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“Theatre is a political act”: Cincinnati’s Experiment in a Trans-Theatre Encounter with Race

*Othello*
Directed by Christopher V. Edwards
Cincinnati Shakespeare Company; Cincinnati, Ohio
Performance Dates: March 2-24, 2018

*Red Velvet*
Directed by Brian Isaac Phillips
Ensemble Theatre Cincinnati; Cincinnati, Ohio
Performance Dates: March 6-31, 2018

Reviewed by ERIC BRINKMAN

In March 2018 audiences in Cincinnati had a chance to experience a thought-provoking act of trans-theatre company crosspollination: Brian Isaac Phillips, the artistic director at the Cincinnati Shakespeare Company (CSC), directed the Ensemble Theatre Cincinnati production of *Red Velvet*, a play about the first Black actor to play Othello on stage in London’s West End. While CSC was concurrently staging a production of *Othello* with guest director Christopher Edwards, Phillips’s production also starred CSC regulars Ken Early, Brent Vimtrup, Jared Joplin, and Jeremy Dubin. Hoping to start a larger conversation about the issues involved across both of these racially-charged plays, what this engaging act of trans-company collaboration highlighted was the political messages involved in these productions: as Pierre in playwright Lolita Chakrabarti’s *Red Velvet* tells us, “Theatre is a political act.” This is certainly true of these two plays, although I subscribe to Richard Schechner’s *is/as* distinction with regards to politics as well as performance: not everything is politics, but we can (and probably should) look at any public act as politics. Both of these productions encourage the audience to engage with both overt is political messages and more subdued as political questions.

Brian Isaac Phillips’ production of *Red Velvet* however usually wears its politics more loosely and is often better for it. In telling the story of Ira Aldridge characters such as the theatre manager who hired him, Pierre Laporte (Brent Vimtrup), discuss their politics, but we as the audience are never told what to think: we obviously empathize with Aldridge (Ken Early), but we also can, if we choose, see him as stubborn, overbearing, even terrifying. The *mise-en-scène* of this production also stays more in its historical moment: the play opens towards the end of Aldridge’s life as he tours in Europe and then takes us back to his debut as Othello at the London’s Theatre Royal, but makes no direct mention of the racism...
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embedded in the current political situation here in the U.S. Conversely, Christopher V. Edward’s Othello foregrounds more blunt, obvious political gestures in its mise-en-scène as it does directly invite us to reflect on the contemporary moment in the U.S. through its introduction of modern costumes, set pieces, and designs. For example, against the backdrop of a modern set and costumes, the leadership of Venice confer via video conferencing about the situation in the Middle East (the cost of gestures towards current relevancy being absurdly dissonant moments such as a modern Venetian administrator shouting “What ho! What ho!” over a video feed). The play opens with Othello operating as part of military or police SWAT force searching in the dark with green laser sights on assault rifles for an insurgent woman: she hides behind a bed center stage, but then pulls out a rifle, is spotted by the soldiers and shot to death.

I have to admit I was slightly confused by this opening: in the actor talkback after the performance (attended by Othello, William Oliver Watkins; Desdemona, Courtney Lucien; Iago, Nicholas Rose; and Cassio, Justin McCombs), Watkins revealed that the production did not want his representation of Othello to be “redeemed”; that they were not buying into the early modern privileging of a “Roman death” and did not feel that Othello’s suicide in any way made up for his murder of Desdemona (“two wrongs don’t make a right”). This is a curious context in my mind however for understanding Othello’s shooting of an insurgent woman to start the play: are we judging him or in support of his efforts to “fight terrorism”? Another question: why is the female insurgent murdered on a bed? The mirroring of this with the final scene of Othello’s murder of Desdemona is hard to ignore, but there were also differences: the insurgent does aim a weapon at him (Desdemona obviously does not) and for some reason the sheets and bedding are different colors: the insurgent-murder bed is white, the (wedding!) sheets on Desdemona’s bed were a deep, scarlet red. The stark difference between these color choices must be significant, but I am left to wonder what that significance is: white is usually associated with purity, red with love (or lust). Are we meant to interpret the insurgent as innocent and Desdemona lusty? That is, are we, as the audience, meant to see one of these murders as more or less defensible or is Othello deeply culpable for both? I’m assuming, despite her red sheets and black negligee (Othello himself wears a white shirt), we are meant to empathize with Desdemona, so maybe assigning white sheets to our female insurgent was meant to encourage us to empathize with the Iraqi and Afghani women murdered in those wars as well (as of March 2015, the current estimated civilian death toll as a result of American wars in those countries is approximately 210,000 people).

The most surprising and profound moment of Edwards’s production, however, is the climax in which this unredeemed Othello commits suicide through “death by cop.” In an interesting solution to the staging problem of where-does-Othello-get-the-weapon-with-which-to-kill-himself, Watkins, a physically impressive, young African American male mimes reaching for a nonexistent weapon in his back pocket and is promptly shot by the soldiers/police officers pointing assault rifles and pistols at him on stage. Watkins argued in the talkback that the “1603 ending” does not make sense to modern audiences, but that his
choice to “step towards the armed men with guns and reach into my pocket” produces a predictable response: another “unredeemed” young, African American male, like so many before, is shot to death by police. The fact though that this cast thought Othello should not be redeemed, in the light of our current political moment, is problematic.

