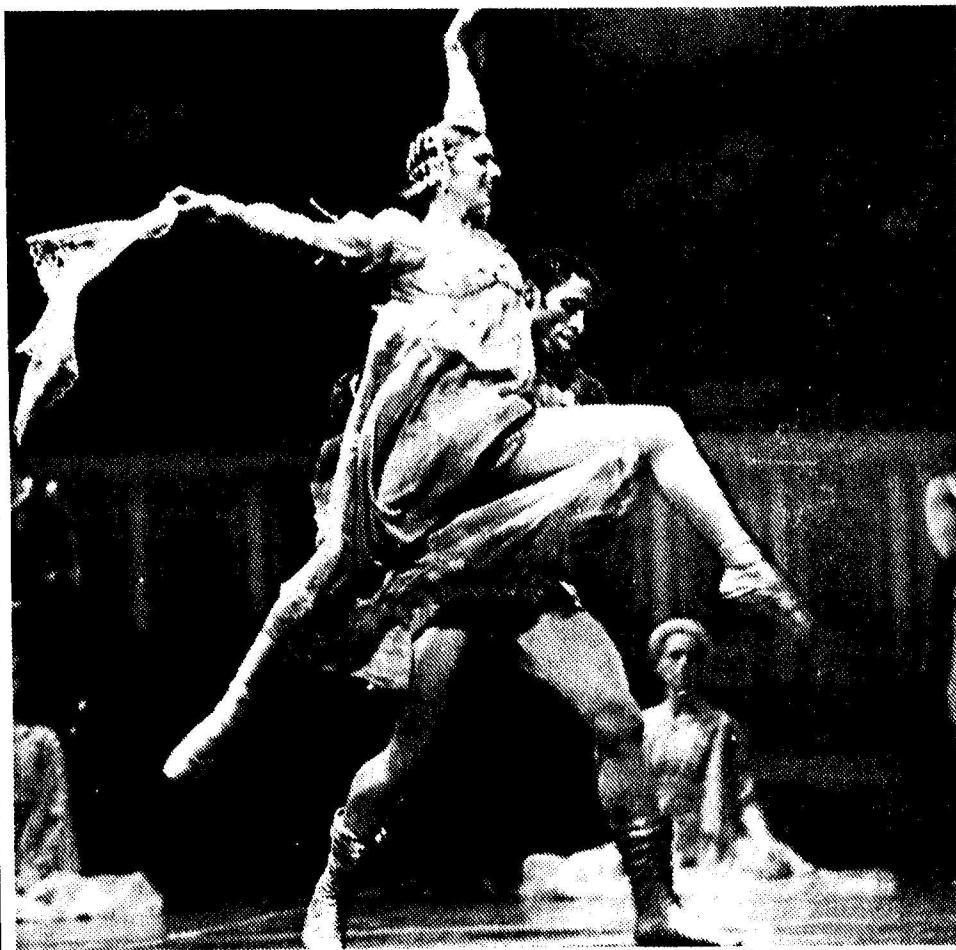


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Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

Sandra Brown as Desdemona and Desmond Richardson in the title role of "Othello."

DANCE REVIEW

A Downtown Experiment Has an Uptown Premiere

By ANNA KISSELGOFF

"Othello," a new, spectacular looking three-act ballet choreographed by Lar Lubovitch to a commissioned score by Elliot B. Goldenthal, is not your usual American Ballet Theater offering.

"It's like Broadway," a viewer declared while going up the aisle at the Metropolitan Opera House on Saturday night. Actually, it's like Off Broadway on an opera-house scale.

This remark testifies nonetheless to the success of this truly experimental production, which had its world premiere on Friday night and was seen again on Saturday with an equally good, even more dramatically integrated new cast.

Depth and characterization are not the strengths of Mr. Lubovitch's "Othello." But then again, Shakespeare is a hard act to follow, and Mr. Lubovitch, also going back to the 16th-century Venetian tale that was Shakespeare's source, has come up with his own take on things.

His Iago is not the embodiment of " motiveless malice," as Coleridge put it. He is a neurotic who finds a hanky dropped accidentally into his lap.

Reinventing 'Othello' from Shakespeare's original source.

Yet it is not Iago but Mr. Lubovitch, with his whirlpool of passionate choreography, and Mr. Goldenthal with his unabashedly dramatic score, who set the action in motion. Whether with Desmond Richardson, one of America's most powerful dancers, seen as a magnificent Othello in the first cast, or a more nuanced second cast headed by Julie Kent and Keith Roberts, this "Othello" is a grand evening in the theater.

Major credit must go to the world of glass that George Tsypin has conceived onstage through his extraordinary décor. His mobile slabs of cracked glass (actually plastic) are eventually reduced to an abstraction of a glass bed and an open space, a killing ground.

Along with Wendall K. Harrington's slides of Venice and a turbulent sea and sky, this

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"Othello" has a visual impact rarely seen in ballet.

