

## “’Twas Me Who Combed Her Hair”: Audience Participation in Two Italian Rewritings of *Othello*

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The last act of *Othello* has occasionally triggered the reaction of male spectators rushing to save Desdemona and has frequently left the entire audience tense and uneasy. Two Italian rewritings of Shakespeare’s tragedy explore the potential for audience response to *Othello* in original and imaginative ways. They are Pier Paolo Pasolini’s *Che cosa sono le nuvole?* (1968) and *Un bacio . . . un bacio ancor . . . un altro bacio* (1993), an educational theater piece inspired by Pasolini’s short film. This paper analyzes in depth the interplay of the film viewers with the internal audience and the performers in *Nuvole*, and the strategies employed by the directors to encourage audience participation in *Un bacio*. It also highlights how both rewritings use *Othello* to address issues of honor and race in Italian culture.

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There is something about the last act of *Othello* that makes the audience “feel less like spectators at an ancient art form than like bystanders at a traffic accident” (Potter 1). The annals of theater contain anecdotes, sometimes authentic but more often invented or unverifiable,<sup>1</sup> about male spectators rushing to Desdemona’s defense. Such extreme behavior can be explained as a racist knee-jerk reaction to the sight of a black man assaulting a white woman, but the restlessness that is shared by most audiences during Act 5, scene 2, of a well performed *Othello* is the result of watching a superbly crafted dramatic episode, cinematic in its construction.

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1. Stendhal, for example, gives his account of an attempted rescue which should have taken place in Baltimore in 1822. But the local newspapers of the time do not support his tale. See Bristol 195-96.

As Othello enters the bed chamber, he believes that his lieutenant has just been killed and must assume that a man from the garrison is coming to inform him. He understands therefore that his window of opportunity for killing Desdemona is fairly narrow. We know that it is in fact somewhat wider, because Iago has chosen Emilia, the slowest messenger he could possibly find. With rapt attention, we watch a murderer who, torn between love and hatred, keeps throwing verbal obstacles between himself and the completion of his act. His lengthy monologue, "It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul!" (5.2.1-23)<sup>2</sup> is full of soothing sounds ("snow," "smooth," "monumental alabaster" etc.) that could keep Desdemona asleep (and one of the bargains that Othello has made with himself is that he will not kill her in her sleep, lest he kills her soul, as we learn in 5.2.25-32). When she wakes, Othello offers to give her any time she may need to complete her prayers. The death threat at 5.2.31 is followed by a recap of the entire alleged affair and is carried out at 5.2.84. Emilia, whose progress we have been mentally following, arrives only seconds too late.

The scene is so famous and its effect on the audience so widely acknowledged that it became the obvious choice for Stanley Cavell when he explored audience perceptions of theatrical make-believe: "*Why* do I do nothing? Because they are only pretending? . . . Othello is not pretending. Garrick is not pretending, any more than a puppet in that part would be pretending" (100-01). Unlike the "Southern yokel" who tries to save Desdemona, he suggests, we know there is nothing we can do. Stopping the performance will simply make Othello vanish: "Quiet the house, pick up the thread again, and Othello will reappear, as near and as deaf to us as ever" (101).

Adaptations of the tragedy frequently exploit the peculiarity of its audience-stage relationship, featuring the spectators as co-protagonists and scripting their reactions into the Shakespearean plot. Two very successful Italian rewritings of *Othello* are Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Che cosa sono le nuvole* (What Are the Clouds?, 1967), an art-house cult movie, and *Un bacio . . . un bacio ancor . . . un altro bacio* (A kiss . . . another kiss . . . one last kiss, 1993), an educational theater piece that was inspired by Pasolini's film. They are worth analyzing together for several reasons. First of all, they both explore the role of the audience in *Othello* with results that are fascinating both in terms of the appropriation of Shakespeare's text and the investigation of unconventional theatrical practices. Secondly, they high-

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2. Act, scene and line numbers here and throughout refer to the Arden Shakespeare edition of *Othello*.

light how social changes in Italian society are reflected in the response of the audiences to the issues of honor and race.

### **Art-house Shakespeare: *Che cosa sono le nuvole?***

In the 1960s Italian directors were frequently asked to contribute a short feature to compilation films that usually belonged to the genre "comedy Italian-style," which was very popular with the average, middle-class cinema audience. *Che cosa sono le nuvole?* was Pier Paolo Pasolini's contribution to one such film, *Capriccio all'italiana* (Caprice Italian Style, 1968).<sup>3</sup> As it was often the case, each director worked independently of the others and the episodes had little or nothing in common. An exceptionally prolific writer and a controversial commentator of Italian politics, Pasolini was frequently reviled in life and almost universally praised after his death (1975). The original scripts of his films were published as part of his *Complete Works*, making it possible to examine *Clouds* in the light of Pasolini's early version of the script, which is longer than the actual film and interspersed with his comments (Siti and Zabagli 933-66).

