

Othello packs solid emotional punch

PERSEPHONE THEATRE PRODUCTION

Soskin directs promising young cast

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GAZETTE CULTURE CRITIC

Shakespeare, in English, in Montreal, indoors – at the McCord Museum.

Now there's a treat.

In the summer, we have Repercussion Theatre bringing the Bard to our parks.

During the rest of the year, Shakespearean fare tends to be restricted to student productions (such as the Romeo and Juliet currently playing at Dawson College).

But thanks to Persephone Theatre, we have access to a shoestring-budget Othello, performed by a cast made up mainly of young, promising, recently graduated actors under the experienced direction of Gabrielle Soskin at the J. Armand Bombardier Theatre of the McCord Museum.

Sparsely staged, briskly paced, flat black platform and a matching black box for furnishings, this Othello delivers its heart-breaking goods plainly, with solid emotional punch.

Tristan D. Lalla is a sincere, gullible Othello, unable to see through the cruelly manipulative Iago (Christopher Moore), whose lies and dastardly deeds propel the action of the play. When this battle-tested soldier, more experienced in war than in love, hears it through the grapevine that his bride, Desdemona (Stephanie Chapman Baker), has betrayed him with Cassio (Matthew Raudsepp), he's all too easily swayed. When he becomes firmly convinced that his wife has strayed, Lalla goes into a reasonably convincing epileptic fit.

And he gives a passionate rendering of The Moor's final, tortured bedroom soliloquy that begins: "It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul, let me not name it to you, you chaste stars!"

In some ways, Othello was a soap opera (or a country & western song) before its time. Like Tennessee Williams's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* recently presented at the Segal Centre, Othello

dwells on the destructive power of mendacity, the tangled webs we weave. Iago is a villain in a friend's clothing, deeply treacherous, even to his wife, Emilia (Rebecca Croll). Although greed and thwarted ambition form part of his motivation, his dark side does not end there.

Moore gives an energetic performance in this pivotal role, successfully connecting with the audience, although not always for the right reasons, sometimes

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evoking laughter in odd moments. Mischievous, yes, but of minimal menace. In an interesting directorial touch, Soskin has him doubling as a stage hand, rearranging the furniture, even tucking Desdemona into bed – unusual, thought-provoking, but somewhat undermining to his bad-guy status.

Baker's Desdemona starts out simpering, but gradually finds her place in the role. As Emilia, the woman ready to defy her husband in defence of her friend, Croll gives an impressive, moving performance. It proved a key factor in triggering the sniffling and dabbing of eyes with handkerchiefs that went on in the audience on opening night during the final, murderous scene.

The intimate lecture-hall space at the McCord serves the

production well. Voices are audible, and bodies and faces visible – from any seat. But this proximity to the action makes things a bit risky for those in the front row during sword fights. A little more room for swinging blades would be welcome. Especially since some of the actors clearly have little idea how to safely carry a sword. (Advice: arrive early and head for the back row.)

Raudsepp is a charming, aptly weak-willed Cassio. Sebastian Jacek-Côté is dashing as Roderigo, Desdemona's wealthy, persistent admirer. Warona Setshwaelo is a feisty, lusty Bianca. Chris Nachaj proves versatile in several roles, including the Duke of Venice and Lodovico. Clive Brewer, by far the senior member of the cast, shows up well as Desdemona's father, but doesn't blend easily into this youthful company when he takes on other roles.

The costumes may be hit and miss (Othello, for one, deserves better), but the performances consistently drive the narrative. Soskin has made sure that her actors understand their lines and believe in what they're doing. Shakespeare does the rest.

Othello, by William Shakespeare, at the McCord Museum, 690 Sherbrooke St. W., until Nov. 29. Tickets \$26, or \$18 student/senior. Call 514-398-7100. www.persephoneproductions.org

Romeo and Juliet, by William Shakespeare, continues at Dawson Theatre, 2000 Atwater St., until Nov. 30. Tickets \$12, or \$8 student/senior. Call 514-931-5000.

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