

Desdemona 2006-2007

Desdemona,

A Play About a Handkerchief
by Paula Vogel
directed by Raine Bode

Molly Moores & Beth Hylton*

January 12-28, 2007

at St Mary's

In a dank back room of Othello's palace, Desdemona's scullery maid Emilia scrubs dirty laundry, gossips and steals a handkerchief. Desdemona, the young bride, strikes up a friendship with Bianca, the town prostitute, in the hopes of discovering a world of freedom through sexual experience. In Paula Vogel's roller coaster of a play, a fog of deception clouds the fine line between sex and control. Desdemona, A Play About A Handkerchief is set in somewhere between the time period of Shakespeare's tragedy and the familiarity of post modern life. This investigation of the constraints placed upon the lives of three women, based on their class, questions the importance placed on the sexual act as a tool for upward mobility.

Vogel's plot further develops Shakespeare's mostly male storyline: a young bride follows her husband to an exotic land for escape and adventure. Her servant is bitter about an unfulfilling sex life and is trapped in a loveless marriage. A town whore longs for marriage and stability. In the women's constricted world, a husband is both a means of escape and upward social mobility as well as the murderer whose jealous rage stifles their breath. Vogel turns a classic tragedy into a modern day mirror by asking: do women define themselves by men? Do women hit the glass ceiling by lying on their backs? Can friendship exist between women? And does any one really control their destiny?

Making her BSF directorial debut, Raine Bode works with a team of exceptionally talented actors and designers. BSF veteran Tara Garwood* takes on the role of the curious and cruel Desdemona. Molly Moores, last seen by BSF's audience as Celia in *As You Like It*, portrays the nobly miserable servant Emilia. BSF newcomer Beth Hylton* deftly portrays the savvy and yet vulnerable Bianca. The innovative design team includes; scenic design by Kimberley Lynne, lighting design by Alex Pappas, costume design by Heather Jackson, properties design by Liza Davies and fight choreography by Lewis Shaw.

* denotes member Actors' Equity Association

[go back to the top](#)

From the Baltimore Sun

An irreverent turn of events, starting with a lost hanky In 'Desdemona,' the women of 'Othello' vamp it up

Molly Moores & Tara Garwood*

by J. Wynn Rousuck

Sun theater critic

January 17, 2007

A saucily corseted stage manager enters down the center aisle, flourishes a handkerchief and then drops it on the floor. That's the bold beginning of *Desdemona, A Play About a Handkerchief* at the Baltimore Shakespeare Festival.

Between scenes, we hear the stage manager's voice calling lighting cues as three female stagehands come on stage, adding or subtracting props. Focusing this much attention on the folks behind the scenes is a little unconventional, but then, Paula Vogel's revisionist look at Shakespeare's *Othello* is a lot unconventional.

Desdemona re-imagines Shakespeare's *Othello* from the viewpoint of its female characters: *Desdemona*, *Othello*'s bride; *Emilia*, her maid and the wife of *Othello*'s arch-rival, *Iago*; and *Bianca*, a prostitute. It's wildly irreverent and bawdy to the point of deliberate bad taste. (Do not take the kids to this one.)

But Vogel - a Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright best known for *How I Learned to Drive* and *The Baltimore Waltz* - uses her play's excesses and low comedy for a serious purpose. Although *Othello* takes place at a time when women were shunted into the background, in *Desdemona*, Vogel suggests that they might have been more powerful - or at least more canny - than Shakespeare let on.

Female director Raine Bode reinforces that notion by letting the audience see that the stage manager and stagehands are all women.

Vogel's play is an 80-minute exercise in overturning preconceptions. In Shakespeare, *Desdemona* is pure of heart and deed. In Vogel, she's such a loose woman, she actually tries plying *Bianca*'s trade at the brothel one night. And though *Othello* believes *Desdemona* is cheating with *Cassio*, he's "the only one" she hasn't slept with, as *Emilia* puts it.

Far from a sweet, young thing, Tara Garwood's *Desdemona* is a brazen, spoiled child. When she discovers that the handkerchief *Othello* gave her as a love token is missing, she starts hurling clothing and laundry into the air, then sits on a table, stamps her hands and feet and howls like a toddler having a tantrum.

