

British Theatre Guide

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Othello

William Shakespeare

Royal Shakespeare Company

Northern Stage, Newcastle, and touring

(2008)

It's a good rule of thumb for a director that, if you add something to an already long play, you should take something out. In this RSC production, Kathryn Hunter has added a lot, much of it physical and incorporating a very effective moving set (movement by Marcello Magni), some musical (instead of two verses of a drinking song in Act II, for example, we have a cabaret singer in blackface performing "You Made Me Love You" along with a puppet of Desdemona giving birth to white and black golliwog twins) and even a completely new scene in which Desdemona dreams of her father during the night she is killed.

Apart from the latter (which did not work for me), these additions - and others - were successful in creating mood. Also successful were Patrice Naiambana's African voice and his touches of African heritage. In his first (non-Shakespearean) appearance, we see him singing an African song to Desdemona (with her joining in) and this really set me a-buzz. Great idea and a wonderful scene-setter, I thought.

On their wedding night, we also see the pair, half-naked, engaging in love-play, which established very clearly their strong physical attraction and commitment. Juxtaposed with Iago's plotting, this was a very telling, albeit short, scene.

The performances, too, were excellent. Michael Gould achieved something that many in the past have failed to do - he made Iago totally believable. There was no attempt to present him as an embodiment of evil or otherwise "explain" his actions: he simply was who he was and his machinations were the natural result of his sense of being slighted and undervalued by Othello. Indeed, he was likeable - vicious underneath he may have been (and we get glimpses of that in this scenes with Tamzin Griffin's Emilia) - but we could understand the high regard in which he is held, albeit not high enough to satisfy his ambition. In many ways *Othello* is as much a play about language and how it can be used as *Love's Labour's Lost* and Gould's Iago is a master manipulator of language, which enables him to manipulate not just Othello but Roderigo, Brabantio, Cassio and almost everyone else.

Naiambana's Othello is seen from the start to be a man of extremes of emotion, so driven by it that he does fall into an actual epileptic fit rather than a simply a fit of rage, leaving him wide open to Iago's manipulations. His use of a bullwhip when crossed contrasts beautifully with the romantic and tender side he shows in that opening scene with Desdemona. Natalia Tena's Desdemona is very much the innocent abroad, not realising how her playfulness can be misinterpreted, especially in her relationship with Cassio. Alex Hassell gives Cassio more personality than is often the case and thus makes Othello's jealousy believable.

I was much taken with Cath Whitefield's Bianca: feisty and with more than a touch of Catherine Tate. Was she bovvered? Yes, she very definitely was!

Updating the setting to the 1950s and putting almost all the men in uniform also worked well. The military *ambience* suits the play and the time period, with its racist undertones (*The Black and White Minstrel Show* references in the two cabaret scenes, for example), points up the suspicion of the "Moor of Venice" in Shakespeare's text.

And yet...

I have to say that, for me, at three and a half hours (including interval) it went on too long. There were moments when interest began to flag and my glance dropped to my watch. Some judicious cutting would have helped. But otherwise this is an excellent production, one of the best I have seen of what, for me, is perhaps the weakest of Shakespeare's tragedies.

Touring to the Oxford Playhouse 24th-28th February, Liverpool Playhouse 3rd-7th March.

Howard Loxton [reviewed](#) this production at the Hackney Empire.

Reviewer: [Peter Lathan](#)