

***Otello* (1986): The Story of a Perverse Man Harassing a Vulnerable One Man from a Literary, Musical and Cinematographic Perspective**

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Received 24 March 2008; accepted 7 June 2008

Summary

The film recreates Shakespeare's masterly play set to music 280 years later by Giuseppe Verdi after an adaptation for the musical theatre by Arrigo Boito. *Otello* forms the "third way" of Verdi in which the sung word reaches a summit in doing justice to the written text, anticipating what would later be refined by "verism". The struggle between the falsified infidelity and the amorous sentiments of the Moor of Venice provide elements that are summarised in eloquent lyricism and profound musical emotion. Zeffirelli's *Otello* is a lofty concatenation of talents that affords the poetic essence and drama of the story a focused significance. Melodic nobility, singing, scenery, complemented by a constant flow of ideas, nuances, effects and hues are all there.

Keywords: Pathobiography, Othello, *Otello*, W. Shakespeare, Giuseppe Verdi, Franco Zeffirelli, Arrigo Boito.

Technical details

Title: *Otello*

Country: Italy

Year: 1986

Director: Franco Zeffirelli

Music: Giuseppe Verdi

Screenwriter: Inspired by play *Othello* by William Shakespeare, libretto by Arrigo Boito and adaptation by Franco Zeffirelli and Masolino D'Amico.

Cast: Plácido Domingo, Katia Ricciarelli, Justino Díaz, Petra Malakova, Urbano Barberini (Cassio, voice by Ezio Di Cesare), Massimo Foschi (Lodovico, voice by John Macurdy), Edwin Francis (Montano, voice by Edward Toumajian), Sergio Nicolai (Roderigo, voice by Constantin Zaharia), Remo Remotti (Brabantio, voice by Giannicola Pigliucci) and Antonio Pierfederici

Color: Color

Runtime: 118 minutes

Genre: Drama, Music

Production Company: Golan-Globus Pro-

ductions, Cannon Productions, Italian International Film and Cannon City Produktie Maatschappij B.V.

Synopsis: Thanks to a careful use of cinematographic possibilities, the film offers us a precise historical reconstruction of the lyric drama based on William Shakespeare's play. Through the murky ruses of Iago, a consummate villain, well versed in the strengths and weaknesses of *Otello*, the Moor formerly endowed with both passion and control over himself gradually falls prey to an irrational paroxysm that can only end in tragedy. She who would have represented an earthly Galatea of Pygmalion ends up as no more than a perfidious Olympic deity; the pain of the broken ideal that, like the cry of a wounded animal, unleashes anger and coarseness that preclude any kind of discernment. Theatre, music and cinema; three artistic expressions bound together in a highly polished representation of the reaches of the devastating ability of a perverse man when he has a vulnerable one in his clutches.

Shakespeare, Verdi and Boito a fortunate trio

Shakespeare wrote *Othello* between 1602 and 1604 and it was played at Court in 1604. Although the work is based on a tale by Giraldi Cinzio, belonging to his *Hecatommithi*, the author introduces important modifications into the plot to transform it into a single piece of universal literature that reaffirms the prowess of the author and his deep knowledge of the abysses of the human soul (Figure 1).

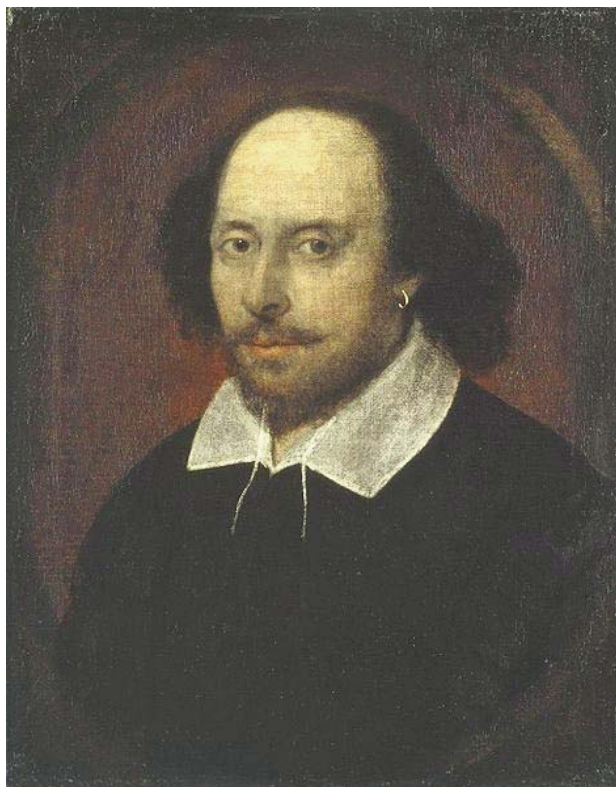


Figure 1: Portrait of William Shakespeare attributed to John Taylor (c.1651), c. 1610 (National Portrait Gallery, London)

