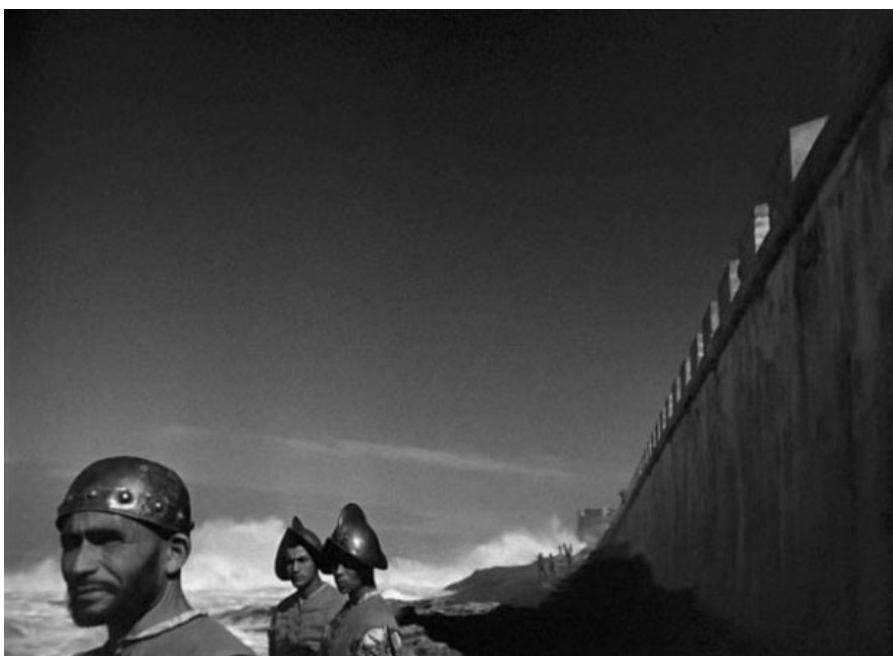




Essaouira and Orson Welles: the true story of the most troubled shoot of his career

When film director Orson Welles arrived in Morocco looking for locations for his film *Othello*, **he knew he had found what he was looking for when he arrived in Essaouira** . It was 1948 and the Moroccan town looked out over the Atlantic Ocean, but its beauty had not yet become famous.

Welles visited its walls, walked along its untamed beaches, watched the fishermen coming home from fishing and breathed in the smell of salt, admired the perfectly preserved 16th-century Portuguese fortifications and told his crew that he had found the perfect location for filming. Mogador, which was the name of Essaouira at the time, was destined to be the natural setting that, along with other Italian locations, would become the **perfect setting for shooting the film based on Shakespeare's work** . Nothing foreshadowed that the shoot would be, in Welles' words, "absolute madness."



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Filming complications

The filming of Othello is one of those whose history is written in the annals of cinema. **It lasted more than three years** , because forced breaks had to be introduced when the director ran out of funds to continue filming and had to turn to his friends to obtain financing.

After filming in Italy, **Welles moved to Essaouira to shoot on location** . His genius alone made it possible to splice together scenes shot more than a thousand six hundred kilometres away.

The first five weeks in Morocco revealed the fragility of the production and the director's determination to overcome any obstacles that might arise. **The first difficulty the crew encountered was the costumes** , which had been ordered from the Peruzzi workshops, the most prestigious in Italy. The agreement stipulated that they would be sent to Morocco once finished. However, the workshops, unsure whether the film's budget would be enough to pay them, first delayed the shipment and then suspended it altogether.

Orson could not sit back and do nothing. **Within a few days he had mobilised all the tailors in Essaouira** and had put scenes of characters dressed in period costumes on the walls of their workshops so that they could start making the costumes. But while they were sewing, the filming had to continue, as the budget for the film did not allow for the entire crew to be stationed in Morocco.



A mythical scene

It was then that Welles decided to modify the scene in which Rodrigo tries to kill Cassius and is killed by Iago. Due to the lack of male costumes, the scene, which was to be filmed in the street, was instead shot in a Turkish bath, where the male protagonists were not required to wear anything other than simple towels. To simulate the steam of the atmosphere, the room was filled with incense smoke. Curiously, the scene was not only perfect, but thanks to the director's genius **it is considered one of the most memorable scenes in cinema**.

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A real madness

Another drawback was the light in Morocco, which was too strong on the actors' faces. For this reason, Welles opted for a very contrasty image, which gave great prominence to the shadows. For this reason, red filters were used to darken the sky and highlight the few clouds in Essaouira. In addition, Welles discovered that the sound of the ocean, always too close to any recording point, sneaked into the dialogues. This drawback led him to record many of the scenes in silence and others with a Cameflex, an almost experimental camera.

In an interview on the occasion of the presentation of the film at the Cannes festival, the journalist Peter Bogdanovich asked Welles if *Othello* had been the most difficult of all his films. And the director replied: "difficult is not the most appropriate word. To be honest, it was a real madness."

Orson Welles finished the film on his own budget and with a third of the crew and actors, as the rest of the team left him, tired of the constant stops to get funding. Some scenes were shot with extras standing with their backs turned and with low angle shots due to the lack of adequate lighting equipment. Despite all the setbacks, and the fact that the film did not receive unanimous critical acclaim, it won the Palme d'Or at Cannes and the recognition of the population.

On the trail of the director

Essaouira owes much to Orson Welles for its transformation from a quiet coastal town two hours from Marrakech into one of the most visited towns in Morocco, with its beautiful beaches and imposing fortifications. A landscaped square, with a bust made of local thuja wood, commemorates that Orson Welles shot his film *Othello* in the town. Although, of course, it makes no reference to how eventful the filming was. Another place that commemorates the film director is the Hotel des Iles, where Orson Welles stayed with his entire team. The suite he occupied during his stay in Essaouira is still preserved, and today it is visited by his most loyal fans, eager to sleep in what they say was his bed during the filming of *Othello* in the town. film that was probably the most unpredictable of his career, in a town that contributed to making his legend even greater.

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