

**THEATER REVIEWS**[Moor's the pity](#)**The Guthrie can't quite conjoin *Othello***

BY JEFFREY GANTZ

Othello

By William Shakespeare. Directed by Joe Dowling. Sets and costumes by Patrick Clark. Lighting by Matthew Reinert. Sound by Scott W. Edwards. With Lester Purry, Nathaniel Fuller, Robert O. Berdahl, Bill McCallum, Kris L. Nelson, Peter Moore, Shawn Hamilton, Brian Goranson, James Cada, Cheyenne Casebier, Virginia S. Burke, and Ann Kim. Presented by the Guthrie Theater at the Cutler Majestic Theatre (closed)

So will I turn her virtue into pitch," Iago says of Desdemona, indicating his intention to make Othello believe that her pure love for Cassio is really lust. Shakespeare's tragedy sees many transformations from white into black and vice versa but little congress between them: one would hardly guess that Othello and Desdemona had ever made the beast with two backs. The play itself sometimes seems to have two backs, being riddled with inconsistencies and implausibilities that director and actors must clothe with poignant flesh and wit. The production that Minneapolis's Guthrie Theater brought to the Majestic Theatre last week was a little bare-boned and lacking in intercourse; by the end, it had, like Iago, lapsed into silence.

Othello's pregnant full title is *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice*. Venice is where the play begins, where, when Othello is haled before the Duke for having Brabantio's daughter, Desdemona, in chains of magic and marriage bound, the pair make public disclosure of their love, satisfying the Duke if not Brabantio. Cyprus, where most of *Othello* takes place, affords no such forum, leaving Iago free to insinuate, manipulate, divide, and conquer. It's a play about honest discourse, and the seeds of its tragedy are sown in Venice when Othello and Desdemona eschew her father's blessing in the manner of that other Venetian couple, Lorenzo and Jessica (whether Othello as a Moor had any choice is the unstated question). As Brabantio is not slow to observe (or Iago to repeat), a woman who deceives her father may well cuckold her husband. Othello is not altogether honest in his speech, either; he gives two sources for the treasured handkerchief, his father and an Egyptian charmer, leaving us to wonder about the tales with which he wooed Desdemona. Cassio gets cashiered after failing to speak on his own behalf; Othello accords him no second chance. Iago exploits these weaknesses with a brilliant chain of inversions and perversions, speaking the truth but never the whole truth; it's when he resorts to bare-faced lying (Cassio's "Sweet Desdemona" invention starts it off) that his house of cards collapses. No surprise that in the end, after silencing Emilia, he himself refuses to speak: public discourse is his mortal enemy.

At the Majestic, Patrick Clark's imaginative essence of a set augured eloquent, plain-spoken Shakespeare: mottled green walls with a doorway and surmounting roundel window at each end that moved from courtyard to chamber as smoothly as Iago practicing on Roderigo. What's more, the stiffness of Clark's Victorian uniforms, formal wear, and dresses anticipated the inability of the characters to unbend to one another, with Guthrie artistic director Joe Dowling achieving more intimacy in the physical exchanges (Cassio's brawl with Montano, Desdemona's protracted death throes) than in the linguistic ones. Lester Purry's Othello had the commanding presence of *Star Trek: Deep Space 9's* Avery Brooks, and in the first act, he and Cheyenne Casebier's girlish, light-voiced Desdemona enjoyed a playful communion. By the third act, however, Purry had fallen into the rant that ruins so many Othellos: all rage and no reason, he's a dull boy. Casebier seemed careless in her concern for Cassio and green in confronting her husband, no bloom into womanhood. Bill McCallum's Iago was Lucifer lite, accomplished in his delivery but peevish rather than pernicious, with a voice that kept floating up and away from the Ninth Circle — "Shallow, shallow," as Touchstone would say. Sporting an Errol Flynn size and swagger, Robert O. Berdahl might have made a better Iago, though his flippant, disrespectful Cassio was the monkey and not Ann Kim's independent Bianca. Virginia S. Burke's Emilia was mistress of pliant body language but spoke with a harpy's tongue; Kris L. Nelson was the fop of a Roderigo that McCallum's Iago required. Peter Moore made for a wimpy Duke, but Nathaniel Fuller (Brabantio), Shawn Hamilton (Montano), Brian Goranson (Lodovico), and James Cada (Gratiano) brought maturity and weight to the production.

Just as communication is Iago's enemy, so stereotype is Shakespeare's. The challenge of the Bard's plays is to make you identify with every character. The trap is to give in to every character's potential cynicism; it's a pitfall the Guthrie didn't entirely avoid.



BEAST WITH TWO BACKS? Lester Purry and Cheyenne Casebier do better at snuggling than at talking