Iago (Justino Díaz) is a consummate scoundrel: a psychopath by definition. Within this perverse structure, hatred and envy are the driving forces underlying his actions, which reach annihilating depths. He knows that Othello (Plácido Domingo) is an innocent creature, with no duplicity; confident in the probity of appearances but passionate in his attitudes and in conflict with his physiognomy. To a large extent he is even fearful of enjoying himself, as we see when he says that he fears he will never be happy in his life. His lieutenant Iago, a sort of *Magister maleficum* for whom virtue is chimaeric, takes advantage of this and cloaks his deep abhorrence in feeling. He is a patient and careful wrecker of suspicion, and he suggests that her deception of her father might portend a similar deception of her husband; he intuits that the

dagger will penetrate the Moor's soul almost without any help.

In Othello's tumultuous existence, Desdemona (Katia Ricciarelli) represents a certain serenity given to him by life. She is the woman in love with his past, his integrity and his nobility, who at the same time pities his suffering. She is the hoped-for ideal; she represents just order, and is a person who –confident in her integrity- does not fear injustice, without imagining that that same virtue will finally entrap her. And when that splendid sun is eclipsed by doubt, Othello's soul begins to reek of shadows until in the end it is totally filled with threat. Not even the loss of glory can be compared with this catastrophic plundering of his honour. The impulse to offend the object of his passion and desires coexists with the love he still feels for her (*How cruel are my tears*) But in the end, his fieriness overcomes reflection and the man who was formerly so much in possession of himself is lost to an irrational paroxysm until he first abuses and finally murders his wife¹. This is the ill-fated destiny of a quasi mythological figure; illustrative of how terrifying mental suffering can become.

After the performance of the *Requiem Mass* in Milan in 1879, the editor Giulio Ricordi thought about getting Verdi to write a new opera. For a long time the maestro had not produced anything. During a meal in Milan, Ricordi tried to tempt Verdi with Shakespeare's *Othello* referring to someone who had excellent resources to adapt the text: Arrigo Boito. Shortly after, Boito appeared with the outline of a libretto, and Verdi merely replied "someone will do the music". At the age of 66 there must have been some doubt as to whether he was still up to par for such a challenge (Figure 2). He had attempted several times, although unsuccessfully, to set *King Lear* to music. On the other hand there was clear evidence that his musical discourse had evolved, with *Aida* and *Simon Boccanegra*. Nevertheless, Verdi did begin to think about Shakespeare, the colossus of theatrical expression, and his Venetian Moor, who he had baptised *Ciocolate*. By the winter of 1881, in the musical world it was clear from the *vox populi* that Verdi was preparing a new opera. After going back and forth from Boito, in March 1883 the piece was established at 4 Acts.

In October 1886, the latest version of *Don Carlo* was presented in Modena and a few weeks later, at the beginning of November, the score and orchestral aspects of *Othello* had been settled².

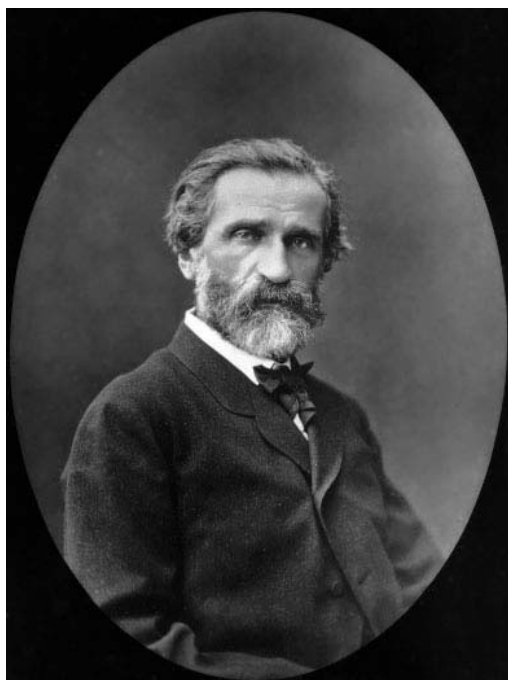


Figure 2: Giuseppe Verdi (studio photo)

