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**Othello: The Remix**

**Rating:**★★★★

**By Lauren Whalen**

The best hip-hop is pure poetry. It highlights human triumphs and flaws, finding lighthearted moments in the saddest tragedies. Hip-hop has its own language: words spilling over one another, multiple callbacks and cultural references and, always, an infectious hook. With these qualifications in mind, Shakespeare was a hip-hop virtuoso. Marrying hip-hop and Shakespeare is both a natural pursuit and a subtle, demanding art. The [**Q Brothers**](http://www.qbrothers.com/) – born and bred in Chicago, now acclaimed worldwide – step up to the plate in their third work. ***Othello: The Remix***is a masterful hip-hop homage to the classic tale and a fresh spin on an all-too-human story: a man who believes his own hype, but is just paranoid enough to let manipulation rear its ugly head.

In this story, Othello (**[Postell Pringle](http://www.qbrothers.com/we-be-chicago-q-brothers.php" \t "_blank)**) rises from prison to superstardom, rapping the stories of his rough ghetto roots. He elopes with beautiful and privileged Desdemona, whose angelic voice has its own inner pain. But during a tour that will make crossover stars of Othello and his pretty-boy friend Cassio ([**Jackson Doran**](http://www.qbrothers.com/we-be-chicago-q-brothers.php)), third wheel Iago ([**GQ**](http://www.qbrothers.com/we-be-chicago-q-brothers.php)) has his own agenda: destroy everything Othello holds dear, with a few dropped hints and a strategically placed bauble.

As with their 2008 hit *Funk It Up About Nothin’*, the Q Brothers bring their own brand of the Bard to [Chicago Shakespeare Theater](http://www.chicagoshakes.com/). They don’t just shake up the genre, they blow it up with sick beats (thanks to onstage [**DJ Clayton Stamper**](http://www.chicagoshakes.com/main.taf?p=2,76,9,5)), wise words and a language style that’s both wildly different and oddly similar to Shakespeare’s couplets. As with *Funk It Up*, actors play multiple roles (brother [**JQ**](http://www.qbrothers.com/we-be-chicago-q-brothers.php) portrays Bianca and Roderigo, and fills in with narration), changing costumes and personas without skipping a syllable or missing a beat. You may have noticed that this *Othello*contains no women: the men play Emilia and Bianca, while Desdemona is represented only by a trilling voice. The latter is initially jarring but eventually so convincing – thanks in large part to Pringle’s expressive face – especially during the play’s final moments.

And it’s *funny*. In the play’s first lines, a character notes that this is a tragedy, but there’s comedy in it. Certain roles (GQ’s befuddled Brabantio, JQ’s sassy Bianca and the vain but goofy Cassio) provide excellent comic relief, but the Q Brothers also find subtle and broad opportunities to lighten the moment just when events turn nasty. Rather than detracting from the drama, the comedy augments it, highlighting the tragedy by providing a sharp but seamless contrast.

The cast is a tight quartet of stellar performers, inspiring delight, sadness and throw-your-hands-in-the-air enthusiasm in audience members. In addition to the above-mentioned roles, JQ shines as a macho, tennis-obsessed record producer. Doran not only charms as Cassio but also fully realizes neglected wife Emilia (and steals the spotlight in a 60’s inspired torch song). Pringle’s Othello goes from soulful and loving to paranoid and raging at breakneck but realistic speed, his soulful eyes a window to the tortured soul within. And GQ makes Iago the ultimate villain: sneaky, snakelike and all too aware that words are the deadliest weapons.

The Q Brothers are certified hip-hop heads that pay appropriate tribute to their predecessors. Many songs contain verbal and melodic references to A Tribe Called Quest, Eminem and many others. But they also have a deep reverence for William Shakespeare. One moment took my breath away: Othello and Iago, kneeling opposite each other, swearing allegiance with clasped hands and faces that almost, but don’t quite, touch. My friend referred to it after the show. “*That’s* what the play’s about,” she said, shaking her head in awe. “They weren’t just telling the Othello story. They *get*it.” “Yeah,” I agreed. “They really, really do.”

**Link:** <http://chicagotheaterbeat.com/2013/03/18/review-othello-the-remix-at-chicago-shakespeare-theater/#review>