

Othello's thoroughly modern shake-up

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Marion McMullen

PASSION, sexual jealousy and racial tension ... Warwickshire television writer Andrew Davies is shaking up Shakespeare with a gripping modern version of Othello. TV writer MARION McMULLEN finds out why two's company and three's a crowd in ITV's screen special next Sunday.

THE MARRIAGE WRECKER

A SEXUAL predator with no sense of compassion or remorse is how actor Christopher Eccleston sees Jago.

Jago and John Othello are best friends, but that does not stop him from ruining his marriage, his career and his life.

"I think there is a malign and destructive side to all of us, but by and large we keep it under control," says Christopher.

The Royal Shakespeare Company once offered him the role of Iago in Othello, but unfortunately he was unable to take the role because of work commitments. However, when he heard about Andrew Davies' modern version of the story he was keen to be involved.

"I think Andrew has been very faithful to the spirit of the play and has very cleverly used lines and the play and dropped them into certain scenes. He's been respectful and also been cheeky, which has added to the humour of the piece," says Christopher.

"The thing that makes me choose a job is the script. It's always about the script for me because no matter how good the other actors or the director is, if I don't have a belief in the script I feel it won't work for me."

Christopher did a great deal of reading to research the role of Jago and what drives him. "I wanted it to be a compulsion to destroy," he says, "because he's not entirely sure why he does it.

"He is incapable of intimacy which makes him invulnerable. He has great control over himself, but also absolutely no control either - he's completely contradictory. I wanted the audience to look for regret, but see none."

THE HUSBAND

TAKING on the role of one of Shakespeare's most tragic characters was not something actor Eamonn Walker entered into lightly.

He's been asked to play Othello three times in the past and has turned down every offer because he felt he was too young and hadn't lived life enough for the part.

Now he feels ready to tackle the part in the modern-day version of the classic tale which sees Othello transformed into top police boss John Othello.

John loves his wife Dessie, but his best friend Jago proves the downfall of them all.

"Andrew Davies' script is amazing," he says full of praise. "It has the emotional roller coaster ride of the original play, plus bringing this story right up to date."

Eamonn says Othello's honest, loving, trusting and kind-hearted nature won him the hand of Dessie, but it also leads to him being easily cheated by Jago.

"They say that love is blind," points out Eamonn, "well, Othello loves his best friend too. He can't even entertain the idea that his best friend would deceive him."

THE WRITER

ADAPTING Shakespeare for telly would be a task that would daunt many writers, but Andrew Davies rose to the challenge.

The award-winning Kenilworth writer has been hailed as a "master adapter" and past successes include *Pride and Prejudice*, *Vanity Fair* and *Wives and Daughters* and the recent *The Way We Live Now* with David Suchet. He also co-wrote the hit movie *Bridget Jones's Diary* with Richard Curtis.

For the Bard's famous tale of sexual jealousy, betrayal, revenge and murder, Davies has turned Othello into the new police boss in a city bubbling with racial tension and unrest.

"I wanted to write about the fall of an exceptional man," declares Davies. "It is something that makes the drama stand out from a lot of what is on television at the moment which is so often about frail creatures."

He certainly relished the challenge of making Shakespeare accessible for TV viewers. "The idea of doing a modern Shakespeare was put to me by former controller of LWT Drama Jo Wright and originally I came up with an idea for *The Tempest* - which I'd still like to have a go at - but it was thought not to be suitable as an adaptation for ITV.

"I went away from the meeting feeling disappointed, but it suddenly flashed into my head - Othello - the first black commissioner of the Metropolitan Police. In the end it was the easiest deal I've ever made ... it only needed one sentence.

"The reason for choosing Othello is that it is the all time great classical story about jealousy, a terrifying emotion that everyone has experienced. It bites hard and goes very deep. It's all to do with love, insecurity and how well we think we know the other person."

Meanwhile, Andrew is currently tackling another classic. He is working on a new adaptation of classic love story *Dr Zhivago* and production will begin early next year.

THE WIFE

ACTRESS Keeley Hawes did not mind turning up the heat to play John Othello's virtuous wife Dessie.

"This is a very passionate love story and so the bedroom scenes play an essential role," she explains. "I've never been embarrassed by having to do these because it's part of life, part of the role and such an important part of John and Dessie's relationship."

She says shooting Othello was enjoyable, but also emotionally challenging. "I like Dessie a lot and I think that's very important because in order to make the characters real to the audience you have to believe in them yourself," says Keeley.

"Dessie is at times a little naive and short-sighted in the respect she can't see what is happening. However, this is mainly down to the strength of the love she shares with Othello. When you love someone that much you don't believe the trust and respect can be broken."

Othello has been made with a television audience in mind, but Keeley thinks the strong theatrical element adds to the story.

"The filming process was treated very much like a theatrical production," she says, "in the respect that a lot of attention was paid to the lighting and backdrops of scenes."

"For instance, John and Dessie's flat overlooks a canal which is a modern-day parallel to Shakespeare's setting in Venice and John's silk robe replaces the handkerchief, because people don't really use them these days.

"Andrew's version also explores the same themes as Shakespeare - jealousy, love, friendship and racism. I found jealousy the most difficult theme to deal with because it is such an evil emotion and one which I can't understand. It is just alien to me."