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# How to Teach a Play

Essential Exercises for Popular Plays

EDITED BY MIRIAM M.  
CHIRICO AND KELLY YOUNGER

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*To Debi, who joined us in Baltimore — Miriam*  
*To Stephanie, Aidan, and Clare (and even Sean) — Kelly*

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2 After the initial reading of the scene, students in groups look at the scene and find non-vulgar ways for the characters to express themselves. You could tell the students to pretend they are movie executives dubbing over the script's profanity with substitute words, a process called "bowdlerizing" the script, so that the movie can be suitable for broadcast (not premium cable) TV. Students can also choose to simply delete the swear words or rewrite the lines without the profanity. Provide an example for the students, e.g., the line "Those fucking deadbeats" becomes "Those unpleasant people who don't want to work."

3 The students present their rewritten and edited ("cleaned up") versions of the scene for the class. These subsequent presentations can lead to a discussion of how and why the profanity works as dialogue, and what is missing or what changes when the profanity is removed.

4 The exercise can further include changes in tempo and delivery for students who have more experience in performing. For example, what if the characters spoke without interrupting each other? What if the characters spoke with refined accents? After such experimenting (with opportunities to play around), the instructor might ask the students how the dialogue as it is presented on the page determines the "who" and the "where" of these characters.

### Reflection

The students are invited to question their own perceptions of profanity—how and why characters (and playwrights) use it in dialogue and how "appropriate" the language is in performance. In the same way other kinds of dialogue are explored for their rhythmic score, such as poetic dialogue, students also are encouraged to explore the rhythm and tempo of profanity. Instructors may need to guide the discussion in order to suggest how profanity is a form of verbal violence and has the potential to shock or establish power over another. These ideas are important in order for the students to understand the kind of intentional impact Mamet's dialogue has.

It might also be worth mentioning that many actors who have performed Mamet's plays (and this one in particular) note that the dialogue often seems problematic to them on a first, silent read, but starts to "work" for them when they start to say it out loud. In one example, noted actor Alan Alda found the key to performing Levene in *Glengarry Glen Ross* came to him while watching an Abbott and Costello movie; he connected the rhythms of the two veteran vaudeville performers with the back-and-forth rapid rhythms of Mamet's dialogue.

## FENCES BY AUGUST WILSON

Baron Kelly, University of Louisville

### IN BRIEF

Create "fenced off" performance spaces for characters.

### PURPOSE

This exercise will help students explore "fences" as a metaphor for the characters' lives. For example, how Troy is fenced out (from baseball), fenced off (prison time), and fenced in (by family, the church, or the military). It may also be used for any of the characters in the play.

### PREPARATION

Students should read the play in its entirety before performing this exercise. Ideally, students could be given an introduction to the significant legal actions concerning black/white relationships and racial segregation in the 1950s at the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement.

### MATERIALS

Masking tape, as well as a handful of props that are specific to the play: e.g., a baseball, baseball bat, empty gin bottle, trumpet, a rose, key, lunch bucket, football, a cake plate, a basket with laundry in it, a pile of wood, a bowl of discarded fruit. Not all are needed, but at least one per character is required.

## Nuts and Bolts

- 1 In an open space, section off the room into squares with masking tape.
- 2 Ask students to select a character (or the instructor may assign them).
- 3 Allow the students to select one prop from those available. For this first part, have them choose one they feel is the most relevant to that character and give them an opportunity to explain why.
- 4 Ask the students to choose a line or lines that speaks to the importance of that prop.
- 5 Place the students in their own squares to give them the sense of being "fenced off" from the others.
- 6 Within their square, allow them to perform their lines in four different ways:
  - a First, holding the prop in their hands;
  - b Second, with the prop placed outside their fence but within reach;
  - c Third, with the prop placed outside their fence and far out of reach;
  - d Fourth, with their prop placed within someone else's fence.
- 7 Repeat step 6 with as many different characters as time allows and have a conversation about the experience. What did the students notice about how their performances differed depending upon the proximity or availability of the prop?
- 8 Break the students into groups without duplicating characters and ask them to select a larger scene from the play.
- 9 Repeat the steps above, this time having students perform the scene from within their own fences yet engaging with one another.
- 10 Allow them to perform the scene several times with their props in different locations. The instructor may have them all perform with the same proximity (e.g., everyone performs the scene with their prop in hand) or with variation (one with the prop in hand, another with the prop nearby, another with their prop in someone else's fence, etc.).
- 11 If the instructor chooses to let students play with multiple props, the students can take turns using the objects as each person speaks his or her lines. For example, if the scene is where Troy confesses his infidelity, the student reading Rose might pick up one object on "I done everything a wife should be" and another on "After all these years to come dragging this into me now." Then, having put these objects down, she may pick up another on "Why Troy?" and another on "Well, you can't wish us away." The student reading Troy might pick up a prop on "We can talk this out" and another on "firmed up my backbone." Whether or not the student picks up an object for each line or each key phrase depends on what seems right to them in the moment. The students do not need to choose a relevant object, but rather pick up whatever comes to mind/hand.

