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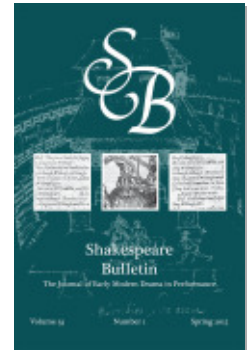
Othello, and: Julius Caesar (review)

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tion ended on an especially disturbing note by delivering no punishment to Othello or Iago—a decision Emilia highlighted when she noted that “man stays alive while women are underfoot.” As this line suggests, the play’s lack of punishment for these men did not seem to excuse their behavior. Instead, it implied something just as depressing: an inevitable oppression of women that spans across cultures.



Othello

Presented by the **American Shakespeare Center** at the **Blackfriars Playhouse**, Staunton, Virginia. August 29–December 3, 2006. Directed by Jim Warren. Assistant Directed by Jeremy Fiebig. Costumes by Erin M. West. Music by Paul Fidalgo. Fight choreography by John Paul Scheidler. With René Thornton Jr. (Othello), Sarah Fallon (Desdemona), James Keegan (Iago), Celia Madeoy (Emilia), Jake Hart (Cassio), Susan Heyward (Bianca), Paul Fidalgo (Roderigo), Álvaro Mendoza (Duke), David Loar (Brabantio), and others.

Julius Caesar

Presented by the **American Shakespeare Center** at the **Blackfriars Playhouse**, Staunton, Virginia. March 31–June 16, 2007. Directed by Colleen Kelly. Assistant Directed by Aaron Hochhalter and Becky Kemper. Costumes by Jenny McNee. With Joseph Langham (Caesar), Adam Jonas Segaller (Brutus), Henry Bazemore Jr. (Cassius), Kevin Pierson (Casca), Lillian Wright (Decius), Tyler Moss (Cinna), Chris Johnson (Metellus), Emily Gibson (Trebbonius), Jonathon Maccia (Antony), Anna Marie Sell (Calphurnia), Sybille Bruun (Portia), and others.

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The American Shakespeare Center (ASC), located in the Shenandoah Valley of Southwest Virginia, is a true repertory theatre, a semi-professional theatre troupe with the mission to produce at least eight Shakespearean and early modern plays in rotation each year. Two additional features distinguish this emerging theatre company and educational center: unique performance conventions and a historic space. First, the ASC seeks to approximate the original performance conventions of Shakespeare’s day, including universal lighting, double casting, gender play, a two-hour time frame, minimalist and emblematic design, and contemporary references in costume, language, and music. In a similar vein, the ASC embraces the traditional value of audience participation, breaking down the fourth

wall through direct audience address, audience role-play, and the close proximity of actors and spectators: not only are some audience members seated on the upstage balconies and the sides of the stage floor, but actors often venture into the audience seating areas.

This eclectic and improvisational approach to renaissance performance is positively enhanced by the ASC's Blackfriars Playhouse, a re-creation of Shakespeare's original private theatre complete with bench seating, chandeliers, a thrust stage and a beautifully designed tiring house with a highly functional discovery space. Despite its aesthetically pleasing features however, the five-year-old Blackfriars Playhouse is not a museum space meant to elicit distant admiration. During intermission, concessions are sold on stage while the actors sing for the audience; indeed spectators are allowed, if not encouraged, to eat and drink throughout the performance. The frequent presence of laughing, questioning, and napping children in the audience also helps create a festival atmosphere where theatre becomes an active part of the rhythm and flow of everyday life.

Given the exploratory nature of the ASC, it is not surprising that the troupe's productions vary widely in approach and execution. While the ASC's fall production of *Othello* in 2006 adopted a more naturalistic performance aesthetic, building slowly in intensity as its action came into focus and form, the spring production of *Julius Caesar* in 2007 offered a tightly packed experience that highlighted the power of choreography and theatrical effect in dramatizing social phenomena.

Othello may be envisioned as a fist that clenches itself tighter and tighter until it suddenly explodes into violent movement. If Othello is the hand, Iago is the muscle, the sinews that contract the object at will. In the ASC's production of *Othello*, directed by Jim Warren, the inherent structural tension of the script—as embodied by the obvious differences in race, class, age, gender, and geography—was downplayed in favor of a more contemplative, if not introverted, exploration of the lives on stage. A slower, naturalistic pace was clearly evident from the very beginning of the play; both the street fight and the late-night senate meeting ran at a relatively leisurely pace that suggested a Venice burdened with a heavy sleepiness and weariness to act.

