

OTHELLO – A POEM AND THE PLAY

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I'm sending a poem to get to the architecture of the play and get past the production, with which I differed.

Here's the poem, which is about how I see the play:

OTHELLO

(Director's Notes)

Beneath each spangled chair,
behind plush tapestries, along curved
balustrades and blinding white piazzas
glides ruin, uncoiling to its own cold beat.

What score notates the music that the
Thick-Lips speaks? The General is his
language: a filigree of dew-rust,
anthropophagi, and camels
tethered under alien skies. A web
of scars from hardships passed, bleak exile,
flashing battles won. The Moor's a Martian --
dropped in the middle of a courtly snare,

his warlike core unused to indirection
or suspended judgment; unskilled at nuance
or with those who would draw ill upon
their world. Unlearned in pure negation
without cause. So, team, the questions are
why evil is; if trust can be; and where
it should be placed. My job's not answers
but to highlight starkly as the wheel

rolls on – yours, to stay innocent

despite an ache nearby the heart
 until the claw-snap of the end, the awful
 thunderclap of that reversing close.

Here's where I differed with this production:

- **Setting.** Most Shakespeare can be set in varied periods. I believe *Othello* is different. Of all the Plays it seems most to demand swishing capes; exotic dress; the postures, timing and rhythms these accessories impose. The play's language, dramatic motion, and atmosphere virtually require this. For me, setting it as a WWI all-khaki trench piece worked against its nuance, magic and splendor.
- **Pace, tone and pitch.** The production started (as it's supposed to) at a fever pitch, foreshadowing greater disorder. But for me that pitch was insufficiently modulated afterwards. The production's prosaic-industrial set was distracting and sometimes confusing. [Louvered shutters to indicate Venice? Giant fans? *Really?*] And if visual impacts are downplayed, speech often should be heightened to help capture color that otherwise may go missing. The diction here went in the opposite direction. Mr. Roberts as Iago did a nice vulgarian Trump but seemed imported from another play. To me his characterization distracted from the fact that Iago's motivation mostly is not sexual, though his jealousy is Othello's contagious evil twin. For both these characters, as for others – Brabantio, Cassio, Desdemona, even Roderigo -- *Othello* is much more about trust than sex. Sex is the vehicle Shakespeare seems to use to operationalize the trust theme.

And while Mr. Tahir's performance was workmanlike, he wasn't imposing. The Moor needs dominating physical and vocal presence – a James Earl Jones or Stacy Keach, say. This Moor was ordinary. And regretfully, a head too short. I had to go looking for him in many ensemble scenes.

• **Concept.** Making the Moor a light-skinned (former) Muslim was interesting. But for me the play is not about racism – it’s about *otherness*, a much broader topic. And *two* “others” are its pivots: Iago and Othello, each outside the conventional social fabric, each acting in his own flawed way to calibrate, triangulate, adjust to being excluded. In fact, Othello’s perceived exclusion from Desdemona’s love lies at the play’s core.

When the Moor’s figure becomes almost indistinguishable from the company, its symbolic otherness – which transcends whether he’s Muslim in a Western society – dissolves. So does its stage weight.

As the *babushka* said to the tailor, “Press on.”

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