any possibly dangerous, treasonable reflection on the present was rendered debatable. So the story of a black man humiliated beyond endurance by a white thug, for that very basically, is the story of Othello, suddenly became irresistible to me. The white girl who falls in love with him, dares to elope so they can marry, and that perfect marriage is then systematically destroyed by a patriarchal prejudices and lies. Essential storytelling for a country rich in transgressive incident. And to me anyway, it made this play essential to explore. I'll come a bit to the exploration later on.

But the big part where they would be politically feasible with an international cultural boycott in place, was something we would have to investigate. At that stage, no one had any idea that secret, if tentative talks had already begun between the world's most famous prisoner and the government. Now, for a man who had never uttered a line by ambitus in his life, it was a brilliant decision. For me, who'd never directed a paper bag, it was lunatic. However, I have to confess that turning myself into a director overnight seemed okay. I'd had this enormous luck to have worked with some of the best over the last 20 years, and I just had to hope that something would've rubbed off onto me. I had learned a lot about verse from John Barton, a lot.

The fact that I would be breaking the equity boycott scene, a mere bag of tell. I'm a South African, born and bred, that I'd never been in the play added to my excitement, brand new territory and I couldn't wait to explore it. Kani, however, was nervous about obtaining permission from the exiled ANC to embark on a white writer's work, however untouchably illustrious. First and foremost, there was the case to be argued with the ANC that this production would not be in breach of the cultural boycott. It might prove a little bit difficult to argue, we thought, that Shakespeare would be part of the people's culture that Oliver Tambo, the then president of the ANC, spoke of.

But as it turned out, in June of 1987, delivering Micaron Collins's memorial lecture in London, he had indicated that the ANC'S decade-old commitment to a blanket boycott of all cultural and academic links with South Africa was to be a bit modified for the first time, and we felt heartened. Anti-apartheid artists might now he said, be able to perform under certain conditions. What those conditions were exactly and who might be exempt were part of an ongoing and heated debate between, as I recall, the ANC, the UDF, the United Democratic Front, the anti-apartheid movement, Azapo, the Pan-Africanists, the whole gallimaufry of cultural and terrorist groups in South Africa, that were morphing and unmorphing.

But perhaps it might be possible to put forward a case, we thought, for the great classics to be

absolved when performed by any of the people, and especially this play, which seemed to me, to be addressing the status quo so pertinently. And so it proved. John Kani's fierce support for the project eventually prevailed and the green light was given. The Market Theater's proven opposition to the government of the day was thereby in some sense, informally acknowledged. There was one worried phone call I remember, from Wally Serote, who was cultural attache in London of the ANC, who was concerned that there were to be so many white actors in the production and only one representative of the people.

Well, I was going to do the play as Shakespeare wrote it. One black man in an ocean, a sea of whites, alien whites. But I could assure him that the people were to be represented in the part of Othello, as a victim of white of oppression, and that the oppressor, represented by Iago, would get his comeuppance. I think I convinced him that it would be useful to think of this play as being a reminder of Shakespeare's inexhaustible relevance, sorry to use that word, but sometimes it has to do, rather than to downgrade it as merely a cultural imposition from a white man's canon. It was enlightened at the ANC, I have to confess, in my view to allow it to go ahead, considering the time and the place. And so there we are.

We jumped the first hurdle and the production was allowed to proceed. I was pleased. I've always thought with Shelly, that art ought not to go about doing good by direct moral precept, but should content itself with invigorating people's imaginations and trust the invigorated imagination to do the moral good afterwards. The powers that be, let's face it, took sport more seriously than culture, though now and then after a complaint by a member of the outraged public, to the censorship committee, plays at the Market sometimes attracted unwanted attentions, censorship laws so pure that laughter was often the only reaction possible. Let me recall a daft night when a Spike Milligan piece, I think it was the "Bed Sitting Room", it has to be, doesn't it?