Shot in one week in 1967, the 22-minute film is set in a run-down theater where a company of life-sized puppets perform *Othello* in front of a boisterous, naive audience. Pasolini planned it as part of an exploration of the possibilities of cinema which had started with *Uccellacci e uccellini* (Hawks and Sparrows, 1966) and had continued with *La terra vista dalla luna* (The Earth Seen from the Moon, 1967). All films had as protagonists Totò, a hugely famous, aging Neapolitan comedian, and Ninetto Davoli, a proletarian youth from a Roman estate who had charmed the director with his innocent gaze. Totò died shortly after completing *Clouds*, and the director cut short what may have become a most fascinating sequence of works. The rest of the casting is just as intriguing. Domenico Modugno, "Mr Volare," sings the theme song while performing his duties as "Immondezzaro," garbage collector. The puppeteer is played by Francesco Leonetti, a poet who was part of Pasolini's sophisticated Roman coterie. Franco Franchi (Cassio) and Ciccio Ingrassia (Roderigo) are a couple of trashy comedians who starred in films that make the *Carry on* series look positively highbrow. Another of Pasolini's friends, Laura Betti, plays a major role in *Clouds*. At the time she was better known as a singer than as an actress. Jazz club au-

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3. The entire film is now available in DVD, but Pasolini's *Clouds* is also viewable on [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com).

diences appreciated the clever, often naughty songs that Italian intellectuals wrote for her. As virginal and demure as Mae West, she would not have been most directors' first choice for Desdemona.

Just as important as the named actors are the extras who interpret the role of the fictive audience. They are non-professionals, selected in the Roman slums to play themselves: a group of urban poor, entire families but also old fishwives and boys of life (Siti and Zabagli 939). The fictive audience recognizes Iago as the trickster of Italian comedy and settles down to an afternoon of family fun spiced up by rude innuendoes that the children, clustered in the first two rows, will hopefully fail to understand. It is not an unwarranted response. After all, "[t]he play's action up until the reunion of Othello and Desdemona in Cyprus (2.1) is a perfect comic structure in miniature" (Snyder 74). Although they do not appear in the film, the Brabantio scenes were included in the original script, thus offering ample scope for comedy at the expense of the black outsider. By calling him "Otello il Marocchino! Pardon: il Moro, il Moro! [Otello the Moroccan!<sup>4</sup> Pardon me: the Moor, the Moor!]" (Siti and Zabagli 941), Iago sums up centuries of disputes about Othello's ethnic background, whereas an outraged Brabantio goes straight for "cannibale!" [cannibal!] (942).

When Iago addresses them directly, trying to gain their approval for his plot against Othello, the urban poor in the film are prepared to let him fashion their responses to the play. Even without the Brabantio scenes, they applaud the trickster's comic wit and ingenuity. Unlike the movie audience, however, they are not familiar with either Shakespeare's tragedy or Verdi's opera (which has introduced generations of Italians to the story of the Moor). After the love duet between the newly-wed, the "spectators" shift allegiances and do not want any real harm to come to them. In the totally homogeneous Italian society of the 1960s, they do not have any reason to feel threatened by the Moor, "quel negro porco, zozzo, puzzolente" [that filthy swine of a stinking negro<sup>5</sup>] as Iago defines him, without causing any indignation, in one of his comic *crescendo*. Besides, they recognize Ninetto's Roman accent as their own, whereas Iago is clearly not one of them (Totò was Neapolitan to the bone—and there is no love lost between the two cities). As Iago becomes more and more Vice-like, the "spectators" hiss and shout

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4. "Moroccan" is derogatorily used by many Italians to identify anybody from Africa and by Northern Italians to refer to anybody from Southern Italy. In the script, it also represents an allusion to the journey Pasolini had just taken to Morocco to choose locations for his next film, *Oedipus Rex*.

5. The line is not in the script.

and try to warn his victims. Frustrated by Othello’s inability to hear them, they eventually turn against him too and storm the stage to save Desdemona. While the women comfort the tearful lady, the men kill both Othello and Iago and celebrate the triumph of a bewildered Cassio.

Like the mechanicals in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the puppets play their “most lamentable tragedy” in dead earnest and the “spectators” accept them at face value. Neither the comedians’ antics nor this Desdemona’s dubious innocence shake the fictive audience’s confidence that it is watching a moving tale of trust betrayed. Totò, Franchi and Ingrassia perform their trademark comic routines, but the “spectators” never laugh—a response which is gratifyingly suited to the intentions of the players. Who is supposed to laugh, then? Middle-class movie goers and art-house types. They are the only real audiences Pasolini can address because, as he says in a 1969 interview, he has lost the Gramscian illusion that, as a film-maker, he could speak directly to “questo popolo, magari idealizzato, ma in realtà anche oggettivamente esistente con una sua cultura . . . una sua visione della realtà” [these masses, maybe idealized, but also actually existing, with their own culture . . . their own vision of reality] (Siti and Zabagli 2979). By the end of the 1960s, consumerism has transformed Italian peasants into an urban underclass, eager to swell the ranks of the lower middle class. Pasolini can only reinvent his ideal, proletarian addressees by making them part of the film as a fictive audience.

