

'Othello' is familiar, but still a crowd pleaser

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If you liked the 2006 American Shakespeare Center production of "Othello" — with Rene Thornton Jr. as the Moor and Sarah Fallon as Desdemona — you'll like the version currently on stage at the Blackfriars Playhouse. That's largely because the same two actors portray the same two lead characters and portray them with all the force and verve they gave us four years ago.

On the one hand, I'd like to have seen different actors in these two roles, if for no other reason than it would have given the play a unique tone. This entry has a familiar ring to it. On the other hand, if you have two actors in the troupe who have done the job before and done it to perfection, why not use them?

So, director Jim Warren used them again, and again Thornton and Fallon deliver the goods, playing not only to the audience with maximum effect, but to each other with a chemistry and artistic symmetry that are difficult to find in their natural state or to achieve through sheer hard work. Thornton is perhaps the most adept interpreter of Othello I've seen, and that includes the superb actor and playwright James Caputo, who was probably the last white guy on the planet to portray the Moor.

My favorite character in this most formidable of Shakespeare's tragedies is Iago. He always has been, he always will be, and it's not just because he's a villain (villains are nearly always more interesting than the good guys). It's because he's such an exquisite villain, and portrayed exquisitely in this production by the versatile Benjamin Curns.

He's slicker than the Louisiana coastline and malevolent to the bottom of his alleged heart, but Iago in Curns' hands convinces us he has a soupcon of an argument for his dreadful behavior. He's a faithful, courageous and hard-working subaltern of Othello who is passed over for promotion — kicked unceremoniously to the curb — and seeks revenge against the Moor with blood-curdling calculation. And, damn it, if I were in his hob-nailed boots, I'd probably be out for revenge, too. At least, that's how I feel watching Curns as one of Shakespeare's most memorable bad guys.

Always a joy to behold on stage is James Keegan, who played the

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part of Iago in 2006. He appears as Desdemona's father in this staging and brings to his performance the unerring, crowd-pleasing skills audiences have come to expect of him. The play also benefits from the top-notch acting abilities of John Harrell, Daniel Kennedy, Allison Glenzer, Patrick Midgley, Ginna Hoben, Paul Jannise, Jeremiah Davis and Chris Johnston.

The bottom line is this: If you saw the 2006 ASC edition of "Othello," and liked it, you'll find yourself on comfortable, enjoyable ground once again. If you haven't, or aren't familiar with the play itself, go. If you don't, you might never see a production of the Bard's great tragedy that is cleaner and crisper than this one.

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