

British Theatre Guide

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Othello

William Shakespeare, adapted by Scott Graham and Steven Hoggett
Frantic Assembly
Lyric, Hammersmith
(2008)

Shakespeare really is amazing with both language and dramas that are timeless and capable of convincing in the most unlikely productions. Think of *West Side Story*, Ian McKellen's Hitlerian Richard III or the work of wild Catalan director Calixto Bieito.

A year ago, Michael Grandage's star-studded version of [Othello](#) at the Donmar with Chiwetel Ejiofor, Ewan McGregor and Kelly Reilly found favour with a traditional reading. In cricketing terms, if that was a five-day Test, this might be the Twenty20 equivalent - much shorter but packed with fireworks.

The analogy may be a little unfair, as unlike Sir Alan Stanford, Frantic Assembly have a real feel for the tradition that they are partially subverting.

Scott Graham and Steven Hoggett have cut about half of the text, set the drama in the shabbiest of twenty-first century Yorkshire pubs and yet retained the spirit of the original.

Jimmy Akingbola in the title role is a muscle-bound Londoner with a Mohican and attitude. He leads a gang of lads who must surely be unemployed and enjoy nothing better than a rowdy night out at The Cypress that ends in a fight.

The pub oozes poverty with grubby walls, a fruit machine and a pool table that doubles as a marital bed to add colour. When we finally enter the slimy, graffiti-besmirched lime green room behind a door marked Ladies but used liberally by both genders, it is hard to keep down a feeling of disgust at what the country has been reduced to.

Othello is proud but so too is his strutting right-hand man Iago (Charles Aitken). The latter vows revenge having decided that the Moor has bedded his slatternly wife Emelia, played by Leila Crerar. His anger might also be fired up by an inbred racism that accentuates his feeling of humiliation at the perceived cuckolding.

It takes time but eventually he gets there through a cruel plot with its main victim, a Desdemona far from the purity and innocent modesty of the original.

Claire-Louise Cordwell's dope-smoking heroine has tattoos and drinks WKD from the bottle. We see her as a thoroughly modern girl from the opening where she and her new husband are caught *in flagrante* in the afore-mentioned Ladies by her dad Brabantio, who, unlike Shakespeare's creation, is working class. Her expletive-exclamation certainly belied the name on the door and is not in any version of the play so far published.

Despite the drastic changes wrought by co-directors, Scott Graham and Steven Hoggett, this adaptation works both as an incisive exploration of an underclass today but also an accessible modern version of *Othello*.

It inevitably loses some of the poetry and subtlety but in return injects exciting drama and spontaneity together this company's trademark choreography, which, as ever, is exceptional, especially in the fight scenes.

The whole cast show real energy as they rush and dance around Laura Hopkins' flimsy-walled bar. Unusually, Jimmy Akingbola and Charles Aitken come out around even with their strongly-felt, muscular portrayals, while Claire-Louise Cordwell is a tough but sympathetic Desdemona supported by Leila Crerar's loyal Emelia.

A downmarket clubber's *Othello* may not be to everyone's taste but youngsters who might be fearful of the Bard could find this gritty, breathless two-hour drama greatly to their taste. Who knows, Shakespeare newcomers might even feel ready to move on to Jude Law or David Tennant in full-length *Hamlets* before too long?

John Johnson [reviewed](#) this production in Northampton

Reviewer: [Philip Fisher](#)