Real-life middle-class spectators had gone to see *Caprice* because it was billed as a comedy Italian-style. They probably had never seen a Pasolini movie, knew of him solely through tabloid accounts of his scandalous way of life and did not know (or care) that he hated everything they stood for, dismissed them as philistines and would never have dreamt of directing a film just for their entertainment. Most likely, they found *Clouds* a bit too silly for their tastes, but enjoyed feeling superior to the fictive audience who could not see the blatantly obvious comic aspects of the puppets’ performance. If Pasolini had included them in the film, he would have treated them like the court audience in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*—teasers and teased at the same time. The discriminating art-house types, on the contrary, had been lured into the cinema by the promise of a Pasolini short feature, a treat for which they were willing to overcome their traditional dislike of comedy Italian-style. They were the only real audience that mattered to Pasolini, the “elite” which, in the same 1969 interview, he acknowledged as the addressees of all his films, with the lengthy expostulations that such an admission required when made by a committed Marxist (Siti and Zabagli

2973-86). Forty years later, their heirs still find *Clouds* intriguing and write scholarly articles about it. They understand that “while Iago shapes Othello’s responses within the fictive world of the play-within-the-film, powerful authorial discourses, like Shakespeare’s *Othello*, shape both the fictive and the real audience’s responses within *and* without Pasolini’s film” (Massai 98).

The opening shots offer the first clue to the intertextual complexity of *Clouds*. The garbage collector goes about his business while singing a haunting combination of slightly reworked lines from *Othello*.<sup>6</sup> It takes a close familiarity with the play to recognize all of them. Strung together, they do not retell the story of the Moor, but that of a man in love who has already lost his beloved and does not find comfort in folk wisdom advice about bearing his loss with a smile. It is the stuff popular songs are made on. Credited to Modugno-Pasolini, *Che cosa sono le nuvole* (a title, without question mark, that bears no relation to the song) has become a long-seller,<sup>7</sup> but very few of those who still listen to it know that it was part of the soundtrack of a film and that the words are mostly by Shakespeare. Of course, such a lowbrow appropriation of a canonical text can more easily go unnoticed when it takes place in a foreign language. Rather than an act of plagiarism, Pasolini’s foray into popular song writing is a scathing indictment of consumerism, a plague that infects not only peasant but also high culture. He is proving that, removed from the context of the tragedy and set to a maudlin tune, Shakespeare’s lines can become indistinguishable from any other mass product.

While the garbage collector sings, the camera pans to show the puppeteer, who is about to complete the creation of a new puppet, a very youthful looking “Othello,” and puts him on a rack with the other characters from Shakespeare’s tragedy. The most conspicuous among them is an elderly “Iago,” his face painted a bright shade of green. The father-son relationship that Totò and Ninetto Davoli had explored in their previous films is imme-

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6. The lines are: “Excellent wretch! Perdition catch my soul / But I do love thee! And when I love thee not / Chaos is come again” (3.3.90-92). “All my fond love thus do I blow to heaven: / ’Tis gone!” (3.3.448-49). “O thou weed / Who art so lovely fair and smell’st so sweet / That the sense aches at thee, would thou hadst ne’er been born!” (4.2.68-70). “The robbed that smiles steals something from the thief, / He robs himself, that spends a bootless grief” (1.3.209-10). “But words are words: I never yet did hear / That the bruis’d heart was pierced through the ear” (1.3.219-20).

7. Recent versions include: Avion Travel, *Bellosguardo* (1990), Grazia De Marchi, *Tutto il mio folle amore* (1989), recently reissued in CD, and Stefano Bollani’s *I visionari* (2006).

diately re-established. The new born puppet is full of questions. What does it mean to be born? It means one exists. Who is singing? It is the garbage collector who comes to take away the dead.

The camera pans over film posters of Pasolini’s past and future short features that are illustrated by details of paintings by Velasquez.<sup>8</sup> It finally focuses on today’s offering, which is not, as the song has led us to believe, Shakespeare’s *Othello*, but Pasolini’s *Clouds*. The poster is illustrated by a cheap reproduction of *Las meninas*. The interior scene at the Spanish court has nothing to do with either *Othello* or the film title, but the painting is an important clue to interpreting *Clouds* because of what it tells us about modes of representation. It shows the painter at the easel looking at his models outside the painting and therefore at the onlookers, who, as Foucault famously argued in his *The Order of Things* (1966), cannot help becoming part of the representation. Pasolini tries to reproduce for his viewers the effect of being at the same time outside and inside the film, of being at one with the fictive audience, but also of wandering backstage in search of the elusive author who challenges them to constantly readjust their interpretation of *Clouds* in the light of his references to other authors.

