



This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears above any article. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

## THEATER REVIEW: This is an 'Othello' that everyone will 'get'

By [Mark Hughes Cobb](#)

Staff Writer

Published: Friday, February 22, 2013 at 3:30 a.m.

Productions of "Othello" typically fit certain descriptors: Harrowing. Dark. Disturbing. Chilling.

How they're not as often described: Lovely. Musical. Danceable.

The latter fit within the realm of the University of Alabama's new production of "Othello," cut, carved and assembled by director Seth Panitch to also encompass the former, in a lean interpretation that, remarkably, seems to flex all the muscle with no obstructing bloat. While we're throwing around the adjectives, add in thrilling, as in "Doth not thy blood thrill at it?," which Falstaff asks Hal, elsewhere in the canon.

Panitch's productions move fluidly and rarely pause, but this tragedy, trimmed from William Shakespeare's original 3,300-some lines, finds moments to let air in, to allow for belief in love, however fleeting, and in truth and friendship, however soon lost.

In cutting "Othello" down to modern size, some productions lose the sense of why what is happening must happen, why the stones rumble downhill. Why does Desdemona love Othello, and he love her, especially against the objections their union causes? What makes Emilia provide the incriminating handkerchief? And what is it that burns Iago so?

Rarely content with working with the Marian Gallaway Theatre as is, Panitch and his set designer Leanna Scotten tilted the playing field into a rake, a rough circle painted with swirling dark shapes, as of gathering storm clouds. Towering draperies, some translucent, others obscuring, do the rest of the work as walls or doorways.

Stage right and left spots create a kind of window into the minds of those soliloquizing downstage. When a rant comes on, as it often will, actors appear in those spaces, visible and yet dreamlike in the diaphanous fabrics. This serves dual purposes: adding visual dimension to otherwise mostly static scenes, and making clear what's being implied, or said. With the surrealistic touches, it's shown this is what Iago or Othello thinks has happened, and not necessarily something witnessed. That leaves intriguing ambiguities intact: Did the Moor really sleep with Iago's wife? Or is that just part of Iago's justification for deposing Othello, while the real jealousy is political or otherwise?

"Othello" rolls out in high passion, with Christopher Collins' nimble lighting design setting things a bloody red, and Michael Luwoye posed kneeling, shirtless and flexed in a position evocative of a hero struggling against chains. Fiery flamenco guitar,

which sets the tone throughout, rips in as soldiers come roaring on; there's a bullfight-like setting, with the Moor as the bull in the ring, then a shift in tone, as what seemed a taunting cape becomes the general's coat. Despite Othello's undeniable prowess in war, his status in society will always be in question.

Luwoye wears the mantle of power nobly, slipping into that coat with grace. His Othello rarely seems unguarded, unflexed and unposed from that opening tableau. Luwoye's voice matches that majestic demeanor: This is a man who can't back down; in battle that's probably useful. But if set down the wrong path, say by a formerly trusted ensign, well, fate is a hard habit to break.

Samuel Hardy's Iago both contrasts and harmonizes with that approach. In scenes directly with Othello, Hardy tends to a more rigid posture, mirroring his general. But when cajoling Roderigo (John Paul Snead) he's sly; when belittling his wife Emilia (Natalie Riegel), he's abrupt and dismissive. In asides or soliloquies, he's nearer to a mustache-twirling villain, without the grin of malice. Whatever drives this Iago, it seems absent the pure devilment some actors might use, and more a direct expression of rage.

For those sweeter breaths mentioned above, Abby Jones is a literal figure of light, dressed largely in white, seeming almost childlike surrounded by the soldier-actors, with a kindness and love radiating from within an underwritten part. It helps anchor this "Othello" that her Desdemona seems full of caring that extends beyond her husband and to the plight of Cassio. Snead, as always a joy to watch, brings out the twit in upper-class brat Roderigo, teasing out those few moments of laughter Panitch was able to divine within the text.

Riegel's Emilia introduces a voice of strength and sanity, tempered with sadness by her own (small) fault in the matter, and Sarah Jean Peters dances on as a light-hearted Bianca, adding much-needed joy late in the game, when even as relentless a tragedy as this can stand a reminder that all is not bleak. Michael Witherell plays an upright Cassio, one not easily dismissed as the undeserving dupe Iago would have us believe. All the rest serve ably, from stalwart Brabantio (Chris Bellinger) and Duke (Rebecca Kling) to those who flourish swords, an always enjoyable facet of plays directed by Panitch, who does his own fight choreography.

This would be an "Othello" to introduce kids to, the ones who don't "get" Shakespeare. Between the swords, the passionate, musical performances and relentless pacing, here's one anybody can get.

Copyright © 2013 TuscaloosaNews.com — All rights reserved. Restricted use only.