

BACKGROUND: *OTELLO*

Composed by Giuseppe Verdi Libretto by Arrigo Boito
Based on Shakespeare's tragedy, *Othello, the Moor of Venice*

PLACE & TIME: A seaport in Cyprus; late 15th century

PLOT SUMMARY

Otello, a mercenary general in 15th-century Cyprus, has led the Venetian forces to victory against the Turks and has married the beautiful Desdemona against her father's wishes. He does not realize, however, that his ensign, Iago, feels slighted because Cassio has been promoted to a rank above his own. Iago has a single minded determination to destroy his master by feeding his jealous nature. Through a brilliant series of hints and insinuations, Iago deceives Otello into believing that Cassio and Desdemona are lovers. Consumed by jealousy, Otello takes Desdemona's life, only to learn of Iago's wicked deception.

MUSICAL HIGHLIGHTS

ACT I

- The magnificent opening choral storm scene with Otello's entrance and the bonfire chorus.
- The *Brindisi* (Drinking Song) where Iago gets Cassio drunk so that he will fall out of favour with Otello.
- The love duet between Otello and Desdemona *Gia nella notte densa* at the end of the act is among opera's most beautiful love music.

ACT II

- Iago's *Credo* a chilling aria in which he reveals the depth of his evil nature.
- The Iago/Otello duet at the end of the act in which Iago convinces Otello of Desdemona's infidelity.

ACT III

- Otello's *Dio! Mi potevi scagliar* (God, try with me affliction, with misery and shame, if I have displeased you).

ACT IV

- Desdemona's beautiful ballad, *Willow Song*.
- Her prayer, *Ave Maria*, as she waits for Otello, knowing her death is imminent.
- Otello's death scene, *Niun mu tema* in which the music associated with the love duet in Act I is heard again.

BLACKFACE OTELLO IN 2007

The character of Otello is a Moor of dark complexion originally intended to be sung by a black man; however, throughout the production's history, the title role was often played by a white man made up to appear black.

The phenomenon of a white man portraying a black man through the use of make-up began in 1828 by white comedian, Thomas Rice. He sparked an American craze for blackface minstrel shows that lasted more than 100 years. Although one of the most popular musical styles in the US, it was viewed as being very crude and racist and with the success of the American civil rights movement, the practice lost all acceptability and disappeared from American entertainment.

Today, opera companies such as Manitoba Opera look to fill roles with the most qualified singers based on their voices, not their skin colour. Caucasian tenor, Mark Lundberg, who will be singing the role of Otello in our production, will not appear in blackface.

OUR SET HAS CONNECTIONS TO HURRICANE KATRINA

The set we're using for this production was designed and constructed by New Orleans Opera just before Hurricane Katrina struck, leaving the company devastated. The sets were salvaged and Manitoba Opera and co-producer, Opera Lyra are the very first companies to use the sets.

OTELLO FEATURES ONE OF THE ALL-TIME GREAT VILLAINS

The character of Iago (pronounced Ja-go), Otello's ensign, is one of the all-time greatest villains. "I am a servant of Evil. I was made in the image of God, who is himself cruel...After life, nothing. Heaven is a foolish lie." - Iago

AN OUTSTANDING ROSTER OF ARTISTS TO BE FEATURED

Otello is rarely produced by smaller opera companies like Manitoba Opera because of the highly demanding vocal quality required of the tenor to sing the lead role. Singers with such exceptional talent are hard for smaller companies to acquire. It's been more than 20 years since *Otello* has been produced in Winnipeg.

"For companies our size it's an artistic watermark," says director, Larry Desrochers.

Tenor **Mark Lundberg** has sung the role of Otello for opera companies including Deutsche Oper Berlin, New Orleans, Hawaii, and Kansas City. "Lundberg looked the quintessential Otello, his height evoking the conquering hero, his weight the insecurity in love, his gruff manner and demeanor the barbarian outsider. Lundberg also sounded the part with easy, full-toned notes and power throughout his wide range." – *Opera News*

Mr. Lundberg will be joined the incomparable Canadian baritone **John Fanning**, a Metropolitan Opera favourite who will sing the role of the evil Iago. Winnipeg's own, **Kurt Lehmann** will sing the role of Cassio and American soprano **Sally Dibblee** is the ill-fated wife of Otello, Desdemona.

Other featured artists: Emilia (Iago's wife and Desdemona's companion) mezzo-soprano, **Elizabeth Turnbull**; Montano (Otello's predecessor as governor of Cyprus) bass, **Gregory Atkinson**; Roderigo (a Venetian gentleman) tenor, **Benoit Boutet**; Lodovico (an ambassador of Venice) bass, **Brian McIntosh**.

The production will be directed by **Larry Desrochers**, Manitoba Opera General Director and CEO and conducted by **Tyrone Paterson**, Manitoba Opera Music Advisor and Principal Conductor.

OTELLO IS A CO-PRODUCTION WITH OTTAWA'S OPERA LYRA

For Manitoba Opera, producing Verdi's *Otello* is comparable to a larger opera company like New York's Metropolitan Opera doing a grand-scale Wagner production. By pooling their resources, Manitoba Opera and Opera Lyra are able to bring this masterpiece to their audiences.

The two companies will be using the same principal singers, conductor, director, stage management, lighting designer, costumes and sets. The majority of this co-production team is from Winnipeg and generally works on Manitoba Opera productions.