

Park Square's suspenseful take on Othello excels as a tragic thriller



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Suspense is the essential cornerstone to every successful thriller, investing audiences in the fortune of characters mired in duplicity and deceit. When supported by intricately plotted storylines and complex portrayals, a thriller's power to enthrall will never slacken, not even with foreknowledge of the



inevitable outcome. In the history of theater, few playwrights have mastered the inseparable connection between tragedy and tension like William Shakespeare. And as the

supremely talented cast and crew of the Park Square Theatre's riveting rendition of Othello so superbly demonstrate, time has done nothing to weaken the electrifying current of suspense that sparks this masterwork.

Though told innumerable times, the central storyline and associated themes of Othello have lost none of their pertinence. A Moorish general in the Venetian army at the height of Venice's power, Othello is revered for his noble bearing and valor in war. But after marrying the beautiful Desdemona, white daughter of a Venice senator, Othello opens himself up to dangers never experienced on the battlefield; namely the treachery of his ensign Iago, a diabolical villain who uses his position of trust to spread doubts on Desdemona's fidelity, orchestrating Othello's

downfall by needling at the Moor's blind jealousy and fierce pride.

"Honest" Iago, as he is foolishly described by Othello, is perhaps Shakespeare's greatest villain. Wicked to the core, Iago's stated justification for vengeance – supposedly getting passed over for a promotion – doesn't come close to explaining his level of unmitigated hatred. Utterly inhabiting the role is one of the Twin Cities' most skilled actors, Steve Hendrickson. His is a charismatically cruel Iago, a cunning manipulator whose schemes not only hide his true intent, but quite probably an unhinged



mental state. For evidence, just listen to Hendrickson's enunciation of the foreboding lines, "I am not what I am," or his chilling delivery of Iago's soliloquies, or his demented cackling at the conclusion. An inspired blend of tactician and sociopath, Hendrickson's Iago is a sensationally vile creation that captivates with repulsive intent.

Just as Iago embodies treachery, Othello is the very paragon of virtue – at least initially. Nobly portrayed by James A. Williams, this is an Othello who wears his heart on his sleeve, commanding the stage with a

regal presence that only falters when confronted by emotion. While William's expressiveness lends warmth to his romance with Desdemona, the darkening cloud of suspicion makes for a gripping tension that reaches a nerve-wracking crescendo in the final act.

As the ultimate victim of Iago's villainy (and Othello's volatile gullibility), Desdemona is imbued with palpable sorrow by the ever evocative Stacia Rice. Her desperate pleading for reason, for understanding, for just a half-hour more of life makes the mortal toll of Othello's madness almost unbearably tangible. Contrasting the horror of that moment with Desdemona's earlier bliss demonstrates the dynamic achievement of Rice's radiant performance.



Taking on an often overlooked role, Virginia Burke lends sheer vitality to Iago's wife Emilia. Rather than simply being a cog in the play's tragic mechanics, Burke brings out the character's essential humanity, especially during a scene in which she consoles Desdemona over Othello's anger. With Burke leading (and Rice matching step for step) the moment establishes a heartfelt affection between the two women that resonates stronger than in any other adaptation of the work I've ever seen. It's an extraordinary moment in an exceptional production

and one that provides a renewed basis for Emilia's fierce defiance at the play's climax.

Providing individual accolades to this production's tremendous cast is a process that could go indefinitely, particularly with such standouts as John Catron as Cassio, Edwin Strout as Roderigo, and Mo Perry as Bianca. Put simply, Park Square Theatre has done nothing short of assembling one of the most remarkably talented local casts in recent memory.

Further conjuring a sense of enthrallment is the kinetic direction of Richard Cook. Establishing the rhythms of a suspense thriller, Cook keeps the stage lively with motion except for moments of private contemplation, wherein dark secrets tend to be revealed. There's literally not a superfluous moment in the production, not one dragging scene in this consistently engaging approach. (For action fans, there's even an outright brawl – choreographed by Doug Scholz-Carlson – that stops just shy of over-the-top.)

An almost cinematic sensibility runs throughout the production, an impression made most clearly by the interplay of imaginative scenic design (by Erik Paulson), costume design (by Kalere A. Payton), lighting design (by Michael P. Kittel) and sound design (by C. Andrew Mayer). The calibrated fusion of these elements, particularly during the individual soliloquies, forms an atmospheric blend that utterly immerses the audience.

Forget about Othello being an "important" work of art. Though the source material is justifiably revered, this Othello doesn't rely on its reputation, but proves itself anew with an exemplary cast and crew that are gifted enough to derive unrelenting thrills from the work's suspenseful core. The result is a crackling thriller of a production that can best be described as edge of your seat tragedy. Not to be missed.