

## NEWS

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# The wait is over...Lenny's Dudley moor comes to the New Vic!

Northern Broadsides and The West Yorkshire Playhouse, present

## Othello

by William Shakespeare

Directed by Barrie Rutter

Tues 28 Apr – Sat 2 May 2009

The wait is over for thousands of New Vic theatregoers this month as Lenny Henry makes a hotly anticipated stage debut in *Othello*.

The Dudley-born comedian has been swapping stand-up for Shakespeare in a new tour of the tragedy by regular New Vic visitors, Northern Broadsides Theatre Company.

Loved by many for his anarchic comedy in shows like *TISWAS* and *Comic Relief*, the production marks a new chapter for Henry, 50, who has been winning a string of rave reviews for his first ever Shakespearean turn as the tragic Moor.

Lenny took on the role following his study of the Bard's work as part of an Open University MA, having been convinced from his school days that Shakespeare was not for him.

In 2006, Henry made a BBC Radio 4 series *Lenny and Will*, about his discovery of Shakespeare. Following an interview with Broadsides' founder and New Vic favourite, Barrie Rutter, they rehearsed a piece from *Othello*. Impressed by the comedian's commitment and ability, Rutter suggested his company present the play, with Lenny in the lead role.

Said Barrie: "I first met Lenny over a microphone whilst recording an *Othello* speech for Radio 4. Afterwards Lenny declared to me that 'sitting with his back against a wall, learning lines in a company of actors' was a strong desire of his. I didn't need any prompting and two weeks later with West Yorkshire Playhouse on board as co-producers, we were able to offer Lenny a done deal! Exciting stuff."

Talking about his theatrical debut, Lenny added: "When I was in Los Angeles making *True Identity*, I worked with a fantastic actor James Earl Jones. The sub plot involved my character understudying James in the role of *Othello*."

"He and I discussed the role many times over the filming period and as one of America's premier black actors, I felt honoured to have the privilege of his wisdom."

"He told me that when the time was right I should jump in with both feet, work hard, keep my eyes and ears open and let the text do all the heavy lifting."

"When I met Barrie during an extended Shakespeare master class at Broadcasting House, his words during that session echoed James Earl Jones' and a big light bulb went off over my

head!!”

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The comedian’s stage debut has seen a ticket gold rush, with seats in huge demand all over the country. One of only six venues in the UK to house the touring production, *Othello* has become one of the New Vic’s fastest selling shows ever, with almost every ticket sold in the space of three weeks.

The production will also see local actor and regular New Vic face Conrad Nelson make a welcome return to his home venue. The Newcastle-under-Lyme -based actor and director has been garnering his own set of stellar reviews during the high profile tour, playing opposite Lenny as *Othello*’s nemesis, Iago.

More information on *Othello* is available online at [www.newvictheatre.org.uk](http://www.newvictheatre.org.uk).

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A syndicated interview and a feature interview with Lenny Henry are available for journalists. For further press images or information please contact Clare Hargreaves on 01782 717954 ext 317 or e-mail [chargreaves@newvictheatre.org.uk](mailto:chargreaves@newvictheatre.org.uk)

## **Editor’s Notes**

### **Lenny Henry**

One of a select few to have built a lasting career on the back of success in a TV talent show, Lenny Henry began his rise to stardom after becoming a finalist on ITV’s *New Faces* at the age of 16. One of Britain’s best-loved personalities, Lenny was the first, and for much of his career the only, Black British entertainer to achieve acceptance in the TV mainstream.

Winning fame on shows such as *TISWAS*, *The Comic Strip Presents* and *Three of a Kind*, Lenny went on to appear regularly on the BBC with his own self titled shows, and later as co-host of charity telethon *Comic Relief*. He also continues to frequent the comedy circle with his own live shows at prestigious venues.

Much of his comedy stems from his Black Country/Jamaican upbringing. His often austere Jamaican parentage mixed with the influence of his ‘Brummie’ peers has often been made light of in his shows. In his routines he is also famous for impersonations such as Frank Spencer from ‘*Some Mothers Do ‘Ave ‘Em*’ and newsreader Trevor McDonald as well as his own creations, such as ‘one man sex machine’ soul-singer Theophilus P. Wildebeeste, inspired by Barry White, and Brixton pirate radio DJ, Delbert Wilkins.

Lenny has also appeared in films, his most recent appearance being as the voice of the Shrunken Head in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*.

In 1985, Lenny co-founded *Comic Relief*, a charity which has become a national institution and has raised hundred of millions of pounds for the poor and needy. He was also actively involved in Live8, created for a similar purpose.

For all his efforts Lenny Henry was awarded a CBE (Commander of the British Empire) in 1999 and also won the Montreux Golden Rose in 2001 and a Performance Lifetime Award at the British Comedy Awards in 2003.

Since 1984, Lenny has been married to fellow comedienne Dawn French with whom he has an adopted daughter, Billy.

## **Northern Broadsides**

Northern Broadsides



Northern Broadsides is a unique theatre company with a true northern voice. Their work is characterised by a high degree of theatrical inventiveness and robust performances from a large ensemble cast of multi-talented and charismatic Northern actors who all perform in their natural voices. For the past 15 years, they have delighted audiences here and abroad with a growing classic repertoire which have won them many awards. Regulars at the Staffordshire venue, Broadsides presented their first co-production with the New Vic, *The Tempest* , in 2007 and *Romeo and Juliet* in 2008.