



# Shakespeare gets a Maori twist in SolOthello

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When Maori actor Regan Taylor set out to re-write a Shakespeare classic last year, it wasn't because he loved the bard's work.

In fact, he hated it.

He could never get into it, it was always "too old", and found it to be more of a technical exercise than an intuitive one.



BRYDIE THOMPSON

Regan Taylor's desire to use Maori performance masks was influenced by Marae visits, and wondering what the carvings would do if they could come off the walls and tell stories.

But as the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death approached, he saw it as the ultimate challenge.

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FAIRFAX NZ

Regan Taylor delivers a "dynamic and cheeky" interpretation of one of history's most tragic plays, Othello, Directed by Craig Geenty.

"I thought, 'what I'm going to do is make a play that's going to be accessible to my cousins and my aunts and uncles and parents?'. I set myself a challenge really, to try and think I was arrogant enough, to rewrite Shakespeare."

What resulted is *SoloOthello*, a bold Maori twist on the classic tragedy in which Te Reo, original prose and contemporary english come together.

With *SoloOthello*, Taylor makes his solo debut at Circa this week as part of the Kia Mau Festival (formerly Ahi Kaa Festival) – which celebrates Maori theatre and dance during Matariki.

Directed by Craig Geenty, Taylor will deliver a "dynamic and cheeky" interpretation of one of history's most tragic plays, *Othello*.

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Using traditional Maori masks (Te Mata Kokako o Rehia), *SoloOthello* puts the spotlight on the characters Iago, Rodrigo, Othello and Desdemona, and places them into the context of a war between tribes in pre-colonial New Zealand.

The idea of Maori performance masks has been sitting with Taylor for over a decade, influenced by Marae visits and wondering what the carvings would do if they could come off the wall and tell stories.

While *Othello* may be a story of betrayal, racism, love, jealousy and the deterioration of man, Taylor was keen to unlock the humour in the story through improvisation and modern speech.

"There's more humour than people expect. The masks love interacting with the people, and the more the people interact, the more I get out of it performing. There's definitely a lot of humour and it's very Maori-centric, Aotearoa humour."

For Geenty, who is, on the other hand, a big Shakespeare fan, one of his tasks as director was to see that non-speakers of Te Reo could follow the show as well.

Taylor himself only began speaking Te Reo three years ago when he helped start the Auckland theatre company Te Rehia.

"I started it with fluent speakers and I thought, this is a beautiful language, so started forcing myself more and using it in different shows.

"Being with them and being held by their sense of protocol, I was able to work with it safely within the context of this show."

Regan found similarities between Shakespearean prose and the structure and imagery of Whaikorero. They also found that themes translated well into a Maori context, such as Othello losing his Mana, or honour.

Taylor admits he set himself a challenge blending Te Reo and with a Shakespearean tragedy, and assuring audiences they would not feel alienated if they lacked knowledge in either.

"The first thing that puts people off is *Othello* – then you put Te Reo on top of that and it's already fighting up against mainstream theatre," he says.

"But the great thing about this play is that Shakespeare enthusiasts come, mask enthusiasts come, and a Maori audience come, that's three very different people under one roof and that's a blinking success for me, I think that's a really great thing."

Since creating *SoloOthello*, Taylor admits his view on Shakespeare has changed.

"I now realise that every word he has written has a purpose and that he has taken the time to polish every word so they can sit and shine.

"And I truly believe that being able to combine Shakespeare, masks and Te Ao Maori is a winning combination."

**SoloOthello, Circa Theatre, June 15 to 18. Book at Circa.co.nz**

**SoloOthello will also be performed at six Auckland Marae in July.**

July 6, Ngā Hau E Wha O Pukekohe Marae, Beatty Rd, Pukekohe

July 7, Hoani Waititi Marae, West Coast Rd, Glen Eden

July 8, Pirihahi Marae The Esplanade, Oneroa, Waiheke

July 12, Te Hana Te Ao Marama Marae 307 State Hwy, Te Hana

July 13, Manurewa Marae, Finlayson Rd, Manurewa

July 14, Te Mahurehure Marae, Premier Ave, Point Chevalier

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**dyrtigaf** 21 days ago  
This is culturally offensive to anyone of English descent. Imagine, a Maori daring to rewrite Shakespeare, it's almost as bad as other races doing hakas. We white people demand an apology and money.

**HamnetLaments** 21 days ago  
1. Shakespeare is ubiquitous. You can't move without someone doing Shakespeare somewhere - he's in no trouble of being removed from his cultural context.  
2. But actually, Shakespeare's stories are almost all borrowed from somewhere else - the Romans, history, The Decameron, so I doubt he'd mind his story being updated.  
3. Maori culture, like other minority and indigenous cultures is constantly under pressure. It's borrowed from without concern for significance or context, it's bought and sold by non-Maori with the same ignorance. Unlike Shakespeare, some people, like yourself, have little or no respect for it and certainly don't show it the same reverence Shakespeare receives.  
4. I am of English decent, and I think you're wrong. I think it's brilliant.  
5. It is about as far from other races doing a haka as it's possible to get.  
6. I wonder who the real racist here is?

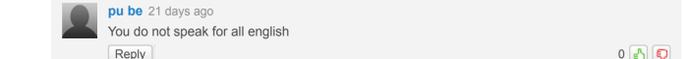
**chop123** 21 days ago  
Imagine if it were the other way around?

**pu be** 21 days ago  
You do not speak for all english

**nzanz** 21 days ago  
Looks awesome! Bring it to Otago!

**tim machine** 21 days ago  
"Put Shakespeare's name on it and they will come"

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