

*Turn*  
by M'Balía Singley

*Flynn Student Matinee Study Guide*



**Table of Contents:**

About M'Balía Singley  
About *Turn*  
The Inspiration: Shakespeare's *Othello*  
Reflection Questions  
Resources

**FLYNN**

**About M’Balía Singley (pronounced em-buh-LEE-uh SING-lee)**

*“I call musicians ‘magicians’ as well, because very often we’re hearing something that no one else is hearing, and then we’re attempting to create it either immediately in front of you or for ourselves on a record or in performance in some way... I’m always really interested in humans.*

*What motivates us, what scares us, what makes us feel true joy*

-- M’Balía Singley

M’Balía Singley is a Philadelphia-based performing artist, musician, and writer. As a musician, she has performed in legendary music halls like the Jazz Standard and Smalls in New York City, the World Café Live and the Kimmel Center in Philadelphia – and you can hear her on John Legend’s Grammy-nominated debut album *Get Lifted* as well as on her own self-produced albums.

She’s performed as an actor in *First Lady Suite*, *Ain’t Misbehavin’*, *The Vagina Monologues*, and more. She composed her first children’s musical, *Anansi, the Spider King* in 2017 and she began writing *Turn* in 2018 when she was selected as a resident artist at the Kimmel Center in Philadelphia.



M’Balía Singley

**About Turn**

*Turn* is an examination of Shakespeare’s play *Othello* through the lens of intersectionality in the life of an African American woman. Intersectionality is a term associated with feminism, popularized by law professor [Kimberlé Crenshaw](#) in the 1990s. It’s a framework for understanding how aspects of a person’s social & political identities combine to create different kinds of discrimination and privilege.

Over a decade ago, M’Balía went to see a production of *Othello* that a friend was acting in – but she did not want to go. “I was going to support a friend, and was in no way interested in seeing *Othello*,” she explains in an [interview](#). “I knew it was the play where the Black man kills a White woman and I felt like I would be coming in mad and leaving mad. What I saw and experienced was actually something very different...I could relate to *Othello* in that I know what it’s like to be the only Black woman in a number of spaces. I could relate to his sense of isolation, and to his employee who felt overlooked by Othello and thought, ‘I’m going to get my boss.’ I could relate to Othello’s wife who is trying to negotiate the patriarchy... how to make her dad and her man happy. There were all kinds of juicy elements and I felt like I actually see myself in these characters... which is ironic because there are no Black women in *Othello*.”

*Turn* is a one-woman show performed by Singley, but there is also a live band onstage, as the piece is full of original music as well. The show is full of stories, humor, and celebration. Asa Singley describes in a [podcast interview](#), “It’s a lot of fun, there’s a band onstage with me, there’s a beautiful set, and it’s an opportunity for all of us to just learn, take a breath. The story of Black women can be very specific but similar to Shakespeare it’s very universal.”

### **The Inspiration: Shakespeare’s *Othello***

Around the year 1603, William Shakespeare wrote the play *Othello*. Shakespeare’s plays are generally divided into the genres of comedies, histories, tragedies, and romances, with *Othello* categorized as a tragedy. *Othello*, like many other Shakespearean tragedies, centers around characters who envision a future of possibility, joy, or freedom but – constrained by the limitations of their realities – instead end tragically, in death, grief, or destruction. However, the scholar Ayanna Thompson, who specializes in Renaissance drama and issues of race in performance, articulates at [the 2019 Shakespeare and Social Justice conference](#) how the play is structured unlike any other Shakespearean tragedy in problematic ways that keep the humanity and psychology of the character of Othello distanced from the audience.

In Shakespeare’s play, Othello is referred to as a “Moor.” For Shakespeare’s audience, that essentially meant someone of North African or Middle Eastern descent, but it’s important to note that, as the American Shakespeare Center explains in [an educational resource](#) about the play, that “rather than pointing to a definite geographical region or skin tone, the term ‘Moor’ seems to



An 1830 painting of Ira Eldridge playing *Othello*. Eldridge was the first Black actor to play the role.

have been a catch-all for a non-specific kind of ‘foreign,’ defined as much by what it wasn’t as what it was.” Considering the racist slurs used by characters in the original play, it seems likely that Shakespeare envisioned the character of Othello as a Black African.

