

# Arches of Venice – the villain’s role and the victim’s part in Kuniaka Ida’s version of Othello (some short remarks on a late Portuguese production)

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*ACE/ Teatro do Bolhão*  
*Direction: Kuniaki Ida*

1.The following notes, focusing on Kuniaki Ida’s version of *Othello*, correspond to the precarious impressions of a member of the audience, not to the qualified judgment of the critic or the expert. The ingenious performance and the return of the classic myth would certainly deserve a more accurate and professional testimony; what the words bellow claim is, however, only the sincere involvement of the spectator and the immediacy of his enthusiastic response. The assumed didactic agenda granted by productions based on canonical texts <sup>1</sup>had already given birth to Berthold Brecht’s *A Resistível Ascensão de Arturo Ui* (Der aufhaltsame Aufstieg des Arturo Ui), in 2003, and to Molière’s *Don Juan*, in 2005; now is Shakespeare’s turn, rich in innovative performance solutions in an age of growing spectacular effects, improvisation and *happening*, but solid in its attachment to the literary source and textual matrix, being the solid outcome of experiment and collective engagement joining director, actors and translator in a permanent groping search and *avant-garde work in progress* only fully given meaning and form in its final version on the stage<sup>2</sup>. If one accepts the resilient idea of plays that find in their literary nature the very basic condition of their performance, *Othello* is a case in point; but this vocation does not confine the text to the barren interpretation by the

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<sup>1</sup> António Capelo, *apud* Ana Cristina Pereira, «Otelo ou o Ciumento», *Público*, Porto Edition, Ípsilon, Wednesday, December 4th 2009, p. 38.

<sup>2</sup> Manuel de Resende, author of the script and translator of the play (in a bilingual edition that is in many ways a companion to the performance), mentions this permanent negotiation of solutions and possibilities (*A Tragédia de Otelo, o Mouro de Veneza/The Tragedy of Othello the Moor of Venice*, tradução, prefácio e notas de Manuel Rezende, Lisboa, Relógio D’Água, 2010, p. 3 and its endnote).

book, no matter how faithful and meticulous it may be. Kuniaki's design and achievement is also the place of the unfamiliar and the unexpected.

2. The convergent agency of music and the power of suggestion provided by English Renaissance songs, by lights, bluish, orange and red, bright or dark, going hand in hand with the tone and atmosphere of the scene, and the operation of the austere atmosphere of scenery delineates a fascinating moving picture that challenges the audience since the very beginning of the performance. Some topics would illustrate the basic features of the auspicious opening. Thomas Morley's composition (*O Mystris Mine*, one of Feste's sceptic songs in *Twelfth Night*) and the popular anonymous *Mother Watkin's Ale* convey the strong reminiscences that the scenic configuration enhances and ratifies – the firm outline of the scenery, two blocks or structures figuring arcades, regular forms, harmonious shapes, solidity and elegance in perfect unison, and evocative and symbolic power, economy and effectiveness in those scarce props and productive devices (a single dislocation, appropriately bathed in suggestive lights and illustrated by insinuating music, implies a change in place and atmosphere). The running water in the foreground supports a calm and soothing feeling; the coloured ribbons add to the serenity of the landscape. Irony – intrigue and tension ruffle the nightly placid shadows of Venice. Farce, and the *commedia dell'arte* as a companion to the tragic structure of the dramatic action of *Othello*, is paid its due in the conspicuous status and features of characters – Iago is the shrewd servant that joins the Elizabethan villain, Roderigo the frustrated lover and unsuccessful rival, and a fool, easily dominated by Iago since the very beginning, in the temptation scene (a structural device in the plot), and later on in the scene Brabantio, the Pantalone or Deceived Father in the same tradition. Then a first glimpse of the enticing power of words – Iago, the Magus; Roderigo as an instrument of a successful experiment, encouraging the manipulator in his ascent. The master of lies rejoices, blissful and exuberant in his exposure of Desdemona and her adventure, and what could be a dismal conscience of loss merges, after all, in a general mood of alacrity and farce. Iago rides Rodrigo, in a vivid image of his supremacy over the gull, that he uses as a shield in the cloak of the night pierced by the shrill sounds of conspiratorial voices, imitates the lascivious movements of copulation and joins word to the action with the crude language of erotic animal reference. The duped father on the upper stage, in his nightcap and nightgown, seems to cooperate in the pure play of farce and slapstick: he is more ridiculous than pitiful, and his anxieties deserve only a very guarded attention in the context of frantic comic moves. And irony inheres in the verbal representation of the

