

The Modern Presentation of Classical Tragedy — Take the stage design of the Royal Shakespeare Company's production of Othello as an example

Ruixiao Li

Royal College of Art, UK

1. INTRODUCTION

German poet Goethe once commented on Shakespeare: "Shakespeare's stage is a beautiful mirror of a hundred images [2], in which the history of the world hangs on an invisible thread of time and passes before our eyes."

As the pinnacle of drama during the Renaissance, Shakespeare's plays extensively reflected the social life of England in the 16th and 17th centuries. The play *Othello* tells a story on multiple themes, including race, love and betrayal, trust and gullibility, and interracial marriage [4]. All of these tragedies stem from the inferiority complex and doubt that the character Othello experiences due to his race.

The 2015 RSC (Royal Shakespeare Company) production of "*Othello*" was over 400 years after the original. In modern times, theatrical performances have become far more diverse. The integration of modern technology has resulted in a more multifaceted stage design for this production of "*Othello*".

Before further analysis, we need to clarify one point: exploring the modern presentation of classical tragedy cannot simply stop at whether the stage "restores" history. As many contemporary drama theories have pointed out, stage design should not just be a pretty "backdrop"; it is actually a "second text" that participates in the narrative [5]. Today, when we re-perform Shakespeare, the most important thing is not to rigidly replicate the stage appearance of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but to use modern theatrical vocabulary to reactivate the contradictions and conflicts in the script that transcend time.

From this perspective, the RSC production of "*Othello*" provides an excellent example. It didn't drastically alter the original story, but rather cleverly integrated modern visual elements (such as lifting mechanisms, modern costumes, and props) into a realistic psychological space. Therefore, the following article will attempt to move beyond a simple description of stage technology and specifically analyze how this version of "*Othello*", through spatial metaphors, the reconstruction of light and shadow, and modern costumes and props, gradually externalizes Othello's inner inferiority and struggle, thereby exploring why classical tragedy still resonates with us today.

2. VISUAL METAPHORS OF STAGE SPACE: THE COMBINED USE OF MODERN MACHINERY AND LIGHTING

This RSC production of *Othello* was performed at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre in late spring of 2015. [1] The stage for this play is an extended stage, unlike the proscenium stage we are used to. The stage lip extends forward, forming a square plaza surrounded by audiences on three sides, with the remaining side connected to the stage frame. There is also some space inside the stage frame, and the whole play is shaped like the Chinese character "甲" (jia). This places higher demands on the actors' acting skills and also presents an extraordinary challenge to the stage setup—it is necessary to consider the stage view from three different angles.

In the performance of *Othello*, there is a lot of dialogue and confrontation between the characters, and they are not so reliant on the props in the surrounding environment. Therefore, the stage design needs to focus on the arrangement of fixed scenery to create a background that fits the play. Thus, the fixed stage frame here is designed as a realistic typical Venetian building—smoky gray cement Roman columns and heavy stone railings.

Here, the stage designer created a two-story effect. We can notice that the height of the first floor is slightly adjusted, only about a head higher than a standing actor. This adjustment aims to create a more harmonious and intimate relationship between the actors on stage. Conversely, if the first floor used a normal height, the overall stage might lose its rhythm and appear loose. In fact, this deliberately lowered height, combined with the heavy, smoky gray concrete Roman columns, is not merely for physical compactness, but also visually creates a highly oppressive and claustrophobic space. It's like an external projection, suggesting that Othello, trapped in a quagmire of racial prejudice and jealousy, is constantly having his sense of security crushed, gradually leading to a suffocating state.

In addition, the rising and falling pool in the center of the stage is not only a realistic prop, but also a core visual metaphor of the whole play. "Water" has two sides in the play: in the meeting and prayer scene in the Venice castle, the top light shines on the water and creates a hazy light and shadow, symbolizing order and holiness; but in the bedroom in the last scene, the pool loses its sacred halo and becomes a stagnant pool. It should represent Desdemona's purity, but under the shadow of the dark conspiracy, the tranquil pool and the impending strangulation form a strong contrast. This combination of modern machinery and natural elements vividly externalizes the sense of destruction of the tragedy [6].

