



David Harewood as Othello: At the mercy of uncontrollable emotions Picture: ALASTAIR MURR

CLAIRE SKINNER'S Desdemona, a sweet young thing wandering about Cyprus in a cocktail dress and painted toenails, hoists frail hands against the chest of Othello who believes her a sexual deceiver. On her death-bed she again rains down weak blows upon Othello, this time hands and feet frantic, voice a muffled scream, while David Harewood's imposing Othello suffocates the life out of her.

Never before have I seen this, the most painful scene in all Shakespeare, achieve before this captivating production by Sam Mendes, set in the 1930s, but I dreamed Desdemona would steal the show.

Othello, seen too rarely because the literary world's silly snufflers of political correctness decree only black actors may take the title role, may not be the greatest Shakespearean tragedy, I fancy, however, it's quite the most emotionally affecting. And last night, Miss Skinner's blanching Desdemona, peering from flirtations gravely to wail like desperation, ensured that the final high notes of emotion were reached.

Mendes's production, on Anthony Warke's marble-floored, baroque stage-set with its portico and peeling stucco, maintains a consistent and atmospheric tone and atmosphere. It reaches a terrific, almost film noir climax, when, with rain pouring down and Joe made solemn in the stillness, Simon Russell Beale's Iago screeches through darkness to murder Othello's wife with a dagger. In this 1930s setting there's sharp though insufficient difference between a cold, efficient Venice with black-booted, vaguely fascist officials, and an exotic Cyprus, all sun, creaks and beating drums, where Othello takes command.

Mendes is obviously indebted to Trevor Nunn,

Sweet young thing scales bitter height of pathos



FIRST NIGHT
by Nicholas de Jongh

Othello ★
The Cottesloe Theatre

whose famous Edwardian production of Othello looked so like this - even having the same British battery served in the Cyprus sun. But Mendes's modernising, 1930s aspects - Othello in a dinner jacket or Maureen Beattie's bewitching Emilia listening to a negro sprout with Desdemona - only seem matters of cosmetic detail.

David Harewood's imposing Othello is more of a muscular young stud than the old war-horse of Shakespeare's imagination. But he takes ample advantage of his youthfulness and powerful aura. His brooding Othello always looks as if poised on the verge of anger. Harewood does not greatly anguish or collapse on Iago's wrack. But when poised to

slap he presses a revolver against Iago's throat, and Iago begins to see Harewood's Moor is at the mercy of uncontrollable emotions. The slip that he delivers to Desdemona in public is both a sign of the breakdown engulfing him and an omen of murderous violence.

Sadly Iago, who ought to have any chance of drawing Othello and Colin Thorne's charming, misanthropic Cassio into his plotting, is played as a cross between obvious painter and a villain, a caricature of a miser. Since Russell Beale's wife, Iago has the complexity of a soon-rotter he ruins the play's psychology. Speaking at the speed of a machine, which, barbed, moaning, his usual retentive Iago struts in black with curly hair and exudes such blarney, heering evil he causes laughter rather than goose pimples, amazing the production manages to enthrall despite him.

Rating: No stars - adequate
★ good ★★ very good
★★★ outstanding ★ four
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Othello de Jongh Standard



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