Moor – depreciation and spite that pervade the biased image of the alien created by resentment and prejudice –

*Que fortuna há-de ter esse beiçudo/ P’ra assim levar a dele!* What a full fortune does the thick-lips owe/ If he can carry’t thus! (Roderigo)

*Um bode preto fossa a vossa branca ovelha.* ...an old black ram/ Is tuppung your white ewe (Iago)

*...deixais um cavalo bárbaro vagabundo cobrir a vossa filha;* ...you’ll have your daughter covered with a Barbary horse... (Iago),

– including the issue of erratic existence and precarious allegiance to law and authority (reference of the rules curbing ‘rogues, vagabonds and sturdy beggars’, of a famous Statute of 1572, would immediately cause a strong impression among Elizabethan spectators), so impressive a remark in face of Othello’s condition and his cherished identity as a member of Venetian society.

3. Somewhat surprisingly, however, Othello is white. Kuniaka’s option, coming to terms to quandaries and dilemmas inscribed in the long history of *Othello* ‘s performance, renounces to the most immediate representation of «black» and «blackness» and the persistent moral and social import of their connotations in Western culture. This introduces an element of complexity: race is not important, it only becomes important when prejudice is activated by Iago. Black is a word, a corrupting one when associated with a degraded set of values; words create things, establish relations and forge systems of behavior and thought. What is arbitrary or simply conventional becomes essential, a material force investing with the force of dogma and the absolute logic of discrimination and exclusion against any open cultural reference. Racism exists in the threatened patriarch’s voice (Brabantio), in the lover’s speech of resentment (Roderigo), and in the wily manoeuvres of the sorcerer and tempter, Iago. The myth of the Beauty and the Beast can only be conjured in the ironic representation of the hero and of his white patrician lady, supposed protagonists of a story of black magic and of female victimization (so is Brabantio’s assured version) or permeated by the universal lust that embraces ostensive animal eroticism and depraved hidden inclinations (so is Iago’s sustained version).

The hero is an exotic figure, not very impressive in his physical presence (António Capelo is clearly not a huge intimidating man), but imposing in his sense of balance, in his calmness and authority among agitated figures (a kind of respected samurai is perhaps the first glimpse one has of his presence). His authority is categorical, unmovable in the

strong intonation of his voice and the solemn expression of his gesture – *Guardai vossos brilhantes gládios, que o orvalho/ Os pode enferrujar...*, ‘Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them.’ A debatable solution: shouldn’t Othello avoid, in his gestures and dress, any specific traits of differentiation, and rather try to erase as much as possible his past? He is, anyway, solid and erect as a rock, and his image of unassailable integrity makes him seem to glide on the stage. Diction, above all in formal and solemn rhetoric moments, accentuates with a pitch the last syllable or syllables of his verses – another strong innuendo of his otherness. In what corresponds to scene two in the written text, Iago exhibits the basic traits of his evading flexible identity: insinuating and obsequious, he now plays the faithful servant, moving around Othello, and later around Cassio, like an obstinate mosquito, exploring the other character’s reactions and frailties. But a glimpse of mute humiliation responds to the condescension and arrogance of the general’s favourite – he taps the ensign on the forehead; after all, hierarchy matters and, as the lieutenant will grant the ensign just before his fall, *O tenente há-de salvar-se antes do alferes.*, ‘... the/lieutenant is to be saved before the ancient. ...’