Behind this architectural framework, the stage is sometimes adorned with a magnificent Venetian dome that creates a 3D effect, complemented by warm lighting that perfectly matches the classical and mysterious style of the Venetian castle. At other times, a vast sky is projected, illuminated by cooler and more diffused lighting, showcasing the open outdoor landscape of the Venetian square. And then, silhouettes of stained-glass windows from the ruins of a church are lowered, their silhouettes becoming even more ethereal under the cool white lighting and mist. The shadows of these windows on the stage floor are also extremely beautiful and sacred, full of religious significance. And beneath this solemn shadow, acts of deception and betrayal against Christ are being performed.

While changing scenes using fixed scenery is impractical, it can be cleverly achieved with the right lighting. For example, in the final scene of the play, Othello and his companions move from outside the castle where the riot has occurred to Desdemona's bedroom inside. First, the lights are projected onto the back of the stage, plunging the front into darkness, giving the actors ample preparation time while they perform. During the scene change, the lights immediately switch to the front of the stage, plunging the back into complete darkness, and finally, a few prop lights illuminate the otherwise dark background, thus quickly and cleverly transitioning from outdoor to indoor settings.

On the other hand, the RSC Theatre Company's version of Othello is also remarkable for its use of modern technology.

First, in the center of the extended stage floor, there is a section where the floor can be raised and lowered. To distinguish this area from the surrounding area and to better utilize this convenience, it is designed as a perforated, floral-shaped steel plate.

Of course, the perforated steel plates have an even more important purpose—after the performance in the sinking pool, the original height needs to be quickly restored, and the perforated steel plates can efficiently drain water, ensuring no water stains remain when rising back to the ground, thus preventing any impact on the performance. In the first act, this lifting area sinks about 15 centimeters, forming a pool. Combined with the prop boats and the actors' movements, this allows the actors and audience to become more immersed in the drama, and is another way of expressing realism. In the conference room of the Venetian castle, the lifting platform also serves its purpose, rising to a certain height to become a conference table, saving the time of moving a large table. After the lifting platform is raised, the lower part can also hold water. When the three lifting platforms rise one by one to serve as a prayer platform, the overhead light shines on the water surface, and the misty reflections shine upwards, creating a sacred atmosphere. In the final act, Desdemona changes clothes and bathes in her bedroom. With the help of modern stage technology, the lifting platform lowers about 15 centimeters, becoming a fulcrum for the actors' performance. The actors can sit on the edge of the pool and freely complete the bathing performance. This tranquil scene contrasts sharply with the death of Desdemona shortly afterward.

Such a modern stage does not seem out of place in classical plays; rather, it gives these ancient plays new vitality.

3. VISUAL REPLACEMENT THAT BREAKS DOWN HISTORICAL BARRIERS: THE CLEVER USE OF MODERN COSTUMES AND PROPS

Another unique aspect of the Royal Shakespeare Company's performance is the modern character design and costumes. The senator Brabantius, with his full head of white hair and crimson suit jacket, conveys his importance, while his black mink coat and black shirt emphasize his dignified status. Similarly, Othello wears a purple suit jacket over a low-cut white shirt in the meeting room, revealing small areas of gold and purple patterns. This attire serves to highlight Othello's high rank and distinguish him from the senator Brabantius. It also emphasizes Othello's high status as a Black man, foreshadowing his later extreme inferiority complex.

Iago wore a military uniform, consisting of a shirt and work trousers, clearly indicating his identity as a soldier; Desdemona wore an elegant and dignified light-colored dress, her golden hair styled very elegantly, and every outfit and hairstyle reflected the dignity and elegance expected of the daughter of a senator.

Unlike the RSC version, in the 1996 Verdi opera version of Othello, the costumes of the actors are all relatively retro [3], such as Othello's floor-length cape covered with gold patterns, the retro lace stand-up collar shirt worn by the officer, and the floor-length dress with a crinoline inside the female characters... The costumes in the Verdi opera version are extremely realistic, which appears slightly redundant compared to the simple and modern costumes in the RSC version.

