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### **LA Opera's 'Otello' – A Poignant Production with Lush Choral Lyricism**

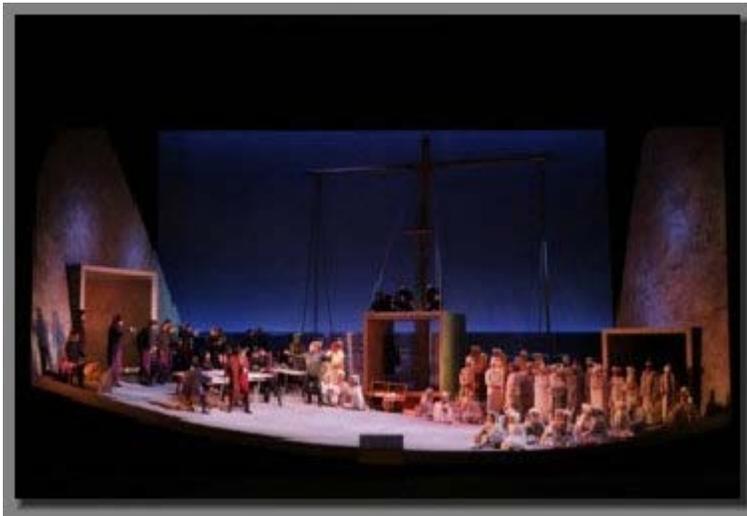


Photo: Robert Millard

**GIUSEPPE VERDI  
OTELLO  
LOS ANGELES OPERA  
FEBRUARY 16, 2008**

By: Carol Jean Delmar  
OperaOnline.us

The buzz going around is that there's a bug loose backstage in LA Opera's Dorothy Chandler Pavilion. Many of the singers have been ill, but the good news is that they're better. Unfortunately, soprano Cristina Gallardo-Domâs, who was set to make her début with the company on Feb. 16, wasn't so lucky. She was too sick to sing Desdemona for the opening night of "Otello," so the company was forced to find a replacement. Russian soprano Elena Evseeva arrived at the very last minute, with very little rehearsal time, and showed that she had the moxie to fill Gallardo-Domâs's shoes.

Los Angeles Opera was born in 1986, and “Otello” was the company’s inaugural production, with Plácido Domingo singing the title role. This time around, the Moorish leader is sung by tenor Ian Storey.

Based on William Shakespeare’s “Othello,” the opera is about one evil man’s (Iago’s) ability to poison another man’s (Otello’s) mind so that Otello is led to believe that his virtuous wife (Desdemona) has been unfaithful, thus prompting him to murder her, only to learn the truth, which then prompts him to kill himself. You’d think that the Moorish general of the Venetian fleet and new governor of Cyprus would have been less gullible. I doubt that something like that could happen today. Things must have been different in the 15th century.

No doubt there have been many stagings of “Otello” since its premiere in 1887, but the onstage environment has changed as companies strive for more cost-effective productions with minimalistic sets. “Otello” is the perfect opera to stage in this manner. Yet cubes and squares are becoming a little bit repetitive. In this production, the characters enter and exit through cubicals placed stage left, right and center. A strange looking fire escape ladder-like telephone pole represents the mast rising from the deck of Otello’s ship, and the downstage area, which is not always a ship, is curved from left to right so that we in the audience wanted Dramamine to ease the seasickness, which was only exacerbated in Act 2 when we were exposed to a backdrop of concrete cubes that resembled a building that was leaning and on the verge of collapse.

All kidding aside, the sets worked nicely, even though some of us crave the more conventional sets of the past. The costumes and lighting were most pleasing when choristers and supernumeraries were on stage, as in Act 3 when the dignitaries arrived with the Venetian ambassador, Lodovico.

There can be no denying it: Bass Eric Halfvarson (Lodovico) has a first-class voice that always makes him a standout, even though this role was not one of his largest. The quality of his deep burnished tone evoked a welcome sound. We want more of the same, please.

But the one who deserves the highest acclaim has to be Elena Evseeva, whose voice proved to have a warm timbre from the moment she sang her first bar. Her movements were flowing and natural, and one wondered how she could have pulled something like that off with such little rehearsal. At times she didn’t attack her tones quite on center, but only a few such insecurities were evident. Her “Willow Song” and “Ave Maria” were a highlight of the evening. Evseeva certainly didn’t seem like a replacement. I prefer to think of her as having been double cast.

Ian Storey looked like the well-known actor John Derek, who was the matinée idol married to Ursula Andress, Linda Evans and Bo Derek. Visions of Laurence Olivier, who brought the Shakespearean Othello to life, didn’t come to mind when watching Storey’s portrayal. Whether or not he is destined to become the new Domingo, James McCracken,

Mario del Monaco, Ben Heppner or Johan Botha in the role is uncertain, but he has a strong presence with a ringing top. He was very effective when demanding proof of Desdemona's infidelity and with his soliloquy, "Dio! mi potevi scagliar." He proved dramatic in the finale, although his voice was somewhat tired by then with some lower tones that were split and couldn't decide whether they were placed in his head or in his throat. But then there were those ringing high tones that remain hard to forget.

Now back to John Derek, who was born Derek Delevan Harris: The Iago in this production was portrayed by Mark Delavan. When Delavan took his final bows, it was quite evident that he's an amiable kind of guy, maybe a little bit too amiable for the likes of Iago, especially when Iago was called upon to confess his diabolical tendencies in "Credo in un Dio crudel." He could have been more satanic. His voice strengthened as the scenes progressed, had depth, good quality and was well-seasoned.

Another Derek, Derek Taylor (Cassio), Ryan McKinny (Montano) and Gregory Warren (Roderigo) were adequate. Ning Liang (Emilia) sounded quite wonderful at the onset, but when she moved upstage, she sounded as if she were in another room, possibly due to the Pavilion's acoustics. We'll have the opportunity to assess her mezzo more clearly next season when she sings Suzuki in Robert Wilson's production of "Madama Butterfly."

The orchestra, under the direction of James Conlon, was at times brilliant; at others, the music seemed more like a film score behind the action on a movie screen -- in this case, the action on stage. There is a Wagnerian quality to this Verdi score, with an awakening theme and motives. Instrumental solos set the scenes and make way for the ensuing musical drama.

But by far the most striking element of "Otello" is its contrast in style when compared to Verdi's earlier works. It isn't comprised of typical arias with beginnings, middles and ends, but blossoms into a music drama which flows more lyrically and brings the audience into a world of realism.

Los Angeles Opera's "Otello" is a poignant production with lush choral lyricism, although more intense portrayals of Otello, Desdemona and Iago would have made the audience more reactive when looking through the proscenium arch -- "as if" the action were really happening.

Libretto: Arrigo Boito

Conductor, James Conlon

Director, John Cox

Scenery and Costume Designer, Johan Engels

Original Lighting Designer, Wolfgang Goebbel

Lighting Designer, Simon Corder

Associate Conductor/Chorus Master, Grant Gershon

Los Angeles Children's Chorus Artistic Director, Anne Tomlinson

Concert Master, Stuart Canin

Co-production with Opéra de Monte-Carlo and Teatro Regio di Parma