

Othello in a colonial context memorably contrives to bring out the broken music of a tortured soul

Review

Michael Billington

Othello
Cottesloe Theatre

OTHELLO is currently the least performed of Shakespeare's major tragedies: partly because of the problem of casting the title role and partly because the play is thought to lack the mythic dimension of a Lear or Macbeth.

But Sam Mendes's brilliant new production solves both these difficulties: not only does it boast a first-rate Othello in David Harewood — thus nailing the racist lie that there are few good classical black actors — but it reminds us that this is a domestic tragedy with public implications.

Mendes and his designer, Anthony Ward, set the play in a 20th century colonial world. Venice is a place of war-maps, phones and brandy bottles, where a black general is prized for his valour, regardless of

race. Cyprus becomes a sun-bleached, garrisoned outpost, all louvered windows and parquet floors, where the military have too much leisure.

The period is indeterminate, though I spotted Cassio reading a Penguin Classic, which dates the action as post-1946. The main point is that Mendes, like Trevor Nunn before him, strengthens the tragedy by allowing it to grow out of an accumulation of domestic detail.

But who is the central figure? Othello, fatally flawed

by his mixture of self-regard and insecurity? Or Iago, the active embodiment of evil? Mendes shrewdly suggests they are absolutely inter-dependent: that Iago's poison is able to work only because of some lurking doubt inside Othello.

Harewood comes before his Venetian political masters with an air of indolent assurance. But once in Cyprus, where Desdemona and Cassio exchange mutually appreciative glances, his certainty crumbles. Harewood, as the isolated

black leader in a Maugham-like colonial society, disintegrates with total conviction: at his lowest, he is reduced to ransacking Desdemona's dressing-table and sniffing the bed-sheets. Yet, in the final scenes, he captures the broken music of a tortured soul.

Simon Russell Beale's Iago, who at one point illustrates his diabolical plan with the help of playing cards, reminds one of Auden's description of Iago as the joker in the pack. But Russell Beale is more than a practical joker carrying out

a scientific experiment: he memorably makes him a squat, shaven-headed, implicitly impotent nihilist, gnawed by the "daily beauty" he sees in others' lives. There is a superb moment when he sits beside Othello whispering into his ear the words that prompt the general's epileptic fit: for this Iago, it's the ultimate symbol of destruction, possession and power.

Claire Skinner, though deeply moving as she listens to a black recording of the Willow Song, is slightly too fragile a Desdemona to sug-

gest the character's "down-right violence". There is a fine Scottish Emilia from Maureen Beattie, speaking up for abused women everywhere, and good support from Clifford Ross as a sentimental Venetian Duke and from Trevor Peacock as a bitter Ibrabanto.

But the joy of this Othello, co-produced with the Salzburg Festival, is that it combines a wealth of realistic detail — down to Iago's surreptitious pawing of the grieving Desdemona — with a sense of the play's tragic architecture.

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