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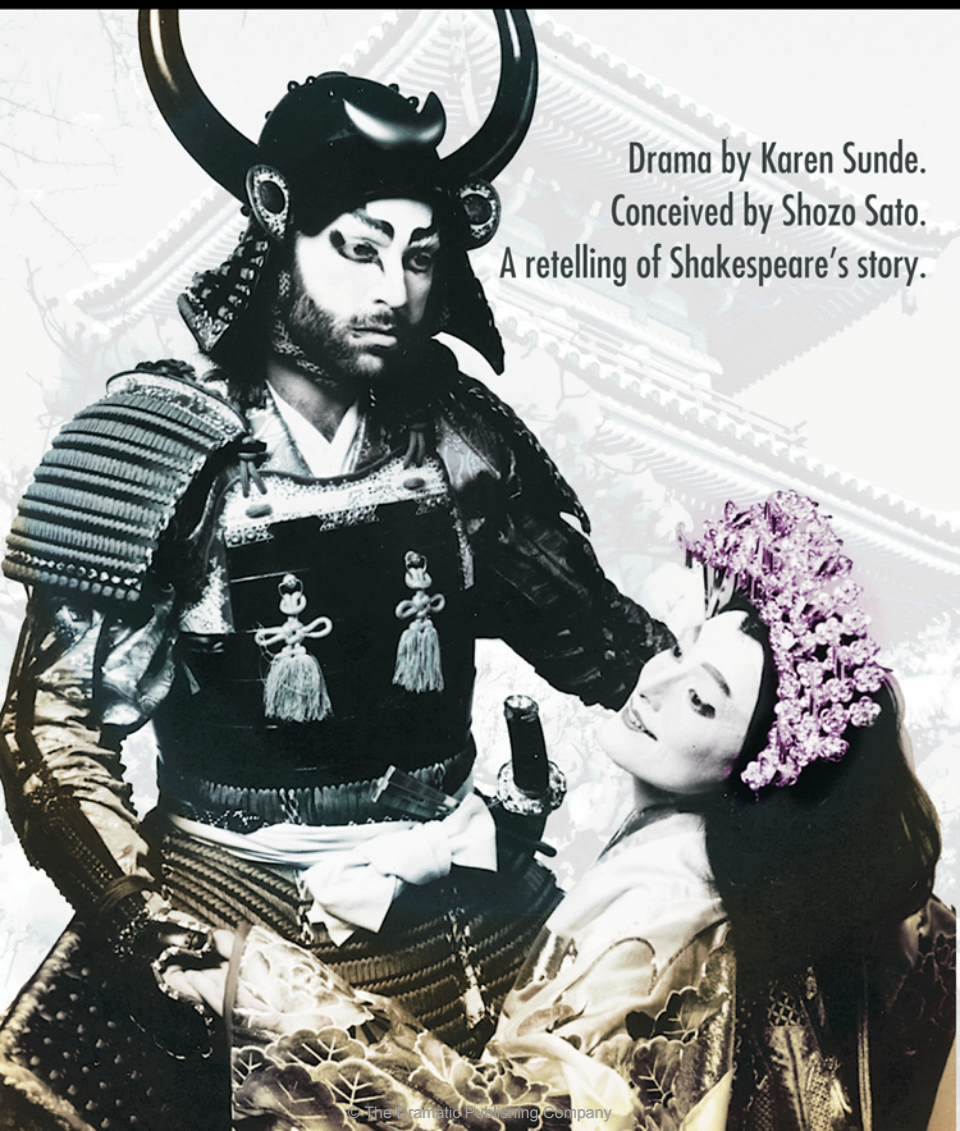
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# Kabuki Othello

Drama by Karen Sunde.  
Conceived by Shozo Sato.  
A retelling of Shakespeare's story.



# Kabuki Othello

*Drama. By Karen Sunde. Conceived by Shozo Sato. A retelling of Shakespeare's story. Cast: 8 to 18+ actors of either gender. Kabuki Othello is a lyric (haiku-like) rendition of Shakespeare's story, Eastern style. Othello, an Ainu (Caucasian native) war hero in Japan; Iago, Othello's officer and husband to Emilia; and Cassio, a playboy officer who idolizes Othello, all revolve around the delicate, sure-minded Desdemona, who captures Othello's heart. Emilia prepares the bride, and a wedding night dance makes Iago, who lusts for Desdemona, burn. So all four "roll together" on a wheel of fate when Iago, who loathes Cassio, manipulates all his "puppets," luring drunken Cassio into a comic brawl that angers Othello and dangling Desdemona's love gift from Othello (a precious fan woven by his mother) with half-heard innuendos that convince Othello that Desdemona and Cassio are lovers. Tortured mad, Othello is transformed into a demon of jealousy. When Desdemona is "tried" for infidelity, Emilia realizes Iago's treachery and tries to reveal it, but Iago stabs her. A chorus of Koken guide Othello in his sad deed—stopping Desdemona's breath by winding her lengthening hair about her throat. When it is done, Othello stands as "the ghost that is alive." Area staging. Approximate running time: 1 hour, 45 minutes.*

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# KABUKI OTHELLO

by  
KAREN SUNDE

Conceived by  
Shozo Sato



**Dramatic Publishing**

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“This play was commissioned and originally produced by the Annenberg Center, University of Pennsylvania, The People’s Light and Theatre Company and Wisdom Bridge Theatre.”