A play where Harold McMillan is presented as a parrot, which fell off its perch, died squawking, and was then cooked and eaten, and in which God was represented as an old codger in a white beard and striped pyjamas, was de deemed to contradict the law's birth on, get this, cannibalism and blasphemy. Great, isn't it? The theatre naturally appealed against the order, nervous in losing a popular comedy, and one famous night, a poor old magistrate was hauled out of bed and we had to put on a special performance at midnight, stranded grumpily in mid stalls, the poor fellow was required to view this ridiculous, but very funny play quite alone.

Every last usher and secretary and stagehand and sweeper that we could find was instructed to sit in the stalls and laugh like mad throughout. And so common sense for once, prevailed and the banning was duly lifted the next morning. He did the box office no harm at all, and Spike Milligan assumed heroic stature for all of the day. But what a waste of everyone's time. But that was apartheid for you. It wasted everybody's precious time every minute of the day. There was never any room in its demented agenda or common decency or common sense or common humanity. It was also the most expensive of follies.

No nation can afford to have two sets of rules and regulations governing the lives of its people. So back then, 1987, with long for freedom still three years away and we had no idea that know what was going to happen. It might be salutary to remind ourselves just which acts of parliament empowering our illiterate cops and our parrot persecutors were still in place on the statute books. One, the Population Registration Act. Two, the Separate Amenities Act.

Three, the Group Areas Act. Four, the Land Acts. Nobody in their right mind were going to explore these damn things now, but they prevented any proper life in the land. They were the pillars upon which the regime rested the governance of the old South Africa, and today with Black Lives Matter engendering this huge worldwide reaction, I know it might be just as well to remind ourselves that these deliberate acts of forced separation of the races meant that people who happened to be born without a white skin could not live where they chose, dedicate their children at a school of their choice, dream on a park bench, hop on any old bus which happened to come along. We even have a blood transfusion from a bottle with a white label.

If you were not white, you had to walk through a separate door to buy stamps. If you were not white, you could travel only in the rear coaches of a train. If you were not white, you had to search for a especially designated public convenience if you were caught short. If you were not white, you could be bulldozed brutally from your home, shack though it was, and plonked down on barren ground in some godforsaken waterless spot, miles from it, no explanation or reparations offered. So the daily humiliation stretched out to the crack of doom, as they do for some to this day, in white countries, and were exacerbated by the fact that you could be arrested on the spot for any supposed infringement.

And over here we may differ a little from a daily horror still visited on black folk held without trial almost indefinitely. It's only marginally reasonable for conflation to recall for what saying sporting is crocodile smile. Ellen Suzman used to say, I think that he was the only man in the world who could smile downwards. So he said that I remember the expression on his face, that apartheid has so often been misunderstood and could just as easily be called a policy of good neighbourliness. Every single South African lived in an insane world, insane because it denied and confused our greatest gift, the quality of our humanity.

We were forced to behave as if cultural differences were stigmas, forced to view that curiosity and passion were crimes. I'm going on about this just to remind us of the dailiness of life. We were forcibly denied the dignity of even attempting to comprehend the lives being lived alongside us. It is hardly surprising that the prison population was the highest per capita of any country in the world, and the majority of them not criminals, just people who got found out. It's equally unsurprising, that caught in this trawling net where the finest minds and the most courageous on the whole continent, some of whom, by the collective strength of their most deeply held convictions, turned their sentences into university courses and emerged from captivity with the degrees that they might not have had had their time for at liberty. A puric victory.

Nelson Mandela emerged with a clarity of purpose and ability of heart that seemed to have been honed in prison. He himself said later, that being incarcerated gave him time to think carefully. So '87, the only act of parliament that would've successfully put paid to a production of "Othello" would've been that most notorious of acts that dealt specifically with love across the colour bar, the Immorality Act, and that iniquitous thing was removed just two years before in 1985, which was why we were able to contemplate a production.

And then down came the cultural boycott, South Africa was obliged to contemplate its own rather unprepossessing naval for years and years. The attrition was terrible. We know that the boycott was a necessary fist wave from a west sick to the guilt to the gills with apartheid seeming stamina. But the government was quite happy that everyone should turn into intellectual vegetables. The Market was the only place where standards, whatever they may be, didn't in fact, fail too much. Shakespeare predicted it was always a useful writer to have up your sleeve, sanctioned as he is, by his historically unassailable position.

