Some things to think about when watching the Othellos

As usual, the schedule is asking you to do several things at once — to view two productions of Othello while we read and explore the play in class — and a few notes and focusing questions may help us approach the modern performances.

- Here are minimal credits for the two productions (more at http://us.imdb.com/):

  Othello (Royal Shakespeare Company, 1989, at Stratford’s Other Place); dir. Trevor Nunn, with Willard White (Othello), Imogen Stubbs (Desdemona), Ian McKellen (Iago), Sean Baker (Cassio), Zoe Wanamaker (Emilia), and Michael Grandage (Roderigo).

 ☛ Virginia Vaughan’s "An Othello for the 1990s" (scholium 10 on our website) comments briefly on this production.

  Othello (Market Theatre, Johannesburg, 1987), dir. Janet Suzman, with John Kani (Othello), Joanna Weinberg (Desdemona), Richard Haddon Haines (Iago), Neal McCarthy (Cassio), Dorothy Gold (Emilia), and Frantz Dobrowsky (Roderigo).

 ☛ Suzman's "South Africa in Othello" (1998), on BB, serves an extended program note for this production; it is an essay in which she explains and defends decisions made in staging the play in an unusual venue. Like those decisions, it is not uncontroversial.

- Mise-en-scène, the "putting in view" of the action. Both films work chiefly in stage rather than cinema mode: what conventions prevail here, and what narrative and dramatic opportunities offered by cinema are unavailable? (In fact, each is a bit of a hybrid: is there a single indicated audience perspective in either or both? Does either use expository or affective camera work which would be impossible on stage?)

  Far more to the point:

  - What style of staging is in evidence? To which kind of theatre does each production “feel” closer: Elizabethan amphitheatre, with its thrust stage, or the "picture window" stage framed by the proscenium arch, or the fully in-the-round stages of the twentieth century? Just how is space constructed and exploited by each production? Do we, for example, sense several main spots where all action is localized? Is there the continuous presence of a stage structure underlying (in different areas or shapes) successive scenes? Or is the stage a neutral element on which scenes are independently imposed? How are blocking and properties used? How is staging used to “pace” and emphasize the contours of the play? Where, for example, are the really striking scene shifts, and how do they organize the narrative for us?

  - In what locale and what historical period do costumes, properties, sets and conventions of behavior seem to place (mise-en-scène again) the action? Which interpretations do these features make possible for the Shakespearean text, and which do they seem to preclude? Which way of “periodizing” the action — Suzman's or Nunn's — makes it more immediate to or remote from a contemporary audience? Does either production tell us more or less exactly where/when we are, in what social or historical environment, or do they point indirectly and allusively to a place and time?

- Units. As we discuss the play and the two productions we’ll be comparing them, so start looking for things that are comparable. As you read the text and watch the films, think of the play as an organic composition of units of action that may include and group, but may also transcend or cut across, roles or "characters," which are far from the only elements of dramatic design. That will facilitate the comparing process. Look for units that seem to you potentially crucial to interpretations of the play: speeches, actions, scenes. Consider scenes both major (e.g. 1.3, 2.3) and seemingly minor or incidental (e.g. 4.3, the "willow" scene between Desdemona and Emilia, or 5.1, the crossing-scene in the final night on Cyprus). Consider sub-scenes that portray coherent actions, both central (the infamous "bordello" episode of 4.2.24-98) and seemingly peripheral or time-marking (e.g. the interval of wit and misogyny at 2.1.84-176). Consider scenes that are in themselves complex and multiple, like the great temptation scene of 3.3, which consists of two long transactions between Iago and Othello bridged by crucial intervening action. Consider repeated (and patterned) bits of dramatic structure, like the Iago-Roderigo exchanges, followed by Iago's soliloquys, that conclude 1.3, 2.1, and (in reverse order) 2.3. Consider kinds of action that seem deliberately repeated: debarkations (in 2.1, implicitly in 4.1), urban disorders (1.2, 2.3, 5.1), "judgment" episodes (1.3, 5.2), oath-takings (3.3.456-82 and where else?). Consider
relationships between characters that are or can be realized in the productions' space and time: groupings, estrangements, leadings, followings, confrontations.