The premiere took place at La Scalla on 5 February 1887. The theatre was packed with musicians, artists, and people of letters, intellectuals and the correspondents from the main European newspapers. Could anything else be expected of that septuagenarian? The answer was yes: the pinnacle of his musical production, the opera that we would take to the desert island. We now see a tardi-romantic Verdi who at 74 manages to surpass himself yet again and set in stone an essential piece in the history of sung theatre. The “*Cabalettas*”, recitatives and arias have now given way to greater emphasis on the unity of action. The Verdian “third way” in which the sung word achieves paramount evaluation, thereby doing justice to the literary text. The duet between Otello and Desdemona in Act I is an intimate nocturne, amorous and even erotic, whereas the song of the “*willow*”, or the scene in the garden bring us back to those Boticelli-like celestial figures, to mention just two examples³. To be just, it should be noted, however, that the text is on a par with the demands. Boito was Verdi’s last great librettist: an intellectual of standing, an open admirer of Wagner, a man of letters and composer, all in one. *Mephistopheles* is faithful testimony to his musical acumen. He is also well versed in classic and European culture. Thus, Iago’s criticism of the designation of Cassio (Urbano Barberini, with the voice of Ezio Di Cesare) *usurpa il grado mio* to a certain extent recalls Canto XXVII of *Paradise*, When Dante puts those verses referring to his successors on earth into St Peter’s mouth:

* The fragment taken from the libretto is transcribed.

*Quelli ch’usurpa in terra el luoggo mio,
il luogo mio, il lugo mio che vaca
ne la presenza del Figliuol di Dio**

The lexical usage is well cared for and the same can be said of the use of rhetoric. We reiterate that thanks to this opera we learn of Iago’s *Credo*, an evil declaration of principles that clearly establishes the creative capacity and power of synthesis of the librettist. From Iago’s different interventions along the theatrical text Boito elaborates a type of typological synopsis of the villain that is a valuable literary piece. As in life, the Opera is not free of the damned, some of them very much so, such as Barnaba, from *La Gioconda*, Scarpia from *Tosca*, Mephistopheles himself or Wotan, from *The Valkyrie*. Iago is comparable to all of them, but in his tone Boito leads him to take charge of his depravation and to reinterpret precious human attitudes as the murky view of the wicked. In his sinister condition, he is way beyond the law and advances in the proposal of a new status. Material for psychoanalysis indeed!

IAGO’S CREED

Credo in un Dio crudel che m’ba creato
I believe in a cruel God, who has created me
simile a sé, e che nell’ira io nomo.
in his image and whom, in hate, I name.
Dalla viltà d’un germe o d’un atòmo
From some vile germ or atom base
vile son nato.
am I born.
Son scellerato
I am evil
Perché son uomo,
because I am a man,
e sento il fango originario in me.
and I feel the primeval slime in me.
Sì, quest’è la mia fe’!
Yes! This is my creed!
Credo con fermo cuor, siccome crede
I believe with a firm heart, as ever does
la vedovella al tempio,
the young widow praying before the altar,
che il mal ch’io penso e che da me procede
that whatever evil I think or do
per mio destino adempio.
was decreed for me by fate.
Credo che il giusto è un istrion befardo
I believe that the honest man is but a poor actor,
e nel viso e nel cuore,
both in face and heart,
che tutto è in lui buggiardo:
that everything in him is a lie:
lagrima, baccio, sguardo,

tears, kisses, looks,
sacrificio ed onor.
 sacrifices and honor.
E credo l'uomo gioco d'iniqua sorte
 And I believe man to be the sport of an unjust fate
dal germe dela culla
 from the germ of the cradle
al verme dell'avel.
 to the worm of the grave.
Vien doppo tanto irrision la Morte.
 After all this mockery comes Death.
E poi? e poi? La Morte è il Nulla,
 And then? And then? Death is nothingness,
e vecchia fola il Ciel.
 heaven is an old wives' tale.

We know from history that during the rehearsals Boito would counsel the singers to follow the recommendation of Hamlet in the VIII scene of Act III⁴: *Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you...*

Incidentally, Verdi and Boito wished to convey a *verista* impression rather than a mere scenic simulation, and of course we know that they accomplished what they sought to do.

