

Get Out Your Handkerchief: "Othello," at the Rock Island Masonic Temple through October 20

Written by Mike Schulz

Wednesday, 17 October 2007 10:22

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I've seen three or four first-rate portrayals of Shakespeare's *Othello* over the years, and I always marvel at how both the character and the performer seem to literally grow in stature through the course of the play.

The bard's boastful, lusty Moor is, of course, larger than life from the start. But after the duplicitous Iago instigates the jealousies that will eventually destroy nearly everyone in the piece, Othello's suspicion and heartbreak and rage appear to alter him physically as well as psychologically; bellowing gloriously intimidating tirades, you'd think that anger and distrust added 10 inches to the Venetian's height. (No matter the performer's actual size, it makes perfect sense when other characters shrink from him.) When you're watching a fully committed Othello, the actor's emotions are likely to be so expansive that they seem to take up more stage space than his frame allows.

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This is not, however, what happens with Julian C. Jarrell in the Prenzie Players' current production of *Othello*, as the actor does something far trickier than expand his presence to match the character's mental state: He *contracts* it. This is the first Othello I've seen who, once he becomes convinced of his wife's infidelity, appears to *shrink* from the knowledge; his body hunched and twisted, as if his internally directed anger was causing him to collapse from within, this Othello's jealousy eats away at him until there's nothing left but a shell of his previously assured, unconflicted self.

And astonishingly, Jarrell manages to suggest Othello's moral decay without lessening the impact of Shakespeare's poetry or coming off as any less frightening or pitiable than he's intended to be; the actor trades grand emotions for life-sized, intensely specific ones that are tragic and terrifying for being so recognizable. (Jarrell projects the mortifying fear of being *unworthy* of the person you love.) Jarrell's virulent outbursts here are affecting because they underline that Othello isn't driven mad by Iago's machinations, but by his own insecurities. Iago gives him a push; Othello's fall is his own doing.

Put simply, Jarrell - whose perfectly calibrated vocal rhythms continually enwrap his dialogue in a firm embrace - is absolutely remarkable in this *Othello*, and his work proves emblematic of the entire production; barring a few theatrical flourishes, it's a surprisingly intimate, unaffectedly down-to-earth presentation of a Shakespeare tragedy known for its thrillingly outsize emotionalism. (Even the casting adds to its intimate nature; although Prenzie Players productions always find actors playing numerous roles, I never thought I'd see a successful take on *Othello* performed by an ensemble of 10.



Directed by Cait Bodenbender and - as ever with the Prenzies - "the cast," there's hardly a dearth of exuberant, memorably staged sequences: the tumultuous rainstorm that opens Act II; the soldiers' joyously drunken revelry (with kudos to Jeff De Leon and Matt Moody for imbibing

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entire bottles of "ale" in one shot); the nerve-racking knife fight between De Leon's Cassio and Andy Koski's Roderigo, with the scene's darkness split by the laser light emanating from a nearby sniper rifle.

But for sheer impact, even these hugely satisfying bits pale next to the ones that thrill via their horrible insinuation - Othello and Iago (Aaron E. Sullivan), on their knees, inching together and grasping hands in a perverse parody of a betrothal; Othello strangling Desdemona (Maggie Woolley), their writhing bodies suggesting their final act of consummation. In *Othello*, the Prenzies - who have never shied away from eroticism in their productions - frequently link sexuality with betrayal and death, yet while you may feel shaken by the results, the performers' beautiful humanity keeps you from ever feeling alienated.

Temperamentally, Sullivan is Jarrell's polar opposite here - his Iago grows calmer and (seemingly) more rational as Othello descends into madness - and it proves to be an outstanding piece of casting. At first, you may think that Sullivan is underplaying to the point of vanishing; his vengeful plan for Othello seems to arise less from spite and envy than for want of anything *better* to do. (Nerves may have played their part in Friday's opening-night performance; Sullivan stumbled over quite a few lines and occasionally jumped his cues by several sentences.) As Iago's wickedness escalates, though, Sullivan's earnestness in the role grows more and more sinister. The actor never telegraphs Iago's hatefulness, and the character becomes all the more horrifying for his blasé indifference - he's like the quiet guy that no one believed could be a serial killer because he always seemed like such a *nice* young man. (Was it Groucho Marx who said, "If you can fake sincerity, you can fake anything"?)

What you miss in overt theatricality is made up for with shrewdly grounded realism, yet this quality is hardly limited to Sullivan's portrayal. Woolley is an extraordinarily poised, touching Desdemona whose delicacy becomes achingly heart-wrenching; her soft, tender singing before retiring to bed suggests someone who knows instinctively that death is near. De Leon's greatness here lies in how simply he achieves his effects - he plays Cassio as a bit of a prick, but a fundamentally decent man with a strong sense of personal worth and a sharp sense of humor - and Stephanie S. Burrough (a *Reader* employee) delivers a marvelously no-nonsense turn as Emilia; the two perform with ceaseless honesty.

Koski, bless his heart, provides the majority of *Othello*'s laugh-out-loud moments - his Roderigo is charmingly slow-witted - and Moody, Jeremy Mahr (with that richly expressive voice that inspires utter confidence), John Turner, and Beth Woolley play a series of roles with great gusto. (Beth is currently working at the *Reader*

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as an intern. Obviously, we're not gonna rest until we've taken on

all

the Prenzies.)

Othello

offers all these spectacular, and happily

familiar

, talents, plus the considerable benefit of Julian C. Jarrell in his first Prenzie Players role. Please

please

please

let it not be his last.

For more information, visit (<http://www.prenzieplayers.com>).