

Review: 'Othello' worth the wait

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If you love Shakespeare, see Playhouse in the Park's "Othello."

If you don't get Shakespeare, see Playhouse in the Park's "Othello."

In his opening night curtain speech Playhouse producing artistic director Ed Stern noted he's been wanting to do Shakespeare in the Shelterhouse for 10 years. It was worth waiting for.

In "Othello," that most intimate of tragedies, Shakespeare mixed a poisonous brew: a sociopath triggered into revenge when he's passed over for promotion; a military hero who is nevertheless an outsider, black-skinned in a white world and plagued by distrust and suspicion; a woman who doesn't run for her life the first time she's a victim of spousal abuse.

In a brilliant interpretation of the play, director Stern melds Shakespeare to our contemporary world in a modern-dress telling even as he wraps the production in the monumental emotions and natural forces of Greek tragedy, so that the intimate Shelterhouse might as well be Epidaurus.

The play starts in Venice, where Othello (Esau Pritchett) meets a wave of disapproval for eloping with fair Desdemona (Sarah Dandridge.) More tragically he earns the wrath of Iago (R. Ward Duffy) for passing him over and giving a choice promotion to Cassio (Anthony Marble.)

Iago makes it his business to destroy them all as the action moves to Cyprus.

Stern and his design team make the production a study in black and white. Blonde Dandridge is invariably in the flowy white of the pure-of-heart. Once the army moves to Cyprus, the black, militaristic uniforms of Italy give way to dress whites.

Stern puts emphasis on the fact that this play takes place as the men are in battle, with scenes in the barracks and at headquarters. Modern audiences invariably question how Othello is so quick to believe the worst of Desdemona; this production telegraphs a reminder to me that military leaders manage to convince themselves to believe what they want to believe, no matter the evidence.

Black and white may be the overriding theme, but this **"Othello" is also a study in the deepest darkness and blinding light. Voices and actions rise out of a blackness so impenetrable that it might be the most hidden places of the soul; again and again lightning rents the night**, because tragedy this great reaches beyond human capacity to contain it to nature itself.

The momentum builds with beautiful pacing, the principal players splendid as they raise the stakes again and again. They pitch themselves into both emotional and physical violence; the latter eruptions are beautifully choreographed by Drew Fracher.

Duffy makes a beguiling villain; Pritchett guides us through Othello's hell; Dandridge gives flesh and blood and bone to Desdemona; Marble is heroic in the Masterpiece Theatre mold, so that it makes perfect sense that Cassio is also an ugly drunk.

Thanks to some insightful pruning to the script, Emilia, wife of Iago and maid to Desdemona, becomes a veritable Fury. Carine Montbertrand gives herself over to the role of avenging angel in one of the play's finest performances. Scott Barrow gives nuance to poor, infatuated Roderigo.

Shelterhouse regulars will enjoy the fact that there are echoes of “Stone My Heart,” Joseph McDonough’s “Othello”-inspired world premiere, in the design – and some of the design team is the same: Joseph Tilford (set) and **Thomas Hase, whose stark lighting spectacularly establishes mood.** Composer Douglas Lowry is back, too, this time with a military fanfare here and there. Costumer Mattie Ullrich makes her Playhouse debut with a smart array that gives necessary details without being too specific.

Expect this “Othello” to stand as one of the most memorable entries of the 2007-2008 theater season.

“Othello,” through Oct. 1, Playhouse in the Park, 513-421-3888 and www.cincyplay.com.