## PRODUCTION

The stage directions describe a version of Kabuki, but with new elements, e.g., Koken that speak. Companies may use the directions as guide, altering elements to suit their needs and imagination.

Open stage or proscenium with curtain (lightweight). A forestage is useful, and even arena is possible. Moveable set elements—long fabric panels that drop; a screen; a platform for reclining or levels. Whatever is needed, the black-dressed, scurrying Koken arrange it, like invisible elves.

The melody for the song on pages 73-74 can be found at at the back of the book (page 88).

## PRODUCTION HISTORY

As *Kabuki Othello*, this play was commissioned and originally produced by the Annenberg Center, University of Pennsylvania; The People's Light & Theatre Company; and Wisdom Bridge Theatre in 1986-87, and also produced at Milwaukee Repertory Theatre and Krannert Center, University of Illinois, and as *Othello's Passion* at Illinois State University in 2006.

# **KABUKI OTHELLO**

A Play in Two Acts

## **CHARACTERS**

**EMILIA:** Narrator, wife to Iago, lady in waiting to Desdemona.

**OTHELLO:** The AINU; heroic general, caveman to the Japanese.

**IAGO:** High-ranking officer, husband to Emilia, serves Othello.

**CASSIO:** High-ranking officer, privileged playboy.

**DESDEMONA:** Brave young noblewoman, wife to Othello.

**KOKEN:** (4 to 8) Chorus, storytellers who facilitate the action.

**KI-PLAYER:** Koken who signals the opening of scenes and key moments by striking the “KI” (key) or resounding wooden blocks.



## TALKING THE TALK

Making sense of words free in space: Whether one person or several speak a line, the text is meant to flow like ordinary conversation. Lines starting with a small letter mean the previous sentence is still going on. Lines starting with a capital letter mean a new sentence begins here. Ends of lines could mean a comma, semi-colon, a period, or none. There are exceptions, but as in life, the more fun you have with it, the better it works.

# ACT ONE

## Scene 1

*(Flute. KI-Player kneels at edge of stage, strikes KI to open curtain, and to begin performance. Salty, wise EMILIA enters, moves into place, nods to audience, begins to tell them her story—)*

EMILIA

It happened in a time  
such things could happen  
not so very long ago

There came to us  
out of the north  
up from the earth  
an Ainu

In our time of troubles  
when even night could not sleep  
came an Ainu  
to lead us

Skin of pale pink  
bristled over with hair  
a man-beast, an Ainu  
we called him Othello

*(OTHELLO strides on, bold, into spotlight, "mounts"[mimes riding horseback].)*

OTHELLO

My horses thunder down hillsides  
blades scream in thick air  
fire is thrown  
against the bitter wind—  
these are the life of Othello  
Harsh days that  
man asks of man  
these are mine

*(OTHELLO steps aside, strikes Mie (mee-ay) pose, as IAGO scurries on into spotlight.)*

IAGO

Iago, I am  
Mine is to serve  
what man asks of man  
brain and back  
arm and eye  
no task too hard  
no time too long  
I serve him, Othello, the Ainu  
I am Iago

*(IAGO strikes Mie pose by OTHELLO, as CASSIO enters preening into spotlight.)*

CASSIO

Cassio is me  
Othello is the man  
I'd like to be  
His life is cut exact and swift  
an arrow leaping  
from a spring of steel  
while Cassio can only reel  
straying off the target  
into meadows deep with flowers

*(CASSIO strikes Mie pose, making a tableau with  
OTHELLO and IAGO. Then DESDEMONA glides in  
softly, as EMILIA narrates.)*

EMILIA

Silent as a waiting child  
her step as gentle  
deer step  
she comes among them  
parting waves of man air  
she comes fearless  
Desdemona

*(The focus of all three men is drawn to DESDEMONA,  
who stands apart. OTHELLO nears her first. At each  
stop of the wheel, one man speaks his inner desires,  
aside, to audience—)*

OTHELLO

In my fist  
she'd be a fragile bird

no bold leg, no ready laugh  
like women of the camp

Why does she gaze at me  
She'd smash between one finger  
and my thumb  
My hairy face, round Ainu eyes  
should frighten her  
She should look away

Shall I answer her?