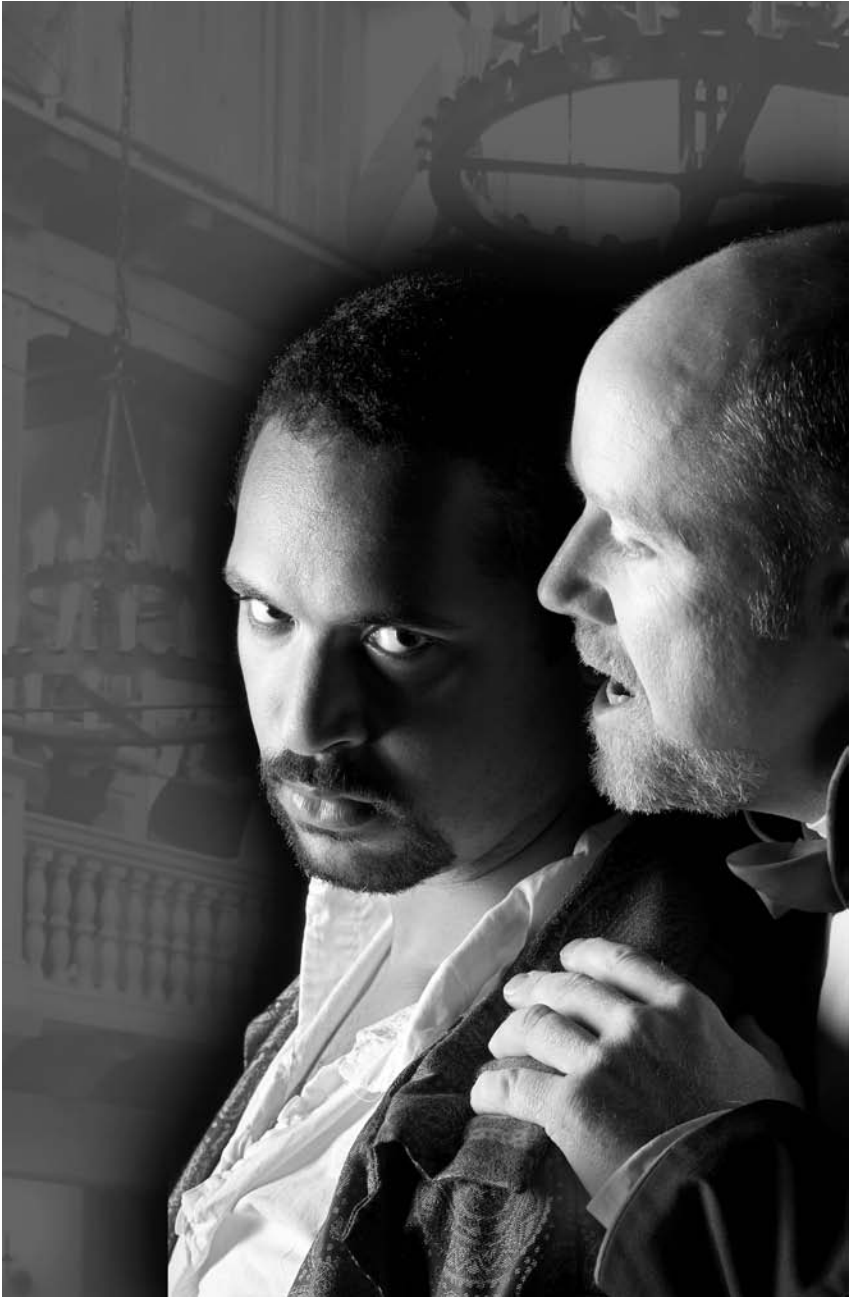
In keeping with a dramatic naturalism that favors truthful introversion over active engagement and clean theatrical form, the characters often appeared focused on their own internal processes, a choice that minimized potential conflict among stage partners. For instance, when the Duke replied to Brabantio, "Your son-in-law is far more fair than black," he avoided eye contact with the shamed father, directing his comments

to the general playing space. Similarly as Brabantio warned Othello of Desdemona's unfaithfulness, a crucial and deadly seed planted in Othello's unconscious, he too avoided eye contact with his intended listener.

