

Otello: a triumphant tragedy

 By Eugene Yiga^{9 Apr 2013}

In celebration of composer Giuseppe Verdi's bicentenary this year, six opera companies in South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand have collaborated to create a new production of Otello. And even though these countries may not get along on the sports field, their performance of what's been called the greatest of all Italian tragic operas is a match made in musical heaven!

It all started with a plot. When Verdi retired at the height of his fortune and fame, his eager publisher used the composer's love for William Shakespeare's works to tempt him into writing one final tragic opera. And even though Verdi was reluctant to do so (and even reserved the right to cancel the premiere up to the last minute), the opera was a resounding success, so much so that the 73-year-old took 20 curtain calls at the end of the performance.

Ironically, the actual story of Otello contains the same traces of cunning and manipulation to achieve desired goals. And despite the unfortunate English surtitles - sometimes too early, sometimes too late, sometimes not there at all - it's easy enough to understand what's going on. "Shakespeare is my first love and I have had some of my most rewarding creative experiences working on his plays," said Australian director Simon Phillips. "But in the case of Otello, the opera surpasses its source. The irrational extremity of both Otello's jealousy and Jago's hell-bent destruction seem somehow better suited to the soaring dynamics of opera, where psychology becomes distilled to its elemental forces."



Set on an aircraft carrier

While the original production was set in a coastal city in 15th-century Cyprus, this one is set on an aircraft carrier in the Middle East. "The concept was based on finding a setting that created a closed-and-claustrophobic world in which the intense psychodrama could play out," Phillips said. "I wanted the sense of the military to be tangible, so that Otello's status as a 'warrior' was immediately contextualised and his recourse to violence as a solution more understandable."

But while the setting may have changed, the music (performed by the [Cape Philharmonic Orchestra](#)) still retains its power after almost 130 years. (Georgian tenor Badri Maisuradze sings the formidable title role; Ferrier Prize-winning South African soprano Sarah-Jane Brandon returns from London to make her role debut as Desdemona; and George Stevens brings one of his signature roles, Jago, to Cape Town for the first time.) And what power from the Cape Town Opera, recently shortlisted as Chorus of the Year at the

International Opera Awards! Who knew a tragedy could be this much fun?

Otello is at Cape Town's [Artscape Theatre](#) on 9, 11, and 13 April. Tickets are available from [Computicket](#). A pre-performance talk takes place at 6.45pm in the Orchestral Rehearsal Room. For more information, go to www.capetownopera.co.za.

ABOUT EUGENE YIGA

Eugene graduated from the University of Cape Town with distinctions in financial accounting and classical piano. He then spent over two-and-a-half years working in branding and communications at two of South Africa's top market research companies. Eugene also spent over three-and-a-half years at an eLearning start-up, all while building his business as an award-winning writer. Visit www.eugeneyiga.com, follow [@eugeneyiga](#) on Twitter, or email hello@eugeneyiga.com to say, um, hello. View my profile and articles...

For more, visit: <https://www.bizcommunity.com>