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[Philadelphia Shakespeare Theatre's OTHELLO: A Pure and Powerful Approach to a Classic](#)Posted in: [Professional Theatre](#) on March 15, 2013 at 6:19 pm[Like](#) 73[Tweet](#) 4[Email This](#)[Print](#)

## Philadelphia Shakespeare Theatre's OTHELLO: A Pure and Powerful Approach to a Classic

Posted by [Debra Miller](#)[Forrest McClendon and J Hernandez star as Othello and Iago in Philadelphia Shakespeare Theatre's OTHELLO. Photo credit: Chris Miller](#)

Forrest McClendon and J Hernandez star as Othello and Iago in Philadelphia Shakespeare Theatre's OTHELLO. Photo credit: Chris Miller

Set against the backdrop of the conflict between the Republic of Venice and the Ottoman Turks over control of Cyprus in the second half of the 16th-century, Shakespeare's OTHELLO tells the story of a fallen hero in a classic tragedy driven by the passions of pride, envy, bigotry, vengeance, and jealousy—the playwright's "green-eyed monster." Trusting in the unmatched potency of the Bard's language and emotions, director Carmen Khan takes a no-gimmicks approach to the famous historical tale in the Philadelphia Shakespeare Theatre's unadulterated production. It is a brilliantly focused and effective choice, offering no distractions from the stirring drama or her superb cast's powerful performances.

The play opens with the sounds of a violent storm that foretell not only the loss of the Turkish fleet in its imminent attack on Cyprus, but also the human tempest that will soon ensue under the unbridled fury of Iago, the trusted ensign who has been passed over for promotion by Othello, a Moorish General in the Venetian military. Iago's perceived affront by the Moor—a cultural and racial outsider—triggers his heinous plot of revenge, to convince Othello that his fair wife Desdemona has been unfaithful with Cassio, the younger and less experienced colleague who bested him in the appointment to lieutenant.

[Eleni Delopoulos portrays Emilia, wife to J Hernandez's Iago. Photo credit: Chris Miller.](#)

Eleni Delopoulos portrays Emilia, wife to J Hernandez's Iago. Photo credit: Chris Miller.

Khan's casting and direction of Forrest McClendon as Othello and J Hernandez as Iago are impeccable; their tour-de-force characterizations will haunt you well after the final harrowing scene. From the moment he takes the stage, the audience is captivated by Othello's commanding presence and noble bearing; but as the tension builds, he becomes increasingly unhinged by the web of lies spun by Iago. McClendon displays the extraordinary range of his talents as he fully inhabits the Moor's personality and psyche, physically and emotionally undergoing the heart-wrenching transformations that reduce his speech from fluid eloquence to staccato outbursts, alter his demeanor from dignified grandeur to the coiled fetal position of a stress-induced seizure, and effect the sudden self-realization of his misplaced trust in Iago and his unwarranted distrust of the innocent Desdemona. McClendon's complex and tortured Othello meets his match in Hernandez's unsettling Iago. He becomes an impetuous whirlwind of rage, deception, charm, and scheming, abruptly switching from sincere friend and close confidant to diabolical enemy and frightening sociopath, with the split-second timing of the turn of his head, the twinkling of his eye, or the timbre of his voice. The indifference with which he disposes of his wife and friends as collateral damage is chilling.

[Philadelphia Shakespeare Theatre's OTHELLO features Forrest McClendon in the title role and Lauren Sowa as his wife Desdemona. Photo credit: Chris Miller.](#)

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credit: Chris Miller.

The supporting cast provides fine accompaniment to the lead actors' bravura work. Lauren Sowa as Desdemona and Eleni Delopoulos as Emilia bring pathos to the men's wronged wives, Chance Dean is dashing as the upright Cassio, and Isaiah Ellis provides moments of comic relief as Roderigo, Desdemona's rejected suitor and Iago's gullible accomplice. The entire ensemble (with effective appearances by Ralph Edmonds as Brabantio, Eric Van Wie as The Duke, Ian Sullivan as Montano, Johnny Smith as Lodovico, and Alexandra Leigh as the courtesan Bianca) captures the spirit of Shakespeare's language and meter, under the skilled guidance of text coach JJ Van Name.

A concentrated artistic design enhances the intensity of the production. Fabian Obispo's dramatic sound and original music create an appropriate mood of urgency, as does Maria Shaplin's strong lighting, inspired by the tenebrism of Caravaggio's turn-of-the-17th-century paintings. Vicki Esposito's period-style costumes, too, are in perfect visual harmony with Shakespeare's Elizabethan verse, and Lisi Stoessel's minimalist set suggests the water-stained walls and mysterious passageways of 16th-century Venice and Cyprus, until the mostly bare stage's stunning transformation into the pivotal bedroom at play's end (employing Louise Grafton's sumptuous props). Beautiful blocking by Khan and fight choreographer Michael Cosenza, with compositions worthy of an old master painting, further contributes to the striking aesthetics of the scenes, rendering Philadelphia Shakespeare Theatre's OTHELLO a feast for eyes, as well as the ears, heart, and mind.

## OTHELLO

By William Shakespeare

Directed by Carmen Khan

March 8-May 18, 2013

The Philadelphia Shakespeare Theatre

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Philadelphia, PA 19103

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Bio



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Debra holds a PhD in Art History from the University of Delaware and teaches at Rowan University, Glassboro, NJ. She is President of the Board of Directors of Da Vinci Art Alliance, Philadelphia, has served as a Commonwealth Speaker for the Pennsylvania Humanities Council, and is a judge for the Barrymore Awards for Excellence in Theatre. Her publications include articles, books, and catalogues on Renaissance, Baroque, American, Pre-Columbian, and Contemporary Art, and feature articles on the Philadelphia theater scene.

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1. [Lilliana Didovic](#) says:  
[March 17, 2013 at 1:03 am](#)

Great job, Deb. I will use your words: "...a feast for eyes, as well as the ears, heart, and mind." Thank you

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