Like Spanie Bernie said, you could never mock him because he's so great. Just terribly simple. I think it's because to me he writes complexities, paradoxes, subtleties, antithesis, I love that word. No jargon. He honours the complications of the human soul and those complications are always being unlotted in very extreme situations. You ski on the black beast with Shakespeare. How "Othello" wasn't banned, often people ask it, but that's to under misunderstand the law abiding limited nature of your government bureaucrat. Unless something is specified under a clause or a subsection, it doesn't exist.

Anyway, there was no act they could find. I remember Aunt Helen, my Aunt Helen, who was in parliament saying that there just wasn't any more holes to plug in that towering and horrible edifice of apartheid. There was a waste of time going to the houses of Parliament. In Europe, theatre going, has acquired a sense of decorum, unknown probably and at odds with the jollier atmosphere that prevails in Africa. Usually the highest accolades you can give somebody is to say, I could have heard a pin drop. Silence is threatening to a black audience, as if the lights are fused. A black audience likes to participate and respond.

I dare say that happened in Europe before people got over polite. I imagine a nice afternoon at the Globe in 1603 was a pretty noisy affair. It must be said that Elizabethan actor, would've been schooled in literary devices. He would've known a metaphor can see to permanent antithesis a sazura, double meaning. Blank verse was expressly invented of course, to make people listen to compressed thoughts in that very noisy outdoor atmosphere. And people would come to the theatre knowing perfectly well what was going to be up to them was heightened speech.

They hadn't yet muddled up the idea that theatre should be in any way realistic, which of course it never is. The idea that the theatre human beings speak in a manner unlike their everyday selves was accepted in 1601. But films have entrenched the expectation that vernacular speech is the only believable form and the whites of the eyes and close up is the preferred take on a character's soul. People like smaller spaces for their great reckonings in little rooms, the more

intimate, the happier they are. They resort to mics now in larger theatres. I have an idea that my lot learned to fill spaces without shouting, but that's now a lost art, I fear. Now why should theatre matter? It's meant to be, I think, that self evidence, that yearnings towards things greater than ourselves are as much a necessity as is the desire for wealth. Imaginations are necessary food to the human species. We expect to learn something rather than a theatre, and I suppose if you see it as a experimentation and a risk-free environment that provides the space where we can explore the implications of the most unimaginable of human transgressions provides us with metaphors for dealing with the hopes and fears of everyday life.

To paraphrase Carl Jung, dare I do that, artists often serve their cultures and epochs in a way that have veiled and not immediately understood. Art is constantly at work educating the spirit of the age, conjuring our forms in which the age is most lacking, and compensating for the simplistic dualities of the present. So now I need to move rather swiftly, I think, through the most moving and enthralling rehearsal period I've ever experienced. I don't quite know how to pray see a month of creative rehearsal. It's a silly thing to do but I'll try.

But I can't go to the details of how my largely young and inexperienced cast learned to play a line through so that the thought pings out at you instead of being unimpeded by little naturalistic pauses, which interrupt the flow. How John Kani, the great Gaza speaker overcame obstacles of huge complexity, both of language and of reference. How I found the precise reason the play needed doing in my mother's folio copy of Shakespeare. I couldn't find a decent one in the university bookshop. Hers was one of those folio editions with all the Fs as Ss and stuff. It's almost creepy that Shakespeare has written the speech that Mr. Favot would like to have written, I feel.

Listen to this, Iago here is dripping poison into Othello's ear and says she did deceive her father marrying you, he reminds Othello obligingly, attacking close to the truth. The better to bait his hook. Observing the wound in Othello, beginning to seep blood as the hook bites. My Lord, I see you're moved. Othello was sinking fast. No, not much moved. I do not think, but Desdemona's honest, Iago, long live she so and long live you to think so, and yet, says Othello, and yet, how nature erring from itself, nature erring from itself. There it is again, the pattern for ground apartheid, and here's the speech.

