

Oh, Othello, Ensign Iago Has Something To Tell You



Danforth Comins as Iago and Chris Butler as Othello in the Oregon Shakespeare Festival’s production of “Othello” at the American Repertory Theater. (Photo by Natasha Moustache)

In many ways, the Oregon Shakespeare Festival production of [“Othello”](#) is the perfect blend of the Diane Paulus and Robert Brustein visions of what the American Repertory Theater should be.

Brustein, the founding artistic director was in the opening night audience and saw Bill Rauch, head of the OSF, follow in the lead of Brustein’s high-concept directors by blending Shakespeare in Elizabethan and contemporary times, with most of the characters in the US Navy, speaking rather colloquially and acting with an exuberant physicality. Rauch, who brought “All the Way” to Cambridge with Bryan Cranston, also relies heavily, and artfully, on superb stage, sound, lighting, projection and costume design to outline the tragic tale. That kind of kinetic sculpting was typical of the ART under both Brustein and Robert Woodruff. The OSF also follows Brustein’s devotion to a company as opposed to casting each show from scratch. Some of the cast members have acted there between 15 and 34 seasons.

And by pushing the racist insults of Iago and others front and center, “Othello” also fits right in with Paulus’s concentration on contemporary issues in America. While the

racism against the Moor is an undercurrent in every production I've seen, it is inescapable at the ART's Loeb mainstage (through Feb. 9). If Iago's motivation is often hazy, his racism is clearly the driving force here. He almost seems like an alt-right plant among a more liberal group that is seeking a more inclusive, multicultural path in Cypress which, Rauch tells us in the program notes, was heavily Muslim at the time. Rauch also took great pains to extend the multiculturalism of his concept of the play to the casting, not wanting this to be one black man in a sea of white.

Nevertheless, it's often Iago who steals the Shakespearean show and that's no different here. Danforth Comins is all smarm and charm when pursuing his malevolent Machiavellianism with other characters, but pleading charismatically for sympathy for the devil while brilliantly delivering his soliloquies to the audience.

But here's my problem, which was not shared by most of my [critical colleagues](#). I didn't much like either Chris Butler's Othello or Alejandra Escalante's Desdemona. The actors all have pleasant, clear diction, but Butler's more stentorian delivery seems out of place among the earthier neo-Elizabethans. He seems like the grandfather delivering sermons at a family dinner while everyone else is rolling their eyes and wondering why he's so out of it. To make the production even more contemporary, Butler and Rauch might have tried a more soft-spoken, Obama-like delivery. For her part, Escalante lacks the charisma to make her any more empathy-worthy than the weekly "Law & Order" victim.



Amy Kim Waschke as Emilia and Danforth Comins as Iago in "Othello." (Photo by Natasha Moustache)

By contrast, Amy Kim Waschke as Emilia, Iago's wife and here a petty officer first class, is a knockout. By the strength of Rauch's intent and Waschke's forcefulness, Emily is a force to be reckoned with like no Emilia I've ever seen. But this is "The Tragedy of Othello," not "The Tragedy of Emilia," and Butler is not the tragic figure here that John Douglas Thompson (in three different New England productions) or [Tony Molina](#) were. All of which puts "Othello" more in a class with "Richard III" than "Hamlet," a play in which the villain dominates the proceedings.

That's not such bad company, though, is it? Despite the misgivings, I think theater lovers should make a point of seeing this "Othello." These forays into Cambridge by the OSF ("Fingersmith" as well as "All the Way") are all multi-award-winning gems. Rauch is about to depart to become the first artistic director at New York's Ronald O. Perelman Performing Arts Center at the World Trade Center, but I hope the OSF continues to come east.

["Othello" continues at the American Repertory Theater Loeb mainstage through Feb. 9.](#)