



Othello (dir. Nick Hytner) at The National Theatre

by Kevin Quarmby. First published in the *ISE Chronicle*.

For the production: Othello (2013, The National Theatre, UK).



THE STREETS OF VENICE ARE DARK AND MENACING. TALL, AUSTERE BUILDINGS SOAR IN VERTICAL authority, their expansive windows lifeless with night-time slumber. Below, two figures share an illicit cigarette. They converse. One is distraught at losing the object of his desire. The other, colder and more calculating, offers titbits of information about a mismatched love affair turned marriage. We hear of a young white woman, stolen from her father's house and secretly wedded to, dare one say the word, a Moor. We hear of the intrigue that now brings the news to her father. Of the malice and deep suspicion of a man who owes duty to his commander, but whose personal jealousy goes hand in hand with deep racial hatred. This is the threatening opening to Nick Hytner's astonishing production of *Othello* at the National Theatre.

The malice emanates from Iago. Rory Kinnear offers a character study that is cold and calculating. Even so, Kinnear's Iago is no less the victim of his own jealousies and delusions. Iago becomes far more than a stage villain; Iago is a downtrodden ordinary 'everyman'. We see Iago's thought processes brought to cold light through the matter of fact delivery of Kinnear's performance. This poor wretch is as doomed to a life of self-inflicted harm as the victims who come under his malevolent gaze.

Iago plays his pawn, Roderigo, with despicable glee. Poor Roderigo is a gulled gentleman indeed, who foolishly plies his false ally with gold, vainly hoping that Desdemona will one day recognize his worth. Tom Robertson's Roderigo is a delightfully gauche young man, eager to travel to the military frontline, as long as his preppy skinny jeans and loafers go unscathed. Roderigo is a coward and a fool, but there is no doubting his utter devotion to Desdemona. Not deemed good enough for the daughter of a wealthy Venetian, Roderigo might have altered the course of tragic events were he only more a man.

Instead, Desdemona's father, Brabantio, must hear the horrific news that his daughter is lost to a Moor from the very man he rejected as her suitor. William Chubb as Brabantio receives this intelligence with understandable anger, mixed with heart-wrenching disbelief. His kneejerk reaction is to seek retribution from the Duke of Venice. Meeting his war cabinet, the Duke is initially sympathetic to Brabantio's plight; that is, until he learns the identity of Desdemona's love. Having invested so much hope and energy in elevating Othello to supreme military commander, the Duke cannot now rebuke the Venetian saviour, just as he is going to fight.

Brabantio is left a broken man. His rejection of his daughter – and the fateful curse that Othello should beware any woman who can so easily betray her father – are both impotent and deadly. Brabantio, as we shall hear, will die a lonely death. The seed of jealousy, so memorably scattered by the insinuating hand of Iago, is here seen as parting gift from a bitterly disappointed father. Chubb humanizes the inhuman to such a degree that his despair becomes too uncomfortable to bear, even though our sympathies must and do lie elsewhere.

Othello, the tough middle-aged military man, and Desdemona, the waif-like child whose innocent sexuality smacks of a Lolita in the army's midst, are flown immediately to Cyprus. There, a full military campaign against the Turks awaits them. The transition to Cyprus is achieved by Vicki Mortimer's evocative set design, which transforms the Venetian verticals into a horizontal hell of sand-swept, concrete defensive work with prefabricated pressed-steel garrison huts, all reminiscent of recent Middle East conflicts. This is the world of IEDs and suicide bombers. Of locals eager to make a living, selling their bodies if they must. Of helicopter gunships and drunken brawls by squaddies let loose after baying for the enemy's blood. This is the frontline world of the commander, Othello.

Adrian Lester is superb as Othello. With the strength and stature of a fighting warrior, Lester brings a rugged dignity to the role. Fascinating to observe, however, is the gradual decline and regression of this hero. When first we meet Othello, he is the dark-skinned diplomat, at home in the corridors of power as on the battlefield. As his jealousy engulfs him, his African roots take hold. His speech becomes more erratic, more laboured with imagery that advertises his ‘otherness’ to those around him, and to the audience. A *coup de theatre* is the moment he acknowledges Desdemona’s infidelity. Too much to bear, this realization causes Othello’s legs to crumble beneath him. His full body weight crashes in a dead faint against a wall, and then to the barrack bathroom floor.



Desdemona, played with wit and innocence by Olivia Vinall, cannot survive the onslaught of Kinnear’s excellent Iago. If only she had the machismo of Iago’s own bride, Emilia, played feistily by Lyndsey Marshal. Recast not as an army follower, but as a female fighting machine, Emilia is the perfect vehicle for exploring the plight of women in the play. She does what her husband commands. When she realizes the truth behind his villainy, she attacks with the fiery hatred of a virago. Of course Iago lamely defends himself against his wife. Of course she will die violently at his hands.

Nick Hytner directs a refreshingly clear and honest Othello that doesn’t shirk from proffering Iago a misguided humanity, Desdemona the hint of naïve suspicion, and Othello the opportunity to explore his faults and aggressive frailties. This is an *Othello* for the twenty-first century, when mixed race marriages seem less contentious, judging by recent political events, than same-sex marriages. When military conflict too readily sends young people home in body

bags. When politicians make alliances and change allegiances without the least thought for those who have died for them to remain in power. Most innovative, perhaps, is the representation of Iago as a misguided anti-hero. Iago's self-justifiable jealousy, no less incendiary than that ignited in Othello, ensures the boundaries between villain and hero are gloriously blurred in this excellent production.