




Desdemona: A Play About a Handkerchief

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Having slept with Othello's entire encampment, Desdemona revels in her bawdy tales of conquest. Her foils and rapt listeners are the other integral and re-imagined women of this Shakespeare tragedy: Emilia, Desdemona's servant and the wife of Iago, and Bianca, now a majestic whore of Cyprus. The reluctantly loyal Emilia pesters Desdemona about a military promotion for her husband. Her motive, however, is that he leave her a wealthy widow, preferably sooner than later. Bianca, now a street-wise, yet painfully naive prostitute, visits Desdemona thinking she is a very good friend and fellow hooker (at least one night a week). Bianca thinks the worst when she soon discovers that Desdemona knows intimate details of the life of her lover, Cassio. Though Desdemona has never been intimate with Cassio, her life is soon in danger when her husband, Othello, also suspects her of infidelity.

Desdemona: A Play About a Handkerchief Details

Date : Published January 1st 1994 by Dramatists Play Service

ISBN : 9780822213918

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Format : Hardcover 51 pages

Genre : Plays, Theatre, Drama, Academic, School

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From Reader Review **Desdemona: A Play About a Handkerchief** for online ebook

zilver says

3.5

Sarah Barry says

If you haven't read Othello do that before you read this. But then definitely do read this. A fascinating look at Othello through the eyes of Desdemona, Emilia, and Bianca (the only characters in this play). It's edgy and surprising.

Meredith Potter says

I love this play. It is modern and charismatic with a breathtaking ending. It makes you question the way we, as women treat eachother in a world where we are all struggling to be treated equally.

Alyssa says

It's an interesting twist to the original story of Othello and Desdemona. We get to see what really goes on with Desdemona, instead of hearing and seeing it through Othello's eyes.

Maria says

Delicious. A comic three-woman play "written as a tribute (i.e., "rip-off") to the infamous play SHAKESPEARE THE SADIST by Wolfgang Bauer" according to Vogel. Funny, heart-breaking, a delightful imagining of the time leading up to Desdemona's final night.

Matt says

This play disappointed me rather substantially. It seems Vogel wanted to ask the question, what happens if we focus on Desdemona and trade her personality out with Emilia's. As a picture of domestic abuse, the play could have been poignant, but unlike the masterpiece that is How I Learned to Drive, this play just doesn't measure up to Vogel's usual delivery. I think the Shakespeare angle was the big misstep. Othello, who never appears onstage, seems unmotivated in his cruelty, and those who know the play recognize this decision as playing into Iago's racialization of him. Knowing the original makes that seem rather hollow. But the real problem I had with this one is Desdemona, who becomes a flat character (not that she isn't in Shakespeare,

but I expected Vogel to texture her much more than the final result)... and her only character trait seems to be "cruel." There are so many places where this play tries to refer to the original, but so few where it lines up in a satisfying - or even enlightening - way. If I weren't asked to compare it to Shakespeare's original constantly, I would've probably liked it more. The delivery method Vogel chose, however, prevents that, and constantly (at least three times) putting Emilia's lines in Desdemona's mouth really just made this behind-the-scenes retelling feel more like a parallel universe... A decision that that felt unnecessary and dissatisfying for my money. If Vogel didn't want to parallel Shakespeare, I can't understand why she did to the minimal degree seen here.

Monica says

Funny and devastating, this really worked for me. A reworking of Othello from the lady point of view, it explores female relationships and jealousies through cinematic framing.

This is part of an effort to make up for my reduced reading time with the same strategy I used in college - read plays.

Mick says

If you've read Othello (my favorite Shakespearean play), you have to read this. From the point of view of the women in the play, with a domestic setting, each episode will make you laugh, make you think, and make you cry. Gorgeous.

Reese says

Watching performances of Shakespeare's plays is not "my thing." Studying the texts is also not "my thing." Can you see my red face yet? Even some of the finest actors reading the most powerful scenes written by Shakespeare can take me to napdom. Honestly, two fellow grad students had to wake me up during SHAKESPEARE'S PEOPLE, a presentation of the great dramatic "moments" given to us by the bard. My friends tried to reduce my embarrassment by telling me that Sir Michael Redgrave had been napping between his readings. But he looked -- and probably was -- about ninety; I was twenty-five. So what was my excuse?

When I feel the need to conceal my SADD (not Seasonal Affective Disorder Disorder), Selective Attention Deficit Disorder, and show interest in Shakespeare's dramas, I attempt to rely on my true appreciation of OTHELLO until I can announce a desperate need for a bathroom or a cup of coffee. What would I do without OTHELLO -- and bathrooms and coffee?