Outline of the film

It is clear that Zeffirelli conceived *Otello* for the big screen and as such he takes advantage of the resources of the seventh art to give greater realism to the production. The same reasons can be invoked to understand why some parts of the Opera were omitted, while dialogued fragments were incorporated. The setting, acting and scenery are effective in their veracity and there is great expertise in the use of cinematographic techniques. By means of a highly perspicacious use of the camera, symbols such as the majestic lion, chiaroscuros, and a skilful interweaving with the musical discourse, the maestro allows the actors to reach the heights they deserve.

Otello's fleet has vanquished the Turks and a crowd awaits the arrival of the new Governor of Cyprus. A storm has broken and all fear that the ship glimpsed by Cassio and Montano (Edwin Francis, with the voice of Edward Toumajian) will be wrecked. The film begins showing us a boat thrashed by the sea as though it presages the misfortune of the Moor. Without coming ashore, Otello proclaims triumph while Desdemona enthuses about his return to the island. In a room at the castle, Roderigo confesses to Iago that he is in love with Desdemona and Iago, in turn, comments about the affront represent-

ed by Cassio's designation as captain of the navy. The plot moves to the scene of the wedding celebrations, which contains the ballet music that Verdi wrote for the third Act of the production offered in Paris. While the celebrations are ongoing Iago makes a toast, requesting Cassio to join in, and never stops pouring the wine. When Roderigo laughs at his drunkenness, Cassio attacks him. When Montano tries to break up the fight Cassio threatens to crack open his head and they start to duel. Iago asks Roderigo to sound the bells in alarm to attract Otello's attention. When asked by the Moor, Iago tells him that the fight was begun by Cassio and Otello dismisses the latter from office. After this episode, Otello goes to the bed chambers; he goes downstairs, as we shall see so often, perhaps in anticipation of his imminent fall. There, trapped by the bindings of love they sing of their joy, flecked with references to the history and events of Venice from the first Act of the theatrical production (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Love duet between Otello and Desdemona

In the second Act, Iago counsels the crestfallen Cassio to go to Desdemona to get her to ask Otello to reconsider his decision. From the castle, the villain spies on the conversation between Cassio and Desdemona in the garden. Otello enters and Iago tells him of his concern about the tryst. Soon after hearing Iago's suspicions about Desdemona's faithfulness, she appears with the request for restitution for Cassio and Otello begins to feel very jealous. Desdemona tries to cover Otello's brow with her handkerchief to reduce the headache he but he rejects her attentions. The handkerchief flutters to the ground and after being picked up by Emilia, Iago takes it from her and rapidly hides it. When Desdemona and Emilia (Petra Malakova) retire, Otello is invaded by despair and demands from Iago firm proof of his wife's infidelity.

The rogue tells him that Cassio talks in his sleep, and hints that they might be having an affair. He also says that the Captain holds a piece of evidence of his love: Desdemona's handkerchief. Otello is beside himself and both swear to avenge themselves before the crucified Jesus where Iago had previously pronounced his creed (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Duet between Iago and Otello (end of Act II)

The third Act begins with the announcement of the herald about the forthcoming arrival of the Venetian ambassadors. Desdemona goes to Otello again with the request. In reply he asks her for the handkerchief he had given her some time before and she intercedes for Cassio yet again Desdemona flatly denies all accusations about her unfaithfulness. Otello is abusive to her again and is filled with despair. Meanwhile, Iago begins to put the details of the final onslaught into operation. With Otello in the background listening, he starts a conversation with Cassio about his trysts with Bianca. Iago repeats Cassio's confessions in a loud voice for Otello (although not stressing that it is Bianca they are talking about), who believes they are speaking of Desdemona, to hear. If such poison were not enough, he flaunts the handkerchief that Cassio had by chance found in his room (Figure 5). The arrival of Lodovico (Massimo Foschi, with the voice of John Macurdy) with the messengers from Venice is followed by another ballet scene. The Moor announces the designation of Cassio as Governor of Cyprus, while he must return to Venice. Possessed by fury and completely out of control he almost strikes Desdemona after having insulted her unforgivably. The film omits the great assembly and also the duet between Iago and Cassio. Otello leaves the room followed shortly after by Iago, who is frankly delighted with his vicious vengeance while he looks at the



Figure 5: Iago with the handkerchief that Otello had given to Desdemona (Act III)

“Lion of Venice” collapsed at his feet. He chuckles sinisterly to himself.