The performance of Othello was particularly affected by an interpretive approach that highlighted a loose directorial approach towards staging and an emphasis on isolated individualism. Acted by René Thornton Jr., Othello was certainly a dignified and amiable character, a physically powerful figure comfortable with military protocol and male companionship. Thornton's youth and comfortable bearing downplayed the various issues of age, cultural difference, and emotional claustrophobia developed in the text, but what was noticeably lacking in his performance was the direct emotional engagement needed to create Othello as a full-fledged tragic figure filled with passion and vulnerability. Othello's isolation stemmed in great part from the naturalistic "casualness" that marked the troupe's line deliveries, character relationships and blocking. For instance in his confessional words upon Desdemona's exit, "Chaos is come again," Othello looked away from the audience and spoke so quietly that he was difficult to hear. Likewise Othello's promise to Iago, "I am bound to thee forever," was blocked so that Othello moved away from Iago during these lines.

In contrast to Othello, Iago was played with spirited theatrical form, focusing his energies outward towards his environment and stage partners. A balding man dressed in a bright, devil-red tunic, Iago, played by James Keegan, was boisterous, overtly sexual, and gruff in speech: he was a supremely masculine figure rooted in his able body and street-smart intuition. His lively enjoyment in orchestrating the downfall of his many victims offered a compelling contrast to Othello's restraint and introversion. Taking full advantage of his soliloquies, Keegan developed a strong rapport with his audience, teasing them with sexual innuendo and reveling in the improvisational nature of his character's machinations. Unlike other characters who also spoke out to the general space, this Iago spoke directly and meaningfully to the audience.

Despite the meandering naturalistic pace and quality of the ASC's *Othello*, the play came into strong dramatic focus at the end of the performance. Othello's murderous entrance through the discovery space was effectively staged, offering a moment of dynamic blocking that empowered, rather than minimized, his physical presence. Indeed, Thornton, Jr.'s Othello came into full form in these last scenes; during these challenging moments, he was emotionally engaged and deliberate in his actions, seeking to impact his stage partner to the fullest and most fatal degree. The effectiveness of the death scene was greatly aided by the work of Sarah



From left to right, René Thornton Jr. (Othello) and James Keegan (Iago) in American Shakespeare Center's production of *Othello*, 2006. Photo by Michael Bailey.

Fallon as Desdemona, who exuded a heightened emotional availability throughout the play. Before the death scene, she pushed her bed into the playing space and sang with emotional depth and longing; despite the private intimacy of this action, Fallon communicated her emotional desire in clear theatrical terms.

During their final confrontation, Desdemona and Othello knelt passionately to one another, a rich and exciting image that suggested the presence of two lost souls clinging together as the world pressed down upon them. Ultimately the ASC's *Othello* sheds its aura of dispersed energies and introversion and built toward a heightened state of involvement and crisp theatrical form. In the final scenes, Warren and his cast demonstrated the power of human desire to move people and events toward tragedy.

The ASC's production of *Julius Caesar*, directed by Colleen Kelly, offered a tightly packaged and highly theatrical vision of the power dynamics at work in first-century BCE Roman society. The production's clear emphasis on social groups and power differentials was evident from the poignant musical opening of the play in which the actors re-created a 1960s counterculture rock band singing about revolution. This late-twentieth-century reference fleshed out with tambourines and hippie swirling suggested the historical repetition of social movements, accompanied as they are with a complex mixture of joy and anger. As the song ended, the actors opened a small box filled with props and costume pieces needed for the performance: unlike *Othello*, this production was to be played entirely for the audience's, as opposed to the actors', immediate experience and enjoyment.

Kelly's directorial approach emphasized the pervasive hierarchy and fear that shaped the lives of the characters. For instance in the opening scene, the initial clash between the tribunes and reveling commoners was filled with anxiety as the tribunes enforced a harsh class privilege. As the commoners scattered for their lives, the soothsayer ran into the audience area and secretly watched the grand entrance of Julius Caesar, who emerged like a god through the discovery space. Moments later, the soothsayer rushed away from the audience and prostrated himself in front of Caesar's dismissive retinue.

A persuasive use of choreography and blocking, including the careful planning of geometric patterns and poses, was demonstrated throughout this production; the actors' bodies effectively communicated a world in which formality and appearances mattered deeply. One small but powerful moment occurred when Caesar discussed his distrust of Cassius early in



Joseph Langham (Julius Caesar) in American Shakespeare Center's production of *Julius Caesar*, 2006/2007. Photo by Michael Bailey.

1.2. Standing downstage right with Marc Antony, Caesar spoke of his fear while nodding and smiling to Cassius, who stood far down stage left. This stage-picture clearly delineated the two sides at war and the greeting shared by both men reflected the feigned friendship and empty protocol that marked their world. Another intriguing moment occurred during the forgiveness scene between Brutus and Cassius (4.3): here the actors talked while sitting on small benches positioned diagonally to one another, a visual pattern of movement that suggested a game board where the players strategized their next move.