A few years ago, my "relationship" with OTHELLO and my high opinion of Paula Vogel's HOW I LEARNED TO DRIVE prompted me to order DESDEMONA: A PLAY ABOUT A HANDKERCHIEF. I have no explanation for my decision to read it this morning, but I'm glad that I did. And if you've ever felt like saving Othello the trouble of killing Desdemona and doing the job for him because she's aggravatingly

sweet and loving and passive and solicitous, then Vogel's play is for you too.

The text is well-constructed and very entertaining. If you're guessing that surprises and suspense are missing, then stop guessing. A script this engaging in the hands of a brilliant director -- my son, for example -- should delight theatergoers. Seriously, my son is not directing a production of Vogel's play, so you can go back to believing that this is an impartial review. It is.

Never read OTHELLO? Or can't remember much about OTHELLO? Read it -- if for no other reason -- so that you can enjoy DESDEMONA: A PLAY ABOUT A HANDKERCHIEF. And much more than a handkerchief.

Franxine (Shadowtearling) says

Am I stupid for not understanding how this was meant to explore feminist themes such as women's relationships with one another in a male-dominant society?

I don't mind the premise. Vogel creates this irony where Desdemona actually does make a cuckold out of Othello but with everyone EXCEPT the man Othello truly suspects.

What I do mind is the switch of personalities between Desdemona and Emilia and almost makes them both the worst two people ever. Neither of their motivations made sense to me. Desdemona, who wants to be a worldly woman, and Emilia, who is this devout and devoted wife, act differently to what they say. I hated that Emilia got preachy with Desdemona all the time, and I hated that Desdemona so often dismissed Emilia. Their personalities may have been switched, but their actions were not (and this is the true failure of this play for me). We have Desdemona wanting that worldliness, but she's still so dependent on men to gain that independence. Emilia's devotion to her husband heavily contrasts with her hatred of him that it only seeks to promote that women are nothing if not for their husbands.

I get that it was trying to explore female sexuality (and I liked that Bianca showed pride in her job because it paid her bills even as people like Emilia berated her), but she "traveled the world through sex" (they "spilled their seed into her") isn't the most empowering idea to me. I don't mind the crudeness, but I also don't understand why sex for Desdemona had to have this grand meaning attached to it.

The "loyalty" to Desdemona makes no sense, either, especially since Emilia made it clear she DESPISED Iago only to reveal later that she took the handkerchief cause her husband wanted to have fun?? In the original Othello it made sense for her to take it and lie about it while still unwavering in her loyalty to Desdemona. Here, it makes Emilia's characterization shaky at best.

I get that women are allowed to be "free" while having dreams of marriage (as was Bianca's case), but the way the play undermines that idea also doesn't sit well with me. Bianca didn't exist beyond either Desdemona's or Emilia's opinions of her. Desdemona loves her because she's this woman who gets to have all the sex and no marriage. Emilia hates her for the same thing. And then when Bianca admits she wants to marry Cassio, Desdemona is disappointed, and Emilia feels justified.

Instead of exploring how female friendship could have helped all these women (and altered the course of the play), we instead see a competition between them as class (and race?????) divide them, and they die before anything good happens to them!

I wanted this play to be something else, and it's my fault for expecting so much of it.

Lluvia Almanza says

This play has its funny moments, but there is nothing special about it. I enjoy Shakespeare and I was excited to read this parody of it. It was alright, but there are better plays out there with more substance, This play did have its funny moments.

Phillip says

I would give this 4.5 stars if half stars were allowed. As a feminist-driven adaptation of Othello, this is a really good play. Vogel points to the kinds of female sociality that is generally suppressed in Shakespeare's work (admittedly partly because Shakespeare had to have boys perform women's parts). However, I do have one critique and one question about the play.

First, I don't understand why Vogel uses stage-Irish and stage-cockney dialects for Emilia and Bianca respectively. Emilia is supposed to be Venetian, and Bianca a Cypriot. So why have their accents been shifted to British class markers? Also, Vogel is an American, so her choice to use British stereotypes is definitely a specific choice.

My critique of the play is that by turning Desdemona into a woman having sex with everyone in sight, Othello's suspicions are ironically confirmed in this play--not specifically that Desdemona is having an affair with Cassio, but that she is cheating on him. I get Vogel's point about liberating women's sexuality, but the problem she doesn't seem to resolve is that when Desdemona is cheating on Othello, his jealousy is justified in a way that it isn't justified in Shakespeare's text.

Lea Dokter says

Interesting angle, but not very thrilling in my experience.

Glenn says

Interesting as a footnote in the author's career and it has a certain cinematic flair but it fails to hold the attention or really come to any point.

Kat High says

Desdemona retells Othello from Desdemona's point of view. There are only three characters, all women, in the entire play and it's presented in twenty-nine short segments. It was good, but I wasn't entirely captivated by it. At points, it seemed unnecessarily hyper-sexualized.

