

REVIEWS

# Triumphant return of a jealous lover

PRODUCTIONS of *Othello* are a rarity these days, especially in comparison with the other great tragedies. This has nothing to do with the quality of the play — *Othello* may lack the spiritual dimension of *Hamlet*, *Lear* and *Macbeth*, but its theatrical impact is shattering — and a great deal to do with political correctness.

It is no longer considered acceptable for white actors to black up for the title role, yet there are relatively few black actors with the authority and technical accomplishment to play *Othello* successfully. This surely explains why the RSC, cravenly, hasn't staged this marvelous study of malign evil and overpowering sexual jealousy for eight years when it receives lesser works with wearisome regularity.

It's a silly situation. Black actors, rightly in my view, are now given the chance to play roles traditionally taken by whites. We're all meant to be colour-blind these days, and I have no problem with it, but it is surely absurd that the traffic is all one-way.

Having got these thoughts off my chest, I have to say that Sam Mendes's new production at the Cottesloe is a stunning success. It features a young black actor who is clearly heading towards a great career.

David Harewood faced a formidable challenge. First he was a replacement for the superb Adrian Lester, who received an offer from Hollywood that he couldn't refuse. Secondly he has Simon Russell Beale as his Iago, an actor so brilliant and so hypnotically charismatic that he often makes everyone else on stage look second-rate.

It doesn't happen in Mendes's production, which, like so much of his work, is clear, direct, full of closely observed detail and displays a profound understanding of what makes the play tick.

This is a very British *Othello*, set in the 1950s or '40s. The Venetian senators are members of the English establishment, coping with a

foreign crisis from their desks, in Whitehall over brandy and cigars. Cyprus is a colonial outpost facing a bit of trouble from Johnny Turk. *Othello* is the black who has been allowed an uneasy place in these exalted circles because of his great gifts as a soldier, though racism simmers beneath the apparently affable surface.

It's a setting that brings the play uncomfortably close to home without forcing it out of shape, and the military, oppressively male atmosphere in Cyprus is equally well caught, especially during the brilliantly staged, increasingly chilling drinking scene.

It is inevitably Russell Beale who commands most attention. Plump and, one suspects, clammy, his Iago puts one in mind of a terrifyingly articulate, obscenely cunning slug, and the only surprise is that he doesn't leave a trail of slime across the tiled stage as he glides across it. It is a performance full of inspired improvisation and bitter disgust, disgust for his dupes, certainly, but also, one suspects, for himself.

There's an extraordinary scene when, after decisively impaling Othello on his hook, he is left alone and retches violently. A reaction of delayed shock to Othello's pistol-wielding fury? Or a sudden awareness of just how vile he is?

Russell Beale has the courage to let the character remain inscrutable — Iago's evil is finally inexplicable — but there is a fascinating suggestion that his hatred of the Moor may be inspired by guilty sexual desire. It's buried deep, so deep that Iago hardly recognises it himself, but when he tenderly strokes Othello's cheek, a window is thrown open on the play.

Harewood is a conventional Othello, full of lofty oratoricality in the opening



David Harewood's powerful Moor contrasts terrifyingly with Claire Skinner's vulnerable Desdemona

scenes and with massive natural dignity. His anger, however, is awesome, his distress harrowing and the scenes of domestic violence with Desdemona almost unbearable in their intensity. This is perhaps the most claustrophobic of Shakespeare's plays, and Harewood fills its stifling dramatic space to bursting point. My only caveat is the irritating pauses he sometimes introduces in the middle of lines.

In contrast to his towering muscular presence, the petite, pencil-thin Claire Skinner makes a terrifyingly vulnerable Desdemona. In

the early scenes she seems to glow with love and sensuality, but it is her pained, pinched appearance at the end, coupled with that wonderful unconditional love, that makes this production so poignant.

There is space for only the briefest commendations of Colin Tierney's unusually compelling Cassio and Maureen Beattie's sympathetic, love-starved Emilia. This is a tremendous production of a play whose recent neglect strikes me as being little short of scandalous.

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## Othello Spencer Telegraph



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