4. The initial debate over Cyprus in the Senate shows us the Duke and his councilor with a map before them: sobriety and depuration are promised from the very beginning. This is not, as a matter of fact, a crowded scene (as perhaps readers of the play could expect), the public occasion with its intimidating effects on Desdemona and Othello – power and mass converging to press the lovers. In Kuniaki’s version a more intimate event is performed, soon to become a restricted court session, reducing the full impact of public deliberative speech and, later on, judicial speech. And one might also think that a more static allocation of positions would be more appropriate to the depiction of formal dialogic features of the debate, but the choice made at this juncture gives expression to the open movement of feeling in the physical movement of characters, changing places, agitated incursions and reactions, suggesting a dance *cum figuris* subordinated to a triangle matrix which operates the distribution of characters on the stage. Movements are carefully orchestrated, the triangle formed by the Duke and his counselor, by Desdemona and Othello, and by Iago, draws in its geometric configuration a place of order and authority, and of the civilized balance to establish between natural impulse inclinations and collective ordered needs. There is a glimpse of privacy for Othello and Desdemona – they share a moment of tenderness in the background when judicial speech crosses overtly urgent deliberative or political

interests and when the voice of reason is summoned to curb and overrule Brabâncio’s emotions, sustaining the warrior’s voice and his wife’s desires in the preparation of the expedition against the Turks. In this minimalist context Othello’s eloquence and dignity, and Desdemona’s bravery are not, after all, jeopardized. But the ways of love never run smooth. Iago, placed on a privileged angle of the figure, a powerful agent of disorder, alert and shrewd in his self-protective physical aloofness, ready to absorb information to be invested later on in his plot, illustrates the old saying; the same could be said of the suspense created by the ominous words of the father repudiating his daughter and admonishing his rejected son-in-law – *Vela por ela, mouro, se tens olhos de ver. / Como enganou o pai, pode enganar-te a ti.* ‘Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see: / She has deceived her father, and may thee.’ – to reverberate later in the fatal hour of temptation, which supports equivocal expectations; and finally the embarrassing social, moral and aesthetic connotations of the word *preto* (black) – *E, nobre senhor, se é verdade que à virtude/ Beleza deleitosa não lhe falta, / Vosso genro é mais belo do que preto;* , ‘And, noble signior, / If virtue no delighted virtue lack, / Your son-in-law is far more fair than black;’ – to be conveniently explored by the conspirator and to be tragically assimilated by the devastated hero in his Fall.

5. And then time for farce: the villain, one had already realized, is a brilliant recreation in Kuniaki’s hands (João Paulo Costa is really the right man for the right job, a tremendous Iago in his modulations in attitude and pose); now the scene explodes in alacrity and mirth, and Rodrigo (João Melo), playing the role of the clown, is Iago’s fool and the audience’s delight in his dangling on the block of arcades threatening to jump down, in his being pulled down by Iago, in his ludicrous attempt to soothe his pains in his sore bottom (trousers down, rubbing it in the fresh water), finally in his giving in to his cunning fellow’s arguments. An easy target, indeed.

Excision is made conspicuous in Iago’s advices to the gull, those speeches informed by the motto ‘*Põe bastante dinheiro na bolsa*’, Put money enough in your purse: the sense of economy operates in performance, and rights granted to farce and slapstick are promptly crowned by the soliloquy of the villain, closing the scene and keeping the plot moving on. A challenge to the audience, always fascinated by the energy and intelligence of the perfidious director and grand designer, and now definitely surrendered to his sharing of feelings, thoughts, and intentions.



Fotografia: Ana Pereira

6. This complicity will also mark the opening sequence in Cyprus – the villain’s position on the stage becomes a strategic point for asides and flattering advances tending to activate the audience’s imagination and captivate their sympathetic enthusiasm. He will perform the spirit of negation’s part: bawdy and derisive, a witty clown allowed to be spicy and provocative in his sexual innuendos and allusions, he displays with charm and confidence his power to corrupt and subvert. The atmosphere is pervaded by anxiety and uncertainty – soldiers bent over the water, nervously manipulating little paper boats and narrating what they see (when does Othello arrive?). Husbandry in props and scenery reaffirm the role allocated to the audience, which are, as in Elizabethan and Jacobean times, invited to recreate in their minds what the austere visual scene suggests. Iago is then both the shrewd mundane master of ceremonies (in conspicuous antithesis to the gentle Cassio, whose social superiority is, by the way, never forgotten) and a malevolent choric voice that comments with fastidiousness and ironic intonation on the announcement of Othello’s arrival and that makes the audience burst with laughter – ‘*O Mouro! Conheço-lhe a trombeta!*’, The Moor! I know his trumpet – , and later on, when the lovers finally embrace and kiss in a mutual and absolute involvement, dismisses a prospect too good to be true and fustigates with gross incisive remarks the gorgeous vision of Mars and Venus in perfect unison. Comedy does not consummate, it has only done its part. Iago’s

