Perfecting Iago's Performance

William Shakespeare's *Othello* touches on themes that have always related to society, such as race, betrayal, and overdramatized relationships. Because of this, the play has been performed hundreds of times since the beginning of the seventeenth century through the twenty-first century. The casting of such a play as *Othello* is important because the depictions of the personalities of the characters make the play and the audience's view of it. Questions of Othello's race and Iago's age are important for directors because such questions influence the audience's overall opinion. Iago is perhaps the most important character in the play, as his inner thoughts are most delved into and his character is the most developed as his evil schemes make up much of the plot of *Othello*. He is a complicated villain because his intentions have motivation that an audience can sympathize with if his character is accurately portrayed.

Because of this, many interpretations of *Othello* have not been right in their portrayal of Iago. Iago's physical characteristics have varied from young to old, white to black, male to female; if I were to direct the performance, Iago would be an older white male character, as his lines and opinions seem to suggest. His stage performance has often been dry and lacking the strong motivation and feelings behind his actions. I would make Iago the most powerful, emotionally-driven presence on the stage, as Shakespeare surely intended it.

\[ \text{or as the play requires...} \]
Adaptations of *Othello* have been both successful and fleeting, depending on the director's portrayal of the characters. In a review called "Othello: Die Trying," Sandra Silvoy comments about an adaptation of *Othello* directed by Sherri Young from the African American Shakespeare Company in 2010. The depiction of Iago is contrary to many other adaptations performed, and poses questions about the character, like gender and race, that have not been before considered. In this adaptation, the part of Iago is played by an African American woman. The remainder of the roles are fairly common as far as casting, with Othello played by an African American man, and Desdemona played by a Caucasian woman. This switch in the character of Iago changes the entire play by making many of Iago's lines quite ironic. In the first act of the play, when Iago tells Brabanzio of Othello and Desdemona's relationship, he says, "You'll have your daughter/ Covered with a Barbary horse," (1.1.112-113). This line relates Othello to an Arabian horse, which suggests barbarism, indicating Iago's racism. In the review, Silvoy comments that "it seems no coincidence that McCrary is an African American actress playing the role of a racist who belittles Othello for his African roots (behind his back of course)" (Silvoy). It is also noted that the parts of Iago and Roderigo are played by the same actress, a result of condensing the characters of the play to five actors. Though this might make the play seem confusing to the audience, according to Silvoy, "The gender switch [of Iago and Roderigo] is an intriguing twist that complicates Iago's plot to destroy Othello's marriage" (Silvoy). The review called the actress playing the parts a lesbian, but I still think this would complicate Roderigo's infatuation for Desdemona considerably. I also think that Iago played by a woman would raise more questions about the overall plot of the play, as the audience would probably feel that Cassio was chosen over Iago for lieutenant because he is a man, raising
gender issues where there should not be. This would affect Iago’s entire motive for scheming against Othello, as she would be angry over being passed over for being a woman, when the real reason in the play, Othello says, is that Cassio has more of a theoretical mind than Iago.

This adaptation of Iago would affect the audience’s entire view of the play because of the irony of an African American making racist innuendos about another African American. This causes a misperception of Iago’s character, and also takes away from Othello’s singularity in being the Moor.

