EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES

Othello, presented by the Royal National Theatre at the Olivier Theatre, London, July 4, 2013

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Directed by Nicholas Hytner; Designed by Vicki Mortimer; Lighting Design by Jon Clark; Music by Nick Powell; Sound Designer by Gareth Fry; Company Voice Work Jeannette Nelson. With Tom Robertson (Roderigo), Rory Kinnear (Iago), William Chubb (Brabantio), Adrian Lester (Othello), Jonathan Bailey (Cassio), Robert Demeger (Duke of Venice), Nick Sampson (Lodovico), Olivia Vinall (Desdemona), Chook Sibtain (Montano), Lyndsey Marshal (Emilia), Rokhsaneh Ghawam-Shahidi (Bianca), and Jonathan Dryden Taylor (Gratiano).

This was not the first production of *Othello* to stress the environment of the military camp, but in doing so, director Nicholas Hytner reminded us of themes important both in the 1600s and today: both *Othello* and *Coriolanus* concern the consequences of a warrior forced to live during peacetime and Hytner brought this idea up to date by recreating a modern army encamped in the Middle East (the men wore full battle gear when they arrived in Cyprus, complete with M-16s). This setting pointed up the tragedies that can occur when men who are trained to kill then have to readjust to a civilian world. Othello's actions became clearer in light of today's all-too-pervasive news items about posttraumatic stress disorder, the rise of suicide in the ranks, and the murders of innocent non-combatants.

The Olivier Theatre was used to its full capabilities. With a series of platforms and wagons, the stagehands were able to quickly change the settings from the outside of a townhouse to

a conference room to the various parts of the military base in Cyprus. The latter included Othello's simple but awful quarters with a standing closet in the corner, fluorescent lighting, and a double bed on a wooden frame upon which finally three bodies would eventually be piled. The music for the scene transitions was a pulsing hip-hop beat, which was entirely in keeping with this driving, exciting interpretation by Hytner. Iago's persuasion began in the company office as he finished his reports on a laptop. It continued in the latrine, with Othello hiding in a stall, while, next to the sinks, Iago talked to Cassio about Bianca.

That Iago would 'spin his web' in such familiar settings made the story much more easy to believe as it unfolded. His ability to manipulate his general also seemed more plausible because Othello and Iago had obviously seen combat together—possibly saved each other's lives if they, as suggested, were both serving in the same unit. Why should he not have trusted such a man?

The decision to stress Othello's military bearing was of paramount importance to the production's interpretation. Lester was often to be found in an official at-ease position, as if it was impossible for him to ignore his training. Lester had obviously put on some muscle for the role, and one could easily imagine him fighting hand-to-hand in the desert. He also went by the book: when he punished Cassio for being drunk and disorderly, he was making an example of him, and was unlikely to reinstate him, despite Desdemona's protests. His sudden bursts of temper seemed to be those of a man whose lightning reflexes kept him alive in dangerous situations, moving without pause between guarded calm to deadly force.

The actors' interpretations, in particular those of Rory Kinnear as Iago, Jonathan Bailey as Cassio, and Lyndsey Marshall as Emilia, benefited from the setting. Iago was found at the beginning of the play having a beer and a cigarette with Roderigo outside of the local canteen. He was in 'civvies', but one could tell he was military by his bearing and his easy sense of authority. He came across as one of those gruff men whom one trusts in a fight and drinks with afterwards. He was not a gentle soul or an intellectual, but blunt and crass, with 'street smarts' rather than book learning. Contrast him with Bailey's good-natured and naïve Cassio, and the latter didn't stand a chance. (To get him drunk, Kinnear even punctured a can with his knife, creating a 'beer bong', and plied him with shots of tequila as chasers to do Bailey in.) And in this modern setting, Emilia herself was in the service; she had obviously married within the ranks, and she might have been thinking of her own

bitter experience in the army when she talked to Desdemona of the treatment by men of women (and she came to a horrible end when she was shot by Iago).

The environment also pointed up just how incongruous many of the characters were among the soldiers: the Roderigo of Tom Robertson was a rich civilian who seemed clueless as to how to behave on a military base; this was a source of some amusement when he was allowed through the front gate wearing jeans and sneakers and a helmet. Meanwhile Olivia Vinall played Desdemona as a very young girl completely out of her element, more of a burden or liability in such a world than a fitting romantic companion. This made her death all the more horrific, as if she was some kind of casualty of war.

The ending of the play had a horrible sense of inevitability. We had seen such incidents in the headlines: the violence of the battlefield spilling over into the calm of the base. Lester, caught in the role of abusive husband who murders his wife, had no choice finally but to pull a knife from his belt and eviscerate himself. Before Kinnear could be taken off and tortured—and waterboarding did come to mind in this production—he pulled away from his captors and stared for a moment at his handiwork. It was impossible to tell at that moment whether he was proud of it or in horror at what he had done. He seemed in a kind of shock at the destruction he had unleashed.

That the audience felt the connection with their own world was clear from their reactions to the various events as portrayed here: it was a tension-filled, heart-pounding, sold-out production that had everyone on the edge of their seats.