

Otello

Peter McCallum, reviewer
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A worthy and forceful interpretation of an enduring masterpiece.

Genre

Opera

Location

Opera Theatre

Address

Sydney Opera House, Sydney

Date

18 July 2008 to 16 August 2008

Phone Bookings

(02) 9250 7111

Online Bookings

www.sydneyoperahouse.com



Otello

THE opening of Verdi's *Otello* is as good a lesson as any in how to turn a play into an opera. While Shakespeare eases suggestively into his drama, Verdi plunges straight into the storm, which this fine 2003 production (by Harry Kupfer, revived here by Cathy Dadd) dramatises with the coup de theatre of a chorus descending a staircase.

The staircase, the centrepiece of Hans Schavernoch's design, provides a telling objective correlative (in T.S.Eliot's term) for the tension of the work: people display themselves on it but are always in danger of falling or being pushed.

After deftly demonstrating each of these potential uses, the chorus delivers the great opening numbers with magnificent force. The chorus part in *Otello* is among Verdi's finest achievements, drawing on a lifetime of experience in using collective choral energy to propel dramatic excitement, and the Opera Australia Chorus here reveals the full depth of its vocal talent and power right from the start.

Cheryl Barker's performance as Desdemona is on the opposite trajectory, growing with commanding dignity from her unassuming but beautiful opening phrase, "my fair warrior" in Act I to powerfully tragic outbursts in Act III. She has the maturity and evenness of range to give the *Willow Song* in Act IV a subtle mixture of sadness, resignation and courage, right down to the premonitory firm tone on the low C sharps.

As *Otello*, Dennis O'Neill was in excellent voice, and in those moments of stentorian intensity which Sydney audiences have learnt to admire, the pitch was every bit as firm as the unflinching power as, for example, in the mighty duet with Iago which closes Act II.

As Iago, Jonathan Summers had that bad-liver look of every villain and had the capacity to sour his voice with malice without sacrificing strength. Kanen Breen as Cassio is showing encouraging capacity to move from comedy into stronger roles: he acts well and maintains the energy and lightness of his voice to serious purpose.

Jacqueline Dark is a vocally warm and sensitive Emilia, and the remaining support roles (Stephen Bennett, Andrew Brunsdon, Andrew Moran and Shane Lawrencev) were all strong. The conductor, Simon Hewett, has alert and intelligent command of the work's musico-dramatic demands. This production remains a worthy and forceful interpretation of an enduring masterpiece.