voice projects a huge shadow over the course of the action, and the last dialogue in the scene, or the soliloquy that closes it, herald the supremacy of his grand design over the frail golden circle of self-confident love. Next move is engendered with bliss and unswerving assertiveness – ‘...*Esta a trama, inda confusa, / Que a vileza só mostra a cara quando se usa.* (...)’Tis here, but yet confused: / Knavery’s plain face is never seen till used). An unequal struggle is in the making, as the accomplished predator is much stronger than the innocent or credulous prey.

Othello’s favourite is a saucy target and a step in the way to more daring achievements. He is austere, smart in his black velvety uniform that typifies the Venetian officer (an outrageous Florentine *parvenu*, in Iago’s eyes), a vivid contrast with the crude grey clothes of the «honrado» (honest) ensign, and apparently untouchable in his virtue. The hunter’s steps are meticulously calculated and at this juncture performance stresses the humiliation endured by the villain – the victim to be imposes his social and martial superiority in what he says (the above-mentioned priority of the lieutenant over the ensign before salvation) and does (the complacent tap on Iago’s forehead, later to be reiterated by Othello). Iago burns in mute resent, and a measure of his devastating power is given by the way he masters his emotions and orchestrates his triumph. When his rival falls in disgrace, the villain tests with tremendous success his skills – insinuating in his role of compassionate observer, then of faithful servant and companion, engaged in the relief and comfort of his bosom friend through curt and incisive remarks, finally in the boisterous joy that allows him to ride the prostrated Cassio, drunk, in all fours, head down, like a monstrous insect in pain, a consummated image of grief and self-abjection. This comic and ironic device helps captivate the audience’s favour and mirth (a dangerous moral deprivation, or a measured risk?): the vanquished (António Júlio) is very thin, and much taller than the victor (the nimble João Paulo Costa), and there is something grotesque and wild in this conspicuous incongruity. Now honest Iago, the insidious agent of disorder, impersonates the Enemy and Father of Lies, invisible in his approaching movements, subtle in checking his victim’s pulse, and perfect in the conception and the timing of his attempts: ‘*Divindade do Inferno!*’, Divinity of Hell is a suitable cry of triumph, and a proclamation of the perfect moment

*Entretanto, eu tomo o Mouro à parte e faço  
Com que ele apanhe Cássio a requestar-lhe  
A mulher; esse é o caminho – em frente!  
Há que malbar o ferro quando quente!*

(Myself the while to draw the Moor apart, / And bring him jump when he may Cassio find/ Soliciting his wife. Ay, that's the way/ Dull not device by coldness and delay), given special effectiveness by the easy cooperation of the other characters, tamed fools to be included into his play and his meticulous grand design ('Quem é então que diz que eu faço de vilão/.../?', And what's he then that says I play the villain?). The audience crowns this explosion of energy and shrewdness with encouraging delight. This is also Kuniaki's success.

7. Music had harmoniously, in the opening of the action, joined the *solid delicacy* of masses and clarity of lines and shapes in the patrician atmosphere of Renaissance Venice. An anonymous song of the English Renaissance – the playful and mocking innuendoes of its narrative lyrics of *Mother Watson's Ale* certainly does not hurt the gentle dignity of the dramatic landscape – , and the same can be said of the Thomas Morley's composition, strongly evocative of the glamour of the Italian city-state. Now irony vibrates in the remaking of the famous aria *What is a Youth*, picked up in Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet*, and made caustic in the musicians' fanfare. Insidious associations are suggested at this juncture – the Clown's face is painted in black (the obvious instances of the hero in Orson Wells and Lawrence Olivier may well obliquely come to the audience's mind); and the bawdy matrix of the dialogue, inappropriate as any underlying exposure of Cassio's attitude and intentions, may hint at the invisible action of Iago by proxy. I wouldn't say that any special meaning should be necessarily attached to the scene (which is expurgated from many productions): it may rather provide, above all, a prime occasion for the alacrity effects of performance and the satiric effects of farce. The spicy ingredients are dully enforced and amplified by the popular accent and expression (the *castiço* of Portuguese northern register, interjections like *pardeus* and *bofê*, all to be found, one must say, in Emilia's voice and gestures). On the other hand the scene adds to the gentility and composure of Cassio a somewhat puzzling inclination: he is also the mundane frolicker, which will return later in the sensual flirt, the dance with the courtesan Bianca (Rute Miranda), when he will pinch and slap the woman that is in love with him, before dismissing her promptly.

