Of Togas and Tunics:
Rossini's *Otello* in Ancient Rome

Charles Jernigan, July 2023

(Charles saw the July 15, 2023 performance.
The run continues until August 6. Central City titled the opera *Othello*)



Rossini's *Otello,* once a real rarity, continues to make its way not only in major population centers, but in small regional companies. It held the boards triumphantly in Europe for most of the nineteenth century, and was the second Rossini opera to be heard in America (in 1826). Even as it was forgotten in the wake of changing tastes and the conquest of Verdi's *Otello* (1887), its third act continued to be known to scholars as marking a change in the language of opera from a stand-and-deliver style centered on vocal pyrotechnics to a greater verisimilitude, a unity of drama and music and a new romanticism symbolized by the iconic, folk-like "Willow Song" of Act 3.

Nowadays, however, Rossini's version of the story is a stranger no more, even in America. There have been recent productions in Albuquerque and Philadelphia as well as New York, and now at Central City Opera high in the Colorado Rockies. The Opera Southwest (Albuquerque) production a decade ago even offered the American premiere of a version with a happy ending which Rossini concocted to please the Romans who did not tolerate tragedy. (They also performed the standard tragic ending Rossini had originally written for Naples, and they let their audiences choose which one they preferred.) Opera Philadelphia's offering, just this last September/October, 2022, imported Emilio Sagi's production from Liege, which set the opera in the 1920s somewhere in a European country house. All of these productions boasted the requisite six tenors whose casting makes mounting this opera so difficult.

Rossini fans will know that his *Otello,* with its libretto by the Marquis Francesco Berio di Salsa, is based only distantly on Shakespeare's *Othello,* but rather on a 1796 French reduction of the play by François Ducis. In Ducis and Rossini/Berio, Cassio is eliminated, Iago's role is reduced and Rodrigo is promoted to the man Desdemona's father wants her to marry, not knowing that she is secretly married to Otello—and Rodrigo gets the most difficult music in the score. Also, the story takes place entirely in Venice; in Shakespeare only the first act is Venetian; the rest is in Cyprus, where Othello has been sent to fight the Turks. Verdi and Boito eliminate Shakespeare's Act 1 and place their opera entirely in Cyprus.

Most contemporary opera productions update the story to contemporary or nearer-contemporary times, but, Ashraf Sewailam, the stage director for Central City's *Otello* did

something I have never seen before in any opera production—he substantially **backdated it from sixteenth century Venice to ancient Rome** in the imperial period. Otello becomes an African general in the service of the Empire, clad in a bright toga and Roman battle gear in Act 1. Sewailam said that the idea to backdate came from his Assistant Director, Barbara Poll, who knew that ancient Rome welcomed and promoted foreign military and political leaders including Africans, but maintained prejudice against them even while honoring them, and these are elements found in Rossini's libretto. (The same phenomenon was certainly true of Renaissance Venice's maritime empire, however.) So instead of a typical (and cliche ridden) "relevant" updating with characters wearing contemporary clothes, sporting sun glasses and carrying guns, we got Roman tunics and togas, thanks to costume designer Madison Booth. Set Designer Matthew S. Crane devised spare sets which changed slightly from scene to scene against a background of classical columns. It worked in terms of the new Roman milieu except that Desdemona's Act 3 bed was a round affair with bright red silk sheets which seemed to me more redolent of a honeymoon suite in one of Central City's local casino-hotels than a bed in ancient Rome. In sum, I did not think that the Roman backdating particularly hindered the story or conflicted with the libretto as contemporary settings often do (but what was that gondolier doing in ancient Rome?), but I could not see that it shed any new light either.

Director Sewailam, like Emilio Sagi in Liege/Philadelphia, rightly understood that **racial prejudice is the fulcrum of conflict in the Rossini libretto**, while racial prejudice plays a role secondary to jealousy in Shakespeare and Verdi. Rodrigo is not particularly jealous of Otello; he is astounded that Desdemona, whom he wants, would choose a black African *foreigner* over a native Roman. Iago is not the archetype of evil, jealous of Cassio and Othello, but a political schemer. Rossini's Otello is constantly referred to as the "Africano" in the libretto, and he sees himself as an outsider and inferior in the Venetian (now Roman) world.

Perhaps because of this view, **Sewailam took as a focal point for his whole production the iconic "Willow Song" of Act 3** ("Assisa a pie` d'un salice"), which tells the tragic story of Desdemona's deceased friend "Isaura," an African girl torn from her native land and forced to live as a refugee in Venice/Rome.

In Shakespeare, Desdemona sings the "Willow Song" as Emilia undresses her for bed; she remembers her mother's maid, "Barbary," singing it when she was a child. The Willow Song was already a well known English ballad when Shakespeare used it to set the atmosphere and serve as a premonition of the catastrophe to come. (Shakespeare changes the protagonist of the old song from a man lamenting his maiden's infidelity to a woman who laments her lover's abandonment.) Verdi and Boito follow Shakespeare's lead, but Berio and Rossini follow Ducis, who changes "Barbary" to "Isaura," an African maiden who was both the subject of the song and its one-time singer—and who was a childhood friend of Desdemona.

