



*H*AMLET 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 headlong to the play's primal heart 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 backwoodsman, watching his first show, gets so wrapped 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 silken web around Othello, catching Desdemona and Cassio and Roderigo casually in the threads and pulling them tight enough to garrote the entire baffled crew, you may have to check the impulse to cry out, and it's easy to forget you know the outcome. That's the way 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 Andre Braugher (Thomas Searles in *Glory* and Jackie Robinson in the HBO film *The Court-Martial of Jackie Robinson*) was Iago.

You might expect a production that features a black Iago to be centrally about race. The choice does provide a few fascinating new shadings. The camaraderie 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 the subtextual complaint, "How could he promote a white man and ignore one of his own?" And the scenes between Braugher and his Emilia (the fine, earthy black actress Franchelle Stewart Dorn) have an unusual, jazzy flavor that makes erotic sense out of that relationship for the first time in my experience.

In every major way, however, the casting removes the issue of race and restores the play to the struggle between innocence and evil at its 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 quotes Olivier's performance on two occasions in the Folger *Othello*, once near the beginning and once at the end; these are, I think, the generous and gracious tribute of one actor to another, as well as a challenge to the charge of racism so often—and, I'd say, misguided—leveled 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 aren't any to fall back upon—that Iago, descendant of the medieval vice figures who tempted the vulnerable Everyman heroes and then boasted to the audience of their own cleverness, is truly evil in his heart, and lures the others to their doom 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 relationship between Iago and the other characters that makes it plausible for them to hand over their lives to him, willingly and

without hesitation. Braugher plays Iago as the consummate Method actor: when he professes loyalty to Othello, friendship to Cassio and Roderigo, compassion for Desdemona, he's frighteningly convincing, burying any clue to his private agenda deep in the warm folds of his devoted-comrade, devoted-officer, devoted-friend guise. You never catch a glint of satisfaction on Braugher's face; he never comments on Iago's ingeniousness—until he's alone with the audience, and then he shifts instantly into Iago the demon schemer, Iago the supreme athlete, the swashbuckler of evil deeds, turning insolent somersaults through the silvery verse. Braugher can carry this schizoid Iago off precisely because he himself *isn't* a Method actor; he's more of a Romantic, more like what we imagine Edmund Kean or Edwin Booth might have been, though his sharpness and hipness and canniness are unmistakably the equipment of a contemporary black performer.

Except for Floyd King's comic-fop Roderigo, whom I had trouble locating in the believable universe of Scott's production, Iago's victims arrive heartbreakingly fit for the slaughter. Graham Winton's sweetly ingenuous Cassio is the most moving reading of the role I've ever 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 inadvertently injure a woman who gets in the way of his sword when, on guard against all imagined comers, he executes a drunken pirouette.) Afterwards, he's crestfallen, certain he's thrown away any chance of ingratiating himself with Othello after his disgraceful behavior. He and Jordan Baker's Desdemona 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 disciplinary action of a parent.

These actors swim straight toward the emotional depths in Shakespeare's tragedy. Baker's Desdemona is recklessly committed to her love for Othello, and in the "Willow" scene (where, with Emilia's 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. Avery Brooks is the most direct of them all, 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 ermine-lined voice. When, on "Put up your swords; the dew will rust them," he uses the rose in his hand (one of his borrowings from Olivier) to mimic swordplay, turning the idea of violence into a witty mockery, his Othello is so graciously commanding that it's impossible to anticipate the abruptness and completeness 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.) And Brooks makes it unquestionably a fall into lunacy. Suddenly he loses control of his body: it crashes and splinters like a ship in a tempest; you gape in horror as, casting around for the source, you realize the storm is inside his head. He's violently, scarily mad. As he shoves 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