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## audience reviews

### *Othello*, Sacramento Theatre Company

**Review:** Shakespeare at its finest! Matt Miller was astounding as Iago, and Desdemona could not have been played better by Michele Hillen. Definitely a two thumbs up!

**Review:** Three Cheers for Iago! The Best of All Possible Villains! First, let me boldly proclaim: The Bee got this one wrong! A paltry 2 ½ stars? What was Marcus Crowder thinking? And second, I know whereof I speak; for starters, I teach Shakespeare, and consequently, I go to all things Shakespeare, as it were, on any stage in the greater Sacramento area. I have seen my fair share of Othellos. And I'll admit that this particular play of Shakespeare's has its share of problems; for one, our hero (if we can call him that—and scholars have debated the issue for centuries) is not nearly as fascinating as his nemesis, Iago—really, who doesn't love a truly great villain? It's fascinating stuff, the misplaced trust with its tragic consequences, the unraveling of lives...but it all depends on deft manipulation by the puppetmaster Iago, pulling the strings with one hand while stroking the egos with the other, and that takes skill! It's that we come to see, and when it's done well, we're both horrified and transfixed—and we were, with Matt K. Miller's superb portrayal of Iago.

While we watch with a certain pity, shaking our heads, tsk! tsk!, as Othello undoes himself through his own completely baseless jealousy, and our hearts break with compassion for poor Desdemona, innocent to the last, it's Iago who steals the show in this Othello, mounted by STC this season. In fact, I would venture to say this was the best production of this play I have seen—and that's saying a lot from this long-time season ticket holder to—well, everything. I was impressed from the moment I took my seat, first with the striking set design of Marion

Williams', simple but imposing, the right combination of grandeur and ambiguity (Venice at first, Cyprus later—it works for both). Then, as the restless crowd began to settle and the lights dimmed, there he was—the guy we love to hate, Iago, already pricking on his flunky Roderigo with most vulgar (and funny!) epithets hurled toward the sleeping household of Brabantio, to rouse his ire, and we're off!

And it is Iago, played by Matt Miller I want to focus the spotlight on, here. I surprised even myself with the private pronouncement that I felt his was the best Iago I've ever seen, and I'll even go so far as to include the latest film version, too, in which Iago was played by Kenneth Branagh (and he knows his Shakespeare!) I have a theory: no matter how great an actor you are, you can't perform Shakespeare unless you understand it from the inside, on a gut level. You have to understand Elizabethan English (and corresponding cultural world view) as if you had learned it as a second language, as a child in a bi-lingual household might, so you think in that language. At that level (which admittedly, takes a lot of study). Most actors don't; they act, they say their lines merely, and often with Shakespeare, they rush through as if by slowing down and paying attention to the normal cadences of the spoken word they might forget those hard, hard lines of the Bard's. Indeed, they might; it's happened. But on the happy occasion that we find one who does know it on the gut level, then, behold—oh, happy day!—the timeless lines of Shakespeare come out of the actor's mouth as easily (and as easily understood by the audience) as if in the most casual conversation. And that's when we start to get some great acting! No one needs to run for their footnotes—or leave at intermission, because they just don't get it, as I have sadly often witnessed. No, they are free to remain engaged, enthralled, by the magic unfolding on the stage. And magic is exactly the right word to describe the superior performance of Iago by Miller.

Other notables (besides our principles, Marc Pritchett [Othello] and Michelle Hillen [Desdemona]) in the cast include Marie Bain (Emilia), whose outrage was palpable, Loren Taylor (the Duke of Venice, a small role, but Taylor "knows it from the inside"), Brett Williams (Cassio) and Brian Rivera (Roderigo), Sacramento favorites. And of course, you can't have a great play without great direction, so kudos and hats off to Peggy Shannon, who brings it every time! I only wish I'd seen it sooner, to post this all the sooner, because this is the last weekend (through April 8) to catch a performance of STC's Othello. Go see a play, indeed—you could start with this one!

- Joan E. Kruger

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