

Ooi's Take On Othello

A new production of Shakespeare's Moor's tragedy makes Desdemona a little less than "right modest".

words yvonne teh

It is usually staged in English, as befits any play by William Shakespeare, but to appeal to a wider audience in Hong Kong, the Seals Players Foundation will present their upcoming production of the Bard of Avon's *Othello* in Cantonese (with English and Chinese surtitles). And appeal to a wider audience they must for, as Othello director Vicki Ooi tells *bc*, "If we don't sell 90% of the tickets, the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD) will not sponsor us again!"

With that kind of pressure along with financial constraints and uncertainties, the staging of such a demanding work devoid of any relieving comic elements might seem like a nightmare to many. For Ooi though, this production allows her to realise a long-held ambition to assemble a 'dream team' of performers capable of "a very precise and sensitive form of acting that is now dying out, at least in Hong Kong".

34 Although much of the limelight often centres on the actor who takes on the role of Othello – be it Laurence Olivier, James Earl Jones or somebody else altogether – Ooi feels that for the play to really work, "You need three actors – you need a good Othello, you need a good Desdemona and, most of all, you need a good Iago." And as far as she's concerned, John Chung, Lynn Yau and Raphael Che – all Seals Players Foundation veterans – are the perfect people to portray, respectively, the eponymous character she characterizes as "a very nice man, a great man, but unable to keep his sense... because of his own lack of confidence"; the good woman who loves him dearly; and the evil, strategizing individual who seeks to darken Othello's soul.

So since 1989 she's been prepared to wait for the opportunity to "get these three actors together for any good length of time to do a play". (And now that she has, there's the added bonus of landing Selina Kan, another Seals Players Foundation pioneer, for the part of Emilia.) Still, for a time it was all touch and go as Raphael Che, who has retired to the USA, will only be gracing the evening performances of the production.

"When [Che] flew in for the second set of rehearsals two months ago," says Ooi, "I got a call from him from the airport. He said, 'Can you recommend me to a good doctor? I've hurt my back!'" Still, as these theatre stalwarts decided, the show must go on. So another actor, Mac Tu, was engaged to play Iago, with the understanding that he would appear in at least a few performances and maybe all, if Che's health concerns dictated it be so!

In addition to her dream cast, Ooi was also successful in enlisting respected choreographer Yuri Ng and music and sound designer Ben Robinson to create something normally not found in the play. "Act II, Scene II is one of the most boring scenes in any of Shakespeare's plays!" is her opinion, and so she has taken the liberty of adding music and dance to spice it up.

"It's supposed to take place in the military barracks and maybe the jokes were then funny, but they're no longer funny," she explains. "But I have to have that scene because it's crucial to the plot." So to show how physically attractive Desdemona is and why the man she loves could conceivably come to suspect her of cuckolding him, Ooi decided to embellish it with a music and dance sequence that makes for "one nice way of doing sexual tension". That, she hopes, will infuse the tragedy with a degree of 'oomph' that the play's audience will relish as much as it causes Othello to feel so tragically uneasy.

The Seals Players Foundation will present Othello from January 18 to 20 at the HK Cultural Centre's Studio Theatre. Showtime for the evening performances is 7:45pm while the January 19 and 20 matinees are scheduled to begin at 2:15pm. Tickets are \$180 and \$120 from URB TIX, 2734 9009.

