

A Fresh, Russian Take on Shakespeare's Othello

By [John Freedman](#)

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Denis Sukhanov plays Othello alongside Anton Kuznetsov as Cassio in the Satirikon Theater's version of Othello. **Yekaterina Tsvetkova**

One thing any decent critic must do is come clean when the situation demands it. Harboring hopes that I may have claims to decency, I prepare a confession.

Allow me to proclaim my utter contempt for "Othello," Shakespeare's asinine play about racism and jealousy. I must do this because one of Russia's best directors just staged the play at one of Russia's best theaters.

There is no getting around this. Yury Butusov directing "Othello" at the Satirikon Theater is an event to grab my attention and anyone else's, regardless of prejudices.

Butusov, in large part thanks to his work with the powerful company at the Satirikon, has developed into an artist of monumental proportions. I mean that in any sense that may accrue

to those words — the director has acquired enormous stature among his peers, and the works he creates are huge visually, thematically, philosophically and physically.

Working as always with designer Alexander Shishkin, Butusov makes use of the entire, incredibly awkward wide stage at the Satirikon. Shishkin scattered junk and debris far and wide, creating a marvelously eclectic visual aesthetic that serves at times as a backdrop for street scenes, domestic interiors and a land of dreams.

That is probably the key, for Butusov's "Othello," I think, is primarily a dream. More precisely, it is a nightmare, a nightmare run amok, where ocean schooners sail in the air and the waters of the seas roil like fog across the stage.

Butusov, to narrow a huge issue to a nub, staged a story about the single-mindedness of hatred and the damned stupidity that human beings insist on displaying in almost every step they take.

Iago, Othello's adjutant and grand nemesis, is the focal point of this imposing theatrical canvas. Played brilliantly by Timofei Tribuntsev, he makes no secret whatsoever of his plans. He stands at the edge of the stage and declares to the audience that he hates Othello, hates him for being a Moor, hates him for his success in love and service, and will destroy him whatever it takes. He repeats this pledge throughout the course of the action, even as he brings down everyone around him, including his wife Emilia (Lika Nifontova), Othello's rap-rock friend Cassio (Anton Kuznetsov), and his own friend Rodrigo (Timur Lyubimsky).

Othello (Denis Sukhanov) is larger than life but not blessed with attributes that could make him a genuine hero. He has the moves down pat — the large strides, the broad gestures, the eagle eye — but in his heart and mind he is not up to the task. He is haunted by visions of his wife Desdemona (Maryana Spivak) as a Barbie doll, a prostitute, an ungrateful wretch.

Butusov gives us entire scenes of "Barbie Doll" Desdemona strutting about in garish wigs and flouncy dresses, and cavorting in bed with Cassio who giddily sprays her with water from a water can.

The director does allow Othello and Desdemona one stunningly beautiful instance of conjugal love on a dimly lit hardwood floor, but other than that, we are usually privy only to Iago's infernal machinations or Othello's weak-kneed worries.

This production handles the topic of Othello's African origins as well as it can by taking it in a completely different direction. Sukhanov paints parts of his body with tar-like pigment — sometimes it is a facial mask, sometimes it is his hands and arms. The point is always that this is an individual attempting to find common ground with a mask or an image, but never succeeding in doing so.

Compared to Butusov's last masterpiece at the Satirikon — a hot, passionate interpretation of Anton Chekhov's "The Seagull" — "Othello" is cold and heavy. That, mind you, is a mark of its success, for hatred and stupidity are not topics to get warm and fuzzy about.

I still find the Othello principle ludicrous. Othello's ignorant and utterly schematic jealousy makes it entirely impossible for me, as they say in theater, to willingly suspend my disbelief.

"Othello," for me, remains a failed play, a groaner.

And yet Butusov's transformation of it into a hard, grinding production about the horror of hatred hits like a ton of bricks.

"Othello" plays Nov. 1, 7, 15, 23 and 27 at 7 p.m. at the Satirikon Theater, 8 Sheremetyevskaya Ulitsa. Metro Marina Roshcha. Tel. 495-689-7844. satirikon.ru. Running time: 3 hours, 45 minutes.

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