

Moor sex please: saucy Shakespearean shenanigans hit the spot



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Desdemona, a play about a handkerchief



Isn't this 'Macbeth'? Clockwise from top: Sue Hansen-Styles, Lindsay McGill and Angela Heath-Larsen. (Photo: TrustNordisk)

Tell me but this," says Iago to Othello in Shakespeare's play. "Have you not sometimes seen a handkerchief spotted with strawberries in your wife's hand?" Such a handkerchief, he insists, "did I today see Cassio wipe his beard with". To fans of the Bard, the handkerchief belongs as surely in 'Othello' as the strawberries belong on its fabric. Shakespearean scholars, typically, have devoted many a symposium to speculating naughtily on the strawberries symbolising penises or virgin blood on wedding sheets.

Now we're getting somewhere because, believe me, when the Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Paula Vogel subtitles her Othello spin-off as 'a play about a handkerchief', she is decidedly not telling the whole truth. 'Desdemona' is a bawdy, comic and ironic adaptation of 'Othello', and the tables have been dramatically turned on the well-known tragedy. For one thing, the characters are all women.

Desdemona, one of Shakespeare's most passive and virtuous heroines, is in Vogel's play a promiscuous, spoilt, filthy-mouthed girl (played by the excellent Lindsay McGill), whose curiosity about country matters (nudge nudge, wink wink) and all that goes on in the dark makes her find a hoof-pick delightfully phallic (look out for that scene: theatrically speaking, there's something haunting about the absurdity of

Desdemona getting aroused by this grim instrument). What's more, the height of Desdemona's week is filling in for the brothelmadam, Bianca (Angela Heath-Larsen) when Tuesday night comes around. That's the slow night at the brothel, and Miss Dessy is none too aristocratic to "Adam-and-Eve it" with a few Venetian soldiers.

'Desdemona' is directed by Barry McKenna, who in 2011 directed 'Vita & Virginia', another of Why Not Theatre Company's warmly-received, literature-charged productions. And McKenna is no stranger to Shakespeare. Just two months ago, he directed and co-wrote That Theatre Company's 'Shakespeare Unplugged' at Krudttønden. And McKenna will again be at the helm when the aforementioned theatre companies team up in the autumn for a production of Harold Pinter's 'Old Times'.

As you may have guessed, what we are generally interested in is the inner lives, longings and lusts of Shakespeare's women – in this case, the titular wife of the Moor, her fille de chambre (Sue Hansen-Styles' warm and empathic rendition as Desdemona's handmaiden Emilia) and her wine-guzzling friend, the prostitute Bianca. By acknowledging the existence of the male characters only parenthetically, Vogel clears plenty of space for the affairs of these females. Through 30 scenes – separated by blackouts and brief film clips suggesting where the male half of the story has been cut – the audience is treated to impassioned, funny, tragic and thoughtful observations on women's plight, delivered in a vernacular that is neither full-on Shakespearean nor full-on anything else. There is enough exquisite and off-the-wall language to meet your literary expectations, though. Sexual metaphors and kinky euphemisms fill the air.

Bianca, according to Desdemona, represents the "new woman". Exactly what this term signifies in the patriarchal society of the play's present is left unclear, but we do learn that the enviably self-empowered woman (to Desdemona she is) secretly longs for a conventional life in a cottage by the sea with Cassio. Incidentally, Cassio may be the only soldier under Othello's command whose instrument Desdemona has not inspected. One critic, I might add, has actually likened Vogel's 'Desdemona' to the notorious Carrie character in Sex and the City – now you know why.

All this sensuality is amusingly rendered, though the amount of caricature felt somewhat lopsidedly applied to the structure of the play. It nearly capsized the ending for me. But to be fair, in view of the wine-soaked scene in which Bianca demonstrates the techniques of a harlot until Emilia's sisterly jealousy turns into a sisterly bottle-and-daggerduel full of high-pitched squealing, maybe it's not that surprising.



'Desdemona – a play about a handkerchief' is playing at Båd-teatret until April 28. For more details, see [InOut](#).