After lingering on the poster, the camera cuts to the theater curtain which opens to reveal a blank backdrop. Having repeatedly stated that “il teatro non è altro che un lunghissimo piano-sequenza” [theater is nothing but an extremely long sequence shot] (Siti and Zabagli 959), Pasolini first merges his real and his fictive audience. Both become the addressees of Iago’s opening line, “Adesso vi faccio vedere a questo qua come lo frego!” [Now I’ll show you how I con this idiot!]. This shot is immediately followed by a countershot that places the real viewers on stage with the puppets and allows them a panoramic view of the fictive audience. They also get to observe the puppeteer who performs the mechanical task of pulling the strings of the puppets to ensure that they cannot stray from the dumbed down version of Shakespeare’s script that he has devised for them. He stands aloof like a god and offers lofty academic replies, which sound awfully clever until one examines them too closely. He explains to a very distressed “Othello” that he may actually want to kill Desdemona. Why? “Forse . . . perché a Desdemona piace essere ammazzata . . .” [Perhaps . . . because Desdemona enjoys being killed . . .] (Siti and Zabagli 959). The

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8. Besides *Clouds*, they are *The Earth Seen from the Moon* and the two episodes he never filmed: *Le avventure del Re Magio randagio* (The Adventures of the Wandering Wise Man) and *Mandolini* (Mandolins).

Freudian explanation of the tragic development and ending of *Othello* is conspicuously at odds with the director's tongue-in-cheek portrayal of Desdemona.

Pasolini's fashioning of Desdemona is at least partially warranted by the first two acts of Shakespeare's tragedy, where she is presented as the willful girl who forced the foreign general to acknowledge and reciprocate her love and as the "super-subtle Venetian" who duped her father, stood her ground in front of the Senate and was not shocked by Iago's bawdy jokes in Cyprus. Laura Betti is perfect as a Desdemona who clearly runs circles around her sexually naive husband. In the puppets' script, she prays and gets ready for a night of love without yet having any idea of Othello's anger. When she pleads again for Cassio, her husband hits her. First she cries, then she misinterprets his violence as sexual foreplay. With a look that speaks volumes, she taunts him: "E' il primo schiaffo che piglio! Se volete darmene un altro . . . (ha un ambiguo sorriso di sottomissione)" [First time I've ever been slapped. Should you care to slap me again . . . (with an ambiguous smile of submission)] (Siti and Zabagli 961). Othello is enraged and tries to throttle her because he sees the harlot of Iago's text. The "spectators" are deeply distressed and try to rescue her because they see the saintly Desdemona of Shakespeare's last act. The art-house types are greatly amused and do nothing because they see an unfortunate failure in communication. Unlike Othello, they fully appreciate that when Laura Betti turns the other cheek it is not Christian forgiveness she has in mind. This Desdemona does not enjoy being murdered, but she does enjoy *pretending* to be murdered as part of that most human of theatrical experiences—love-making. However, an awareness of Betti's naughtiness does not give the "elite" the right to dismiss the response of the fictive audience as laughable. Pasolini does not idealize his proletarians but does not mock them either. Desdemona's willingness to take part in rough sexual games does not make her any less true to Othello and, therefore, any less worthy of rescue.

The illiterate are instinctively right in their evaluation of people, according to Pasolini. Disaster strikes when they yield to the advice of those they consider their betters, and the fate of the new puppet is there to prove this point. "Othello" is eager to play his Shakespearean role to which he contributes the child-like innocence of Ninetto Davoli, who at nineteen was better suited to play the besotted lover of the pretty blonde than an awe-inspiring general "declined / Into the vale of years" (3.3.269-70). His Othello, therefore, is easily led into doubt; his wrath is amusingly akin to a tantrum. He is obviously no match for Iago, who is played by Totò as the personifi-

cation of envy, with comic madness in his eyes as he voyeuristically watches Othello’s and Desdemona’s tender encounter. It soon becomes evident that, whereas “Iago” understands the difference between his good-natured, fatherly behavior off-stage and his rascally role on stage, the new puppet does not. As a severely curtailed but basically accurate version of the tragedy unfolds before his eyes, “Othello” has a chance to overhear Iago’s plans. He therefore asks him about his motivation, another vexing question for Shakespeare scholars, and about the contrast between his off-stage persona and on-stage machinations.

Instead of explaining that their stage life is predetermined by the puppeteer who maneuvers their strings and that it should not be confused with their off-stage life, “Iago,” “serio e dolce, un vecchio, paziente filosofo” [serious and kind, an old, patient philosopher] (Siti and Zabagli 955) solemnly asserts that they are “IN UN SOGNO DENTRO UN SOGNO” [in a dream within a dream] (956). “Othello” is not particularly impressed. Even without the benefit of the capital letters in the script, the viewers can infer that Pasolini, who had a long-standing interest in Calderon de la Barca,<sup>9</sup> is introducing the Spanish playwright’s most famous line to tell them that they should not focus their attention exclusively on the performance of the Shakespearean text. The backstage life of the puppets is just as important, and yet, it too is only a shadow of their “real” life.