I, there's the point, as to be bold with you, not to affect many proposed matches of her own kind, complexion and degree. Where to we see in all things nature tends. Fi, we may smell in such a will most rank foul disproportion thoughts unnatural. That's what I called the domani speech. The domani is a thundering preacher and a death reform church preaching is moralist. There's my domani, not thundering from a pulpit, but insinuating. Don't consult with anyone who's not of your own tribe, your own race, your own rank. All of nature bears this exclusivity out to do otherwise is unnatural. It is sexually and socially abhorrent.

Sort of quoting directly on the theme of humours of wood and draws of water, this is pure Old Testament dogma, so beloved of Afrikaner demagogues, in justifying the doctrine that they were

dead keen to sanctify since it was so patently unjustifiable in any other terms. There was the speech that made me hang my hat on "Othello". My apartheid speech. How thrilling it was also, to discover the first feminist speech in all dramatic literature. How Dorothy Ann Gould's Emilia turns out to have the tragic stature the play cries out for by the end.

How movingly fatalistic young Desdemona grows, fulfilling the emotional maturity she promises at the beginning of the play. How I found a great actor in Richard Haddon Haines, who became a sort of comical satanical Eugène Terre'Blanche figure flashes on his uniform, fascist bigot with an honest demeanour, all six foot of him, a man from whom you would buy any amount of secondhand cars. It grieves me to report to you that that marvellous actor developed a brain tumour three years after "Othello" and is no longer with us. Great loss.

John himself had to adapt speech patterns of a lifetime. Elon Go as recalcitrant goonie vowels stet of state, ka instead of car, so on. And I knew he would have to risk his murdering me, rather than Desdemona and nagged him mercilessly one. I tell you why I talk about those vowels because one discovers, with the help of Mr. Shakespeare, that it's the vowels that are, they're like drain pipes. They convey the emotion that you need in a word or in a thought. It's the consonants, which are the taps you can turn on and off and kickstart and throw googlies with. But the vowels are essential to a full feeling, a full flow of feeling.

And one day we were working on the great speech that marks Othello's transition to an avenging angel. Oh, blood Iago, blood he cries. And that day in rehearsal, my hair stood on end. No short change in those vowels. Patience. Your mind perhaps may change, advises Iago, a little bit shocked now. Never Iago, like to the pontic sea, whose icy current in a compulsive course, ne're feels retiring ebb, but keeps due on to the Propontic and the Hellespont, even so my bloody thoughts with violent pace, shall ne'er look back, ne'er ebb to humble love til that a capable and wide revenge swallow them up. Now beyond, be a by yond marble heaven, I hear engage my words. And we were all silent in the room.

And I remember suddenly a furious John cried out, "Where's the Pontic Sea? "Where's the Propontic, the Hellespont? "Why them, what do they mean? "Why marble heaven is not made of stone?" John's questions were fired in a sort of glowing rage. And I had to try rather feebly to explain the cultural resonances that classical mythology holds in the European collective psyche. His anger had suddenly snapped. He kicked a chair plum across the room yelling, "Damn my bloody education! "Damn effing Bantu education! "I was never allowed to learn an effing thing! "How the F am I supposed to know what all this is about?"

Forgive me, I know you all forgive that language, but extremity calls on extremity and actually nearly broke my heart. So that was one of the great steps across the Rubicon that John took. He had been amazing and in a run through that day, we were nearer to opening now, he just found those, the emotions that he found, the things that that oiled Othello's feelings, and everybody caught the atmosphere and caught the feeling. And people were wonderful, the whole cast was wonderful. And I stopped writing notes in mid-air and came to an end and we all

cheered and clapped and was thrilling. And I sort of wondered what had triggered it. And when we gone off for a celebratory drink, he told me that very morning he was on the phone to Winnie Mandela. She was still then, the mother of the nation, revered for being the great Mandela's representative on Earth, a powerful, influential figure still.

