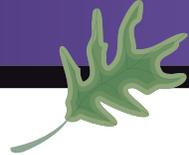


Off The Couch



PSYCHOANALYSIS AND CULTURE

V4N3

Otello by Guiseppe Verdi (1813-1901)
Live in HD, by the Metropolitan Opera
October 27, 2012
Re-broadcast on July 10, 2014.



The cast included tenor Michael Fabiano as Cassio, baritone Falk Struckmann as Iago, tenor Johan Botha as Otello, and soprano Renee Fleming as Desdemona. The opera was conducted by Semyon Bychkov. It is a powerful production, set in period dress, vividly capturing the mental forces I speak of below.

Verdi

Verdi, along with Wagner, was the most important opera composer of the 19th Century. He married Margherita Barezzi when he was age 23. 2 children died in infancy and his wife died after 4 years of marriage. He knew something about pain and loss. His first successful opera was Nabucco, first performed in 1842. In all, he composed 30 operas and revisions. Best known are Macbeth (1847), Rigoletto (1851), Les vèpres siciliennes (1855), Simon Boccanegra (1857), Un ballo in maschera (1859), La forza del destino (1862), Don Carlos (1867), and Aida (1872).

Otello is an opera in four acts to an Italian libretto by Arrigo Boito, based on Shakespeare's play Othello. It was first performed at the Teatro alla Scala, Milan, on 5 February 1887. After Aida in 1872, Verdi had determined to stop writing operas. He did the well-known Requiem Mass in 1874. However his publisher, Ricordi, schemed to tempt Verdi to write again. Ricordi developed the idea of the opera on Otello, using a libretto by Boito. Verdi did work with Boito on revisions for the opera Simon Boccanegra and grew to admire his abilities. Much of the

libretto was written in 1879 before Verdi had firmly committed to the project. Verdi's composing took place in 3 short bursts between 1884-5. Composition was complete in 1886. It was premiered in New York in 1888, London in 1889, and Paris in 1894. It has become a staple of the opera repertoire in the 20th century. Verdi was to compose one final opera with Boito, Falstaff in 1893.

Comparison with Shakespeare

Verdi starts with Act II of the play. Act I takes place in Venice. Othello was a frequent guest of Brabantio, a senator of Venice. Desdemona was his only daughter. She falls in love with the tales of adventures and adversities and Othello with her. We learn little of Othello's background. He has been a soldier for many years, was sold into slavery and was redeemed.

She loved me for the dangers I had pass'd,
And I loved her that she did pity them. (Act I, scene III)

We know even less about Desdemona. She has refused other suitors. When the play opens, Othello and Desdemona have just eloped and married without the knowledge of her father. We can infer a rebellious side to Desdemona; she has defied her father and crossed racial and class lines to be with Othello. We are also introduced to Iago who hates Othello for promoting Cassio to be his captain, a place that Iago had coveted and felt he deserved. Iago is clever and cunning. He can hide his rage and plot a revenge that will unfold over time.

Others that are
Who trimm'd in forms and visages of duty,
Keep yet their hearts attending on themselves,
And throwing but shows of service on their lords
Do well thrive by them, and when they have lined their coats
Do themselves homage (Act I, scene I)

Iago outlines his plot to Roderigo, who is in love with Desdemona. He will contrive to get Othello jealous of Cassio. He has already figured out a key weakness in Othello.

The Moor is of a free and open nature,
That thinks men honest that but seem to be so;
And will as tenderly be led by the nose
As asses are. (Act I, Scene III)

The libretto skillfully compresses the action and dialogue yet touches on all the important points. A few minor details are changed. The music fills in what is lacking in the spoken word.

The opera

The opening scene in the opera is a fair summary of Act II and included information from Act I of the play. The important points about Othello and Iago are referenced. The opera opens with a violent storm. Watchers on shore are anxiously waiting for Othello's ship to arrive. The orchestra portrays vividly the wind and the waves, the lightning and thunder, the danger of floundering and death. In this production, the chorus is spread out on the stage, mostly in the dark but with flashes of light on individuals as they sing.