The next author who contributes to the fleshing out of the backstage life of the puppets is just as easy to recognize. Unconvinced by the puppeteer’s explanations about his desire to kill Desdemona, an anguished “Othello” asks “Iago” what truth is: “Quello che penso io de me, quello che pensa la gente o quello che pensa quello là dentro?” [What I think about myself, what people think, or what the guy up there thinks?] (Siti and Zabagli 959). It is the kind of question the “elite” effortlessly associates with Pirandello’s neurotic and highly articulate characters. The answer, though, is pure Pasolini. According to “Iago,” truth is something that stirs deep inside the young puppet’s chest. “Othello” is overcome with joy when he can dimly feel “something,” but he is warned not to mention it because it would vanish. Unfortunately, whenever “Othello” is on stage, all his behind-the-scenes knowledge disappears. He cannot, therefore, tap into the source of truth in his heart that would assure him of Desdemona’s innocence. Instead, he is enmeshed within his opponent’s web of words. They both are totally oblivious to the warnings of the audience

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9. He was writing a play called *Calderon*, part of which takes place in Velasquez’s studio while he is painting *Las meninas*.

because, as Cavell reminds us, when a performance is in progress not even puppets are pretending (101). When death comes, it is very real. Or is it not?

The next morning, two disjointed dummies that reproduce the features and clothes of “Othello” and “Iago” are thrown inside the garbage truck by the collector, still totally absorbed in his theme song. When the camera shows them again, inside the truck, the two actors have taken the place of the dummies. Their faces start showing signs of life, of the terror a baby about to be born must feel when it is being pushed out of the womb. When the garbage collector, that most indifferent of midwives, throws them into the open air dump they lie on their backs amidst the rubbish, shaken but definitely alive. A subjective pan fills the screen with clouds coursing in the sky. Excited by their beauty, Ninetto wants to know what they are. Clouds. And what are the clouds? Totò does not know the answer. So he joins Ninetto in contemplation of the sky with one final comment: “Ah, straziante, meravigliosa bellezza del creato!” [O heartrending and marvelous beauty of creation!] (Siti and Zabagli 966). The puppets must die so that they can be reborn in the real world, ready for more adventures in the next film. For any Italian viewer there is very little doubt, at this point, where Pasolini found his primary source of inspiration for this delightful “dream”: “[c]ome il Pinocchio di Collodi le marionette di Pasolini perdono la loro natura di pupi di legno e diventano umani” [like Collodi’s Pinocchio, Pasolini’s marionettes lose their nature of wood puppets and become human] (Costa 59). It is a sobering thought for the “elite.” The essential precedent is not to be found in the works of Shakespeare, Calderon, Velasquez, Freud, Pirandello or Foucault, but in *Pinocchio*, the most famous of Italian children books, one that would have been familiar even to the uneducated fictive audience.

Although *Caprice* did pretty well at the box office, film critics did not single out *Clouds* for praise. They dismissed it as a *divertissement* unworthy of Pasolini until a shocking event rekindled their interest. In 1975 the director was brutally murdered by a street hustler and Ninetto Davoli was asked to go identify his disfigured body in an urban wasteland reminiscent of the garbage dump in *Clouds*. The extradiegetic knowledge provided by the extensive media coverage of the murder encouraged Pasolini’s fans to go back to the short film in search of premonitions of his death. Academics followed suit with scholarly essays on Pasolini’s narrative strategies and on his interpretation of Shakespeare’s *Othello*. In their eagerness to make up for early neglect, however, they often produced overdetermined readings that did a disservice to this short film. *Clouds* is intriguing, poetic, amusing but it was hastily put together and it shows. Thanks to the appeal of its

charismatic director, *Clouds* has been frequently shown on Italian television and keeps attracting new viewers. When in the 1990s two young directors referenced it in their own rewriting of *Othello*, they could still be confident that quite a few spectators would recognize their source.

**Educational Shakespeare: *Un bacio . . . un bacio ancor . . . un altro bacio***

In 1993 Letizia Quintavalla and Bruno Stori staged *Un bacio . . . un bacio ancor . . . un altro bacio* (A kiss . . . another kiss . . . one last kiss), an adaptation of *Othello* for school audiences. Their production, which lasted a little over an hour, was so successful that it was televised in 1994 and evening performances were added for the general public. It is still being revived today. Taken from the close of the libretto, the title foregrounds Verdi's *Otello* as one of the lenses through which Shakespeare's tragedy is read. The other is Pasolini's *Clouds*. The directors of the educational staging were the protagonists of a documentary for television, *La favola di Otello* (The Fable of Othello, dir. Nico Garrone, 1994), which alternated excerpts from the rehearsals and performance of their play with video stills and soundtrack from *Clouds*, along with scenes from Orson Welles's film and Zeffirelli's film-opera. They praised Pasolini for his ability to pare down Shakespeare's characters till they lost all psychological complexity while maintaining their capacity to move the spectators with their story of love, jealousy and envy. This oversimplified reading of Pasolini's film was the starting point of *Kiss*. When their play was televised, it was for a select audience of late night viewers. It was an interesting program but a far cry from the live performance, which involved all the spectators in the action.