8. This deliberate device, a break in the action of the play, prepares the audience for a long temptation scene. Now one can see Iago in his prime. The insinuating approach of the villain to a conjectured affair between Desdemona (Rita Lello) and Cassio (António Júlio) is providentially supported by the clumsy movements of the beautiful lady in white. She is a whimsical spoilt child in her mannerisms and artificiality, a fact that



will perhaps in the given moment favour the insinuation in the mind of a simple man and soldier of the double nature of sophisticated women in mundane Venice, and in the unobtrusive and sly separation between the general's wife and his former go-between one can see a sparkling chance for the intruder. Othello's self-assertiveness, and tenderness towards his devoted lover will soon give way to the growing agitation the hero will try to suffocate, but the talented manipulation of time and suggestion will arise in the victim, first the figments of his own anxiety, then the alleged terrible revelation only provided by the full assimilation of stereotype ('...*Como eu sou preto,...*' ...Haply, for I am black/ ...) and fuelled by a string of enticing associations – «penso» (*I think*), «honrado» (*honest*), «ser» e «parecer» (*to be* and *to seem*). '*...esse monstro de olhos verdes que se diverte/ Com a carne que o nutre. ...*' (...the green-eyed monster which doth mock/ The meat it feeds on; ...), that had laid in waiting, enters at last the hero's mind, the slow progress of suspicion becomes a devastating spectacle of subversion (the image in the water, Kuniaki's device to illuminate the epiphany of blackness and self-abjection, seems visually and symbolically appropriate). There is magic in words, and what deserves particular consideration, in this scene that includes a long dialogue subjected to cuts for the sake of performance, in an effort of depuration and concentration that does not jeopardize the basic features of the conflict, is the brilliant role of Iago, the formidable step of his ascension. This character treads his ways with the expertise of the accomplished rhetorician (*Inventio*, *dispositio* and *elocutio*, or, with specific comic effects, *refutatio* and *peroratio*, ... a purposeful argumentative structure could even perhaps be surprised, if not in the experience of the audience and the stage, at least in the words on the page and the reader's scrutiny of his soliloquies, and the *actio* of the debate he engages himself with his antagonist) – and that's also how the Myth of the Magus joins the Myth of the Beauty and the Beast. He keeps his pose of restraint and respect, simulates hesitation and pretends to draw back in the name of friendship and loyalty, plays the sympathetic confidant and the reliable comforter, in a dazzling sinuous course that sustains tension and suspense in a most articulated exercise in argument and persuasion. In this confirmed outstanding moment in the action of the play João Bernardo is a supreme interpreter, and António Capelo, a convincing Othello, may well see in him a responding partner and a worthy antagonist

9. Othello's defeat announces the correlative fall of Desdemona. The odds are against her, not only because the nature and disposition of the cunning and brutal force walking in the shadow can hardly anticipate a different outcome but also because she seems to adjust her behavior to the