Similarly, the most affectively painful scene of Phillip’s Red Velvet is also ripped from the headlines, but this time from the historical 1833 first night reviews of the performance of the first Black actor to play Othello on a London stage, Ira Aldridge. When Charles Kean (Jared Joplin), upset that he has not been chosen to replace his father in blackface on stage as Othello, reads out the vicious newspaper notices remarking on Aldridge’s skin color and “thick lips,” we are also on the cutting edge of issues of representation on contemporary stages: we must never forget the past, and yet, one could also argue that reading these reviews out loud again today grants them a second life that they don’t deserve. The vileness of these words never should have seen the light of day the first time, much less achieve modern print status and be spoken again and again in public by a white man. This conversation has been in the public eye recently in regards to Ice Cube’s response to Bill Maher’s “joke” about being a “house n—r”: he called out Maher on his “joke” and told him “when a white person says n—r it feels like that knife stabbing me, even if they don’t mean it.”

The Washington Post has published an “interactive project” online (you select three points of view which creates a customized video) to discuss the public use of the n-word after the NFL’s discussion of a penalty to ban it. So, what are the political ramifications of having a white actor read on stage a review written by a white journalist that uses the n-word? On one hand, Chakrabarti is reminding us of this history, but on the other hand, she is also re-instantiating that violence. As Aldridge tells us, perhaps that is the power of theatre: to unsettle us and force us to ask uncomfortable questions.

Fig. 1 William Oliver Watkins as Othello and Nick Rose as Iago in the Cincinnati Shakespeare Company’s production of Othello.
Another performance as politics choice that Edwards’s production made was discussed during the actor talkback: Nick Rose, playing Iago, spoke in a southern accent. In the talkback I attended, Rose was unsure of the provenance of this particular choice: he stated that originally he was asked to do it as part of his audition and later was unsure if he was asked to do it as a test of his abilities as an actor or because the director was making a decision about the character. So he kept it, and they left it in the show. Rose stated that he preferred the accent as a part of his character because he felt the “musicality,” or natural rhythms of speech, that occur in speaking with a southern accent fit the pattern of iambic pentameter. In his defense, David Crystal has stated that when he performs Original Pronunciation (OP) he asks audiences what they hear, and they often respond that they hear Scottish, Australian, or American accents. But the questioner seemed upset that Rose was associating a southern accent with villainy. In response, Rose offered that he felt Iago was playing upon the stereotype of the southern bumpkin: for example, Iago was letting Roderigo (Billy Chase) think he was in charge, right up until the last moment, and he was in part able to convince Roderigo he was harmless because he had a country bumpkin accent. Rose felt conversely that if Iago were too obviously a villain it would imply that all the other characters on stage were idiotic.

Without necessarily agreeing with that logic, it mirrors Connie’s (Burgess Byrd) speech to Aldridge as a critique of the character of Othello in Red Velvet: “Can’t trust no-one… Everybody smilin’ like them a friend but… I fin’ mo’ often than not, people mostly have two face don’t you think?” Drawing on Black critical responses to the gullibility of Othello, Connie cannot understand why Othello would trust a white man. It was in response to this perceived flaw in Shakespeare’s play that Iqbal Khan’s 2015 RSC production of Othello (also modernized) featured Black actors playing both Othello (Hugh Quarshie) and Iago (Lucian Msamati). Why this production’s modern Othello blindly trusts a white man is still a question: Watkins suggested he is suffering from imposter syndrome, and I am still haunted by his choice to sniff Desdemona’s pillows when he encounters their bed: here is a man obsessed.

Rose’s interpretation of Iago is convincing in that it embodies the human potential to be two-faced: he smiles at Othello, Cassio, Emilia, and Desdemona with a good-ol’ boy, down-home southern charm, then hisses to the audience to tell us what he will do next. Occasionally Rose’s performance reads as over-the-top, but at its best, it reflects the cognitive dissonance of “southern hospitality” as it is sometimes practiced: loving God, family, and country while also being willing to participate in a lynching—that generosity of spirit that would give anyone a lift, unless that anyone was Black, who would then instead be murdered by being chained behind a pickup truck, like James Byrd, and dragged until dead. Rose’s Iago seems to encapsulate the mind that could do something similar: he is genuinely concerned that Cassio is hurt and emotionally relieved when he finds out that the only thing that has been injured is Cassio’s reputation. He drinks beers with Roderigo and cheerfully persuades him that his best course of action is to “make money.” Emilia (Miranda McGee) opens the play after the intermission gleefully singing along to Taylor Swift’s “Shake It Off” on her iPad, unaware she
is in a tragedy. Even after Desdemona’s death Iago hugs her and pats her on the back, genuinely comforting her, right up until the moment when she finally realizes it was his “damned lie” that caused Othello to believe Desdemona had cuckolded him. In the actor talkback, McGee said that her interpretation of Emilia’s culpability is that Emilia believes everything will be fine until this moment, when she finally realizes that she never knew Iago at all. This is the strength of Rose’s reading of the part, as he told us during the talkback: at the end of the play, when the officers on stage have shot Othello mistakenly believing him to have a weapon, Iago thinks, “I got them all,” because everyone on stage, and potentially also in the audience, has colluded with Iago to bring about this bloody end.

Notes


Eric Brinkman is a PhD candidate the Theatre Department at The Ohio State University. His dissertation research focuses on utilizing affect theory, performance, queer, and transgender studies as disciplinary approaches in order to develop methods for engaging in inclusive performative and reading strategies.