Even though Iago’s character is presumably a white man, adaptations of Othello in which Iago meets this criteria can still come short of meeting Shakespeare’s intended interpretation of him. The 2001 film adaptation of Othello called directed by Tim Blake Nelson is a younger, more modern version without Shakespeare’s language. The setting is a boarding school, and instead of a military background the characters play on the basketball team. Iago in the film is a high school student named Hugo, whose character and strange circumstances, different than the original play, completely alter the overall film. A review by Roger Ebert on the film describes how Hugo’s character does more to comment on the twenty-first century school and sports systems than it does show justice to Iago in the original. Ebert says, “The movie creates Hugo’s motivation,” by setting him up to be the son of the basketball coach who is jealous of O’s popularity and skills on the court. Along with Hugo’s fictionalized motive, Ebert claims that “it is clearly established that Hugo is a psychopath, and that his allies are victims of that high school disease that encourages the unpopular to do anything in order to be accepted” (Ebert). The context of the film is different than Shakespeare’s Othello, and this affects Hugo’s character in the most dramatic way. Aspects of Iago’s character are lacking in “O”, like his relationship with
Emilia, who is Emily in the film. When Emily finds Desi's handkerchief and gives it to Hugo, he expresses his appreciation for her romantically and they have a sexual encounter. In the play, Iago merely calls Emilia “a good wench” and soon after he tells her to “go, leave me” (3.3.317 & 324). Not only in this specific scene, but throughout the film, Hugo is not cruel to Emilia however Iago is with Emilia in the original text. This trait makes up part of Iago's character, and the audience has a different perception of Hugo because he does not match with Iago. Nelson set up the film to be a dramatic portrayal based off of Othello, but it is far from matching the original text, and Hugo's character is the most farfetched. He is the conniving, manipulative villain of the play, and his scheme to destroy O makes up the plot of the film, but his lack of a connection with the audience, as Iago has in Othello in his many soliloquys, makes him less of a presence, which alters the entire perception of the work. Hugo's youth and circumstances with the basketball team, apart from drawing on modern high school dilemmas, motivates him to destroy O, but it so unlike Iago's reasoning that the overall work is changed because of Hugo's character.

Although all of the performances of Othello undoubtedly have flaws, some do complement Shakespeare's original. One of the most popular contemporary versions of Othello is the 1989 film version with Ian McKellen as Iago, in which McKellen's rendering of Iago is much closer to the text itself. The actors in the film first performed on stage, and McKellen seemed to play the part of Iago flawlessly. McKellen said, “Iago is an easy part to bring off and rarely fails to impress. I am not the first to realize that there is no need to act the underlying falsity of the man rather to play ‘honest Iago’ on all occasions” (McKellen). McKellen noted that in the making of the film, he was told to try to win over the sympathy of the audience, by appealing to
them instead of sneering or appearing entirely evil. He explains that in acting out the role, the audience did appeal to him because Iago’s character is the gateway for the audience to understand what is happening, since he says most of the asides and only Iago and the audience know exactly what is going on. McKellen describes Iago’s role as “the jealous husband who suspects “the lustful Moor hath leaped into my seat” and can urge his boss to “beware of jealousy” because he himself is a victim of it” (McKellen). He is attired in military garb, which is suitable for Iago because he is a soldier. He has a beard, and light, piercing eyes that stare into the camera, showing a hint of hidden troubles underneath. The actor is the typical Iago, a middle-aged white man in appropriate dress, playing the part of ‘honest Iago.’ This representation of Iago, that comes closest to the text’s description of his character, makes the play itself more believable. Iago has the most prominent connection with the audience, and McKellen is able to play on this connection in order to draw some sense of sympathy, or at least understanding, which is best compatible with how Othello should be performed.

If I were to direct a performance of Othello, Iago would be the most central role of all of the characters, and I would ensure that his is the most appropriate match to the text. This is because it is important that the audience understand Iago’s motivation, as it is imperative to do so to truly understand the play. If I were to direct the play, Iago’s character would be the most difficult to cast, since the actor must be able to interpret Iago’s emotions in contrasting evil with jealousy, which are two distinct and different aspects of Iago’s character. He is the most complicated character in Othello, and his depiction through performance should reflect his deep motivations. He is the villain, so the actor portraying him should display facial expressions and tones reflecting his manipulative character, but there should also be some mystery behind
his visage, displaying some inner hurt feelings at being overlooked for the promotion given to Cassio. Iago hints at this in the play, when he says, “And I—of whom his eyes had seen the proof / At Rhodes, at Cyprus, and on other grounds / Christened and heathen—must be beleed and calmed / By debtor and creditor” (1.1.27–30). His jealousy of Cassio also shows some sense of pain because he stood strongly by Othello on the battlefield, and Othello’s betrayal seems to be a stab at their friendship, more so than being a simply political matter. In the line “I hate the Moor” (1.3.355), Iago should display hatred deeper than being caused by simply not getting a promotion from him. He should show feelings of being betrayed. When portraying this, it should seem like he used to love him, but has since turned against him.

