



Nonso Anozie's Tour Diary from Cheek by Jowl's 2004 production of Othello

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March 13: Lille

Our first performance. I was terrified: what if the play went really badly? It would affect the morale of the whole group: we might have to spend the rest of the year doing a play we didn't believe in. Instead, the response at the Théâtre du Nord was completely unexpected – the audience gave us a standing ovation!

Because we were performing with surtitles projected above the stage the audience were sometimes a little bit behind or ahead of the action, but it all came together. Now just 200 or so more shows to go.

March 23: Oxford

Our first performance in front of an English-speaking audience and it's as scary as the first night. This audience is more used to seeing classic plays; I can't help but feel that some people will come more to judge the production and compare it with their idea of Othello than for a night's entertainment. From what I've read, a lot of people before me – mostly white actors – seem to have been overly concerned with the "otherness" of Othello, with conveying their idea of him as a black man. I want to concentrate on Othello as a human being rather than a colour – someone with whom the audience has an emotional connection.

April 2: Paris

When we first got to the Odéon, the entire staff came out to meet us – not just the lighting people and the stage manager, but everyone who works in the offices and front of house. That would never happen in Britain. I don't like reading reviews but they're all over the walls here. One paper said I am "the most complete Othello in the world". Me? You can't take statements like that seriously – what it would do to your ego beggars belief.

Before I took this job, I stopped myself from seeing other Othellos so that I wouldn't be influenced, but I can't help but think of the calibre of actors who have played the part before

me – Ira Aldridge, Paul Robeson, James Earl Jones. It's as if the whole company is becoming part of an ancient tradition. This theatre has a traverse stage, with audience on two sides instead of just in front of you. It's exhausting, but on this stage you can't get away with tiredness: every expression can be seen by someone. But it gives more energy to the whole production – you can feel it bouncing off itself.

April 23: Rome

This is the first place where I've felt I can closely relate to Othello's sense of isolation. Rome really isn't a multicultural city and Othello isn't really done here with a black actor playing the lead. The show is going really well and everyone I meet is really friendly, but I can't help but feel like a second-class citizen when I'm made to wait 45 minutes to be served in a restaurant and get disdainful looks from (mostly older) Italians.

May 27: Cambridge

People here know the play very well – even more than in Oxford. Audiences watching the play seem to be anticipating speeches: you can see signs of recognition on lines like “Beware of jealousy” and “Chaos is come again”. It's refreshing to have an audience so alive to every moment.

June 2: Istanbul

Othello talks about the Turks as the enemy – and here we are performing in Turkey! It's as if the play and the tour are overlapping: the hotel I'm staying in looks out over the Pontic Sea (“whose icy current and compulsive course/ Ne'er feels retiring ebb.”) so now when I say Shakespeare's lines I have a real image in my head. I feel like being here is going to change the way I do this role.

June 14: Moscow

I had a lot of negative preconceptions about Russia, mostly from an Arnold Schwarzenegger film where Russians were the bad guys. And I don't know why, but I thought everyone here ate cold potato soup served by a woman with a moustache. Not surprisingly, everything I thought was wrong. The Russians do eat a lot of borscht, though. I'm eating it too – it's helping me fill out my costume.

The theatre culture here is unbelievable. It's much more revered than film. We had a press conference and the room was full of TV and newspaper reporters. And the way actors work is crazy. The average Russian actor, if lucky enough to join a rep company, will spend up to three years rehearsing a single play, and then perform the same play for up to 15 years. I spoke to an actor after the show; he said he loved it but he could see it was still young and fresh and that it needed “five years to get to the right place”. I laughed – it's just a completely different mindset.

July 16: Shanghai

People here are incredibly inquisitive about me: I'm tall, I'm black, I'm completely different from them. They seem very surprised by my appearance, but it's not a negative prejudice: people look at me because they're interested to know about me. I can't understand why people

can't be this positive everywhere you go. I'm on TV a lot doing interviews, which means people aren't just noticing me but recognising me as an actor. It's almost like being a movie star. The attention is nice but, like the reviews, I don't want to let it affect me.

August 20: Sydney

We are back in front of English-speaking audiences; it's refreshing not having to worry about people keeping up. But this is also the first time I've felt really homesick on the tour. It feels like things are getting silly now: we've done over a hundred shows now and that, plus the travelling, is taking its toll. You have to find new ways of performing, otherwise the play dies. Luckily, feeling fatigued creates a real conflict inside you – you have to do the show but you feel like you don't want to – and you can tap into that on stage, add it to the drama.

September 14: Warsaw

We had a week off to recover after Sydney but it wasn't even enough to get over the 24-hour flight back to London. Everyone is tired and lots of people have the flu. Worse, Caroline Martin, who plays Desdemona, has a kidney infection. Cheek by Jowl doesn't have understudies, so Kirsty Besterman, who plays Bianca, is doing both roles. In Sydney, I felt a lot of responsibility for the production because I was playing the lead role. Now I'm doing it opposite someone who's on stage with the book because she doesn't know the lines.

She's brilliant, but she doesn't always know how and where she's supposed to move. At times I have to move her myself, in as unobtrusive a way as possible. It makes me feel more responsible than ever – but it's also making the play feel even more immediate and alive. The audience response is weird. They all clap in unison, very slowly, as though they're about to boo us off. Then you realise that actually they love it.

October 5: New York

This is the first time on the whole tour that I haven't felt like I'm in a minority. We're performing in the Harvey Theatre in the Brooklyn Academy of Music; I feel surrounded by African and African-American people and culture. It's like where I grew up in London, much more multicultural. I don't feel like the exotic black man any more here, and that alone takes the pressure off.

October 30: Lagos

I screamed with joy when I first heard we were going to Nigeria; my parents were born there, and came to England to work and study in the 1970s. Going there to work feels like I'm completing that circle. We've had standing ovations and you can't help but feel that the audience is proud to see a fellow Nigerian leading a British company. My mother hoped to come over a few weeks before me to bring the family to see the show, but she hasn't been well. It turns out, though, that it has been screened on Nigerian TV, so my cousins got to see it anyway. It's been really emotional being here – but it's also the best place on the map so far.

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