Roaring tempest, rolling thunder.
Bright as the day the lightning flash,
Waves are surging high and monstrous



Where the battling whirlwinds clash.
Through the air is blindly rushing
Now the spirit of the night.
And the tempest-riven clouds
Are like a funeral pall.
Chidden billows, gushing skyward.
Now reflect the lurid light of heaven,
And now in deepened
Darkness lies the world (chorus, Act I)

This opening scene, psychologically, portrays the primitive mind, chaotic, fractured, full of terror and fear of death. The opera centers primarily on the relationship of Iago and Otello. I will suggest that we can see these two characters as aspects of this primitive mind, a means to bring order and stability to this chaos and terror. To this end, I will use the theories of Melanie Klein, an English psychoanalyst, who remains influential to this day. Klein believed that very young children are preoccupied with fears of death and hate, which Verdi portrays in the storm scene. In turn, children protect themselves against these fears by fantasies of hating those they fear and wishing to kill and torture in revenge.

Iago represents the side of hating. In this production, the character of Iago is extremely well done. We see his



cold and calculating side, his cunning and his intelligence. It seem to me spot on. We see Iago for the first time in the storm scene who reveals his death wish against the father figure Otello.

May the ocean's seething belly be his tomb! (Act I)

Iago is the least favored son, pushed aside by the favored son Cassio. Iago yearns for this adoration and hates anyone who appears to take this from him. After Otello enters triumphantly, having defeated the Turks and survived the storm, Iago is filled with anger and envy. Klein (1957) differentiates among envy, jealousy and greed. Jealousy is a basic emotion of feeling love has been taken away by his rival. Envy adds hate to jealousy; it is the wish to destroy what one is jealous of. Greed is an insatiable craving to take what one wants. Iago is the perfect example of envy. He is jealous of Otello favoring Cassio and in turn wants to destroy both of them.

O, beware, my lord, of jealousy;
It is the green-eyed monster, which doth mock
The meat it feeds on (Shakespeare, Act III, scene III)

or the opera version:

Beware, my lord, of jealousy!

'Tis a spiteful monster, livid,
blind, with her own venom
self-poisoned, with a vivid
wound upon her bosom. (Act II)

Iago is a true psychopath; he is not impulsive but can plot and channel his envy and hate to get his ends. He is attuned to the weaknesses of others and can exploit them to his means. Klein would call this a paranoid vigilance. One protects oneself from attack by continually scanning for dangers from the outside. In the beginning of Act II, Iago has a soliloquy (not found in the play) that reveals his character. Here is his rage:

I believe in a cruel God
who created me in his image
and who in fury I name.
His true nature of that of:
I feel within me the primeval slime.
There is no such thing as goodness, all is deceit:
I believe the just man to be a mocking actor
in face and heart;
that all his being is a lie,
tear, kiss, glance,
sacrifice and honour. (Act II)

He can only do to Cassio and Otello what he believes would be done to him if he weakened. The just man, who is envied, must be destroyed. At all costs, the primeval slime must be escaped from. Nothing is real except death:

After all this mockery then comes Death. (Act II)

I believe the opera, even more than the play, can be read as a love story between Iago, Cassio and Otello. This does not invalidate the heterosexual love story between Otello and Desdemona; it provides an additional dimension to the complex interactions between these 4 characters. When Iago is starting to hint at Cassio's deception, he says to Otello, You know that I love you. On the surface, this statement is meant to conceal his plotting but I think it is also a genuine expression of his deepest needs. Psychoanalysis thinks that all of us have bisexual potentials. I think this is a story of the vicissitudes of homosexual love between Iago, Cassio and Otello. Otello seems to love Cassio more and has elevated him to second in command, even though Iago has more military experience. We also see his sense of betrayal when Cassio gets drunk. Iago is aware of this love:

This is a spider's web,
'twill your heart catch,
in spite of complaining
'twill trap and dispatch.(Act III)

While Iago counsels Otello to strangle Desdemona, he himself plans to kill Cassio, his true rival for Otello affection.

