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'Othello' makes his Abbey debut

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Othello by William Shakespeare. Directed by Joe Dowling.
Pat Redmond

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Rating: ★★★★★

As well as marking the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death in 1616, this landmark production also marks the first time "Othello" has been produced at The [Abbey Theatre](#). Featured as part of the Abbey's "Waking The Nation" programme, "Othello" also has much to say to that other landmark the Abbey gave birth to, "#wakingthefeminists." If not quite the contemporary thriller it purports to be, "Othello's" gender representations have much to contribute to the gender debate for contemporary audiences. But debating aside, with its fast paced direction and a strong, central performance, "Othello" is also a thoroughly enjoyable production.

While its usual themes of jealousy, passion and politics are all still in evidence, patriarchy runs riot in director Joe Dowling's production, where women are not so much reduced to being second class citizens, they're barely citizens at all. Here we find Shakespeare's warrior Moor, his mind poisoned against his faithful wife, Desdemona, by the devious Iago, wrestling for answers in a

world where men are more concerned with the opinions of other men than with those of the women they love. Stripped back to this raw undercurrent, male camaraderie might talk it up as they fight, drink and love their women, but it's all smoke and mirrors, built on the most fragile of shams. And when it collapses, it's the women who suffer most of all.

Director Joe Dowling, former artistic director of both the Abbey Theatre and the Guthrie Theater, Minneapolis, seems less concerned with embedding "Othello" in the contemporary as with divorcing it from the overtly classical, and the finished result falls somewhere between the two. Joan O'Clery's costume design sees most of the cast dressed in non-descript, military uniforms, with the Moor often looking like an African dictator reminiscent of Idi Amin. Dowling also plays with the space, incorporating approximately 23 members of the audience seated either side of the main stage, transforming it into a kind of intimate thrust. Ricardo Hernandez's simple set design, which places a raised, black marble platform at the centre of the thrust, relies heavily on sliding panels to the rear of the stage, which open out onto an image of the sea, as well as on Sinéad McKenna's lighting design which brings some much needed atmosphere.

With several entrance and exits coming from the auditorium, reinforcing a sense of intimacy, the dictates of the transformed space results in less occasion for spectacle and more focus on language. Indeed, Dowling lets the language do all the heavy lifting, and the production is all the better for it. Initially a slow burner, "Othello" picks up pace and Dowling mines the language for all its comedic as well as tragic possibilities. If, on occasion, it teeters close to toppling over into "Othello: The Comedy," it manages to rein itself in, assisted by composer Conor Linehan's carefully crafted soundtrack, which seemed almost cinematic on occasion in the manner in which it accentuated key scenes.

Supporting cast are strong throughout, with Liz Fitzgibbon's scene stealing Bianca being an absolute joy during her short appearances. Karen Adriff's, Emilia, and Barry John O'Connor's, Cassio, are equally convincing. Perhaps to highlight her lack of agency in this male dominated environment, Desdemona doesn't shine as brightly as she might have, with Rebecca O'Mara's Desdemona being an innocent child trapped in a woman's body and a man's world. Marty Rea's devious and deeply dislikeable Iago is a brave choice, with Rea's Iago exuding no real authority, charm or redeeming qualities whatsoever. Rather, from the outset, Iago is clearly a coward, a powerless, trumped up, sociopathic secretary to the Moor, who likes to start fires just to watch people burn. Indeed, it strains credibility at times that there exists any strong relationship between himself and Othello which no amount of declarations of love could make completely convincing. But if we strain to believe their relationship, we can easily believe Peter Macon's booming, authoritative and deceived Moor. Utterly engaging throughout, Macon negotiates these difficulties with a powerful presence and authority, bringing a wonderful fluidity and richness to both the performance and to the language.

"Othello" is an extraordinary play in this well above ordinary production. It's fun, fast and furiously paced at times, and if some of its power is sacrificed to that, its nearly three hour running time makes the comedy a welcome respite. Indeed, at no time does pace slacken or attention wane, and a gender reading reveals much that resonates with a contemporary audience. Indeed, here is

where much of its real power lies, in its damning and scathing representation of male privilege. This may not be the most innovative or powerful "Othello," but it still has some important things to say while also being a cracking good night's entertainment.

"Othello" by [William Shakespeare](#), directed by Joe Dowling, runs at The Abbey Theatre until June 11th.

For more information, visit [The Abbey Theatre](#)



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