In the production, Isaura actually becomes a mute character on stage, starting with a mimed drama during the overture, as she meets, embraces and is ripped from her lover, a young Roman. She reappears during the atmospheric Gondolier's Song in Act 3, and the Venetian gondolier of the original is now the ghostly presence of Isaura's lover become a Roman boatman who sings—somewhat anachronistically for the ancient setting—famous lines which Berio took from Canto V of Dante's *Inferno.* Sewailam obviously wanted to emphasize Desdemona's acceptance of Otello's Otherness through her love long ago for her African friend, Isaura. The African Isaura's tragedy, in her life and death and in her song, presage Desdemona's.

Likewise, the iconic willow tree becomes a visual symbol throughout the production; it is on the scrim curtain from the very beginning of the overture, and a stylized willow tree is on stage in several scenes leading up to its incarnation in the song in the last act. Characters walk around it and through its hanging branches. It is the symbol of sorrow, representing Desdemona's tragedy throughout and not just briefly in the song.

It might have worked, except that if I had not heard Sewailam's pre-opera talk, I would have had no idea who this mute character wandering through the production was supposed to be. The visual symbol of the willow tree does make sense—especially if you are aware of the fame and iconic nature of Rossini's "Romanza del Salice" across all the arts in the nineteenth century.

Sewailam also makes **Desdemona a decisive character** and not the innocent lamb led to sacrifice found in many interpretations of Shakespeare over the centuries (Shakespeare's Desdemona was played by a boy and had very few lines compared to Othello and Iago). There is a basis for this in the opera, in that Desdemona has chosen the African foreigner in the first place, has married him secretly and stands firm in her choice. In Shakespeare (and Verdi) Othello smothers Desdemona with a pillow; in Berio, he stabs her before killing himself. In the Central City production, Otello arrives with a knife prepared to stab her, but she silently presents him with a piece of patterned African cloth which Isaura had given her in one of the mimed parts and indicates to him that this should be his weapon. He strangles her with the fabric. According to Sewailam, if Desdemona must die, at least she chooses her own manner of death.

The multi-talented Sewailam is a singer himself, having recently sung the title role in Washington Concert Opera's performance of *Maometto II.* I had seen him as Bottesini's Ali Baba at Opera Southwest in Albuquerque. He clearly understood that in Rossini's opera serias the singers must be allowed to sing, unimpeded by extraneous stage action. Thus the singers did act during their arias and ensembles—it was not 'park and bark' opera— but the stage was never cluttered and the focus was on them.

Vocally, the singers were superb in every way. Kenneth Tarver is well known in Germany, having sung many leading roles in Rossini operas at the Rossini at Wildbad festival and elsewhere. He sang the more baritonal role of Otello, hitting all his high notes and making easy work of the coloratura. As an actor, however, he was stolid, particularly in the last scene where his rage should be overwhelming as he comes to kill his wife. Tarver seemed unemotional and even sang some of this scene sitting down even though the music is full of fury and thunder and lightening are raging in a storm outside. That Tarver is African American helped with the verisimilitude of Sewailam's concept, but then the Iago, Bernard Holcomb, is African American too. As the third tenor, his role is also imposing and full of high notes and coloratura, which Holcomb deftly dispatched. His little hidden smiles and sneers ably created his character as an untrustworthy schemer. The other tenor, Christopher Bozeka (Rodrigo), has the most difficult and longest role. Bozeka was stunning in the duets with the other two principal tenors and in his aria sung at Desdemona's rejection of him, "Ah! come mai non senti." Bozeka recently sang the title role in *Comte Ory* in Albuquerque (and before that he was in *Ali Baba*). As Rodrigo he acted convincingly and sang with unbridled emotion; his is a full-bodied sound which never goes screechy in the upper register and those long-held high notes were never screamed. Rossini uses the coloratura and high notes to depict emotion and struggle, and these tenors wielded them like swords.

Desdemona was sung by Cecilia Violetta Lopez, a soprano who has made quite a name for herself as Verdi's Violetta across the country (including Opera Colorado in Denver). She also had a previous outing as Rossini's Desdemona, with Loft Opera in New York. Her voice is

probably higher and lighter than the original Desdemona, Isabella Colbran, or the most famous one in the nineteenth century, Maria Malibran. She seemed, however, to have no trouble with the role although the voice weakened a bit on the lowest notes. Desdemona carries the final act with the Willow Song, the Prayer which follows and her duet with Otello, but her real test as a singer is the aria-finale of Act 2 and which was conceived as a show piece for Colbran, "Che smania, ohime`, che affanno." Lopez brought it off, and with the briefest of pauses had to go on to dominate the next act too.



Colbran as Desdemona

Desdemona's father Elmiro was Federico De Michelis while Daniel Miller sang the Doge, Dylan Schang was the Gondolier and Angelo Silva was Lucio. Hilary Ginther was a fine Emilia, Desdemona' companion. All added admirably to the whole.

John Baril, the Music Director of Central City, conducted the orchestra and chorus, the latter composed of apprentice artists in Central City's extensive summer training program. The individual players in the orchestra took full advantage of the many solos Rossini gives them.

The opera was performed uncut with a short pause after Act 2. The small house was reasonably full.