Otello seems to be the mirror image of Iago. Where Iago is hard and cunning, Otello is soft and pliant; Iago directs and Otello submits. In this production, Otello looks soft and confused; he does not know his own mind and is easily influenced by another. One interesting question about Otello is why he so easily believes Iago and succumbs to jealousy and envy. After all, Desdemona is the perfect loving wife. She adores him and this never changes. She is loyal to Otello to death. She knows he is planning to kill her yet she does not run away. He also

completely misjudges Iago, calls him honest Iago throughout the opera and places his trust in him. Clinically, in such cases, we think the misjudgment is a repetition of earlier important relationships in which the child loved and needed a parent who was abusive to him. In the opera, we have no information about this. After Iago has instigated Cassio to get drunk and fight with Roderigo and Montano, Otello impulsively gets angry and feels personally betrayed. He reacts with rage, demoting Cassio. Cassio is desperate to get back Otello's love and foolishly tries to get Desdemona to intercede for him. Otello is reacting to the injury to Montano, whom he respects as a father figure and the disturbance of Desdemona. Rather than investigating what happened, he shames Cassio by demoting him, as we know unfairly. Is shame an issue for Otello? Iago rather cleverly suggests that Otello is being shamed by Desdemona's infidelity and he is easily brought to shame. One clue may be in the differences between Otello and Desdemona. She is white, upper-class, born and raised in privilege. Otello is black, presumably born in a lower-class and having no privilege. He was a soldier, a self-made man, and rising in the ranks to become a general. Desdemona says to him:

You would relate your sufferings,
Tell me of chains and slavery's agony. (Act I)



He is a brilliant soldier but has little experience in peace. Now he is governor of Cyprus and married to the daughter of a senator of Venice, then the reigning power in this part of Europe. While not explicit, there is likely a marked age difference between Otello and Desdemona. She is likely an adolescent or barely an early adult, while he has been a soldier for many years and must be middle aged (I am declined into the vale of years – Act II). There is no suggestion that Otello has much experience with women and love. This may well be his first real love affair. When Otello and Desdemona are rapturously exclaiming their mutual love, a curious foreshadowing appears to Otello:



Let death come now, that in the ecstasy
of this embrace I meet my hour of hours!
Such is the rapture of my soul, I fear
that never more to me may be vouchsafed
to know such bliss in all the hidden future of my fate. (Act I)

He cannot really believe his good fortune and expects it to disappear somehow. When Iago starts to spin his plots to get Othello jealous of Cassio, Othello says:

O misery!
No! I have no use for baseless doubts.
Before doubt comes enquiry,
after doubt comes proof,
After the proof-
Othello has his supreme laws –
away with love and jealousy together. (Act II)

Of course this suggests that Othello is aware of his tendency toward jealousy and must banish it consciously. Iago

knows this and works on it. When Desdemona pleads for Cassio to be reinstated, Otello has an aside:

Haply because I am not practised
in the deceitful arts of love... (Act II)

Here he reveals two beliefs about himself. He does not know much about love and he believes love is inherently deceitful. As the germ of his jealousy starts to take root, he brings up another insecurity:

My complexion is of this dusky hue (Act II)

He fears shame:

I am mocked. (Act II)

We know from clinical work that shame is a very powerful and painful emotion, to be avoided at all costs. One way to avoid shame is a reactive anger. What Otello seeks about all else is certainty, I must have certainty (Act II). He believes Iago and then he doesn't believe him. His mind is shattering and it slips quickly into chaos. His jealous fears quickly shift into the need for revenge:

My heart is ice.
Banished be the spirits of mercy...
In fury and dire compulsion
Shall thunder-bolts soon rain. (Act II)

Above all, it is the mention of Cassio that seems to drive Otello mad. Desdemona pleads his case several times. The final straw is the naming of Cassio to be governor of Cyprus when he leaves.

It seems plausible that the real love object for Otello is Cassio. It is his 'betrayal' by getting drunk that initially propels the action and Iago's subsequent allegations of betrayal. Once Otello feels betrayed, he must banish the conscious love he feels for Cassio by hating him. The wish now is revenge, to prevent Cassio from having any good things in his life. This may be why when Cassio is named governor of Cyprus, Otello becomes unhinged. He cannot bring himself to kill Cassio himself, he thinks Iago will kill him and he displaces his rage onto Desdemona.

Robert S. White