And, she treats devoted *Emilia* reprehensibly, calling her "Mealy" in mean-spirited mock affection and constantly belittling her. In Vogel's world, *Emilia* - not *Desdemona* - is the soul of propriety. She's also a religious woman, and Molly Moores comically conveys *Emilia*'s disapproval of *Desdemona*'s wantonness by saying her rosary with increasing distress as *Desdemona* and *Bianca* engage in a bit of S&M.

But while *Bianca* may be the local strumpet, Vogel turns the tables here, too. *Desdemona* admires *Bianca*'s freedom, but *Bianca*'s deepest desire is to settle down with *Cassio* in a little cottage by the sea. Despite a Cockney accent that is at times too thick to be fully intelligible, Beth Hylton amply depicts *Bianca*'s enthusiasms - whether for her trade or her dreams of domesticity.

Even if this all seems a bit much, *Emilia* and *Desdemona* undergo an affecting change. Disproving *Emilia*'s assertion that "there's no such thing as friendship with ladies," servant and mistress eventually form a bond of friendship and equality. The bittersweet ending of Vogel's play suggests that this bond won't be enough to alter the fatal final scene of Shakespeare's play. But Vogel has accomplished the goal of imbuing the women with honesty, openness and trust - emotions lacking in their husbands.

Desdemona, A Play About a Handkerchief is a daring endeavor for the Baltimore Shakespeare Festival. You can tell how far it is from traditional Shakespeare as soon as you see designer Kimberley Lynne's set, in which the stage - and some of the rest of the theater - are strewn with line upon line of laundry. Vogel also retains only a smattering of Shakespeare's lines.

Purists and the more staid theatergoers may not be amused. And Desdemona is slighter than some of Vogel's other work, feeling at times like an academic exercise.

But producing this offbeat (and at times off-color) play is a clear, entertaining demonstration of the burgeoning Baltimore Shakespeare Festival's willingness to stretch its horizons and those of its audience.

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[go back to the top](#)

From Baltimore City Paper
Her Story

Play Tackles Othello From The Decried Woman's Point Of View

by Geoffrey Himes

January 17, 2007

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S OTHELLO turns on the question of whether Desdemona has been a faithful wife to Othello, the Venetian general. For the most part, the play consists of men debating her fidelity, with Iago urging suspicion, Cassio denying it, and Othello torn this way and that. Desdemona gets few chances to weigh in, and when she does, she comes across as a man's fantasy of a woman so virtuous that she will forgive even her husband's false accusations.

Many women have been dissatisfied with this depiction, but Paula Vogel is the only one to have written an alternate version. Vogel, who grew up in the Maryland suburbs of Washington and who won a 1998 Pulitzer Prize for her Maryland-set play *How I Learned To Drive*, wrote *Desdemona, A Play About a Handkerchief* in 1979, when she was only 28. If the play is energized by a young feminist's need to provoke, it is also limited by the exaggeration such provocation invites.

In Vogel's version of the Othello story, no man ever appears onstage. Instead the entire show takes place in the back laundry room where Desdemona (Tara Garwood) gossips with maid Emilia (Molly Moores) and best friend Bianca (Beth Hylton). In Baltimore Shakespeare Festival's current production, the floor is littered with heaps of dirty clothes while soiled sheets and underwear hang from five levels of clothes lines, which extend out into the audience. Here is a show that airs dirty laundry in more ways than one.

And Vogel's is a very different Desdemona than Shakespeare's. Rather than the Bard's lily of purity, Vogel's heroine jokes about buying some chicken blood to soil the sheets and fake her virginity on her wedding night. When she spots a cylindrical tool called a hoof pick, she soon turns it into a dildo. Her pal Bianca is not only Cassio's mistress but also madam of the local whorehouse. Desdemona is so titillated by her friend's stories that the general's wife volunteers for a shift at the bordello just to see what it's like.

By contrast, Emilia, with her thick Irish brogue, is a religious prude. She may detest her cantankerous, sexually inadequate husband, Iago, but she will be faithful to him nonetheless. She scolds her employer every time Desdemona jokes about sleeping with other men and compares their relative sizes. It's as if the play were taking place in a freshman dorm room at the University of Virginia; Desdemona is the rich Roland Park girl sowing her wild oats at last, Emilia is the scholarship kid and disapproving born-again from Glen Burnie, and Bianca is the streetwise townie from Charlottesville.

