***Othello* at the Royal National Theatre, d. Sam Mendes (1997)**

**Extracts from a conversation between Sam Mendes and Genista**

**McIntosh (National Theatre Platform Paper)**

It’s set loosely in the mid to late 1930s, in an imagined war between the

Turks and the Venetians. There are certain Shakespeare plays which demand

you create an imaginative universe for the play, quite separate from any real

period [...] But *Othello* is the first Shakespeare play I’ve directed which

makes specific, social demands without which the play won’t work. It seems

to me that there has to be a recognisable social and military hierarchy for a

modern audience. Othello is a general, and the pressure that the play exerts

on the characters is very dependent on this hierarchy. So I wanted to find a

period that was relatively modern and that would release the play into a

twentieth century environment without hampering it and without answering

too many questions [...] We therefore came up with an unspecific twentieth

century set of uniforms: dark blue, vaguely Fascist ones and the khaki,

slightly English-looking colonial uniform. I was able, then, I thought, to

bring in echoes of twentieth century British colonies [...] I also wanted to be

able to feel the desolation and the loneliness of Cyprus. Shakespeare’s play

is set on an island within an island, as it were: the barracks is itself closed off

to the outside world, outside of which exists a foreign race, and then there’s

the sea. You’re a long way from home and Venice. I wanted to get that sense

of compression and claustrophobia. And I also wanted something that was,

not to put too fine a point on it, sexy, that acknowledged the youth of Othello

and Desdemona in my vision of the play, and there’s something about the

texture of that period which is enticing.

***Othello* at The Shakespeare Theater, Washington d. Jude Kelly (1997)**

**From an interview by Lyn Gardner in *The Guardian*, 1997**

In Jude Kelly’s production all the characters apart from Othello, were played by black

actors. Othello was played by the white actor Patrick Stewart who coined the phrase

‘photo-negative’ to describe the production.

Kelly is aware that her photo-negative *Othello* [...] will present great challenges to

audience preconceptions. She doesn’t agree with those who argue that *Othello* [...]

should be struck from the canon because it offends late twentieth century sensibilities.

Instead she believes we need to find ways to do these plays. Kelly is acutely aware

that her production may rouse controversy but believes her approach is justified by the

racial mix of Washington, where approximately 60% of the population is black, but it

is the 30% white minority who hold most of the power and make most of the

decisions. And go to the theatre.

When an all white or mostly white audience watches a black Othello, the reaction can

be liberal but patronizing. This production is a deliberate attempt to reverse that

situation, to make white audiences experience some of the feelings of isolation and

discomfort that black people experience all the time in their lives.

**From an interview with Patrick Stewart**

I call it photo-negative. One of my hopes is that it will continue to say what a

conventional production of *Othello* would say about racism and prejudice. It might

even say it in a more intense and possibly provocative way [...] To replace the black

outsider with a white man in a black society, will, I hope, encourage a much broader

view of the fundamentals of racism, and perhaps even question those triggers – you

know, color of skin, physiognomy, language, culture – that can produce instant

feelings of fear, suspicion and so forth.