*Kiss* is performed in a small amphitheater. As the spectators enter, they are directed to their places, all the men being requested to cluster together on one side, and all the women on the other. From there, they look down onto a bare circular acting space. After this rather inauspicious start, the lights go out, and the disembodied, recorded voice of a narrator bemoans the stormy passions of youth—love, jealousy, envy—that have washed over “i nostri cuori sospesi come nuvole. Ah straziante meravigliosa bellezza del creato!” [our hearts, floating like clouds. O heartrending and marvelous beauty of creation]. The target audience of *Kiss* had not even been born when Pasolini directed *Clouds*, but Quintavalla and Stori openly pay homage to him by taking his last sentence as their starting point. The best informed among the evening spectators will recognize the quote and appreciate the similarities in approach to Shakespeare's play between Pasolini and

the two young directors. Like *Clouds*, *Kiss* presents *Othello* through the performance of hopelessly inadequate players. They too have been assaulted by the spectators, but it happened long before the play opens and because of their off-stage behavior.

In the first scene, three strolling players, with obvious physical disabilities, are getting ready for their performance while recollecting who maimed them and why. “Othello” (Claudio Guain) had wooed ladies with his beautiful eyes until jealous husbands blinded him. Famous for her beautiful voice, “Desdemona” (Paola Crecchi) has had her tongue cut off by envious women; “Iago” (Morello Rinaldi) had displeased his audience with a show they considered blasphemous and is now deaf because they poured scalding oil into his ears. They will attempt to perform *Othello* with the help of Verdi’s music and of members of the audience. As in *Clouds*, regional accents establish a difference between the male protagonists that would be as relevant to an Italian audience as skin color. This time, “Othello” is from Veneto and “Iago” from Emilia, again two neighboring regions divided by countless rivalries. On stage, all three actors soldier on gallantly, trying to disguise or at least minimize their disabilities.

Having reinforced the definition of the acting space by walking around in a circle, Iago recreates Venice and Brabantio’s house with the help of a few props and the background music. Then, he steps out of the circle and convinces a member of the audience to join him on stage as Roderigo. Later on, Cassio, the brawling soldiers and Emilia will also be recruited from the ranks of the spectators. The presence on stage of eager schoolchildren or self-conscious adults determines the actors’ improvised reactions and the response of the audience. Understandably, the volunteers are mostly (though not exclusively) employed in comic scenes, so that the audience’s giggles at their clumsiness may not destroy the dramatic effects the directors are trying to create.

For these spectators, who are either unfamiliar with theatrical conventions or used to Italian-style proscenium theaters, the directors try to adapt staging practices that have a Medieval flavor, with their emphasis on “the traditional interplay between *platea* and *locus*, between neutral, undifferentiated ‘place’ and symbolic location” (Weimann 212). Such practices are eminently suited to a tragedy that plays so cleverly with the emotions of the audience. “Iago” takes on the metatheatrical function of the clown who lures some spectators into the circle where a few props signal essential *loci* (Brabantio’s house, the garrison, the bedroom) but also circulates in the tiers and turns them into an acting space by assigning to the spectators the role of

Chorus. Under his tuition, the men’s section and the women’s section of the audience alternate in singing lines from “Jealousy Tango” when Othello starts abusing Desdemona. In a production where the actor playing Othello is indeed “declined / Into the vale of years” (3.3.269-70), the bathetic switch from Verdi’s opera to a catchy tune is there to remind us that “old husband suspects he has been cuckolded by young wife” is the subject matter of comedy.

The conventional separation between audience and actors is re-established only during the two “intermissions” that interrupt the play for the actors but not for the audience who is expected to keep watching them as they are supposedly relaxing in their dressing room. The audience too can relax, momentarily confident that its traditional role will not be challenged because the actors are “elsewhere.” The “intermissions” introduce allusions to the time-honored tradition of life imitating art. The blind actor asks “Iago” to describe the evening’s Cassio. “Desdemona” mutters about past lovers. When the violence of “Othello” on stage becomes much too realistic for comfort, she requests another intermission. In the dressing room, she accuses her partner of actually believing he *is* Othello. On cue, “Iago” retells the shop-worn anecdote of the actor who got so carried away by his role that he actually killed Desdemona. Some of the evening spectators may wonder whether they will be expected to storm the stage at the end of the play, not to save Desdemona, like only Pasolini’s naive fictive audience could think of doing, but to save the actress playing her role, like any upright citizen should feel duty-bound to do.

The story is retold in a combination of colloquial Italian and regional dialects that offsets the beauty of the fragments of Shakespearean verse preserved in the script—quite often, the same lines that Pasolini had used for his theme song. Ironically, an audience only superficially familiar with *Othello* will think that Pasolini’s verses are being beautifully integrated in the script, when in fact the directors are returning to Shakespeare the lines that were his to start with. The comic scenes offer an outlet for the pent-up energy of the boisterous school parties but never last long enough to overshadow the dramatic and moving moments. Thanks to the perfect timing of the directors, *Kiss* never turns into a parody of Shakespeare’s tragedy.

