HAMLET may be the richest of Shakespeare’s tragedies, Macbeth the most exciting, King Lear the most
sublime, but Othello is the most terrifying.

A great production—like the famous one by the National Theatre of Britain with Olivier as Othello, Maggie Smith as Desdemona, and Frank Finlay as Iago (which was filmed in 1965)—can rush you out of your seat before the play is even half through and restore the innocence of your initial, childhood experiences in the theater, when you felt no distance from the characters. There’s a scene in the musical Show Boat where a background narrator, who has been talking, bursts up in the melodrama that he leaps down from the balcony, brandishing a shotgun, and threatens the villain. In the best Othellos you may feel a kinship with that man: as Iago winds his silky voice, you feel like you’re watching the scene twice, with Des- demona and Cassio and Roderigo casually in the threads and pulling them tight enough to garrote the entire buffed crew, you may have to check the impulse to cry out, and it’s easy to forget: you’re watching a show. The best Iago I felt at Harold Scott’s mounting of the play at the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, DC in January, where Avery Brooks (Hawk in TV’s Spenser for Hire) played Othello and the brilliant young actor Raef Miller played the Iago that Iago. In the film of the same name, directed by Jack Rosenthal, with Earle Hyman in the title role and Jackie Robinson in the role of Iago’s, Bragg’s production, there was no such thing as distance. You were there.

You might expect a production that features a black Iago to be centrally about race. The choice does provide a few obvious opportunities to explore the her- raderie between Othello and his ancient seems easy and natural when both men are black. When Iago speaks (in soliloquy) of being passed over for lieutenant in favor of Cassio, you can’t help hearing it in different circumstances: "How could he promote a white man and ig- nore one of his own?" And the scenes between Braugher and his Emilia (the fine, earthy black actress Franchelle Stewart Dorn) have an unusual, jazzly flavor that makes exotic sense out of that relationship for the first time in my experience.

In every major way, however, the cast- ing removes the issue of race and restores the play to the struggle between innocence and evil, the central core. When Olivier played Othello, he was startlingly, audaciously black—as black as he was Jewish in The Merchant of Venice—and that, obviously, was the reason Finlay’s Iago hated him so much. (Brooks quickly proved that the only way to avoid occasions in the Folger Othello, once near the beginning and once at the end; these are, I think, the generous and gra- cious tribute of one actor to another, as well as a challenge to the charge of racism in the film.) But Braugher—overly—levated against Olivier’s interpretation.) But when both characters are the same color, you have to look for other reasons for Iago’s destruction of the Moor, or to assume (as I suspect Shakespeare did) that there was something, or someone, underlying that—ah, because he delights in the opportunity to show how good he is at it.

In order for this reading to work, of course, Scott has to establish a relation- ship between Iago and the other charac- ters. He has to make them plausible them of hand over their lives to him, willingly and without hesitation. Braugher plays Iago as the consummate Metz actor: when he protests loyalty to Othello, friend- ship to Cassio and Roderigo, compas- sion for Desdemona, he’s frighteningly convincing, burying any due to his pri- vate voice deep in the warm folds of his devoted-earr, urging fellowship with a devoted-friend guise. You never catch a glimpse of satisfaction on Braugher’s face; he never comments on Iago’s inginous- ness—until he’s alone with the audience, and then he shifts instantly into Iago the homely husband, the resentful athlete, the swashbuckler of evil deeds, turning insolent somersaults through the silvery verse. Braugher can carry this schizophrenic Iago off precisely because he is not a Metz actor; he’s more of a mischievous, ironic, off-the-cuff fellow. Imagine Edmund Kean or Edwin Booth might have been, though his sharpness and hainess and cunningness are unmis- takably the equipment of a contempo- rary actor.

Except for Floyd King’s comic-op Roderigo, whom I had trouble locating in the believable universe of Scott’s pro- duction, Iago’s victims arrive heartbreakingly for the slaughter. Graham Winton’s sweetly ingenuous Cassio is the man in need of the kind of read- ing Iago has never seen. Surrendering against his better nature to Iago’s seductive invitation to drink, he gets in way over his head and acts like a clumsy, belligerent lout. (A shrewd directorial touch: Scott has him get his way by his sword when, on guard against all imagined comers, he executes a drunken pirouette.) After- wards, he’s crestfallen, certain he’s thrown away any chance of ingratiating himself with Othello, his boss, with the only acti- vable behavior. He and Jordan Baker’s Des- demona make it easy for Iago. They’re a pair of children playing together; she takes up his cause with her husband the way a bold little girl might defend her kid brother against the too-strict disciplin- ary action of a parent.

These actors swim straight toward the emotional depths in Shakespeare’s trag- edy. Baker’s Desdemona is recklessly commited to her love for Othello, and in the beginning she is so ready to trust—so help, Desdemona prepares herself for bed, sensing her own approaching death: you want to weep at her openheartedness— the way she gives herself over to her fears and, finally, to her fate. Every actor in the cast, however, is haunted by the most daringly emotional. When he strolls on stage in the second scene, the dry elegance of his line readings makes you smile, and you’re amazed at how much he can do with that crumine-lined voice. When he says, "Here in the dust will they rust," he uses the rose in his hand (one of his borrowings from Olivier) to mimic swordplay, turn- ing the idea of violence into a witty mockery, his Othello is so graciously resonant that you long to see how he can anticipate the abruptness and comple- teness of his descent once Iago plants the poison of jealousy in his brain. (That, of course, is Shakespeare’s point as well as his dramatic strategy.) Roderigo’s death, however, just falls into lunacy. Suddenly he loses con- trol of his body: it crashes and splinters like a ship in a tempest; you go in horror as, casting around for the source, you realize the storm is inside his head. As hehowls "Oh! Iago against a pillar, hoisting him up by
you think, "My God, he's going to tear him apart." And through it all, Braugher's Iago, physically the weaker of the two, never relinquishes his psychic power over the Moor. At the center of this marvelous Othello is the thing that makes theater inspiring: two actors dancing a thrilling pas de deux through a magnificent text.

—Steve Vineberg