The storm scene, arguably the best-staged scene in the play, illustrated the power of choreography to create an imaginary world on a bare Renaissance stage. Against the background of a heavy drumbeat of thunder, the conspirators moved onstage like hunted carnivores, knives drawn, heads covered by bright red sashes, bodies bent. At times the drumming was so loud it drowned out their voices, and often Cassius, played by Henry Bazemore, Jr. with full-bodied physical expression (in contrast to the more reserved decorum of the other Roman characters), moved to the beat of the drumming as if he were one with the storm. Upon entering Brutus's home, the weather-beaten conspirators formed a circle around Brutus, suggesting an uneasy balance between protecting and attacking their host. The use of circular formations was used again to strong effect in the killing of Caesar as the Senators surrounded their victim both horizontally and vertically. Thematically this deadly act came full circle as Caesar stabbed himself with Brutus's sword after his famous line, "Et tu, Brute!"

The characters of Brutus, Cassius, Antony, and Caesar were engagingly developed, each demonstrating different political strengths and styles. Brutus, played by Adam Jonas Segaller, confidently carried the production with a calm, gentle demeanor that became increasingly brittle and agitated as the action developed. Cassius was portrayed as earnest in his desire for reform, though his penchant for self-mockery and vocal play (including the imitation of other characters and the occasional use of a southern accent) reflected a trickster quality to his persona. Antony, attractively played by Jonathan Maccia, was perhaps too soft for a commanding chief, his skills at diplomacy hindered by a low speaking energy that downplayed his reputed gift for rhetoric. Caesar, played by Joseph Langham, possessed a fitting physical bearing, dignity and humility; he poignantly re-appeared as the two soldiers who aided Cassius and Antony in their suicides.

The inherent goodness expressed by all four lead characters suggested an open-minded outlook on the political situation at hand, making it dif-

ficult to infer the production's answer to the question "whose tragedy is this?" Indeed, by first staging the crowd scene (3.2) among the audience members, and then dressing the soldiers in contemporary movie-styled military gear, this performance clearly implicated the audience in the thirst for revenge over Caesar's death. Perhaps the desire for blood and violence is the true evil in this play; the play's tragedy is ultimately our own.

In addition to the strong, detailed focus on the play's shifting power dynamics and the highly theatrical use of movement to underscore social phenomena, Kelly used cross-gender casting to intriguing effect. Though *Julius Caesar* is not known for its strong female roles, this production integrated female actors in all of its groupings—as commoners, tribunes, conspirators, triumvirs, and soldiers. The presence of female actors was certainly a reminder of the original gender-bending played out in Shakespeare's Blackfriars Theatre, and also suggested a universal humanity underlying social revolution. Like the box that held the props and costumes at the beginning of *Julius Caesar*, the active presence of female actors playing male roles highlighted the power, scope and limits of representation in matters of both artistic and political persuasion.



The Merchant of Venice

Presented by **Theatre for a New Audience** at **The Duke**, New York, New York. January 6–March 11, 2007. Directed by Darko Tresnjak. Scene Design by John Lee Beatty. Costumes by Linda Cho. Sound by Jane Shaw. Lighting by David Weiner. With F. Murray Abraham (Shylock), Kenajuan Bentley (Launcelot Gobbo), Arnie Burton (Balthazar), Cameron Folmar (Solanio), Kate Forbes (Portia), Ezra Knight (Morocco), John Lavelle (Gratiano), Nicole Lowrance (Jessica), Vince Nappo (Lorenzo), Tom Nelis (Antonio), Saxon Palmer (Bassanio), Matthew Schneck (Salerio), Christen Simon (Nerissa), and Marc Vietor (Aragon, Tubal, and Duke of Venice.)

The Jew of Malta

Presented by **Theatre for a New Audience** at **The Duke**, New York, New York. January 6–March 11, 2007. Directed by David Herskovits. Scene Design by John Lee Beatty. Costumes by David Zinn. Sound by Jane Shaw. Lighting by David Weiner. With F. Murray Abraham (Barabas), Kenajuan Bentley (1st Knight), Arnie Burton (Ithamore), Cameron Folmar (Barnardine, 2nd Merchant), Kate Forbes (Bellamira), Ezra Knight (Selim Calymath), John Lavelle (Lodowick), Nicole Lowrance (Abigail), Vince Nappo (Mathias),