## Reflection

When actors come to a piece of text, there is no internal reference in their heads unless it is created. Actors may refer to a place, and they may even decide with the fellow actors where that place is in relation to the stage, but the concrete reality has to be imaginatively created. Actors need to create a specific internal landscape so that the dialogue can live within the immediate exchange of one character with another. The way to that internal landscape is to create an external landscape in which they can perform, and establishing lines of fencing in the classroom is one way this landscape can be achieved.

This exercise is valuable because it physically recreates a sense of prohibition and restriction connected to the play's theme of "fences." As an acting exercise, it emphasizes the act of choosing a prop and using it to communicate to another person, to show the person you are talking to what you mean. By giving them props but changing their proximity and relationship to it, the exercise emphasizes how the characters perform their proximity and relationship to one another as well as to the larger society. In other words, the props represent the longing, desire, restriction, and limitations we put on ourselves and each other.

The more playful the instructor is with this exercise, the more the students use the props to represent their words and communicate their meanings. After the exercise is concluded, the students should have a deeper sense of the words in relationship to each other, but also a deeper sense of the restrictions and limits placed upon Troy, Rose, Cory, and other characters by society.

*“Othello in the Age of the Alt-Right” in Playing Shakespeare’s  
Characters: Lovers, edited by Louis Fantasia. Peter Lang Publishing, Jan. 2019, 47 – 53. [P]*

## **Othello: *In the Age of Black Lives Matter and DACA***

“Suit the action to the word, the word to the action, with this special observance: that you o’erstep not the modesty of nature. For anything so o’erdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is to hold, as ‘twere, the mirror up to nature...”

(*Hamlet*, Act 3, scene 2)

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## BARON Kelly

In the age of Black Lives Matter, when unarmed black and brown boys and men in America are being senselessly killed by law enforcement, when the racist divisions in our country are becoming more overt, what are the different ways Shakespeare's *Othello* can resist any attempt to endorse what are labeled racist assumptions? Shakespeare wrote about characters who are socially excluded, discriminated against, alien: Caliban, Shylock, Othello, Sycorax, the witches of *Macbeth*. Also, the association of blackness with both innate evil and natural servitude is exemplified in Aaron, the demonic Moor of Shakespeare's earliest tragedy, *Titus Andronicus*. Early in the play, the ambitious Aaron seeks to cast off his "slavish weeds and servile thoughts" (2.1.18), yet when he calls the child of his adulterous liaison with the Empress a "thick-lipped slave" (4.2.181), it is as though he instinctively recognized the baby as marked for servitude by its appearance. At the same time, wishing only to "have his soul black like his face" (3.1.208). Aaron celebrates his own color as the badge of a wickedness he shares with almost all the other black characters of early Elizabethan drama.

When Iago, in the course of the tirade with which he opens *Othello*, snidely refers to the protagonist as "his Moorship" (1.1.35), he immediately highlights the ethnic tensions in the play. Not once in the scene do the other characters refer to Othello by name; instead he is simply "the Moor," "the thicklips," and "an extravagant and freewheeling stranger" (1.1.151).

From the perspective established in the play's first scene, what we nowadays call "race" would appear absolutely central to the tragedy of *Othello*.

