

Othello: Image, Improvisation and Shakespeare as Source

Presented by Tom Stroud, Friday, February 17 at the 2006 Festival of Original Theatre: *Performing Adaptations*, Toronto, Ontario.

My presentation today will look at my recent production of *Othello* as a non-narrative, interdisciplinary approach to this classic Shakespearian tragedy. I will also discuss my methodology in the creative process, which I am currently referring to as Central Focus. My comments will last about 10 minutes and then we'll view a couple of clips.

Throughout my career my work has combined elements of theatre and dance. I am drawn to the very direct and visceral way in which movement communicates but at the same time I am interested in the specificity of subject matter offered in the world of the play. Arguably one of the defining differences between current dance and theatre creation practice is that theatre tends to remain rooted in a narrative whereas dance will tend to follow a succession of images based on a theme. I see my work as a series of images and interactions that honour and respond to issues and ideas contained within the narrative but without the intention of recreating the plot in any literal fashion. The narrative is however imbedded within the image. This in turn frees the text from its primary function of telling the story and allows it to operate much more like music does in dance; defining structure, creating tone and providing context for imagery that remains irrational and poetic rather than descriptive.

Othello was created in this fashion. The production was commissioned by Winnipeg's Contemporary Dancers and presented at WCD's Studio/Theatre in September 2005. It was the result of a highly collaborative process between a team of creators that consisted of eight performers, a visual artist, and a lighting designer. My role was to provide the vision for the work and to weave our contributions together to form a coherent whole. The production was a full-evening, highly structured improvisation based upon text selected from the play. The characters represented on stage were Othello, Iago, Brabantio, and five Desdemonas.

I began the process by abandoning the narrative completely. We started with open improvisation using text drawn from the play. As a source for an image-based exploration Shakespeare provides a powerful catalyst. The dense layering of imagery and the social/political and spiritual themes embedded in his plays hold a mirror up to the very roots of our culture. In *Othello*, notions of honor, loyalty, betrayal, justice, and order, collide with issues of marriage, race, religion class, revenge, gender and responsibility. These were the ideas that fueled our explorations. There were no restrictions at this stage of the process and throughout the improvisations the performers were free to play any character at any point in the play. This open and rather dream-like exploration seemed to allow the text to merge with the imagination of the performers, and, as if it had become a part of their subconscious, to bubble up and resurface once again as spontaneous impulses fueling the collective creation. Through this process we discovered what the play meant to us. Image, archetypical relationship, inferences, themes and ideas began to function and inform the stage on equal ground with situation and plot. What was essential about the narrative was captured within a series of images which left the stage open to transformation and metaphor.

For example we began to work with images of domestic animals, and wealth which dominate the textual landscape, and to respond to notions of jealousy, which, defined as a fear of being replaced, is a central motivation for all the male characters. We became aware of how free will, and passion threaten order, how all the characters participate in deception, and how fear of “the other” be it expressed in race, religion, or class is personified in the character of Othello.

Interestingly we began to view Iago in a much more sympathetic light and to see how all the characters were complicit in the tragedy, in particular, Desdemona who, of course, is traditionally portrayed purely as the victim. These perspectives ultimately informed all decisions in the making of the performance.

Before we view some images from the production to see how these ideas translate to the stage I'd like to talk a little about the technique we used in the creative process, Central Focus, which you'll also see illustrated in the excerpts.

In my view, it is hard to match the intensity, risk-taking, and creative energy of an improvised performance. The challenge of course is achieving a consistency in both the quality and content of the performance.

Central Focus addresses precisely these issues. It is a method of training and improvising for both actors and dancers which I have developed over the last twenty years of working with the body as a source for performance. It began primarily as a research tool for my own creative process; however, with the production of Othello, it clearly went beyond that of a research tool to become a practical technique for performance itself.

In terms of the training, I begin by establishing some very fundamental understandings of what is required of us as performers.

We address and define the basic requirements necessary to be on the stage, such as concentration, sensitivity, relaxation, what "being in the moment is", the nature of creative relationships and exploration, trust, and safety mechanisms.

It is not my intention to reach a definitive description of these elements but rather to establish agreement, points of reference, and building blocks for the performers. It is my belief that we ask a great deal of performers. Essentially we are asking them to abandon all of the social contracts that govern our daily lives in pursuit of an "artistic realm" where they will explore aspects of humanity that may well fly in the face of social norms and accepted morality. In my experience it is in establishing these basic fundamental understandings and agreements between performers that will ultimately create an atmosphere of trust, courage and liberation.

Actually a great deal of development for this work came from watching the tiny involuntary muscle spasms, twitches and unfulfilled movements in the inexperienced actors, which we normally attribute to beginners tension. I began to view this muscle activity, as the actor's spontaneous impulse, either passed by through a lack of awareness or stifled by an unconscious fear of going beyond normal social boundaries. I began training performers to identify these impulses as they occurred and to acknowledge and embrace them by releasing them into spontaneous action.

I begin with a series of exercises based on sound and gesture circles, non-patterned movement improvisations, partner work, and group improvisations. They are designed to strengthen concentration, sensitivity, and relaxation, identify sources within the body, expand range, anchor the performer in moment to moment reality, and to promote courage and spontaneity.

The exercises are simple, focused on form, and are effective in establishing the basic skills and understandings necessary for the stage.

These skills are then placed in more elaborate exercises and improvisations that more directly resemble actual performance situations which then will begin to raise larger issues concerning the stage.

How do we move an improvisation forward as an ensemble? What are my choices in any given situation? How do we measure the effectiveness of one choice over another? What agreements are necessary for the ensemble and how do I know when to support or initiate?

When working with a group we examine in great deal all aspects of performance but of the many issues facing the performer, the movement of focus on the stage is ultimately the most significant.

An ensemble works to support a singular image or action on the stage which means there must be an agreement as to what they want the audience to see. Now this can be very complex because each performer may have their own individual focus, which, may be entirely different than that of the audience. To establish this agreement among the ensemble I divide the focal perspectives on the stage into two categories. The central focus and the supporting focus.

The central focus is simply where we want the audience to place their awareness and concentration. By following the central focus, moment to moment, the audience remains engaged and is moved through the production. Therefore all members of the ensemble must work to support the performance by either becoming that central focus or being a support to the central focus.

It is this simple principle that forms the foundation of all the performance agreements we make on the stage and grounds the complexity of the performance relationships in communication and action.

It was very interesting to me that the most effective notes given to the performers during our run of Othello were given in terms of how well the performance agreements had been met. Not so much what they did, but how they did it. And it was clear when these agreements were met Othello came to life.

Let's take a look at some of the excerpts.