In addition, some of the props on the stage do not fit the historical context of the story—when exchanging military intelligence in the conference room, a laptop appears on the table, and communication is completed via video call.

The modern costumes and props they wore and used clashed with the historical setting of the story, which took place 400 years ago. Was this a mistake by the costume and prop team? Actually, no. As ordinary viewers, we didn't see any problem with it and could even become quite immersed in the story. In fact, the RSC theater company's costume and prop team could have provided them with accurate costumes and props that matched the era of the story, just like in Verdi's opera version. However, in my opinion, the effect of that performance might not have been as good as the current version of Othello.

Why did the theater troupe abandon retro costumes in favor of modern attire and electronic devices? This is not due to a lack of historical research ability, but rather a deliberate strategy of modernization. Overly realistic historical recreations often erect a "firewall of time" between the audience and the characters, turning tragedy into a mere ancient spectacle. In contrast, the RSC version, through modern costumes, bridges the psychological distance with the audience.

For example, Iago's simple work trousers, devoid of the stereotypical villainous features of traditional drama, make him resemble a cold and pragmatic modern military officer, a relatable character that is all the more chilling. Similarly, the appearance of the 'laptop' on the conference table is not merely for novelty. In a modern context where communication is so advanced and intelligence can be verified via video, Othello's continued entrapment in Iago's clumsy lies creates a highly ironic tension: it reveals that even with technological advancements, human distrust cannot be eliminated, and a crisis of trust is fatal in any era. This use of modern props is, in effect, a precise contemporary awakening to the tragic core of "Othello".

4. A CONTEMPORARY DIALOGUE ACROSS TIME AND SPACE: THE AESTHETIC AND SOCIAL VALUES OF MODERNIZING CLASSICAL DRAMA

Can classic ancient dramas be modernized? In my opinion, the answer is yes, and it is inevitable. If every performance simply "replicates" the original version, using costumes, props, and stage designs from the era depicted in the script without innovation, then Shakespeare's works will fade into obscurity with each repetition. For centuries, Shakespeare's plays have been performed countless times; his most famous work, "Hamlet", has likely been performed hundreds, even thousands of times... What is the significance of this? Simply because such classic works deserve to be deconstructed and reinterpreted in various forms and techniques, while retaining their original themes. This modern interpretation of "Othello", from the perspective of theatrical aesthetics, is undoubtedly worthy of affirmation, praise, and emulation for its innovation and artistry.

This echoes the viewpoint expressed by Professor Wang Luwei in his stage creation lecture, "I Have a Date with

Spring": When we create stages for past works, we must combine them with modern new technologies. If we simply copy past creations, then where is the value of our modern creations?

Therefore, presenting classical drama in a modern way is not merely about pursuing visual and technological novelty, but about building a bridge of dialogue across time and space between ancient texts and contemporary audiences. Just like RSC Theatre Company's "Othello", the creative team, through innovative stage design — whether it's the spatial structure that creates a sense of psychological oppression, the metaphorical rising and falling pools, or the modern communication equipment that reconstructs the mechanism of information transmission—constantly reminds the audience that this is not a distant Venetian anecdote, but a mirror reflecting the present.

Although the play spans 400 years, Othello's feelings of inferiority stemming from identity issues, his vulnerability to misinformation, and the fatal crisis of trust in interpersonal relationships have not disappeared with time. Instead, they exist in our real lives in more complex and hidden forms. The core value of modernizing classical drama lies in 'activation'. It sheds the heavy burden of history and uses stage language that resonates with the modern context to allow us to confront the eternal weaknesses and tragedies of human nature. Through this highly dynamic modern presentation, the RSC Theatre Company not only interprets the struggles of the soul but also provides profound reflections on contemporary issues of race, trust, and society. This is the true reason why classic works remain vibrant in the modern theater.

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