

# British Theatre Guide

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## Othello

William Shakespeare  
Donmar Warehouse  
(2007)

The Donmar must surely have a better track record of attracting ticket touts than any other theatre in London. They have done it again, as artistic director Michael Grandage has cast British film stars and Donmar alumni, Ewan McGregor, Kelly Reilly and Chiwetel Ejiofor in Shakespeare's tragedy of love and betrayal.

It would be an interesting debating point to know whether people believe that this trio outstrips the Donmar's last two big sellers, a naked Nicole Kidman in *The Blue Room* and Gwyneth Paltrow in [Proof](#).

In any case, after the whole allocation for the run disappeared in only six hours (don't believe The Times), the returns queues stretch an awfully long way and tickets are selling on eBay for hundreds of pounds each and elsewhere for up to £1,000.

So is the glittery and indubitably sexy trio worth it? That is the wrong question to ask on this occasion, as the production lives on its own merits, regardless of the high profile casting.

*The Tragedy of Othello* might well represent Grandage's bid to become a film director, like his predecessor, Sam Mendes, not to mention those stage stars who did so well on screen with this play, Orson Welles and Sir Laurence Olivier.

As well as the actors, the production looks fit for the silver screen. Christopher Oram has kept the set simple, little but bare walls and, at the death, a bed and curtains. The colour scheme is basic too. All dress in black except for two symbolic exceptions, Desdemona in creamy white and the scarlet prostitute, Bianca.

The designer then creates the desired atmosphere by utilising some stunning lighting, courtesy of Paule Constable, and enough dry ice to counter global warming for a year to create artistic soft focus almost throughout.

This is complemented by an almost continuous and sometimes obtrusive soundscape from Adam Cork, a scarily realistic swordfight and stagings that at times allow us to enter the protagonists' heads as action goes on around them, again evoking film.

The main interest for readers however will be in the acting of the big three.

This play always allows two stars to vie for ascendancy, and generally it is the one playing Iago who shines brightest. On this occasion, so striking is Ejiofor's performance as the Moor, that he wins the contest hands down.

The [Blue/Orange](#) and *Dirty Pretty Things* star sounds Nigerian and rather than the familiar belligerent warrior, this soldier is characterised as a stoop-shouldered, insecure foreigner in a

country that engenders endemic hatred of his race, made even worse when he marries a pale, ginger-haired beauty.

For whatever reason, it is his "honest" ancient Iago, played by McGregor who schemes his downfall by calmly piling wickedness on wickedness and stirring up the "green-eyed monster" of jealousy. In doing so, he eggs on Edward Bennett's gullible, wimp Roderigo and defames Cassio who, to be fair, seems far too keen on licentiousness for his own good and is well played by Tom Hiddleston.

The innocent victim of the plotting is the lovely, frail Desdemona, sweetness personified, in a role that eventually allows Miss Reilly to reach a memorable peak as a bemused wife pitifully declaiming her purity on a lavish, Moroccan death bed.

It is also at this stage that Michelle Fairley's Emilia almost steals the show with a tear-jerking speech testifying to her mistress's honesty and condemning Othello to a tragic death, knowing that he has wronged the woman who loved him to distraction.

And Ewan McGregor? He is no Sir Ian McKellen or Simon Russell Beale and does not send chills of fear down the spine as they did in the part of an untrustworthy trustee.

This Iago has an accent that sounds more Irish than Scottish and his behaviour is naturalistic and feels wholly matter-of-fact and modern. He gabbles his lines at the start, thereby giving the opening scenes great urgency; but eventually calms down. Then he becomes a fairly ordinary man consumed by hidden hatred and a need to do down an outsider who relies on him implicitly.

This is a highly entertaining evening that feels nothing like its duration, which is close to 3½ hours. It is ultimately likely to be remembered for the inventive staging, Chiwetel Ejiofor's masterly Moor and the prices at which tickets were apparently changing hands.

*Playing until 23 February 2008*

**Reviewer:** [Philip Fisher](#)