

CULTURE

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REVIEW | THEATRE

UA troupe 'makes Shakespeare characters approachable,' worth seeing

By Jared Downing

The University's version of "Othello" turns the stage into a gigantic mood ring. It happens amidst a canopy of curtains and veils that melt from blue to green to scarlet to black, tracking the emotional shifts in the greatest soap opera of all time.

This is good, because for us non-English majors, it can be a little difficult to follow the marital woes of Othello (Michael Luwoye), Shakespeare's Saharan prince of Venice, his new wife Desdemona (Abby Jones) and his ensign Iago (Samuel Hardy), a sociopathic genius who really, really hates his boss. Beat out for a promotion by the goody-goody Cassio (Michael Witherell), Iago sets out to trap the other three in a net of suspicions, lies and trickery that makes Madoff look like a Sunday school kid.

And trap he does. This

charismatic baddie's hatred for Othello is matched only by his power to mind-screw. Iago is Shakespeare's Darth Vader, his Joker, his Hannibal Lecter – the Bard knows he's the most interesting guy in the script, and so does director/fight choreographer Seph Panitch. As he speaks, Othello, Desdemona and Cassio appear behind thin shrouds, writhing like puppets as he plots their demise. Even when he's out of sight, which is rare, it feels like he's still somewhere, listening from behind a curtain.

The expression goes beyond Iago and beyond drapes and lights. The entire stage becomes an expression of the living heartbeat under the thick Elizabethan lingo. The show opens with soldiers in a silent dance of sabers, and the actors slide into choreography bits throughout. They repel, draw, crawl toward and circle around each other like

puppets on invisible strings of tension.

Yet where the stage glides, the acting stomps. Such an approachable design should give the student actors a chance to step back and play around with the Bard's subtlety, but instead they crank up the good-ol'-fashioned Elizabethan melodrama. Senior Michael Luwoye has plenty of dark, heavy rage, but the whisper of doubt is more of a megaphone. He launches his biggest emotional artillery early on, showing us little of the gradual soul rot that makes the climax so terrible.

But the melodrama isn't necessarily a weakness for the other characters. Most of our other hapless Italians have been reduced to Commedia stock that parade around in colorful costumes, wink at Cassius' innuendos and gasp at Othello's outbursts. The theatricality of it all gives

everyone an eerie detachment, like living puppets, which could be pretty cool if Iago was the one pulling the strings, as the design suggests. Unfortunately the great villain himself has the emotional range of Gaston from "Beauty and the Beast" (complete with bungling sidekick). He might as well tie Desdemona to some train tracks and be done with it.

But the UA troupe does make the Shakespeare characters approachable, which is a feat all of its own and can be a big relief for us non-English major schlubs. And any loss of depth is bound to stand out against such a dynamic and living production. In a way the show is "Othello" inside out. Bama takes one of Shakespeare's most intimate and psychological works and turns it outward – a visceral and emotional delight well-worth seeing.