The actor playing the part of Iago would need to understand the most important aspects of his character. Perhaps the most important part to consider is that Iago is the most human character in the play, and should be somewhat sympathized with by the audience. His character encompasses basic human emotion, such as jealously and spitefulness, but these should be portrayed as being a result of his circumstances, not necessarily his entire character. For instance, during a soliloquy with the audience, Iago says, “Cassio’s a proper man. Let me see now, / To get his place, and to plume up my will / In double knavery —how, how? Let’s see” (1.3.374–376). In this passage, Iago includes the audience in his trickery, involving them in the scheme. Sections such as this in the play need to be performed as near to the audience as possible, as if he is including them as part of the cast. Iago should smirk while he is saying this, but pause afterward as if in deep thought of his actions. Another soliloquy should be in an attempt to gain sympathy from the audience, when he says in a part of it, “For I do suspect the lusty Moor / Hath leapt into my seat, the thought whereof / Doth like a poisonous mineral,
gnaw at my innards / And nothing can or shall content my soul / Till I am evened with him,”
(2.3.282–286). The actor here should overdramatize this part in an attempt to make the audience understand the pain that inflicts him, although they will not know whether it is true or not, as this could be another part of lago’s plan.

lago’s appearance should reflect his character. He should be older than middle aged. If he appears to be “wise,” he will come across as more honest. His honesty, as well developed in the play that it is, shows some hint at lago being older, otherwise Othello would not have the ground that he does to constitute him so entirely honest. Othello mentions lago’s trustworthiness throughout the play, with lines such as “thy honesty and love doth mince” (2.3.230), and “I know thou’rt full of love and honesty” (3.3.123), which makes it understood to the audience that Othello looks upon lago in a favorable light, seemingly regarding him as an elder. Older people are often thought of to be more honest, as they know more of the world and have more experiences to account for. This also aids in explaining why lago feels so vehemently abashed about Cassio getting the promotion over himself. lago obviously feels that he is more qualified for lieutenant, as he says, “I know my price, I am worth no worse a place” (1.1.11). This and many of lago’s other lines hint at some astute sensibility that shows a trace of age and maturity.

Besides lago’s age, his physical characteristics and dress also make up his character and his credulity. The presence of facial hair is often disputed in performance. He is regularly performed with facial hair, which adds to his mystery, and conceals some his face, causing the audience to wonder what he is hiding. lago should have a beard, especially in an adaptation set in earlier times, as many men in Shakespeare’s age had beards of some kind. He should have
preferably light colored eyes, to make him more menacing when he is acting out his evil schemes, but also give a sense of innocence and honesty. It is important that even his physical characteristics show some juxtaposition, as “honest” lago’s character does exhibit some irony overall. The military dress works best for lago, as his character seems like one who revolves around military duties and attitudes. He seems proud of his military background, as he says to Roderigo speaking of himself, “Others there are / Who, trimmed in forms and visages of duty, / Keep yet their hearts attending on themselves, / And, throwing but shows of service on their lords, / Do well thrive by ’em, (1.1.49 –53). Overall, lago should physically come across as a proud man, as he claims to be. This is the reason he is chosen over Cassio, as he is too proud to spend his time flattering others for a higher position.

In the performance of Othello, casting is an essential consideration, especially for lago. His character is so complex and entangled in the plot that his portrayal makes an adaptation a success or a failure. His character is so central to the play that any mistakes affect the play’s credibility entirely. Ian McKellen comes the closest in the plays reviewed to encompassing lago’s physical likeness. His age shows him as older than Othello, he has a beard, and his military dress suggests an older soldier who has not perhaps as quickly forgotten the battlefield. Although this is important, if I were to direct the play lago’s physical characteristics would about match this, but his presence in the play would rely much more on his demeanor on the stage and his interactions with the audience. lago is the most powerful and influential character in Othello, and the audience should leave the play feeling that they also were in his control.
Works Cited


http://www.mckellen.com/stage/othello/


Megan–
I like your reading of Iago and I think it is effective with all of the details you put into it. It would be stronger if you used stage productions exclusively (especially as you look at Iago on stage before the audience) – this would help you build on what you’re doing.