



Othello

A Five-Sided Triangle

[American Shakespeare Center](#), Blackfriars Playhouse, Staunton, Va.
Saturday, October 30, 2010, Seats C-6&7 (middle stalls)
Directed by Jim Warren

This play belongs to Othello, Iago, Desdemona, and, to a lesser degree, Cassio. This production, however, belonged as much to Roderigo and Emilia as to the others, not just because of outstanding performances (John Harrell and Allison Glenzer, respectively), but also because of interpretation.



Sarah Fallon as Desdemona and René Thornton Jr. as the titular Othello at the Blackfriars Playhouse. The married couple at the center of this production of *Othello* danced and played and frequently kissed amid embarrassed onlookers. Photo by Tommy Thompson, American Shakespeare Center.

This is especially so with Roderigo whom Harrell described as a character who thinks he's in a different play, a play about Roderigo's romancing of Desdemona instead of a play about Iago's plotting against the general. Harrell brought his comic gifts of paused timing and studied manners to bear in this mostly serious role of a man smitten not only with the lovely lady but the notion that he deserves such a lady. Only when he felt the discomfort of a beating and the danger of having to assault a soldier did he get a glimpse of reality, and then it was only a self-centered reality. Assisting him in his portrayal was the production's choice of costume:

The soldiers were in European Edwardian mess dress matched by the long, elegant gowns of the Venetian ladies, but the Venetian civilians wore modern Italian suits, and the Cypriots looked more like harem-owning Arabian knights (and Ginna Hoben's Bianca a harem girl). Among the Venetians, Roderigo was suited in bright-colored vests and satin ties, the self-image of an in-crowd player.

Where Harrell brought a singularly vivid reading to a mostly straightforward character, Glenzer grounded what comes across on the page as an enigma. Did Emilia have an affair with the Moor or not? (Probably not.) Is she aware of her husband's Machiavellian methods or not? (If she is, she doesn't see them as truly dangerous.) Is she in a loving relationship with Iago or a stale marriage, or is he a wife-beater? We've seen all three interpretations. Glenzer played Emilia as in love with Iago in a marriage that is not abusive but has run a little stale. Her handing over the handkerchief was playful flirtation barely marked by Iago. Emilia is witty and Glenzer used her clownish talents in giving Emilia an air of daffiness, but she was courageously earnest in her stern defense of Desdemona's chastity to an increasingly dangerous Othello. Then, when she realized that Iago had, in fact, taken his little maneuverings to the extent of murder and mayhem, she reacted in sheer horror. That moment when Glenzer—gasping for breath through her suddenly constricted chest, her eyes in horror futilely searching for any explanation than the one she knows to be the sickening truth—linked Othello's accusation of the handkerchief to her husband's motives

WILL POWER ON STAGE

That moment when Glenzer—gasping for breath through her suddenly constricted chest, her eyes in horror futilely searching for any explanation than the one she knows to be the sickening truth—linked Othello's accusation of the handkerchief to her husband's motives was a searing image in what was already playing as powerful tragedy.

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Othello in performance On Stage:

was a searing image in what was already playing as powerful tragedy.

Of course, that “powerful tragedy” can only come about courtesy of the performances of the play’s three heavy lifters: Othello (René Thornton Jr.), Iago (Benjamin Curns), and Desdemona (Sarah Fallon). Othello is a man of few shadings in Shakespeare’s rendering, and the power of the part comes from the actor’s ability to realistically unfold the general’s growing jealousy and disintegrating pride and demeanor over the two hours’ traffic on stage. Thornton did this well. Although he was a “cruel Moor,” in the end foolishly abusing and then murdering his loyal wife, Thornton managed to make the audience pity him even as he strangled the innocent Desdemona.

The other two characters in this triangle are not so clear-cut, though in the case of Iago the enigma of his villainy is more in the minds of critics than in the lines of Shakespeare’s text, which clearly indicates he is prompted to his plot because he was passed over for promotion. Those who have lived long in a military setting know their share of Iagos (would they go to his lengths? I’m not so certain the ones I’ve met would not). Not only did Curns make clear how much this fact goaded him (a loyal soldier who has fought alongside Othello on the battlefields supplanted by a desk-driving bean counter), the production also played up every instance of Cassio’s outranking Iago. Though there is uncertainty about whether Othello and Emilia had a real fling, Iago makes it a fact in his mind to steel his psychosis.

Desdemona, on the other hand, can be played in a number of ways: an innocent lamb or a strong-willed woman who unknowingly treads down a dangerous path. She could also be a flirtatious woman of the type Iago describes as typical of Venice and Emilia herself acknowledges, exhibiting behavior that helps to trigger Othello’s jealousy (even though the scene where she would be most flirtatious, her arrival at Cypress, happens with Othello off stage). Having seen Fallon in so many previous lusty roles, we anticipated an equally lusty, passionate Desdemona. We were in for our own shock as Fallon seemed more of Romeo’s Juliet than a noble lady of Venice. She entered wide-eyed at the world unfolding around her, frightened to be called before her father and the counsel. She notably put on a brave front against her nature upon her arrival at Cypress. Innocent lamb? This one was just born.

At first this was a bit disconcerting, as her demeanor didn’t match the tone of the verses she speaks to her father, or her adamant desire to accompany Othello to war. But it does fit with the notion that her tyrannical father would have kept her holed up, and to her, Othello is an other-worldly presence. Once married, she let her passionate side blossom, all directed at the Moor. This reading accomplished two things. One, it made this a more domestic *Othello* than we’ve seen before, as the married couple at the center of the play danced and played and frequently kissed amid embarrassed onlookers. Two, along with that domestic bliss, this Desdemona’s total naiveté sharpened the tragedy played upon her. It made Iago all the more evil, and it made Othello all the more pitiful.

Eric Minton
November 1, 2010

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