

## O

US, 2000 – 93 mins

Tim Blake Nelson

Brad Kaaya was the only black student at his American high school and so is Odin 'O' James, hero of Kaaya's *O* screenplay. At Palmetto Grove, an elite co-ed boarding school in Charleston, South Carolina, scholarship boy and 'Most Valuable Player' Odin (Mekhi Phifer) is leading the Palmetto Hawks towards the state basketball championship finals, alongside teammates Mike Cass and reliable Hugo (Josh Hartnett), whose father, 'Duke', is their passionate, exacting coach: sporting brothers instead of *Othello's* military comrades. Odin is deeply involved with Desi (Julia Stiles), the Dean's daughter. Hugo goes out with Desi's roommate, Emily; Mike's girlfriend is Brandy (Bianca); Hugo's overweight, friendless roommate, Roger (Roderigo), is hopelessly in love with Desi.

The leads and supporting players are all convincing, with Phifer nobly passionate and Stiles mixing steel and vulnerability, and Kaaya compensates intelligently for their youth. Hugo is a neglected son motivated by desperate envy for the affection and pride his father shows towards Odin. Duke's presence also circumvents the problem of Odin lacking *Othello's* authority over Iago and Cassio; the coach suspends Mike for his drunken fight with Roger, and Desi tries to persuade Odin to have Duke reinstate him.

In following the play, Kaaya thoughtfully tweaks specific incidents and adds noir-ish complexity to the climax, which, outlined in flash-forward, is meant to see Roger shoot Mike, making it look like Mike committed suicide after strangling Desi. The plan goes horribly awry. Roger wounds Mike; Hugo shoots Roger dead; Odin strangles Desi; Hugo shoots Emily for denouncing him; Odin shoots himself and the cops drive the handcuffed Hugo away as we hear again the opening scene's 'Ave Maria' (from Verdi's *Otello*) and Hugo's voiceover: he wanted to be a hawk, like Odin, and 'soar over everything and everyone' – an awkwardly pretentious flash of poetry in an otherwise relentlessly prosaic script

('Reputation is an idle and most false/Imposition' becomes 'Who gives a fuck about reputation?').

In appropriating Shakespeare, *O* powerfully connects with contemporary American society and film genres. Duke's locker-room rhetoric, Hugo's injury-battling steroid abuse and ten minutes of on-court action fit Hollywood's basketball template (see *Hoosiers*, *Coach Carter*, *Glory Road*). Odin and Desi's affair taps interracial anxieties previously explored from *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967) to *Jungle Fever* (1991) and, as Tim Blake Nelson observed, setting *Othello* amid Charleston's pre-Civil War architecture, with Odin studying alongside 'the scions of former slave-owning families', gives the racial theme 'immeasurable rhetorical value'. Hugo's suggestion that Mike and Desi call Odin 'nigger' wounds him deeply, and he dies distancing himself from the curse of black-on-black violence: 'I wasn't no gang-banger.' Rap and hip-hop songs accompany the basketball, party and dorm-room scenes, and the white boys incessantly call each other 'man', 'bro', 'dawg' and 'player' – like so many wealthy, suburban white kids, Palmetto's pupils adopt black 'ghetto' music and slang – and Odin.

Above all, *O* is a high-school movie. A world away from the breezy comedy of *10 Things I Hate about You* or *She's the Man* (pp. 241 and 278), darker even than *Heathers* (1989), its ending reflected and became embroiled in real-life tragedies. Blake Nelson had shown news footage of recent school shootings to his cast and had been editing for two weeks when, on 20 April 1999, the Columbine Massacre occurred. Overnight, *O's* potent realism became too provocative for US distributors Miramax, who postponed its release and eventually sold it to Lionsgate Films. *O* finally opened in the US in August 2001, entering the box-office Top Ten alongside its teen antithesis, *American Pie 2*.

**Dir:** Tim Blake Nelson; **Prods:** Eric Gitter, Daniel L. Fried, Anthony Rhulen; **Scr:** Brad Kaaya; **DOP:** Russell Lee Fine; **Editor:** Kate Sanford; **Score:** Jeff Danna; **Main Cast:** Mekhi Phifer (Odin James), Josh Hartnett (Hugo Goulding), Julia Stiles (Desi Brable), Rain Phoenix (Emily), Elden Henson (Roger), Andrew Keegan (Mike Cass), John Heard (Dean Brable), Martin Sheen (Coach 'Duke' Goulding), Rachel Schumate (Brandy).