IAGO  
Desdemona is a word  
I whisper  
only deep at night  
That word alone is blessing  
my coarse tongue  
can touch it only  
secretly  
Desdemona

CASSIO  
Each woman enchants me  
rhyming breath in my ear  
brilliant silk on my skin  
“Cassio” they say “won't be long  
selecting this night's lady”

*(RONDO DANCE: Circle of three men dance, gradually increasing their tempo, while EMILIA prepares us for her prediction—)*

EMILIA

What sways the willow  
over quiet water  
what whisper of pink sky  
swells the bud

What stirs  
and once it stirs  
will happen?

*(OTHELLO carried away with his passion—)*

OTHELLO

Desdemona  
Her voice sweeps my temples  
bright as dawn rain  
When I speak  
my life shines  
in her face  
She's mine  
I will have her  
no power that lives  
can damp such a light  
once it flows

EMILIA

*Life* sways the willow  
over quiet water  
its whisper of pink sky  
swells the bud

Life stirs

and once it stirs  
will happen

*(KI strikes, and all dancers stop at once, striking a Mie pose. KI strikes. Curtain closes or KI strikes fast as they exit.)*

*KOKEN enter swiftly, presenting their Choral Ode. [Make the best distribution of lines for your KOKEN. Numbers indicate a possible distribution of lines when there are four KOKEN—"A" indicates that ALL speak together.] Clear flowing meaning is the goal. Rhythm is sharp, tight and swift, like one voice speaking naturally, or like an eager conversation, its excitement heightened by the group.)*

KOKEN

(1) Man-time marches  
straight on his line  
never  
marking the wheel

But let him once  
wait and listen

(3) In the twilight  
he'll hear  
his younger self  
bark at his heel

(2) Life  
spins on in cycles

- (4) Woman follows the moon  
marks on her womb  
that time is no line  
but a wheel
- (1) Wind (A) wind on the wheel  
(1) it gathers  
the paths of our lives  
beginning to end  
(A) and back again  
(1) to beginning  
(A) we all arrive
- (1) Cassio  
(4) Desdemona  
(2) Iago  
(3) Othello  
(2) Why do these  
four roll together  
belonging no more  
to each other  
than pebbles  
tossed on the sand  
(3) yet once they have touched  
they will hold  
and each be the fate  
of the other  
(1) sure as clay molded  
in only one hand
- (1) Wind (A) wind on the wheel



- (4) never think  
your dance is your own  
(A) wondering  
(3) why this way (2) why that  
(4) why these cares (1) these desires  
(2) dance in grace  
there is nothing to find  
(A) more than your place  
on the winding wheel

*(KOKEN scurry away as curtain opens or the new scene is revealed. KI strikes.)*

## Scene 2

*(Bright colored silky panels hang the height of the stage. Each character stands behind the panel that is his color, then shakes it, in a manner that announces his mood the instant before he steps out to tell the audience his story. EMILIA is first to flutter her banner, then step out to speak—)*

EMILIA

Men stretch their banners  
bold against the sky  
declare their might  
and leave the earth all trembling

We women watch the show  
and smile our secret smile  
remembering

Emilia, I am  
I chose Iago the soldier  
more clever than most  
not so loud  
I couldn't outguess him  
and that kept life lively  
and Iago my man  
served the Ainu

*(OTHELLO's banner shakes boldly, and OTHELLO  
steps forth, and dance-tells his battle story.)*

OTHELLO  
I, Othello the Ainu  
barbaric, untamed  
Before me  
the smooth skin polite ones  
revile us  
regard us  
only as slaves  
take our land  
push us back into caves

But on me  
they learn to smile  
me they praise  
in their homes  
me raise over their heads  
I have amazed them

Invaders from the far seas came  
and bled them

chased them  
into one small cave  
Invaders loomed  
across the field between  
I ordered “wait”  
They strained to fight  
but I said “wait”  
until they’re close enough  
to squeeze

I held us still  
Invaders thundered in  
When I said “now”  
our arrows had an easy mark  
Then we burst forth  
a many-headed serpent  
now awaked from sleep  
When my arm dropped  
they say a hundred dead  
spread at my feet  
So much blood drenched me  
that I was to them  
a sight from hell  
My name alone  
now starts a wave of fear

EMILIA

Yes. He bled the enemy  
when we had lost hope  
but we honor him too far  
that’s not wise  
He’s learned our manners

can mimic our speech  
but what smothered growls  
lie inside

*(But CASSIO's banner waves gaily before CASSIO steps out to argue with EMILIA.)*

CASSIO

I know the chambers  
of the most refined  
Among them all  
there is not one  
with half  
his elegance of heart

EMILIA

Elegance is it  
that you're his Lieutenant?

CASSIO

I—Lieutenant?

EMILIA

You did not know  
Othello has appointed you?

*(IAGO's banner shakes angrily, and IAGO steps forward, stifling his fury. Simultaneously, CASSIO strikes a pose of astonished obedience.)*