



Shakespeare's villain lives again at Laboratory Theater of Florida

Good Iago. Honest Iago.

The people of Venice are stupefyingly clueless and gullible in the Shakespeare classic “Othello.” And, boy, do they pay for it in the end.

Everybody loves Iago, it seems. But behind their backs, he schemes and plots and relishes the imminent demise of Moorish general Othello – who made the mistake of passing Iago up for a promotion in favor of new lieutenant Cassio.

The Lab Theater cast of “Othello” is frustratingly hit or miss, but actor Tim Gunderman plays Shakespeare’s most famous villain with passion, subtlety and even a bit of humor.

I admit, I didn’t appreciate Gunderman’s take at first. I want my Iago to be oilier and scarier – a beard-stroking baddie just this side of melodrama.

But as the show progressed, I realized Gunderman was going for something more nuanced and believable. His Iago is charming and funny – after all, that’s how he would have worked his worm-like way into everyone’s confidence.

But then, when Iago talks directly to the audience, you see the snake lurking beneath the skin. His eyes gleam with hatred, and at one point, his voice drops to a venomous, shocking growl.

That’s when you realize it: This man is pure evil.

It’s a visceral, inspired performance that practically carries the show. Although, to be fair, there are many other strong performances here, including Wil Harbison as Cassio. I enjoyed watching him get convincingly, belligerently drunk in one scene, and later crumble into a sad heap as he realizes his own actions have destroyed his career (little does he know that it’s Iago, of course, orchestrating the whole thing).

Director Annette Trossbach assembles a decent community-theater cast here and they find some powerful moments along the way, but there are glaring problems right from the start.

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Vladimyr Bellefleur – who replaced the original actor just two weeks before opening night – has an impressively commanding bass voice, but he mistakes loudness for intensity. And while Bellefleur easily expresses rage, he can't quite convey the heartache and conflict Othello feels when told that his new bride, the virtuous Desdemona, is cheating on him (or in Shakespearian terms, "making the beast with two backs").

Bellefleur dials up most of his scenes to 11, and that leaves him no emotional room to maneuver. Maybe with more time, he could have developed the character more convincingly.

Some artistic choices hamstring this production, as well. Trossbach trims "Othello" to its bare bones in the interest of a speedy narrative (just over two hours), but by doing that, it's not always clear who these characters are or why they're doing what they're doing. She's had the same problem with past Shakespearian productions, as well.

I liked the creative set – simple flats painted with fluorescent blue windows and doors to suggest Venice's famous waterways – but then there's the unnecessary music that can distract from the emotions onstage. The music sometimes even clashes with the required mood – peppy classical, for example, when the scene calls for something more somber.

Still, you can't deny The Bard. And the

play's tragedy and raw emotion shine through, especially in the faster-paced, emotional second act.

Stella Ruiz breaks your heart as Othello's innocent wife Desdemona, caught up in Iago's net and her husband's blindness to the truth. And so does Kathleen Taylor's Emilia, who too late sees what she inadvertently helped husband Iago accomplish.

In the end, a flawed "Othello" is better than no "Iago." They don't make 'em like this anymore, and who knows when someone will stage another local version of this Shakespeare great?

Lab Theater's production is worth watching for that reason alone. But thanks to Gunderman's powerful performance, you leave the theater knowing what those gullible Venetians had to learn the hard way: Iago is anything but good.

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If you go

- **What:** "Othello," performed by Laboratory Theater of Florida
- **When:** Now through Oct. 28.
Performances are 8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays
- **Where:** Kiwanis Hall, 1634 Woodford Ave., Fort Myers
- **Tickets:** \$20 (\$12 for students)
- **Information:** 218-0481 or laboratorytheaterflorida.com

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