

Trinity Rep's Othello Trudges Off Course



Left to right: Rebecca Gibel as Desdemona, Charlie Thurston as Cassio, and Stephen Thorne as Iago in *Othello* directed by Whitney White. Costume design by Andrew Jean, set design Daniel Soule, lighting design by Amith Chandrashaker. Photo by Mark Turek.

Trinity Rep's *Othello* aims at being a bold, contemporary production. Yet director Whitney White misses the target, and instead the play strolls into the minefield laid by the unforgiving challenges of Shakespeare's text. Staged with a minimalist, modern, military look and feel, Trinity's *Othello* seems to forget its mission, instead becoming bogged down in a long, slow march toward an inevitable ending.

Blending themes of race and xenophobia, money and ambition, power and misogyny, war and deception, *Othello* is one of the Bard's most well-known tragedies. The text's overlapping controversial topics crescendo in recent socio-political relevance. Yet, in spite of the play's apt timing, what could have been a fortuitous and fascinating juxtaposition instead tangled itself in the traps set throughout the landscape of Shakespeare's play.

The plot is complicated, requiring more than just an audience's willingness to suspend disbelief.

We are expected to believe that Iago hates Othello enough to dedicate his every waking moment to wholly destroying Othello's existence. Iago states early on that he hates the Moor because Othello passed him over for promotion ... he hates the Moor because Othello is, well, a Moor ... and he hates the Moor because he suspects Othello slept with his wife. That particular plot point is never clarified. But, it can probably be attributed to Iago being a bigot and Othello being a Moor. We are expected to believe that Michael Cassio is extremely educated and very handsome, yet also a gullible dupe and a predictably violent drunk. We must believe that Emilia dearly loves her mistress, Desdemona, yet is devoted enough to and knows so little about the diabolical, sociopathic machinations of her own husband, Iago, that she is willing to steal for him her mistress' handkerchief and plant it in Cassio's room. And, we are expected to believe that Othello, a battle-tested general of renowned integrity, deeply in love with his new bride, can be talked precipitously into a jealousy so ferocious as to define the play's tragic conclusion.

I am willing to believe all of these things, and more (and Moor ... sorry). However, for an audience to believe an epic tale, there is no time for the players to do anything but tell the story. Characters will reveal themselves throughout the story. Yet there are too many moments that feel as if the actors are explaining who they are, demonstrating how they feel and translating what they say. Slowing down the story undermines the production. After all, *we all know how Shakespeare ends*. Comedies end in marriage. Tragedies end in death. And *Othello* is the latter. The best hope of audience engagement is keeping the story galloping ahead of us so we can experience the ride.

Jude Sandy was proficient as Othello. He is obviously a fine actor with a bright career ahead of him. Yet in the titular role, he lacked the commanding presence, the powerful stillness and the calcified soul of a general so respected or feared as Othello. Without such steel, there is no contrast when he softens for Desdemona, or corrodes and collapses due to the rot of jealousy. Desdemona, played by Rebecca Gibel, was doe eyed, loyal and sweet in her naivete. However, together, the couple fell short of the sexual chemistry necessary to fuel the resentment underlying the motivation of those who wish to divide them.

Company veteran Stephen Thorne turned in a strong performance as Iago. He relished the role's soliloquies, snapping back and forth from oozing charming mendacity to inviting the audience in on the cruel joke. Other familiar company members, Mauro Hantman and Fred Sullivan, Jr., lent expertise to the stage as Roderigo and the Duke, respectively. Brian McEleney was perfect as Desdemona's father, Brabantio. He brayed his conspiracy theories of sorcery as the only possible explanation for his daughter's attraction to Othello, mimicking a true FOX News loyalist. However, it was Angela Brazil as Emilia who stood out from the rest of the cast, giving a nuanced and multi-dimensional performance. In the most gripping moment of the play, Brazil rings loud and clear, crying, "Lay thee down and roar!"

In the program welcome note, artistic director Curt Columbus mentions that *Othello* is listed as the "Shakespeare that high school students most want to see." Perhaps director Whitney White had this in mind when she staged the amped up, testosterone-frenzied, military barracks party scene. Contrarily, perhaps the subdued pace of the dialogue allows less experienced Shakespeare viewers to easily access the language. Regardless, it would have benefited the story to pick up the pace. Earn your pauses, people.

The nation wrestles with the overwhelming cognitive load and warp speed media cycles of police shooting unarmed black Americans, ICE deporting hundreds of undocumented people, Neo-Nazis rallying in the shadow of women marching, and the White House planning a military parade to distract from the Commander in Chief's affair with a porn star and the looming federal investigation into L'Affaire Russe. *Othello* is an epic tragedy encompassing myriad themes, any one of which echoes the spirit of the age in which we live. Unfortunately, Trinity Repertory Company's production of *Othello* simply failed to raise the stakes enough to meet or exceed its life and death struggle, even in the midst of scenes that are written as, literally, life and death struggle.

Othello is playing through March 18 at Trinity Rep, 201 Washington St, PVD. For tickets, call 401-351-4242 or go to trinityrep.com.