

FILM REVIEW; Fishburne and Branagh Meet Their Fate in Venice (Published 1995)

By Janet Maslin | Dec. 13th, 1995

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Kenneth Branagh has the rare ability to deliver Shakespearean dialogue as if it were street talk, with an expert casualness that keeps the meaning of the language crystal clear. Mr. Branagh's terrific skill as a popularizer is a boon to the new "Othello," in which he plays an accessible, alarmingly human Iago to Laurence Fishburne's voluptuous Moor. Within Iago resides the heart of the tragedy, which loses its complexity when the character radiates nothing but evil. Thanks to Mr. Branagh's seductively colloquial performance, this time the character's poisonous nature is revealed in full.

It's true that this "Othello" has been truncated, rearranged and illustrated by its director, Oliver Parker, in unapologetically high-handed ways. (There's a map

that looks like a board game to show that Othello, the celebrated military leader, is being sent from Venice to Cyprus.) But it has also been given a blunt vitality, one that makes this look like the timeliest of Shakespeare's tragedies. Mr. Branagh's superb performance, as the man whose Machiavellian scheming guides the story of Othello's downfall, guarantees this film an immediacy that any audience will understand.

The uphill battle of selling "Othello" as a Christmas movie should be further helped by the well-preserved relevance of this play's themes. With Mr. Fishburne as an unusually hotblooded Othello and the first black actor to play the role in a major film, the story's sexual and racial tensions are frankly emphasized. Here is an Othello who passionately kisses his Desdemona (Irene Jacob) at the start of the story, in full view of the Venetians who resent and envy his triumphs. When this Desdemona explains why she married him, it's clear that it wasn't only Othello's war stories that won her over.

Aiming recklessly for the colorful elan of the recent "Much Ado About Nothing," Mr. Parker has assembled his international cast with an eye to star power, and with no great concern for consistency. Mr. Branagh is the soundest imaginable choice, but Mr. Fishburne represents more of a gamble. With no previous Shakespearean experience, he at first displays an improbable loftiness, sounding very much the rarefied thespian beside Mr. Branagh's deceptively regular Joe. But Mr. Fishburne's performance has a dangerous edge that ultimately works to its advantage, and he smolders movingly through the most anguished parts of the role.

If there's a hint of Ike Turner (whom he played brilliantly in "What's Love Got to Do With It?") to this Othello's jealous fury, that seems to be very much what Mr. Parker had in mind. It's a long way from Welles or Olivier (the two giants among cinematic Othellos), but this performance still has its pathos and power.

Miss Jacob, the beautiful Swiss-born star of Krzysztof Kieslowski's "Double Life of Veronique" and "Red," would seem to be the film's most out-of-place performer, since she struggles so noticeably with the English her role requires. At the same time, it's obvious why Mr. Parker wanted her: for her look of absolute purity and decency, and for the real emotion that seems to well in her limpid eyes when Othello challenges her virtue. The essence of this film's approach can be seen here, as Mr. Parker ignores all sensible warnings to find a performer who engages the camera in such strong, uncomplicated ways. The fine points of the characterization are blurry, but its substance is made moving and clear.

Opening up "Othello" so enthusiastically that he includes a bed strewn with rose petals (for a frank boudoir scene) and a pair of ominous chess pieces, Mr. Parker remains more notable for zest than for subtlety. The staging of some of the play's final scenes could have been improved upon, as could the final sight of a burial at sea. Still, this energetic, uneven film has much to recommend it, from ornate costumes and Venetian scenery to some fine acting in supporting roles. Anna Patrick is particularly transfixing in the role of Emilia, Iago's wife and Desdemona's servant, who scathingly articulates some of the play's feminist undercurrents. Mr. Parker makes sure that the most volatile aspects of "Othello" come to the fore.

"Othello" is rated R (Under 17 requires accompanying parent or adult guardian). It includes violence, partial nudity and sexual situations.

OTHELLO Directed by Oliver Parker; adapted for the screen by Mr. Parker, based on the Shakespeare play; director of photography, David Johnson; edited by Tony Lawson; music by Charlie Mole; production designer, Tim Harvey; produced by Luc Roeg and David Barron; released by Castle Rock Entertainment. At the Paris Theater, 4 West 58th Street, Manhattan. Running time: 125 minutes. This film is rated R.

WITH: Laurence Fishburne (Othello), Irene Jacob (Desdemona), Kenneth Branagh (Iago), Nathaniel Parker (Cassio), Michael Maloney (Roderigo) and Anna Patrick (Emilia)

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