

A tiger tamed

Michael Billington finds that opera singer turned actor Willard White has yet to unleash his full power in the RSC's fine new Othello

OTHELLO has lately become the odd man out among Shakespeare's tragedies. Current racial sensitivity makes it virtually impossible to have a white actor blacking up as the hero (though the last truly earth-shaking Moor was Olivier a quarter of a century ago). We also seem uncertain whether to treat the play as a large public tragedy or an intimate private drama.

Trevor Nunn's new production at Stratford's Other Place (which seems to make more farewells than Kirsten Flagstad) addresses both these problems head-on. It casts a black opera-singer, Willard White, as the Moor. It also treats the play as a study in claustrophobic desperation. Running at four hours, it has the microscopic attention to detail that is Nunn's trademark. But the paradox is that, while it handles the public scenes brilliantly, it ultimately misses the sound we long for in tragedy: the agonised cry of a cornered human soul.

Like John Barton in 1971, Mr Nunn sets the action in a 19th-century world. This gives particularly rich dividends in the opening act where Mr Nunn uncovers a tragedy-within-a-tragedy: that of the deserted father, Brabantio. Clive Swift plays him as a frock-coated politician who allows private grief to erupt into a midnight cabinet-meeting, all brandy and cigar-smoke. And when the Duke counsels stoicism, Mr

Swift turns on him with a savage fury and impeccable logic ("So let the Turk of Cyprus us besigue. We lose it not so long as we can smile") that suddenly makes the war preparations seem irrelevant.

But everything in the first two acts clicks perfectly into place. The shy, conspiratorial smile Imogen Stubbs's Desdemona shoots at Othello on her first entrance instantly tells us they have been bracing themselves for this moment of public exposure. Ian McKellen immediately establishes Iago as the barrack-room traditionalist who believes in "the ancient gradations" of rank. And Cyprus is clearly defined as a smirking colonial outpost where the women fuss over the barley-water while the men get on with the post-war admin.

Anchoring the events in a precise world gives the action a rare plausibility. But, at some point, we wait for Othello's wracking anguish and what F. R. Leavis called his "heroic self-dramatisation" to break out; and in Mr White's performance this never quite happens. He is superb in the opening scenes: a majestic war-lord who convincingly fetches his life and being "from men of royal height" (not "siege" as usual). He is very moving at the close when he pathetically ransacks Desdemona's dressing-table and allows his great rich bass to sing the blues.

But in the central scenes of the play you wait impatiently for the thunderbolt to explode and for any real sign of mental torment: even a line like "I'll



Waiting for the thunderbolt: Willard White and Imogen Stubbs

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tear her all to pieces" is delivered with chair-bound temperance. Mr White has a fine Othello locked within him; but at the moment he lacks that tiger-like bestiality which Henry James found in the great Salvini.

Ultimately, this has an effect on Ian McKellen's Iago: in the central scenes he is, to vary the animal metaphor, like a matorador in search of an angry bull. But, that said, this is the most complex and fascinating Iago since that of the late Emrys James. With his ramrod-back, swinging arms and clipped Northern consonants, Mr McKellen is the absolute embodiment of the professional soldier: every detail is correct

down to the little baccy-tin for half-smoked cheroots and the obsessive way he tidies his barrack-room blankets.

What Mr McKellen brilliantly establishes is the contrast between the public and the private face. In Cyprus, Mr McKellen is the military joker who relishes his role as the camp entertainer; but, in one swift move, he turns his back on Desdemona and the rest to reveal his superhuman contempt for these laughing fools.

This Iago is no demi-devil: he is instead an old sweat warped and corroded by fantasies of power and by a destructive jealousy far greater than Othello's. Mr McKellen not only makes you understand Iago: he also

induces a compassion for this pitiable creature. And he is quite extraordinary in the final scene when he leans across the death-loaded bed and slowly says to Othello "What you know, you know": the implication is that he has simply articulated the Moor's own buried insecurities. This is great acting.

Imogen Stubbs's Desdemona is also exactly right: a girl whose youthful impetuosity (she emits a squeal of excitement when realising they are heading for Cyprus "tonight" as if it's her first trip abroad) separates her from the Moor far more than the colour of her skin. Zoe Wanamaker also lends Emilia a perceptibly trou-

bled conscience as if secretly aware of her husband's dark destructiveness. And Sean Baker's Cassio, turning up in white civvies to enlist Desdemona's support and clutching a box of fruit, suggests he is more than half in love with her.

The production, set by Bob Crowley in a world of sun-bleached wooden walls and sand-strewn floors, is shot through with that kind of ferocious attention to detail. Everything is meticulous, careful, pre-planned. The one thing lacking is the sense of unpredictable danger that should make the hairs rise on the nape of your neck and plunge you into the stark, primitive world of tragedy.

Billington on Othello

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