fate Iago has in store for her. She annoys Othello in the untimely flirtation aimed at Cassio's reprieve, and later on, when the general is conveniently refashioned by his tempter, her affectation and female appeal become outrageous in the new mood of prejudice and suspicion instilled, fed and activated by Iago: the loving and playful wife is seen as the seductress, as she adopts the worst pose one can imagine in a woman who wants to charm and bring her jealous husband round. Her white fashionable dress, her delicate patrician temper, her somewhat mannered aristocratic speech makes otherness more conspicuous, depriving it from its pristine fascination and spotting it with the strong insinuation of vice and the devious sophistication of the mundane. And, yes, her beauty: *Ida's Desdemona* is blond, her skin is fair, corresponding to the patterns of physical perfection and moral virtue consecrated in the Renaissance. In fact, now she is a white devil, her immaculate beauty only recovers the colour of shame and corruption – '*O nome dela, que era puro/ Qual face de Diana, está enfarruscado, / Negro como o meu rosto...*' (Her name, that was as fresh/ As Dian's visage, is now begrimed and black/ As my own face. ...). All she says and does cannot but be used against her – bewilderment and tender inclination are seen as disguise, submission and humility are read as an attempt at evading exposure; unmanageable eroticism are certainly to be perceived in the warmth and moist of her hand, a confession of guilt and sin and a plea for an undeserved pardon in her bashful eyes.

The innocent victim surrenders unconditionally to her fate, that is to say, to her lord and husband. Patriarchy has it so, and the lady stresses the dominant value of submission and obedience in the climactic scene with the Venetian ambassadors – insulted and beaten in public, she doesn't react in protest with stiff offended dignity or indignation, in spite of her being well aware of the appalling treatment she suffers at the hands of Othello ('*Não mereci isto*', I have not deserved this)– she only cringes, whimpers and cries, falls down with the impact of the strike; later on she will avoid her husband's eyes, more fearful than resentful, and kneel down in bewilderment and supplication; then, with Emilia (Ângela Marques), she will not go beyond disenchantment, and moderates criticism of male unfaithfulness and egotism. The perverse design of the villain seems to be tutored by the haunting influence of pure accident, the capricious mover underlying the *handkerchief sequences*, favouring the explosive combination of «Cássio» and «o lenço», leading ultimately to the «*provas oculares*» (*ocular proof*) required by Othello. As a matter of fact this prop, made in the words of the Moor's solemn advice a fearful insignia, this way erected to a powerful *Leitmotif* in the action of the play, could be seen as a magical associate

in the orchestrated machination against ill-fated Desdemona. In Kuniaki Ida’s version the bewitching item is almost ridiculous in its trivial visual configuration and deprived of the claimed powers that perhaps only a frantic and credulous imagination could assign to it. «*Sou vosso para sempre*», I am your own for ever – this is not only an ironic comment on a situation of hidden reversion. João Paulo Costa’s intonation is reserved and thoughtful, suppressing any traits of jocularity. *Alea jacta est*: the plotter’s mind conjures possibilities, engenders traps, anticipates his next stroke.



Fotografia: Ana Pereira

10. The frailty of the central female character is perhaps also enforced by the surprising representation of Emília (Ângela Marques), lady-in-waiting and confidant. Could she ever be a firm and reliable support of her lady in distress? She is depicted as a simpleton, or, at least, a very disturbed woman, clearly defective in her fits and starts – a peculiar feature of Iago’s wife is to be seen in the continuous nervous movements of her head (a sign of an underlying sinister experience with her indifferent and cynic husband?). Her social extraction is humble, and her northern popular accent, with typical sibilant speech and recurrent expressions of plebeian *castiço*, as observed before, invites the audience to see her as a character of comedy; but she plays an important role in the action – it is she who provides Iago with a powerful tool of sedition (in a moment when her flirtation with her sardonic husband is almost pathetic in the vain attempt at moving and seducing the

villain), and it is she as well who feeds, with her murderous silence, Iago's plot. Her suicidal devotion to truth and to Desdemona is, however, a grand gesture of independence and redemption (from passivity and obedience to the most radical self-assertion, her development and growth establishes in a way chiasmus when compared with the course of Desdemona), perhaps somewhat embarrassing in its exuberant performance and the erratic and groping steps towards the place on the ground beside her lady's bed (there is nobody to show her the way, or to take her there). This is not entirely irrelevant – the faithful servant is not given exactly what she asks in her final moment – '*...Deitai-me ao lado da minha ama!*', ....lay me by my mistress' side! – the place in the bed is reserved for Othello. Surprising indeed: how far can the most frustrated and invisible human being go?

