

# British Theatre Guide

News, reviews, features and podcast on theatre across the UK

## Otello

Giuseppe Verdi

Royal Opera House

Regal cinema, Evesham and other venues

28 June–15 July 2017

Jonas Kaufmann's debut as *Otello* was London's hot ticket of the season, so it was not surprising to see a nearly full house at my favourite live relay venue for Keith Warner's new production from Covent Garden.

And they were not to be disappointed. First night reviews, while full of praise for the tenor's musicality and subtlety, had suggested he seemed a little constrained. Not to my ears, or in this later performance.

From the opening triumphant *Esultate*, when the hero is hoist above the stage from his returning ship, there was no holding back from a vigorously martial but always beautifully precise Kaufmann.

But as those great *Otellos* Jon Vickers and Plácido Domingo demonstrated, the role demands intelligence as much as passion. Kaufmann, if not yet quite achieving their depth of interpretation, is short by only a Moor's whisker.

It was fascinating during transmission to see a glimpse into rehearsal with conductor Antonio Pappano—ebullient as ever—of the great soliloquy *Dio mi potevi*. The result in performance seemed all the more masterly, from low brooding monotones to the explosive climax, all over Verdi's rich, unsettling harmonies.

The act one love duet with Maria Agresta's Desdemona, Wagnerian in texture but not in length, achieved a delicate beauty, even if the pair did not quite convincingly convey a sense of intimacy.

Sixteen years had passed since Verdi wrote a new opera and a lot had changed since *Aïda*. There are no set-piece, time-stopping arias and Desdemona's Willow song and prayer are more like a mini-drama in themselves.

Agresta's rich soprano was employed to best effect here, as her acting had been when violently accused of adultery—her expression recognising neither the charge nor the changed husband who made it.

But if Kaufmann is star of show, it is Marco Vratogna's Iago who—appropriately enough for a villain—steals it.

Verdi had planned to call his opera *Iago* and Warner makes him the centre of action throughout. Vratogna, shaven-headed and with a jaggy line in facial hair that a Latin American drugster might emulate, literally calls the tune, dropping a mask to cue the opening storm music from the orchestra, and his hand periodically moves the scenery to drive events forward.

There is a demonic intensity to his Credo, and an irresistible energy in his drinking challenge to Frederic Antoun's Cassio, *Beva con me*, which turns into a riot of choreography, principals, orchestra and chorus, brilliantly controlled on stage and from the pit.

There could be no finer example of the combined arts of music and drama in what is arguably Verdi's most perfect opera.

**Reviewer:** [Colin Davison](#)