The most famous arias from Verdi’s *Otello* provide the soundtrack for such crucial episodes as Othello’s victorious arrival at Cyprus and the protagonists’ love scenes. When Desdemona gets ready for her last night, the soprano lends her voice to the mute actress who selects a spectator from the women’s section and mimes a request for assistance. To the haunting notes

of Verdi's "willow song," "Emilia" gently starts combing her mistress's hair. Previously exploited only for laughs, the gender-based division of the audience now generates one of the best moments in the play. As the men look on in uneasy silence, a current of sympathy from the women envelops Emilia and Desdemona. The line "O, these men, these men!" (4.3.59) is not spoken, but hovers in the air—a subtext to the collective sigh of the women in the audience. For once, a production of the tragedy that is famous for allegedly triggering uncontrollable male reactions makes room for the response of women to Desdemona's plight.

Verdi's music plays an important role in *Kiss*. Not only does it signal the shift from comic to dramatic scenes, but it also takes the place of the poetic language which makes all the difference between Shakespeare's *Othello* and a lurid tale of domestic violence. Its effect on the spectators is not, however, entirely positive because it encourages them to embrace an oversimplified interpretation of the characters. In *Kiss* there is no room for the irony and ambiguity that Pasolini had managed to weave into his *Clouds*. This Desdemona is the entirely guileless victim of a gullible man, who is in turn the victim of a trickster. Even the most theatrically illiterate adolescent should have no difficulty establishing the connection between the actors' physical disabilities and the weaknesses that cause the ruin of the characters they play. Desdemona is unable to convincingly argue her own innocence; Othello is blind to Iago's web of lies; Iago cannot hear any voice other than that of his own envy.

Desdemona's death in *Kiss* is brutally realistic, but no spectator, to my knowledge, has ever rushed to her rescue. The seed of confusion between actors and roles which was planted during the "intermissions" is forgotten by the directors, who choose to foreground another, more topical connection between the world of the play and real life. After the murder, Iago himself reveals the truth to Othello. The actor delivers his triumphantly malignant speech while walking in a large circle, as he did in the opening scene. Having goaded his victim with the handkerchief, he starts hurling at him racial abuse that sounds uncomfortably familiar to the audience: "Brutt schifous ner, lavron d'un lavron! Torna in Africa. . . . A vliv i nostri casi, a vliv tot" [Filthy, thick-lipped Negro! Go back to Africa. . . . You lot want our houses, you want all we've got!]. For his emotional outburst, "Iago" abandons the heavily accented standard Italian of his previous scenes and resorts to strict dialect, more intimate and revealing. Nearly thirty years have passed since Pasolini's *Clouds*, and the race issue has acquired entirely different urgency.

Disquietingly clear-sighted when it came to identifying early symptoms of social crises, Pasolini had said, with his customary bluntness: “The Italians are supposed not to be racist, but I think this is a big lie. The Italian bourgeoisie hasn’t been racist up to now because it hasn’t had the chance” (Stack 63-64). In 1967, however, any discussion of race relations was theoretical, since Italy was still one of the most homogeneous countries in Europe. Pasolini could then choose to let his *Iago* touch upon the topic in a comic vein. In the 1990s, any illusion that Italians would be capable of treating immigrants better than they themselves had been treated as emigrants had been shattered by the rise and success of xenophobic political parties. It was becoming clear that racism had to be admitted before it could be unlearned. Educational theater was a good place to start.

In his angry tirade against “*Othello*,” “*Iago*” ad libs, but without the blueprint of Shakespeare’s plot his verbal resources prove very limited. They are, however, sufficient to evoke the marginalized black immigrant and place him in a continuum with the noble Moor in the mind of the audience. The young spectators are forced to acknowledge the ugly underside of the trickster’s jibes that they had found so entertaining. They now welcome the formal separation from the acting space that “*Iago*” has re-established by walking in a circle and addressing himself exclusively to *Othello*, because it allows them to be onlookers rather than participants in a destructive endgame. Closure comes quickly. *Othello* kills his tormentor and then collapses in utter despair, while the final bars of Verdi’s opera restores the harmony of art after the jarring notes of reality.

*Kiss* provides a good introduction to the story of the Moor for audiences unfamiliar with both Shakespeare’s tragedy and its operatic adaptation. It effectively encourages post-performance discussions of racism in schools, thus fulfilling its educational mandate. Its lasting success, however, is primarily due to the directors’ ability to draw the audience into the play and to challenge the limits of theatrical make-believe. When it was performed in Ferrara, I gave a lecture about it, using excerpts from the video to illustrate the points I was making. At the end of the talk, a lady came up to me and asked: “Was it recorded last night? Can I have a copy? ’Twas me who combed her hair.” Any experience of breaking through the fourth wall illusion and entering the world of the players is, of course, bound to be memorable and worth documenting for a spectator. Her phrasing, however, struck me as yet another proof of the peculiar quality of *Othello*. She would not have described her role with the same intimate simplicity if she had been asked to comb Lady Macbeth.

