

Othello

by William Shakespeare, directed by Marc Antonio Pritchett

1/14 - 2/20/2005

The Lillian Theatre

In honor of the 400th anniversary of this play's first production in 1604, Lyric Hyperion Productions, in association with Company of Angels, presents this complete and uncut version of one of the bard's best-known plays. At 3½ hours, it promises a "cuttingedge presentation" with a "hip soundtrack and LCD projection onto big screens" that will bring this classic tragedy into the new millennium. Who can resist?

The production, sadly, did not deliver. The director, Marc Antonio Pritchett failed to create a sense of place, time, fashion and socio-political context, nor did he have the insight or skill to explore the much ballyhooed interracial conflict that is at the heart of this piece. In fact, Mr. Pritchett himself is something of a mystery: he is listed as the character of Othello, and as the director and co-producer. However, no further information on Mr. Pritchett can be found anywhere in the program, either as an actor, nor as the play's director or producer. Nor, as it turns out, as the lighting designer, the set designer, the sound designer, or the video editor, coincidentally the areas of this production that most suffered. Suffice it to say that this mystery is by far the most enthralling aspect of this production. Thus, with Pritchett's attention spread out too thin, the cast appears to have been left to its own devices, with a resulting unevenness in pacing, style, and delivery.

Unfortunately for his platoon of enthusiastic actors, he does not appear to have an inkling about almost anything theatrical, Shakespeare or otherwise. Without any discernable guidance, the majority of his cast mumbles, rushes, and tramples through the challenging text, oblivious to it's content, import, and subtext, more often than not upstaging themselves. Without any understanding of what they were saying and why they were saying it, it was simply not possible to develop the depth of emotions nor the relationships required to fuel the unfolding drama. The lighting was a travesty, neither lighting nor enlightening anything. The highly-touted special multi-media effects were distracting and intrusive. And the cutting edge music for this period piece was from the contemporary band "Velvet Chain", for which Mr. Pritchett is the keyboard player; apparently, his only relationship with the stage.

Despite some moments of lucidity, John Cady's Iago lacked a clear, emotional arc. He clearly has the potential but lacked the direction, and as a result, his Iago is smug and petty, perfectly capable of organizing a surprise roast, but never achieving the profound duality of loathing and desire required for this character's vengeful and calculating devastation. Cady often rushed through his dialogue so quickly it left the scant audience exchanging quizzical looks. In fact, the entire cast -with the exceptions below noted - were likewise afflicted and overwhelmed by the iambic pentameter, delivering their lines in sing-songy rhyme when they could be heard, or shouting unintelligibly when a more substantial emotion was called for, with Mr. Pritchett himself the most egregious perpetrator. The notable exceptions were

Victoria Ullmann (Desdemona) and Cecelia Sprecht (Emilia), who actually appeared to have some Shakespeare experience, and could be clearly, and refreshingly, heard throughout. As a bonus, these two ladies actually turned in creditable performances and some semblance of an onstage relationship.

Reviews such as these are heartbreaking, even to the reviewer, since a theatrical production is a collaboration of many individuals who work exceptionally hard for usually no more reward than recognition for their efforts. But all the hard work needs leadership, which was sorely lacking here. After enduring the full three and a half hours of this sorry production, the only question that persists is how and why these two highly respectable organizations would attach their name to what is clearly an individual with no theatrical experience.

Ambition is not a failing when it is tempered with self-knowledge. Everyone has to start somewhere. But Mr. Pritchett's is a ribald, selfish ambition which tramples and suffocates, preferring self-congratulation than collaboration, which is what theater is, after all. He not only bit off far more than he could chew, he delivered it less than half-baked. The Bard, most especially on his 400th anniversary, deserves far better.