Race has been among the most fiercely debated social issues of our times. Othello's blackness has come to dominate any interpretation of the play. In Shakespeare's *Othello*, Othello's race and color do not simply determine the reaction of the reactions of other characters to him, they also explain his actions. In other words, Shakespeare suggests that Othello behaves as he does because he is black. And to suggest that a person's behavior is racially determined is, by definition, racist.

In today's real world, it is easy to see how racism is alive and well in digital online comment sections. Today, the digital age is "the real world." Polls and studies that measure racism are hotly debated because most people won't acknowledge their prejudice to a stranger. The subject is so subjective and politically charged, and many people, of all races, may not recognize their own biases. In a world of racial profiling, systematic inequalities and extreme prejudice are abundant in too many people who are sworn to serve and protect. Such disrespectful treatment of people of color is simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Contrast the following recent incident in Las Vegas involving football player Michael Bennett, with recently-surfaced dash camera footage showing a Cobb County, Georgia officer, Lt. Greg Abbott, comforting a nervous white woman who had been pulled over and expressed her fear. On Saturday, August 26th 2017, Seattle Seahawks football star Michael Bennett was among of group of people attending the Mayweather vs. McGregor boxing match in Las Vegas. Bennett and others began fleeing what sounded like gun shots when police officers brought him down to the ground, dug a knee into his back and threatened to blow his "f---ing head off" (Mather). Lt. Abbott, in contrast, told the



terrified woman, “But you’re not black. Remember, we only kill black people.” In the wake of the furor, Abbott retired—with full benefits (Hauser and Fortin).

African American high school students, particularly in depressed urban and rural communities in America, need to understand that the same conversations about race that have been relevant for generations, still apply in 2018. How do the visuals of prison bars in film director Oliver Parker’s 1995 *Othello* resonate with the surveillance and criminalization of black men and women in twentieth-century America? How do the racial tensions that accompany Othello’s presence in Venice relate to the students’ experiences in and out of school?

The continuing immediacy of the issue that is played to the worst fears of whites for example, black crime, or black male super-sexuality deflowering white womanhood, was made apparent by the nationwide reaction to the O.J. Simpson scandal in 1994. When the African American football star and sports broadcaster was arrested for the murder of his white wife, journalists across the country immediately drew comparisons with Othello. By providing an explanatory template for Simpson’s crime, Shakespeare’s tragedy even seemed to confirm the accused’s guilt. Observers claimed to recognize in Simpson the symptoms of a particular jealous psychosis known as “Othello syndrome.”

When issues of race, language, and culture are prominent in national conversations, the reading and writing students engage in can present both opportunities and challenges. In the age of Black Lives Matter and DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) teachers can use *Othello* as a basis for discussion on how race plays out in current images seen today. Othello can be used with students of color and their white counterparts as they learn to understand one another in and out of the classroom. Othello can be used for students to work through difficult perspectives as they try to understand racism today. The assumption of black violence and also black naiveté that is played out to its logical conclusion in *Othello* haunts people of color in their own neighborhoods, still choreographs their steps, and motivates full body searches by police when they stop a car for a missing headlight. The fear of being judged less than—which we all face at different times of our lives—plays out particularly for first generation, low income students of color. These students do not understand that asking questions or even asking for help is a sign of curiosity and interest, and not of weakness.

Students spend a lot of time learning academic skills, but rarely do they talk about the emotional reactions they may have to what they read, which may address deeper themes. Students in school are pushed to become clinical crafters of arguments and masters of academic language. While these are essential skills, students appear perfectly comfortable not acknowledging and discussing emotional responses to literature. Characters are fictitious abstractions, and, without actors to bring them to life, and makeup and digital tricks to make the drama feel real, students are blocked and may strictly do the analytical work without a significant emotional response. In my opinion, this is a bad thing. An emotional response to drama and literature should be part of the curriculum.

In the right hands, the important stories, grim plots and all, can help students cope with real life. A work like *Othello* becomes a way to address the corrosive legacy of racism that continues to haunt society. The process of entering imagined worlds of fiction builds empathy and improves one’s ability to take another person’s point of view.