Deeply worried as he was about the cultural boycotts, still that he hadn't really told me, even though we'd been given the green light. He'd been talking to her about his fears and she said to him, this is as he told it to me, "What you are doing is noble. "It is enhancing your reputation, "and therefore it's enhancing the reputation "of the black people whom you represent." So suddenly the albatross of comradeship he was secretly bearing, fell from him from that day onward. I'm telling you this because it had nothing to do with me. It's she who earned the key. I should always be grateful for that unwitting intervention of the late Winnie. Before our public preview, the management of the Market panicked.

The running time was over three hours, but I was digging my heels. I refused to cut another word. People have buses to catch, they won't stay, they'll walk out. Johannesburg can't take this length. They're not used to it. I said it lasts as long as it lasts. How long is a piece of string? You know, the old arguments about if your interest is there, you don't notice time. I'm not budging. So I just, I did bite my nails to the quick that night. But I have to tell you with some pride, that not one person left before the end. You see it had caught them and by the third preview, the nine o'clock show, they were on their feet cheering the actors to the rafters at past midnight on a Saturday. And somehow that give back from the audience made us know that we were telling the right story.

On the whole, the reviews were good, but the event itself, even its weird context took over. Mm, there seemed an impetus that nothing they could write about could impair and I began to see that for the first time, this protest play was attracting an audience that the Market Theatre was quite unused to. It was undialogue, unconfined by jargon, great language was heady-stuffed to an audience, so long a stranger to it. It it was the only one of Shakespeare's plays that could describe with persistence of power, what it felt like to be destroyed on, when you analyse it, a mere whim. If you choose to describe apartheid like that, it'll do. Iago, in self offers up a handful of reasons for his vengeance, none of which hold water in the end. What is forced to face it? It's simply because he cannot bear the happiness of the lovers.

He says of Cassio, he has a daily beauty in his life, which makes me ugly, just so I hoped with the unreasonable vindictiveness of apartheid appear to its victims, the black audience, and it's accomplices in crime. The white audience could side with whomever they liked. They liked Iago, they always do love at the villain. It's always rather difficult to love someone who's being gold. But there was something terribly touching about John's desperation, as the battles of the bedrooms began to drown his sense of self. Sometimes the factions started up in the audience. The white people saying, "Shh," and the black audience shouting. It was wonderful. I'd never known such liveliness in an auditorium.

Sometimes there'd be a shout of look out behind you when the Iago stabs Emilia in the back in that last scene became like a pantomime full of life. The actors had to learn to control this wayward beast. I sometimes I suggested they talk very quietly so the audience has to listen. But in the end, Othello's greatness draws saws into its proper prominence in the final act, taking the play away from Iago, who otherwise is in danger of stealing the play and is able to redeem his damaged nobility. For a black audience teetering on the verge of contempt for him, the hero of Othello snatches back his self foot, just in time.

There's even time for an Emilia to achieve tragic status as she frees herself from a lifetime of moral cowardice, and dies telling the truth. A few people of course, worked out in Hyatt, walked out in high dungeon. I heard the chairs going up and their first kiss. Well, it's a very sexy play. It's about sexual passion and jealousy. There were hate male duly penned from the usual fringe of lunatic hardliners, most of whom had never set foot in a theatre. But the thing was, is the run progressed, the Market's normal, 10 to 15% black audience for a European play jumped to an unprecedented 40, 50, 60%.

Every Asian colour poured in to see this dreadful tragedy unfold. I expect it will not happen again. It was a play that had found its time and place. As Hamlet says, the readiness was all. And it made show in the outer world. It could have run for six months, but six weeks was all we had, such the initial doubts about Shakespeare's box office clout. And that's why in the end we were asked, luckily Channel 4 thought it was a good idea to commission it and hence, the television version of it, recording it for posterity. We've recorded it in a ridiculous six days, even with a hail storm on the tin Market roof, I remember one day.

