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'O': The Price You Pay for Getting Too Real

By TIM BLAKE NELSON

I was in Australia working on "The Thin Red Line" as an actor in August 1997 when I was called with the offer to direct a film titled "O," a modern-day adaptation of Shakespeare's "Othello" set in high school. Initially turning the project down, without reading it, I wondered when would it end, this ruining of classic texts by teening them down? There had been the successes, beginning in 1995 with "Clueless," based on Jane Austen's novel "Emma," but many subsequent adaptations of literature typified the film industry's appetite for soullessly copying previous hits. When I finally did agree at least to read "O," I found Brad Kaaya's script as provocative as it was challenging, setting myself (and many others who would work on the film) on the strange journey of making "O" and then navigating it toward release.

Though I'd decided to direct the film, which will open Friday after a one-and-a-half year delay caused by qualms over its subject matter, its conceptual liability remained: it was still another Shakespeare-set-in-high-school film. What distinguished this adaptation, however, was that it would be from a tragedy, not a comedy or romance, and that tragedies of similar scale had been occurring in American high schools with chilling frequency. There were five shootings in the year or so leading up to photography on "O," and the names of the schools' towns had become shorthand for what seemed an epidemic of teenage violence: Jonesboro, Pearl, Eugene, Springfield, Edinboro. It suddenly occurred to me that a high school setting could be not only a credible environment for a Shakespearean tragedy but, at least if set in America, the most appropriate one as well.

I had always felt, even before shooting the film, that audiences would approach "O" with the same suspicions I had when it was first described to me, and that one of its challenges would be to win them over. With this in mind, our central aim involved, above all else, never pandering. The hope was that in re-imagining a very serious work without deviating from its plot (kids would kill each other in "O"; there would be no happy ending), we could make an R- rated movie for a younger audience with very adult sensibilities. I even warned the writer and producers that my version of the film would emphasize acting, character and story, and that while it would have pace and visual flare, it would not be "Othello" for music television. This was going to be a serious film. It would also, if only for the sake of its unlikely veracity, be unmistakably American.

"Othello," Shakespeare's tragedy of a black general manipulated into killing his white wife, Desdemona, by Iago, the adjutant who despises him, has always seemed to me a story more about envy than about race, making it no less human, and all the more universal. This is not to say that Othello's race isn't central to the tale; in fact, it is racial fear that Iago exploits in drawing others into his plot to destroy Othello. It's rather that Iago's envy, more than his mostly unspoken racism, drives the plot. Whereas in "Othello" the title character is a man of war "little blessed with the soft phrase of peace," in our version "Odin," or "O," is the African-American ringer imported from the

inner city for an all-white boarding school's perennially dominant basketball team. Iago (our "Hugo") and Cassio (our "Michael") play forwards to Odin's point guard. Desdemona ("Desi") is the bright and beautiful daughter of the dean.

The school worships Odin (just as the greater society idolizes its sports heroes), and it is this that fuels Hugo's envy, along with a rivalry with Odin for Hugo's father's affection. Hugo's is the envy of adolescence, which combines the acute and unwieldy passion of childhood with the sinister ability to act that comes with adulthood. What makes "O" credible in executing the considerable leap from war and statecraft to basketball and high school is the reality that this specifically adolescent combination has lately resulted in the American phenomenon of teenagers killing teenagers. Time and again I've heard pundits conclude, with a slavish need to generalize, that our teen-age violence stems from such national pathologies as emotional numbness or alienation. While this might partly be true, the classmates of the killers in these incidents have mentioned less abstruse causes: ostracism in several cases, a love triangle in another and friction at home in still another. In other words, whatever generalities the clever can extrapolate, the impulse to kill has each time been personal.

With the media only partly responsible, kids are "older" at a younger age now. (I don't consider this to be entirely corrosive.) In our research (interviews, visits to classrooms, basketball games and countless high school corridors), we were astonished by the level of sophistication we encountered masquerading as maturity. By this I mean that kids were simply indulging in acts — whether sex, drugs or social transactions like gossip and manipulation — that I simply didn't know about in the 80's when I was a teenager. With guns as available in our country as they are, it is not surprising that the nation has suffered the tragedies it has. My friend Doug Hughes, who directs both Shakespearean and contemporary plays, put it best when I asked him whether setting one of Shakespeare's tragedies in an American high school was a foolish notion. "Tim, what better place?" was his response.