As in Shakespeare's play, the point of contention in Vogel's is a handkerchief, a romantic gift from Othello to Desdemona

that has gone missing. In both shows, Iago has pressured his wife to steal it from Desdemona so he can plant it in Cassio's quarters and "prove" that Desdemona and Cassio have been having an affair. In Vogel's version, Desdemona is more concerned that the hankie has ended up in someone else's cleavage.

By twisting the Othello story into such new and unexpected shapes, Vogel not only makes us reconsider all our assumptions about the men and women in the play but also generates a great deal of humor besides. When Desdemona complains, for example, of her husband's suspicions about her and Cassio, Emilia jokes, "The only one you haven't had." "And I don't want him either," Desdemona rejoins. "A prissy Florentine, that one is. Leave it to a cuckold to be jealous of a eunuch."

But by exaggerating Desdemona's libido and Emilia's prudishness for comic effect, Vogel pays a price. When she tries to steer the play back to its tragic nature in the final scenes, it's too late. Her characters may be delightfully cartoonish but they're cartoonish just the same.

The comic inflation is also a challenge for the show's three actresses. This cast makes most of the jokes work, but they are no more successful than Vogel in adding a tragic dimension. Garwood captures the try-anything adventurousness of a spoiled-rotten college freshman--very good at showing the self-indulgent acting out, less good at revealing the insecurities that prompt such behavior.

Moore gives Emilia not only a peasant's easily shocked sense of morality but also a poor woman's dogged determination to make some money at every turn. But she, too, is much better at these comic types than at the inner feelings of a much abused servant. Hylton has the smallest and most exaggerated role, but she, too, strikes some comic sparks as a blunt-talking prostitute who nonetheless dreams of marrying her favorite John.

Director Raine Bode has staged the play as if it were on a TV soundstage with black-clad technicians scurrying around to set each scene and an invisible director giving cues through a static-crackling sound system. This framing device proves more distracting than illuminating, though, and Bode does her best work by keeping the pacing of the brief vignettes brisk enough that the comedy never falters.

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[go back to the top](#)

From The Baltimore Examiner
A hankie-waving affair

by Dan Collins

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Everything is a matter of perspective. One woman's 9-to-5 job is another's escape to freedom. One woman's jest is another's faith. "Desdemona: A Play About A Handkerchief" is about much more than linens - it is black comedy at its blackest as three women's lives intertwine over frank discussions about sex, men, friendship and love.

Paula Vogel's play offers us another look at Shakespeare's tragedy "Othello," this time from the women's point of view. Tara Garwood portrays Desdemona as a "young, unbridled colt" who escapes the drudgery of marriage by moonlighting as a prostitute. Emilia (Molly Moore) is her maid and laundress, a woman who clings to her rosary and her propriety while praying for the day her husband, Iago, "makes her a lieutenant's widow." And Bianca (Beth Hylton), the "harlot with heart of gold," provides Desdemona with graphic tutelage in the finer arts of sadomasochism while actually dreaming for what Desdemona would happily abandon: marriage.

All three women are ultimately undone by their blindness to the other's perspective. Desdemona, the lady of privilege, fails to see how her philandering could have horrible repercussions for Emilia whose life and livelihood depend upon her mistress' fortunes. Emilia, is focused only on her attempts to raise her station, and so steals Desdemona's handkerchief and gives it to her husband, Iago, refusing to see how this deception will lead to her lady's demise. And Bianca is blinded by jealousy when she believes the handkerchief, a gift from her would-be husband, Cassio, represents betrayal on the part of her friend, Desdemona, seeming proof of Emilia's contention that "there's no such thing as friendship with ladies."

While the iambic pentameter is left at the door, the language crackles with wit as the women "shrink their vowels and enlarge their vocabulary" on topics ranging from purdah to perfidy.

None of the characters are particularly likable. Desdemona seems happiest when berating men. For her, men are vehicles to take her to new worlds and experiences, nothing more. A "vessel of vinegar," Emilia is all "save and scrimp, plot and plan," while Bianca turns out not to be the 16th century Bettie Page-meets-Gloria Steinem Desdemona had thought her to be.

And why? Blame the men. Emilia is married to Iago, not exactly one of Shakespeare's more whimsical creations. Othello, jealousy incarnate, attends Desdemona, while working girl Bianca is betrothed only to a fool's dream of becoming the aristocratic Cassio's wife, living in "a cottage by th' sea."

Real love rarely enters into Vogel's three-woman equation, as all seemed far too consumed by life's pains and their own perceived misfortunes to feel anything else.