It's bad worth remarking in conclusion, that Shakespeare gives Iago in the end, no defence, just as the old regime bothered with none to justify its own atrocities to the terrible question that Othello puts to Cassio. These are Iago's final words. Demand me nothing. What you know, you know. From this time forth, I never will speak word. So there we are. It was a once in a lifetime experience, for a play is nothing without an audience, and that makes me think what now in these plaguey days for audiences, when will it ever come back?

I was watching the opening ceremony of those wonderful 2012 Olympic games and thought that's the last time that thousands of people had a great time together singing, laughing, dancing, having a wonderful time. It'll come back someday, but the power of the theatre is not ever going to diminish. It has to happen. Thank you ladies and gentlemen.

Q&A and Comments:

Q: Thank you very much. Same Janet. If you don't mind, we have a couple of questions for you. So actually, I wanted to start with a phenomena taking the world today, which is, which is called cancel culture, you know, which is effectively described as the removal of support based on somebody's opinions or actions, and you're probably seeing it sweep particularly across the U.S. and in the UK as well. And you know, I wondered what your thoughts are on this movement

based, you know, on your desire and your decision to take "Othello" to South Africa during the boycott.

A: It goes against every grain in my being. I think closing down debate, closing down opposition, closing down intelligent discussion is maybe something we have to go through for some strange simplistic reason. I think it's probably got a lot to do with Twitter. How can you express everything that is needed to be expressed in a tweet? And I think the abnegation of argument is pretty sad. I like Jermaine Greer.

Q: Me too. You mentioned early on that you know, you see often actors as activists. Do you still feel that's true today or do you feel people are less willing to take professional risks?

A: No, as I try to explain, it was in the culture itself. I somehow feel that celebrity comment, which is we live, I dunno why celebrities are thought to be such important commentators. I really don't understand it. We weren't celebrities then. We were just simply working actors, jobbing actors, addressing ourselves to something we thought ought to be seen. But I think somehow there's a, perhaps actors shouldn't make any comment about anything ever, except when they do their own voting as a, you know, as a member of the public. But I think too, they can be influential, which is odd to me that an actor should be influential in any way, but people seem to want role models. It's quite a mystery to me, frankly.

Q: So you talked about the fact that, you know, you felt "Othello" was the right play for that time and in that era and even in that country. With everything going on in the world at the moment, what play do you think would strike a chord?

- I don't know. You mean to meet the tweets? The tweet world?

- Yeah, to meet the tweet world and also as you said, you know, the reaction of the Black Lives Matter movement and you know, meeting this cancel culture phenomenon or is it time for--

- That's a whole basket full of problems in one play. I doubt, I can't think of one that would've been written already on that subject. Probably even Don Stockard would be defeated by that bunch. But--

- "Othello" again with--

A: No, no, I don't see it, I honestly don't. I see it as a play that fitted the country it was in at that moment perfectly. Just as for example, I myself, saw Chekhov's "Cherry Orchard" as the perfect play to describe the landowner being bought out by his surf. When South Africa was liberated, it's the perfect play. It held water at every point to describe Mandela's new dream rainbow country, selling the white useless cherry orchard in favour of somebody who'd made his own money and would now develop it and build houses on it.

Q: You mentioned obviously that there was, you know, the typical, you know, kind of hate mail from the expected groups. Did you ever fear once you were returned from South Africa that this, that putting on "Othello" and taking that risk would have an effect professionally or would--

A: No, not at all. Why would it? No, I couldn't possibly think that.

Q: And in terms of the standard of South African theatre today, one of our audience is asking, you know, how you view that and whether you think, you know, there is a lively South African theatre movement?

A: Yeah, there's just been, which I missed actually, but you can all punch it up. The Grahamstown Arts Festival, which was digitalized this year, and I bet there's a lot of lively stuff in there. There must be a huge amount of stuff going on that I know nothing about. I've certainly done a new play from the Baxton Theatre in Cape Town, which was one of the most beautiful plays that I've ever been in, just a two-hander, and I played it with a black young actor from Kaili in Cape Town and it was one of the best, best things to act that I've been in.

