



Chris Butler (left) tends to Montano's (Barzin Akhavan) wounds, inflicted by a now-disgraced Cassio (Derek Garza) — who stands at attention with Lodovico in *Othello* (James Ryen, right).

OTHELLO

IN THE ANGUS BOWMER THEATRE
THROUGH OCT. 28

Rauch himself directed *Othello*, which opened to a near-sellout Friday night. He set the classic tragedy in contemporary America, complete with U.S. Navy uniforms, text messages arriving via cell phone and CNN looping endlessly on listless monitors in the palace exercise center. He cast the play as a meditation on racism, sexism and misogynistic violence — not a bad call at this #MeToo moment.

Othello is also a reflection on jealousy, trust and faithfulness.

Rauch's storytelling is mostly straightforward, moving from event to event on a spare and elegant set by Christopher Acebo.

A powerful turning point comes when Othello's wife, Desdemona (Alejandra Escalante), retires to her bedchamber — the place where we, and she, know that she is soon to be murdered by her husband.

In preparation, and perhaps as a ceremonial divide in the play's straight narrative, the rest of the cast assembles around the bed and slowly rotates it — arranging the set more coherently for the action to follow but also marking, in a funereal way, a chilling point of no return for Desdemona. We know, by their gestures, that she is doomed.

Chris Butler's Othello was the most engaging character on the stage for all three-plus hours of this ultimately wrenching show.

Butler played the admiral as a refined, somewhat aloof leader, a Muslim immigrant to the Christian country that he now serves as an officer, and a man who is so desperately in love with Desdemona that he is an easy mark for the evil machinations of his scheming lieutenant Iago.

Danforth Comins, one of my favorite members among OSF's company of actors, brings Iago into dismaying focus with a wonderfully understated interpretation. Comins' brand of evil doesn't come at you with Shakespearean force and majesty; instead, it's fresh-faced and engaging, making it all too comprehensible that Othello succumbs to Iago's wild stories linking Desdemona and Cassio (Derek Garza) in an illicit affair.

Othello is one long, hard slog of a play. Rauch

explained at a Sunday morning panel discussion that, after casting Butler as Othello, he asked the actor to also join the cast of *Romeo and Juliet* in a summer production on the outdoor stage.

Butler begged off — two such intense tragedies at the same time would be too emotionally wrenching — and will appear instead in *Love's Labor's Lost* to fulfill his repertory duties at the festival.

This *Othello* starts a bit slow but picks up an unstoppable and deadly momentum after intermission; by the end, with Desdemona's slow and graphic murder in the marital bed, the audience — me included — were totally absorbed in tragedy and despair.

HENRY V

IN THE THOMAS THEATRE
THROUGH OCT. 27

Regulars at OSF have been following Shakespeare's history plays in order since 2016, when Rauch directed *Richard II* to kick off a four-play chronicle. Last year's

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