To compare this production to Broadway is not necessarily a kiss of death in the hot-house world of classical ballet; it is a tribute to a genuine artistic collaboration. There are only two performances left this week (tonight and tomorrow), then "Othello" will return for a brief run from June 24 to 26. Anyone interested in seeing how offbeat artists work in an establishment setting, not to speak of anyone interested in superb dancing, should see this "Othello." For despite its opera-house scale, there is an experimental tenor here that full-evening narrative ballets from Europe do not have.

Essentially, this is a downtown team of collaborators working uptown. Mr. Lubovitch is a modern-dance choreographer long accustomed to working in ballet and has also choreographed Broadway musicals. Mr. Goldenthal's film scores ("Interview with the Vampire") do not preclude work in the classical field and in experimental theater ("Juan Darién," "The Green Bird"). Mr. Tsy-pin is equally at home anywhere in the world in theater and opera, including Peter Sellars's "Death of Klinghoffer." One of his teachers was Oliver Smith, the distinguished set designer who was Ballet Theater's longtime co-director.

A similar range comes from Ann Hould-Ward, one of Mr. Lubovitch's favorite costume designers; Pat Collins, the lighting designer, and Miss Harrington.

The combined result is bold and free of the conventions common to other three-act narrative ballets. The British and the Russians have led the way here since World War II; many

American companies (including Ballet Theater) have imported a "Romeo and Juliet" or imitated one from a European model. Usually these ballets are based on classical sources.

What is unusual but not without precedent is that this American production has an original score. Mr. Goldenthal will be accused of sounding like Prokofiev in his first act, but actually he owes much more to the "Fall River Legend" of Morton Gould. Melodrama is not beneath

The costumes may be Renaissance but the choreography is all Lubovitch.

him, especially shrieks of sound that connote emotional anguish. But he can also, despite his fondness for drums, subside into quiet lyricism. There is a wonderful turbulence about the score when it gets worked up, and it is very much on Mr. Lubovitch's wavelength.

For all the Renaissance costumes and the fact that Desdemona and Emilia are on toe, the choreography is imbued with Mr. Lubovitch's modern dance signature style: a surge of movement that sweeps its dancers along into lifts or waves and eddies around the stage.

The corps thus becomes a major player, so to speak. The mood in the first two acts is signaled by crowd patterns. The wedding of Othello and Desdemona, beautifully staged with two children also acting as their symbolic surrogates, is celebrated in

Act I by a ball and a carol, or circle dance. This round dance, glimpsed through glass arches and pillars against a Titian-like slide projection, could have come out of a medieval illuminated book. The ball, however, is almost a parody of the courtiers in the "Romeo" ballets. There is sound and fury as the men beat their fists in the air and the women drop at their feet.

Like the aristocrats, the common folk who celebrate the return of Othello's ship (anchored stunningly by curved ropes across the stage) in a bawdy flex-footed tarantella, telegraph Mr. Lubovitch's main theme: namely that Desdemona and her attendant, Emilia, are part of a society whose men are wife abusers.

To reduce any "Othello" to just that idea is cheap. Mr. Lubovitch does not do this, but Emilia gets yanked around by Iago, and Desdemona is clearly helpless. In Act III she appears, startlingly, resigned to her death. Emilia gives her a cross (which leads into her only big solo) and she prepares ritualistically for her fate.

That Othello loves her as he kills her is symbolically telegraphed in their lovemaking; tenderly he ties the white handkerchief around her neck and seems to hold its ends until Desdemona goes limp with him in a spin.

Othello's suicide by dagger is even more dramatically timed. But every so often the main characters disappear into the crowd. It is clever of Bianca, portrayed fetchingly by Christina Fagundes as a street dancer, to slip the handkerchief into Cassio's jacket in the midst of the tarantella.

But with all this seamless action, carried along by the crowd, Othello is anything but the focus of the ballet. Cassio dances more. Or so it seemed

on opening night, when the characters looked more schematic.

The exception was Mr. Richardson, a former star with Alvin Ailey's company, who dances with a riveting blend of lightness and muscular power. He turned Othello's big solo, ending on the floor, into a chilling picture of debasement. Sandra Brown as Desdemona was lovely with a natural flow, while Parrish Maynard, with a goatee, was a steely emblematic Iago. Martha Butler, as Emilia, was a picture of vulnerability.

The second cast, however, fleshed things out and its members had better rapport. Mr. Roberts is white, while Mr. Richardson is black, and Mr. Roberts's Moor, in dark makeup, was more torn than noble. Ms. Kent, pale and fragile, and Susan Jaffe, vivacious as Emilia in a piece of great dance acting, emerged as the main characters. Robert Hill's fit as Iago was nonetheless a grand study in angularity and John Gardner danced a decent Cassio. Jack Everly conducted both performances, which featured a delightful *divertissement* danced wittily by Shawn Black, Yan Chen, Ashley Tuttle, Charles Askegard and Maxim Belotserkovsky.