And "onlookings." These are important. Othello is a play full of scenes "framed" by commentary and acts of witnessing and tale-bearing, scenes "layered" with espials, observations, and scenes-within-scenes: therefore point of view is a major concern. How does each production handle such scenes, such opportunities for exposition, control, deception, and discovery? Who looks, and who is seen? Who controls narrative, and who is caught in it? Who interprets, and who is interpreted? What role do the direction and the camera-work play in distributing and consolidating “p.o.v.” among characters?

- To anticipate Essay #2: One topic will ask you for a "focused comparison" of these two productions, and the best-focused essays will begin with a highly specific comparison described in detail and will then go on to show what it reflects or typifies about an aspect of the whole production. Questions LIKE the following, which it is up to you to frame, are good starting points:

  - How do Nunn and Suzman manage the arrival scene (2.1), and why? What relationships among characters are foregrounded, locked together, or eclipsed in the two treatments of the scene?
  - The boys on the town: how do these productions handle the carousel/riot scene in 2.3, and what does each handling of the scene say about the role of male bonding in each production?
  - How do Willard White and John Kani deliver the great "Farewell!!" speech (3.3.350-62), and how do they handle the deterioration of Othello, fast and slow, in the immediately surrounding episodes?
  - Physical intimacies: who is in touch with whom in 2.1 and 2.3 and elsewhere, and who looks on?
  - How, in these two productions, does the notorious handkerchief (3.3.294 and after) circulate and organize the increasingly conflicted relations among Iago, Othello, Desdemona, and Emilia?
  - The two bordello-scenes (part of 4.2): which is more horrifying, given where it takes place, and why?
  - How, in the two productions, does Emilia's growing role in 4.2 and 4.3 (and in 5.2) supplement and fortify Desdemona's?
  - Othello's final identity: how do the two productions -- with lighting, costume, scrims and other delimiters of space, pacing, and of course the acting of the two protagonists -- "code" Othello's identity culturally and ethnically?

  And so? (Any such question as those above trails a long And so?, encouraging you to draw out the consequences, for the action of the play and our interpretation of it, of the details you've noted.)

- Roles: groupings, alliances, assimilations, and contrasts. Othello is a tightly knit play with five or six key roles; the way they work together just about determines the effect and import of the play. First, how are they cast? (What relationships are suggested by age, ethnicity, body size, timbre and range of voice, and what used to be called "carriage"?) Second, in each production, which characters are grouped together by race, gender, age, occupation, costume, manner, and the composition of scenes — and against which other characters? Do these associations change as the action evolves? Second, which characters are “played strong” (up, down) vis-à-vis others? One or both of these productions may belie the common-sense assumption that the staging of drama is a zero-sum game, that a “strong” Othello means or needs a “weak” Iago or Desdemona, or that a powerful and all-controlling Iago is bound to weaken other parts. The equations may be much more complex than that. How do they work out in these two cases?

- And of course, the "issues." It is best to respect a production's artistic values and arrive inductively at such issues as it puts in play, but there's no denying that Othello is a play "about" race and gender, as it is about nationality, social class, and status in a colonial empire. So consider: which of these two productions seems to address itself most systematically to differences seemingly built into human attributes and activities, and in how concerted and nuanced a way? This doesn't sound like a simple question, and it isn't one. At least with these productions, there is no stance outside history, race, and gender: there is no Othello about a prominent professional soldier who just happens to be of non-European descent, or about the breakup of a perfect marriage that just happens to be between people of different races. Nor can we deal concretely with an Othello where differences in gender and marital status are erased by the dominant fact of racial difference. But it is worth asking just how the differences work together: how the racial difference between Iago and Othello is "mapped" onto the difference in their roles and their similarity in gender, hence the differences in the way they deal with each other and envision sex; how the gender and social differences between Othello and Desdemona mesh with and cross with the difference in race; how the differences in social class and age between Desdemona and Emilia work with and against the conflicts engendered by sex and nationality.