I love it when a play expresses a time and responds to an audience's feeling for the time, and that must have been how Elizabethan theatre was and why it was so powerful. Why did people go back and back and back to all those plays? Obviously, it was a very popular way of passing the evening. Well, they didn't have Downton Abbey to distract them from an evenings entertainment, but I do believe that, I believe in a sense of place, I think that's always best and I don't think that tray players always travel and have, and this they strike a sort of popular note, which is I think a little different from the sort of exploration that I've been talking about, are which complications of human nature, which Shakespeare's preeminent at.

Complications of human nature don't really appear too much in a musical. Maybe a bit of Stephen, sometimes yes, 'cause he's a great musician, but I think popular, there is a division between popular entertainment and I suppose, the Shakespearean one. A lot of Shakespeare has to be recalibrated, rethought now, because everybody knows the stories so well, they know them almost too well. I think I loved this experience because I didn't know the play at all. So I was exploring it in that moment, felt rather Shakespearean to me.

When Hamlet plopped through the door of the Lord Chamberlain's men, they must have been pretty excited as they turned the pages and discover the Hamlet story. So it's difficult to recapture that freshness, except with a new play. And roll them on please, we need playwrights.

Q: So talking of theatre of the future, you know, this is your first Zoom and as you said, when you watch the London 2012 ceremony, you know, when when will we be there again? And what do you see as theatre perhaps reimagined or is there a role for, you know, a Zoom-type theatre, you know, where do you see the future?

A: So far, I can't see a damn thing. It's obfuscated and obscure and cloudy. I do see musicians

working fabulously well together on Zoomy things because somehow or other, maybe because they've been in quintets and quartets and orchestras together and are used to responding to each other, but, you know, forging a company with a disparate band of actors is a very different thing than playing a series of notes that all of you're watching at the same time time. So I think music has a certain, not as fulsomely exciting as the proms themselves, who's not missing the proms right now? But I don't see, I'm too blind or stupid to see a future for the theatre which is electronic.

A: Did you find that this experience you had as a director had an effect on your acting roles later on?

Q: Yes, it did because I started directing more. I loved the feeling of being able to see the arc of a play instead of just your bit. When you do a part in a play, you have to be as blind as all of us as human beings are. We have to see the world through our own eyes and so does an actor with his character. You shouldn't know more than his character knows, but the director has to do the whole thing and that was quite thrilling, really. I'm, shall I say, I'm a snob. I like plays of muscle. I like interesting beautifully written plays. I can't help that.

And I feel no shame about that, obviously. I have never thought as an actor, that I wanted to be just like my next door neighbour. I've always thought as an actor, I want to play parts that are quite different from myself, that are bigger than me that I can reach towards. And Mr. Shakespeare stepped into my life where that is necessary. That's what you need to do to try and inhabit somebody you really have no knowledge of at all.

The emotional knowledge will come as you delve and respect their motives and understand them. But I think that I've never wanted to do a sitcom and I've never wanted to just, you know, do a play for the sake of doing a play. So in that sense, I've been a bit choosy, but I was able to be, so I was.

- Thank you very much. I'm going to hand back over to Wendy.

- [Janet] Okay.

- Janet, thank you very much for a most inspiring and thought provoking presentation. We are all scattered across the globe today because of the appalling apartheid system that we, the South Africans, were subject to. A real privilege to hear your reflections on "Othello" and its role in the wider society. As you actually said, imagination is a necessary food for the human species and during this really difficult time, we must be shown not to cancel culture. Theatre and the arts play a key role in our society. It was a true privilege and pleasure to hear you so eloquently describe your personal journey. So from all of us here, a very big thank you.

- Thank you.

- Thank you to all of the viewers, thank you for joining us. And on that note to the Americans, I'll say enjoy the rest of your day. Those on the West Coast, you've got the whole day to look forward to. And those in London and South Africa and Israel, goodnight and thank you. Thank you for joining us. Thank you Janet. Thank you, very much, thank you.

- It was wonderful, thank you. Bye-bye.