We set out to shoot "O" in the spring of 1999, and, much to their credit, the film's producers agreed with my plea that any money saved by shooting in Toronto simply wouldn't be worth the inevitable generic feel that films shot in Canada "for America" have. We instead opted for Charleston, S.C., which seemed in its way as exotic to much of the United States as Cyprus is to Venice in "Othello." There was, of course, the danger of the story's deeper forces being eclipsed by the cliché of the South as perpetually backward and irredeemably racist, but we hoped to get around this with a simple, faithful accuracy that would nourish the film's overall point.

The facts, as concern the story's racial elements, are far more intriguing than the fiction. One irony of American hip-hop culture is that white suburban kids strive to emulate the inner city tastes in dress and manner of speech that are described in rap music or depicted in its videos. Teenagers in the South are as hip-hop as they are Southern, making Odin far easier for students to venerate and therefore far easier for Hugo to envy. Just as Othello first catches Desdemona's attention because her father can never tire of the Moor's stories of "hairbreadth `scapes i' th' imminent deadly breach," so Odin's peers at Charleston's (fictional) Palmetto Grove Academy would worship rather than fear this singular embodiment of hip-hop culture in their midst. They would do so in one of our most beautiful and historically preserved cities, in which the Daughters

of the American Revolution occupy one of the downtown's most prominent facades; in which families who've settled there within the last century are derided as newcomers. One principal location was the College of Charleston, whose quad is dominated by an enormous American flag jutting from the granite-pillared Alumni Hall; another was the elite all-girls high school Ashley Hall, at which Barbara Bush prepared.

We were already in Charleston — just two days from principal photography, in fact — when Dimension Films, an offshoot of Miramax, purchased worldwide rights to "O." They had read the script, presumably seen my first film ("Eye of God," 1997) and read a voluminous production booklet I'd written for the crew of "O," detailing exactly the movie we were setting out to make. Most important, we had an impressive cast: Mekhi Phifer would play Odin; Josh Hartnett, Hugo; and Julia Stiles, Desi. Martin Sheen would portray Hugo's father. Though technically a "negative pickup," meaning a film the studio would acquire only after its completion and delivery, we sent dailies to New York regularly and invited executives to visit the set. Dimension could not have been more supportive; not only did it not interfere, but it spoke already of post-production enhancements and of hastening completion for a fall 1999 release.

With two weeks to go in the shoot, I was asked to play a leading role in the Coen brothers' Depression-era comedy "O Brother Where Art Thou?," which meant I had quickly to assemble a cut to show Dimension in a mere six weeks. On April 20, 1999, less than two weeks into the edit, the massacre at Columbine High School occurred, projecting into American homes images that the bloody ending of "O" seemed to imitate. Just days before production began, I had shown both cast and crew news footage from the succession of shootings that preceded Columbine, and the eerie similarity confirmed our approach. Sadly, "O" had the feel of truth.

As it turned out, the Columbine shootings, and the cynical attacks they provoked against Hollywood in last year's election campaign, made Miramax uncomfortable releasing the film. In answering to a company that I remain convinced admires the film, I found myself in the odd position of defending my own ethics as a filmmaker who strives to examine violence, not encourage it. However frustrating, it seemed to me that the company's concerns probably spoke to the film's gravity. Dimension has been wildly successful in distributing films far more violent than "O," and with the very same target audience. The difference was — and the company was admirably forthright about this — that "O" was real. Speaking for everyone who worked on the film, we stand proudly accused.

What cleared the way for "O" to open this week was that Miramax, mindful of its responsibilities to a film it had promised to release, was able to interest the same company audacious enough to take over another of its controversial movies (Kevin Smith's irreverent theological comedy "Dogma"): Lions Gate Films. Though my dealings with Miramax were always quite cordial, if at times devastatingly frank, it is a tremendous relief finally to know that the film will be released, and to a wide audience, without trepidation or apology.

Tim Blake Nelson's next film as a director will be "The Grey Zone," which he also wrote.