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COMEDY, THEATRE, MUSIC AND MORE: THE HOTTEST SHOWS AT THE EDINBURGH FESTIVAL



The Bard gets hip (hop)

The Q Brothers wowed Fringe audiences with their rap adaptations of *A Comedy of Errors* and *Much Ado About Nothing*. Now they're back with their first Shakespeare tragedy, **Othello: The Remix**. They talk to Jo Caird.



Simon Kane

"Good storytellers borrow / but great ones steal / So believe me / the thievery is / how we keep it real." And so begins *Othello: The Remix*, the latest show from the Q Brothers, the US theatremakers who have achieved critical and box office success with their hip-hop adaptations of Shakespeare.

Othello comes to the Fringe following its premiere at the Globe to Globe season at Shakespeare's Globe, which saw all 37 of the Bard's plays staged in 37 languages as part of the World Shakespeare Festival. The brothers—GQ, who does most of the writing, and JQ, who's in charge of the music—are thrilled that hip-hop is finally getting the recognition it deserves. "That it's considered its own language is just the coolest thing," says JQ. "It's just so dope!"

The Q Brothers' *Othello* reimagines Shakespeare's tragedy of love, jealousy and betrayal in the context of a hip-hop tour, with Iago prompted to make trouble when MC Othello overlooks him to make Cassio the headline act.

Produced by Chicago Shakespeare Theater, the same company the brothers worked with on their last Shakespeare adaptation, *Funk It Up About Nothin'*, *Othello* received four and five star reviews at the Globe. Given the success of their previous shows at the Fringe—*The Bomb-itty of Errors* in 2002 and *Funk It Up* in 2008—it doesn't take a wild leap of imagination to conclude that *Othello: The Remix* will go down well here too.

Persuading audiences to take a chance on a hip-hop version of a Shakespeare play, however, is not without its challenges. When the brothers first talked about adapting *The Comedy of Errors* while at New York University in the late 90s, many people were "pretty doubtful" about the wisdom of such a plan. There are plenty of potential punters today who would feel similarly nervous: *Othello* is rapped from start to finish and the constant presence of a DJ ensures that it's as much a gig as it is a theatre performance.

GQ's message for the doubters is: "Come see it. People come to us afterwards saying, 'My kid brought me. I came here kicking and

screaming. I thought Shakespeare's going to be rolling in his grave, but it turns out he's bopping his head to everything!"

The brothers point to a "musicality in Shakespeare's language that lends itself really well to hip-hop," as well as to the "visceral poetry" found in both forms. The best rappers, says JQ, are those that tell stories. "We believe Shakespeare is the original rapper and we're not joking when we say that."

The Q Brothers treatment works because while they appreciate the beauty of the Bard's language, they are not afraid to "mess it up" in the pursuit of a contemporary show with its own dramatic integrity. "It doesn't bother us to lose the old language. It actually helps us to bring it alive in a new way."

Their first task when adapting *Othello* was to write a rhyming, line-by-line translation of the play; 20 or 30 drafts later and Shakespeare's language has all but disappeared, to be replaced with irresistible lines like: "You can't know what love is til you let your snake slither / How could you be in love when you've never spoken with her?"

But even if only a few references to the original survive, the show's language still feels somehow Shakespearean. Characters use the same types of asides, metaphors and similes found throughout the canon; it's just the references that are different, with everything from Adidas to Ritalin peppering the fast-paced script.

Having previously tackled two of Shakespeare's comedies, the Q Brothers were eager to get their teeth into a tragedy. The approach, they say, is essentially the same. "We're finding that there's a lot of comedy to be had within a tragedy," explains GQ. "The idea is to not dumb it down, but to elevate the real tragic moments by contrasting them with lighter, more accessible moments."

So we have *Othello* consumed with rage when he learns that Desdemona is cheating on him, but then we also have Emilia suggesting that she and Iago play "a naked game of Twister" to help him "de-stress."

It doesn't stop here. "One day we'll have the complete hip-hop works that we can put on a shelf of every library and every school in every country that we can get into," says GQ. "We want to make Shakespeare accessible to everybody. We want to universalise hip-hop as an art form. We want to reach everyone." f

Othello: The Remix @ Pleasance Courtyard
1:55pm - 3:10pm, 1-27 Aug, not 7, 14, 21, £5 - £15