

by Jennifer Ruby



There is no denying that the main draw to the Northern Broadsides' production of Othello at Trafalgar Studios is the prolific and enduring British comedian, Lenny Henry, who adopts the lead role. Having been a huge part of stand-up and TV comedy since the 1980s, Henry is turning his hand to Shakespeare for the first time - to surprising success.

Henry made his debut in Othello last February in Leeds, a performance which ultimately disappointed the critics. While some found that Henry was stiff on stage, others thought that his diction was poor and stage presence awkward. Time, and the transition to London's Trafalgar Studios have clearly built up the comic's confidence as, especially during the second half, the character of Othello comes to life.

In the first half of the play, in which General Othello incites jealousy from those around him for marrying the beautiful Desdemona, the struggle of the newly-wed couple does not come across as fully as it should. The strain on an inter-racial marriage in a time when racism was an accepted part of society would have been enormous but Henry and Jessica Harris play the couple as being carefree and almost blissfully ignorant.

Othello's desperation and anger surface in the second half however, as the cunning Iago dupes him into believing that Desdemona is having an affair with the captain Cassio. Manipulated into murdering his wife in a fit of passion, Othello is crushed and takes his own life. The tragedy of this final scene is captured well, especially by Henry, whose emotional break-down is heartbreaking to witness.

While Henry exudes emotion and has a towering stage-presence, he is completely upstaged by Conrad Nelson's Iago, the puppet-master and wicked manipulator of the play. Nelson's creepy,

all-encompassing malevolence sends a palpable chill through the audience and this seems to set the entire tone of the play.

For a play so historically concerned with race, there seems to be little indication of this in the Northern Broadsides production. Of course, the racist language is still shocking; Othello is called such things as “thicklips” and “the devil” because of his skin colour, terms which are perhaps more outrageous to a modern audience. The racial hatred that Iago has for Othello is not completely obvious however, and the audiences are left questioning his motives.

However, Shakespeare was seemingly more concerned with the action and manipulations in the plot rather than the underlying racial tension and sexual jealousy, and that is what this production hones in on. The action scenes are rousing and the deathbed scene is moving, and in a role that many originally derided him for taking, Lenny Henry excels.

Othello is on at Trafalgar Studios, London, until 12 December 2009