At the beginning of the last Act, the director offers us a sort of ritual through which Otello reneges his faith and throws the holy cross into the flames. Desdemona is prisoner to anxiety and menacing premonitions. According to Zeffirelli, the passage dealing with the song about the willow would have delayed the action so he decided to omit it, but not the prayer to the Virgin because he wanted to underline Desdemona's religious convictions (Figure 6). Otello arrives and asks her whether she has asked for God's pardon for her sins. Of course her only sin has been to love him and she wants to prove her innocence. Otello tells her that nothing can save her now; the captain (Cassio) must surely be dead. Desdemona pleads for mercy but she is caught and strangled by Otello. We hear Emilia calling at the door to inform that Cassio has murdered Roderigo. Horrified, she looks at



Figure 6: Desdemona in her prayer to the Virgin (Act IV)

the body of Desdemona in her last moments and calls for help. Cassio, Montano, Lodovico and Iago enter. Iago's scheming is discovered at the death bed. Unlike in the text, where Iago flees after having been found out, and perhaps to give a more cathartic "closure" to the tragedy, Zeffirelli kills him off with a lance thrown by Otello**. Ashamed of his dreadful behaviour and without further ado the Moor stabs himself, kisses Desdemona one last time, and dies. He who had formerly been so victorious was unable to find the strength to win the battle that was eating away at his soul, probably because the possibilities of contemplating an alternative route were coerced by his pathobiography.

The coda written by Verdi for the finale is replaced by a postlude based on the music that has previously accompanied Otello's entrance to the nuptial enclosure. In a lugubrious and distressing setting, the camera silently contemplates the dead lovers, where Desdemona to a certain extent recalls the Nazarene on his cross (Figure 7). The fruits of evil in the purest state; execrable,... painful,... Pure evil.



Figure 7: Final scene with the dead lovers

The psychopathological framework

Far from wishing to offer a thorough description of the psychological structure of the main characters, we believe it necessary to sketch the most salient features of the trio. It is clear that Desdemona is a diaphanous being but without sufficient perspicacity to handle the conflict any other way. The Otello she loves merits veneration owing to his incredible courage and suffering, a sort of living legend not only for her but also for all Venice.

** An idea adopted by many directors.

From her perspective, her husband's attitudes do not seem to be arbitrary; in any event, the Moor's wrath is no more than the result of the errors she or Otello's closest acquaintances have committed. In her unconditional faithfulness, she even tries to preserve the Moor's reputation to the very end when she blames herself for the tragedy.

From his baseness, Iago moves in keeping with the visions and expectation of others. His discourse varies as a function of the characteristics of his interlocutor and in this way he becomes a mirror in which others are reflected, ready to operate as a kind of catalyst for the subliminal to become the ostensible. From his almost diabolic understanding of the other, he clearly perceives that Venice's fondness and Desdemona's love for Otello are the pivot card that sustains and comforts Otello; if Desdemona's credibility can be undermined the fall of the Moor will soon follow.

Regarding Otello, the consternation due to the presumed infidelity of his wife is excessive to say the least and reveals his weakness and lack of confidence in himself. Integrity and reputation lie at the hub of his existence, a sort of social valuation that more than compensates for his dark skin and Moorish condition. Otello exists through that recognition, and his love for Desdemona is, in so many words, the crowning of an exemplary life. His union with her is imbued with nobleness and transcends what is merely worldly, but in the strict sense what he really loves is piety and the love she professes for him. When he has to face up to issues that are extremely painful for him, the situation becomes untenable. Thus, he who deprives him of such a precious honour merits death.

Zeffirelli's camera indeed offers a magnificent depiction of these typologies!

Conclusions

The first production of *Otello* in 1887 clearly shows that Verdi had managed to develop new forms of musical expression and that his creative genius together with the stupendous libretto of Arrigo Boito did justice to the drama of the Bard of Stratford to offer a masterly illustration of personages as unlike each other as Iago and the Moor of Venice. The orchestral treatment, the fluidity and luminosity of the vocal concept make *Otello* the culminating work of the



USA poster

great Bussetano. His search for scenic truth achieves its maximum expression. One century later, an outstanding figure of the seventh art shows us that that aesthetic boundary can be moved even further. Zeffirelli's *Otello* is a sublime conjunction of talents that affords the poetic and dramatic essence of the tale full meaning. Theatre, music, singing and action, subordinated and complemented in a constant flow of ideas, nuances, effects and hues.

Otello is a true gem within an exquisite combination of expressions.

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