### Conclusion: “a very Italian story”

In *La favola di Otello*, Bruno Stori refers to *Clouds* as “a very Italian story”: “C’è un intervento del pubblico violentissimo che impedisce che la storia vada a finire male” [There is an extremely violent intervention of the audience which prevents the story from ending badly]. Although he may be faulted for not considering tragic the deaths of Iago and Othello, the director is right when he sees something typically, and deplorably, Italian in the behavior of Pasolini’s fictive audience. Unlike Cavell’s “Southern yokel,” who single-handedly storms the stage, Pasolini’s spectators first feed on each other’s anger and then strike together. Their comic violence has the disquieting quality of a mob reaction. Pasolini idealizes his urban poor as color blind (in opposition to the potentially racist bourgeoisie), but he knows that they would be sensitive to honor issues. From the comments that are shouted at Othello and Iago, the real spectators are made uncomfortably aware that the fictive audience rushes to rescue Desdemona only because battering an *innocent* woman to death is wrong. Had she been guilty, they would not have considered Othello’s reaction over the top. Honor killings were still largely condoned both by public opinion and by the legal system in 1960s Italy, although they were usually condemned in dramatic films and made the butt of jokes in comedies Italian-style. By stripping *Othello* both of Shakespeare’s language and of Verdi’s music, Pasolini foregrounds the similarities between the basic plot of the tragedy and the crimes reported in the tabloids. By entrusting the story to life-size puppets, he adds a surrealist dimension that exposes to ridicule, in the eyes of the “elite,” the very real threats of the wronged husband: “A pezzi la faccio! Le corna . . . a me! . . . Non merita altro che la morte!” [I’ll tear her to pieces! Cuckholding a man like me! . . . She deserves to die!] (Siti and Zabagli 958). Even without any knowledge of Shakespeare’s tragedy, the fictive audience knows from cultural experience that he is not speaking metaphorically.

The directors of *Kiss* rightly felt that their rewriting of *Othello* for a target audience of teenagers should focus on race rather than honor. In mainstream Italian theater, there was not in the 1990s—and there is not now—any doubt that the role of Shakespeare’s Moor should be played by a white actor blackened up. While *Kiss* was touring small provincial venues, for example, a major production of Shakespeare’s tragedy was playing to rapturous applause in all the main houses. Directed by Gabriele Lavia, it was hailed by critics as highly innovative because the protagonist (Franco Branciaroli) played Othello as a “real” African instead of the Arab prince of most

twentieth-century Italian productions. In fact, in this modern dress version of the tragedy, Branciaroli played the Moor as a cross between King Kong and Bokassa, a brutal, uncouth military man whose savage character is already evident under a thin veneer of manners in the Senate scene. Critics and spectators did not see anything objectionable in a show that would have caused a huge outcry in Britain, had somebody been insensitive enough to produce it there. Clearly, directors who wanted to problematize race in their versions of *Othello* had their work cut out for them.

“An audience brings with it attitudes, preconceptions, knowledges which establish a cognitive framework within which they ‘read’ the performance” (Shepherd and Wallis 238). When the audience is made up of school parties, it also needs to be fed the information about *Othello* that one can take for granted in adult theater-goers. Quintavalla and Stori assign the task of chief informant to a mischievous Iago who quickly establishes a current of sympathy with the youngsters. They are inclined to side with the trickster not because his victim is black but because he is middle-aged and therefore does not fit their mental image of a tragic lover. The evening spectators know that passionate love is not the prerogative of the very young and are therefore likely to find the courtship between Othello and Desdemona more fascinating than Iago’s horseplay. They flesh out the characters portrayed by the maimed strolling players with their memories of Pasolini’s ambiguous puppets and Verdi’s noble characters. As for Shakespeare’s tragedy, even if they have only seen it in Lavia’s version, they are as unprepared as the school parties for the racist *coda* that the directors add to their rewriting. Verdi’s music and this Othello’s Veneto accent successfully deflect their attention from race until Iago starts ad libbing.

At the end of *Kiss* the spectators are expected to realize that the theater cannot be considered a harmless realm of make-believe where anything goes. Acritically laughing at Totò’s racist jibes in *Clouds* and at Lavia’s *Otello* is no longer possible even in Italy because the reinforcement of negative cultural stereotypes through the performing arts can have serious consequences in a country that, for historical reasons, is so ill-prepared to meet the challenge of multiculturalism. It contributes to marginalizing the mysterious “others” who work and live in the country in such numbers that, in the twenty-first century, the tale of a love story between a black man and a white woman will cease to be perceived by local audiences as exotic and out of the ordinary. It will become “a very Italian story.”

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