The fate of a third woman in the plot would also deserve some attention. The moment when the hero enters above to supervise the appointed suppression of Cassio and to boast and rejoice in the supposed achievement of the task, tragedy may be at risk and farce a dangerous intruder. As a matter of fact the audience seem to find the rise of the black mass of his head and breast somewhat ludicrous. But what seems even more embarrassing is the reaction to the resolute and challenging attitude of Bianca when falsely accused by Emília of Cassio's disgrace '*Não sou meretriz, tenho vida tão honrada/ Como vós que assim me insultais!*', I am no strumpet; but of life so honest/ *As you that thus abuse me* (by the way, the brunette and flirtatious Rute Miranda is brilliant in the role, António Júlio could find in her a reliable partner). Why do people laugh at this juncture? Perhaps patriarchal values of the time are not that far after all.

11. Red is the colour of the last sequence: Othello enters the stage dressed in red clothes, the floating little candles on the water, evocative of the mystery of the East, are red, and the scene is flooded with the premonitory red lights. The hero's hesitant movements, his averted looks, his urge to give the bloody deed under the chaste stars a meaning of sacred performance and a last act of love, are duly underlined by the heavy solemn liturgical speech and the intense red colours of the scene. On the eve of her death Desdemona will disrupt with the energy of the supplicant the role of sacrificial victim that the dreadful priest and executioner had allocated to her. Her fears are perfectly sound, the huge figure hovering above her bed, rolling the eyes and biting the lip like a disturbed black angel of death, is not the embodiment of a vague danger any more: she reacts with the most vehement life instinct against an imminent physical threat. The bed had been brought onto the stage, and the audience provided with the ritual movements of shadows around it in a kind of Dance of Death;

her wedding blankets and dress had also foreshadowed, in the traditional confluence of marriage and burial one could already find, for instance, in *Romeo and Juliet*, the fate of Desdemona (in the intimate moment shared with Emilia, the shroud that is to enwrap the one doomed to die is ominously conjured). When the stage recovers the symmetrical outline, now with a shrine as a powerful symbol in the center, the sense of doom and inevitable fate is given new breath and visual import. Kuniaki's Othello conveys his divided feelings (the violence that kills and the repulsive preservation of the sacred body of the woman he shouldn't touch) with the wavering movements on the stage and with the tension between the contact implied in his fatal stroke and the retraction that would avoid it, faces the truth with the excruciating moaning of a prostrated hurt panther, all this under the impressive frame of the presence of the victim, like a fine image of Henry Fuseli or a puzzling choric frame – the serenity of the beautiful woman, the artistic mass of her disheveled hair and reclined head covering the place of murder. There is beauty in her death.

12. The play's denouement is not very reassuring as it seems to obliterate, or at least to put in perspective, any convincing sense of tragic reconciliation. The hero emerges suddenly with the sword in his hand: everyone and everything stops in awe in this moment of statuary, and the startling view of the tawny naked trunk of Othello, his mesmerizing and challenging look, and his shining scimitar (a prop marking his otherness) hold the scene in suspension, only the sinister hiss of the weapon fending the air can be heard. Then the fugacious attempt to die upon a kiss, '*morrer com um beijo*', so frustrating as to join Desdemona in the conjugal bed (in many ways they lay apart, the untroubled beautiful lady facing the audience; the lifeless warrior hidden behind her and away from the spectators' view seems indeed more remote than the graceful image of loss depicted by ill-starred Desdemona). Cassio, evidencing a remarkable power of regeneration, is a member of the final choir, all blacks on the eminence of the upper stage proclaiming in words more harsh than mournful the final verdict (exorcizing in the energy of their voices fears and anxieties not entirely dissipated?). Venice preserved? For whom does the bell toll now? Life must go on, authority is reestablished – over the indifference of the corpses, however – , and there is certainly a life out there. But the gleam of the villain's face, or that disarming smile of his celebrating the triumph in consummate destruction, does not easily depart, even when Iago's bent shadow crosses the background and moves slowly beyond the arches of Venice.

I wish you were here:

*In Memoriam* – Paulo Eduardo Carvalho (1964-2010)

