

TREVOR NUNN's enthralling production of *Othello* (RSC Stratford, The Other Place, transferring to the Young Vic next month) is set around 1900, which means that Iago (Ian McKellen) takes the stage like a hailbound from Strindberg and Emilia (Zoë Wanamaker) becomes a troubled Cuckoo's nest spinster. The motherless Desdemona (Imogen Stubbs) is a humorous, innocent and impulsive tomboy who literally hurls herself into Othello's arms. The ambivalent pathos of the regal-maternal corner disturbs the comfort of the baronism (music by Guy Wolfenden) and the play becomes, among many things, a lesson for women in the destructiveness of men.

The noble, gentle Othello (Willard White) is the most blindly destructive of all, and fits uneasily even into a Venetian republic run like a Liberal Club. The point is made explicit by the arrival of Uncle Gratiano (Clive Swift) at the end when, between dinner and bedtime, the old boy is suddenly required to prevent the escape of his niece's killer with a cutlass.

What all of them fail to notice is the psychotic in their midst. McKellen's invincible, understating Iago, so choked with tension he gulps at a narcotic for sweet, explosive relief, has long perfected the techniques of concealment: the affection of sincerity, the puckered frown of concern. His bedside manner is seductive; his counter-attacks, ingenuously concealed, never fail; his eyes are an irreproachably deep blue.

Iago's disgust is the engine of the play. When he warns Othello of the green-eyed monster, the monster is his own. When, embracing the Moor rightly, Iago cries 'I am thy own for ever', it is not the cry of a servant, still less (pace Olivier) of a man in love with his own master, but the mephistophelian claim of a succubus bound for the abyss.

This is a towering performance, one of the finest and most uncompromising of McKellen's career.

Willard White, Nunn's Porgy at Glyndebourne, an expert singer of theatrical integrity and consistent stage power, is playing Shakespeare for the first time. His speaking voice is rich, powerful and dark, though not entirely under his control. As General of Venice, he is magnanimous and commanding; he conquers Desdemona with a devastating smile. As a man of instinctive intentions, his Othello moves us with a natural power. What it cannot yet do is take us on the kind of dramatic journey undertaken by McKellen. The narrative breathing techniques demanded by Shakespeare and Wagner are quite unlike: White's voice resonates where it should colour and remains earthbound where it should rise.

Like his exemplary *Macbeth* one year ago, Nunn's *Othello* unfolds with perfectly judged speed and chamber-larity in the bare room of The Other Place, dressed and furnished with an intensifying simplicity by Bob Crowley. The text is full — four hours, including a short interval — if not complete (no Clown).

THEATRE
'Othello' and 'Boris Godunov'
MICHAEL RATCLIFFE

Stubbs and Wanamaker witness, and haplessly assist, the process of destruction with sensuality, intelligence and feeling; and the play, unlike Verdi's opera, is restored to its true nature as a painfully private affair.

Pushkin's *Boris Godunov* (1825), on the other hand, a pioneer of Shakespearean political-poetic theatre in the rebelling December Russia of Tsar Nicholas I, is a painfully public affair in which the eye of God sees all and privacy is so painful, indeed, with its symbiotic drama of tyranny and the people influenced by *Coriolanus*, *Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth*, that it could not be published for six years or performed for another 40, after which Mussorgsky's operatic masterpiece took over and that, as far as the West was concerned, was that. There is no easily accessible literal translation to read, so we were all in the same boat on Tuesday when Yuri Lyubimov brought his tremendous production of *Othello* to the Edinburgh Festival in Leith. Boris was both Lyubimov's ticket to exile from Moscow and the banner under which he made his properly unrepentant return.

Lingering doubts over the quality of his subsequent work outside the Soviet Union were banished by its full-throated power, choreographic austerity and spiritual force. Ancestor-worship is a reviving discipline in many European theatre companies, and the Taganka raised portrait banners of Stanislavsky, Vakhtangov, and the Yokohama Boat Theatre, which performs on the Nakamura River in Tokyo has come to shore in Edinburgh bringing Oguri Hangan, Terate Hime to the St Braid's Centre as part of the official festival. The company, directed by Takuo Endo, have not the means to mount a spectacle of Ninagawan grandeur but they enact us with a theatre of restraint, formality and grace. The story, an old Japanese folk-tale, is about the love between Oguri Hangan, God of Violence, and Terate Hime, Goddess of Love.

Oguri (Akikiko Yamashita) is an alluring figure and his white mask is adorned with carved black eyebrows that advertise his unreliability. His courtship is both erotic and controlled; he can wind a woman about him like a snake, or woo her with a letter on a fan (giving fan letter a new meaning). Like Oguri, Terate Hime (Michiko Tomonija) is masked — their mouths seem impossibly alive beneath the unfly of their faces. The evening begins with a supplication of sung by outlaws with such stillness that the music seems breathtakingly to supply the movement — notes heard in an appeal to the gods.

The gods don't always listen, be Ogi is murdered and Terate

Ratcliffe On Othello

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