

The Blood and Baseness of Our Natures

LCC's *Othello* deals with the green-eyed monster

I have to apologize to the LCC Student Production Association (SPA). When I saw that the group was putting on *Othello*, I was, frankly, skeptical. The massive, weighty tragedy seemed an unlikely candidate for success. But thanks to a good cast, an excellent villain and strong production values, LCC's *Othello* largely triumphs.

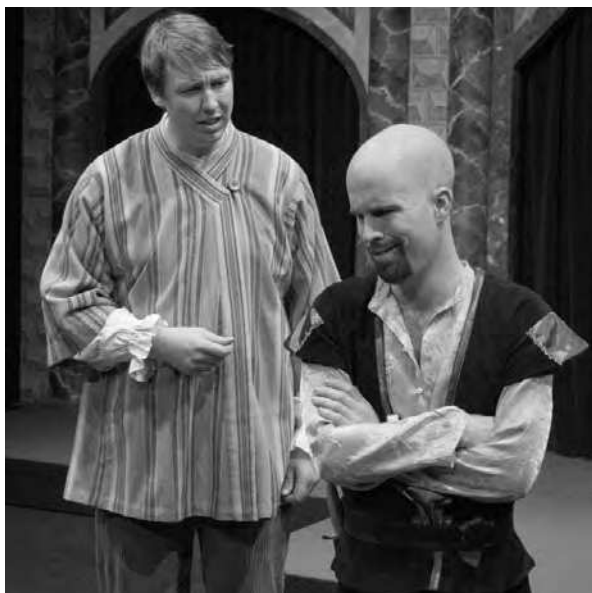
Elizabethan theater audiences placed a high value on puppetry, mimes and everything from trick-performing dogs to jugglers, but modern audiences are more used to straightforward, highly respectful performances of Shakespeare. Director Sparky Roberts and the students of the SPA present a more complex tale by using large-scale representations of Desdemona and Othello's faces and hands (puppets by Jeff and Tamora Lake) along with a strong interpretive role for the Clown (Chip Sherman). Sherman's Clown gives the emotions of the audience full expression on his pretty, beautifully made-up face; at other times, his dancing heralds the larger-than-life actions of the puppets.

Images projected on the sheer scene-framing drops also provide a meta-commentary on the action of the scene or act to come, and the music during the set changes usually portends a darkness at the heart of love — that canker, jealousy. One quibble: Much of the action is set in Cyprus, but some of the music would be better suited for North Africa. Er, we already know Othello is "a Moor," thanks very much.

And a note on the issue of race and racism in *Othello*: In the opening scenes of the play, the audience knows that Desdemona's father Brabantio (Tyler Walls) isn't a wise person because he continually refers disparagingly to Othello's skin color and ethnicity, but by the end, Shakespeare seems complicit in the idea that darker skin heralds a darker spirit. Only the fact of (European) Iago's true evil saves the play itself from our earlier verdict on Brabantio. But Othello is usually played as more of a noble man than Will Jenniton makes him here. Othello's fatal flaw is his jealousy, obviously, but he should otherwise seem a brilliant soldier and storyteller.

As for Iago, is there anything Benjamin Newman can't do? On the night his fine *Kimberly Akimbo* closed at the Lord Leebrick, there he was, grinning his villainous smile and contorting his lithe body as the vengeful, sly ensign. Perhaps some of his "Iago-markers" (the open mouth, the intense stare) could become less glaring indicators of character, but in general, Newman carries the production on his apparently capable shoulders.

As Iago's warm-hearted and tragically fooled wife Emilia, Tara Wibrew contrasts



Roderigo (Scott Shirk) yields to Iago (Benjamin Newman)

sharply with Michelle Nordella's Desdemona. Desdemona requires more focus, more winsome sweetness and more internal glow (not a look that comes from over-utilized rouge). Wibrew's warm, vibrant voice in the scene in which she helps prepare Desdemona for bed emphasizes the innocence and tragedy of her mistress, and the ease with which Wibrew presents Emilia in the key "I do think it is their husbands' fault/If wives do fail" scene deepens the poignance of what is to come.

Only one or two lines were muffed the night I went, an excellent record for such a wordy play, but other problems popped up. Both Nordella and Jenniton spend so much time on enunciating clearly that they lose their emotional appeal. I'd say 'twould be far better to swallow a few consonants and give the roles more resonance. Parsa Naderi as Michael Cassio gets the mix right, which befits Cassio's easygoing, friendly character.

The costumes range from brilliant — especially the Duke and his retinue — to goofy (Desdemona's nightgown). And the set morphs nicely from Venice to Cyprus and from house to citadel to interior, all in the Blue Door's black box space and three-quarter surround. Bright acting spots include Shanah Lindquist's amusing and sparkling Bianca, the courtesan in love with Cassio, and Dylan Skye Kennedy's mincing Lodovico, emissary of the Duke of Venice. The swordplay choreography worked surprisingly well and is a credit to director and actors alike.

I've been hard on the SPA in this review, but that's only because they mounted such a generally outstanding production that they deserve critical analysis more than a simple pat on the back "for trying." But the SPA and director Roberts also deserve a large audience and support for their powerful presentation of the too-human failure of trust, love and wisdom.

MICHAEL BRINKERHOFF

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