In the play, which is set in Venice, Othello is a high-status military general who has secretly married Desdemona, a wealthy white woman. The plot of the play centers around the strained nature of their relationship in a society in which interracial marriage was illegal and dangerous. The character of Iago plays a crucial role in the play. He is a soldier who hates Othello and makes it his mission to plant and spread false rumors about Desdemona being unfaithful, intentionally stoking Othello’s jealousy to the point where Othello, in a fit of blind rage, kills Desdemona. Othello discovers Iago’s betrayal – and Desdemona’s innocence – too late, and the play ends with Othello committing suicide.

In Shakespeare's time and for a long time after, white actors would perform the role of Othello in blackface and using other racist prosthetics. After centuries of non-Black actors performing the title role, in 1825 Ira Aldridge finally became the first Black actor to play the role, when he was only 17 years old. However, white actors continued to play the role, including many famous actors such as Constantin Stanislavsky (considered the founder of contemporary method acting), Laurence Olivier, Anthony Hopkins, and many others.

The question of how to think about *Othello* is a challenging and important one. The Ghanaian-born British actor Hugh Quarshie, who played the title role in a production at the Royal Shakespeare Company in 2015, puts it this way in his essay "[Playing Othello](#)": "Does the 'willing suspension of disbelief' really mean that I should accept that a play written over 400 years ago by a white Englishman for another white Englishman in blackface make-up is an authoritative and credible profile of a genuine black man?"



*Hugh Quarshie as Othello and Lucian Msamati as Iago in 2015*

### **Reflection Questions**

*Here are some example questions to prompt deeper engagement from your students, both before and after the show:*

#### **Before the Show:**

- Have you ever been to a theater before? What are some ways an audience is expected to behave in a theater that are different from how you behave in other places you go for entertainment, like a movie theater?
- When you think about a one-person play, what comes to mind?
- When you think about Shakespeare, what comes to mind?
- Do you think Shakespeare can be relevant in our contemporary world? Why or why not?

#### **After the Show:**

- How did the show meet or break your expectations of a one-person play?
- How did the show make you think differently about Shakespeare?
- How did the show make you feel? Was there a specific moment when it caused an emotional reaction in you? How did it do that? What did the show make you think about?
- In theatre, symbolism is the use of one or more objects to represent something else. The object may represent an idea, a feeling, or a physical entity. Symbols allow theater



makers to convey messages to audiences that would be difficult to communicate through dialogue or action alone. Did you see any symbolism in the show?

- If you were to write a review of the show, what would you say? What stood out to you? Would you recommend it to other people? Why?

### **Resources**

- M’Balía Singley Interview with The Philadelphia Sun  
<https://www.philasan.com/entertainment/mbalia-singley-premieres-in-turn-at-the-kimmel-center/>
- M’Balía Singley Interview with the Philadelphia Community Podcast  
<https://www.iheart.com/podcast/482-philadelphia-commun-28438308/episode/mbalia-singley-turn-at-the-57586860/>
- Ted Talk with Kimberlé Crenshaw: “The Urgency of Intersectionality”  
[https://www.ted.com/talks/kimberle\\_crenshaw\\_the\\_urgency\\_of\\_intersectionality](https://www.ted.com/talks/kimberle_crenshaw_the_urgency_of_intersectionality)
- American Shakespeare Center: Contextualizing *Othello*  
<https://americanshakespearecenter.com/2020/10/need-help-contextualizing-othello-weve-got-you-covered/>
- Ayanna Thompson speaking at the 2019 “Shakespeare & Social Justice” conference  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pOxqewmnb1g>
- *Othello* Study Guide  
[https://media.americanshakespearecenter.com/app/uploads/2020/10/12141053/OthelloSample.pdf?\\_ga=2.178725540.1688343939.1688142165-1518723662.1688142165](https://media.americanshakespearecenter.com/app/uploads/2020/10/12141053/OthelloSample.pdf?_ga=2.178725540.1688343939.1688142165-1518723662.1688142165)
- Hugh Quarshie’s essay, “Second Thoughts About Othello”  
<https://www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/playing-othello>