Since the number of black teachers is declining significantly, and the population of all minorities is rising, it is important to ponder those implications for black students. Shakespeare's Othello lives and works in a white environment. The play concerns itself with shame, humiliation, and a sense of betrayal. It is crucial for students to explore the nuances of these feelings. and "all of his complexion" (2.7.87). Hamlet denigrates his mother's choice when, comparing pictures of his father, he puns "Could you on this fair mountain leave to feed, and batten on this Moor? Ha, have you eyes" (3.4.77). In *The Tempest*, the King of Naples, in the eyes of his court, has brought disaster on himself because he was foolish enough to marry his daughter to the King of Tunis, or "lose her to an African" (2.1.133). As Virginia Mason Vaughan notes in her book *Othello: A Contextual History*, "Black skin signified in addition to visual ugliness an ingrained moral infection, a taint in the blood often linked to sexual perversion, and the desire to possess a white woman—her body, her status, her wealth, or her power".

The question also arises did Shakespeare know any black people? Could he have known any black people? Miranda Kaufman's *Black Tudors: The Untold Story* establishes through scholarly research that in parish records there were hundreds of black people in Elizabethan England. There was an ambassadorial visit in 1600–1601 to Queen Elizabeth's court by Abd el-Ouahed ben Messaoud Anoun Mohammed and his entourage from the Barbary Coast, to discuss their common enemy, Philip II of Spain. It was in the interests of the North African states to form an alliance with Elizabeth I. So, yes, Shakespeare could have known some black people. The question is, did he do his homework? Did he bother to get to know any black people? If he didn't, was he being lazy? If he did get to know some black people, and still wrote the Othello of the second half who becomes an obsessive murderous honor killer, was he being a bigot?

Students must be made aware that the Black presence in Britain has been rigorously historicized: harking back to Roman times. It includes the African entertainers in the Tudor court, the servants, valets, extending to the grooms of Hogarth's time, seamen, hostel keepers, the African American anti-slavery campaigners, and such 19th-century greats as the composer Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, to the earliest Black Shakespeare performers, Ira Aldridge, and after him, Paul Robeson. Aldridge and Robeson both challenged the virulent racial assumptions of their respective time.

Teachers can use the lessons from *Othello* to talk about how people in contemporary society live authentic lives despite the narrative of racism. How do we face our fears and self-doubt? What happens when we confront institutional forms of racism? The weak, minority, and the poor are targeted recipients of racism that is being politically endorsed. Different groups of immigrants are played off against each other. In the twenty-first century, black students are still called names like "nigger," "pick niddy," and "chocolate mousse." They have been discouraged from taking STEM course, though their parents are doctors and scientists. Some white teachers still feel black students aren't capable of handling advanced courses.

It is necessary for these uncomfortable conversations to be pushed forward in this historical moment. One of the biggest conditions of impossibility that people of color face everyday is the isolation and self-destruction felt by Othello. Is Othello a warrior, wife murderer, gullible dupe, or victim of a campaign of hate?

Teachers of Shakespeare in high schools and colleges can initiate discussions of how people of color

navigate public spaces. How might the Latino or African American student who has been adopted and raised by a white family in a white culture be both similarly a part of and separate from that culture in their everyday lives? How might Iago's alienation be felt in the current political climate of disgruntled working class white voters, and the issue of immigration and DACA?

Students can be taught to choose to cross the ancient line of racism to find common ground for social change, or we can continue to allow the color line as Langston Hughes noted in his poem *A Dream Deferred*, "to fester like a sore" and to "sag like a heavy load" on the nation until it explodes.

No wonder that Vaughan, in the course of her contextual history of the play and its reception, should find herself oscillating helplessly between the two positions: "I think this play is racist, and I think it is not." But Vaughan goes on to warn against the impossibility of escaping this conundrum, since "Othello's example shows me that if I insist on resolving the contradiction, I will forge only lies and distortions...the discourse of racial difference is inescapably embedded in this play just as it was embedded in Shakespeare's culture and our own" (70). Like *Othello* itself, we may resist this discourse, but, as the play's reception and performance histories demonstrate, learning to think outside its parameters in the Age of Black Lives Matter and DACA is a much more difficult matter.