

The other side of military

The National Theatre's latest *NT Live* production is *Othello*, Shakespeare's classic tale of jealousy and revenge, and its modern military backdrop stays true to the text. **Nushin Elahi** saw it live on stage in London.

Othello from a military perspective? It sounds like yet another director's far-fetched take on Shakespeare's endlessly adaptable plays. In fact, it's not. The dress may be modern, the bunkers concrete and the guns automatic, but Nicholas Hytner's brilliant version of *Othello* slots right into place with the text.

This is a comment on military men pushed to their limits who all crack up in different ways. Othello snaps at the woman he loves, his second in command Cassio wreaks havoc because he can't take his drink, and behind it all stands the monstrous Iago, whose anger is the seething poison that blights the lives of those around him.

It is the sort of production that makes you understand just why Shakespeare continues to enthrall audiences and actors. Memorable performances, a strong supporting cast, a director with vision and design that gives life to the claustrophobia of an army camp; this will turn any bored student into a fan, and the National Theatre deserves fulsome praise for making this available to an international audience.

It is not the first time, though, that I have thought the play belongs

to Iago, seen here in a definitive performance by Rory Kinnear (his Hamlet is featured in the National Theatre anniversary screenings soon). Hytner has layered class, rather than race, into the vitriolic mix of jealousy and hatred that boils within Iago. He can drink with the men, yet be a confidant to Othello, Desdemona and Cassio. Kinnear is utterly convincing in both extremes of his role, making his working-class accent most pronounced while setting up his plans. When Othello delivers the accolade "honest Iago", the audience must believe Iago's con-artistry is sufficient to allow for such error of judgment.

That added sinew of class distinction makes Cassio's advancement so much more obvious, and Jonathan Bailey's boyish charm in the role just reeks of privilege. No wonder Othello, already slightly awkward within society, despite his urbane exterior, chooses one of the boys.

With the modern army backdrop, Hytner has set the scene so we could be looking at the fallout from the Iraqi war, or any of the other current military conflicts across the globe. As director he deliberately plants the seed for the



Adrian Lester as Othello, left, and Jonathan Bailey as Cassio – military men under stress



Adrian Lester as Othello with the reflection of Rory Kinnear's Iago – dripping poison

tragedy in the words of Desdemona's father, who warns Othello that a daughter who has deceived her father may do so again.

Hytner makes this less of a love story across the colour bar and more about society's rules and expectations. What better microcosm of the world than the stifling confines of an army barracks, where a woman in civilian gear, bubbling

with new love, is bound to cause an explosion? In contrast, the other women disappear in the faceless, bland environment, drab and unfeminine in their uniforms, including Iago's wife Emilia.

The play is filled with asides to the audience, in which Iago makes us his confidant, and Kinnear has an easy air with this. We meet him seething with hatred of Othello because he has been passed over for promotion in favour of Cassio. He is an opportunist making it up as he goes along, not sure, he tells us, whether it will make or break him. Far from being pitted only against Adrian Lister's Othello, Iago plays them all – from Desdemona's thwarted suitor Roderigo who bankrolls the plot to the Venetian rulers. His game unfolds quickly, and Kinnear is compelling in the manner in which he orchestrates things, turning every move to his advantage.

Against this monstrous and overpowering evil, Lister's Othello is naturally a less interesting character, a mere pawn in the other man's hands. It is nonetheless a strong portrayal that takes Othello

from the confidant arrogance of a general in the army to a man who seems to have the veneer of polite society stripped from him as jealousy drives him insane.

Olivia Vinall is altogether too light and bouncy as Desdemona to make this a memorable performance, but both she and Lyndsey Marshal as Emilia create a wonderful sense of foreboding as the women talk on the eve of the fateful night. Marshal's spitting *virago* when she then finds the depths of her husband's deceit is a tour de force, and the only time when Kinnear's Iago ever seems to flinch.

The powerful passions that drive Iago eclipse all else and Hytner's production is a mesmerising tale of a man who unleashes such fire that the deadly ending comes as a relief from an emotional torture. Iago's sullen look as he is dragged to face the body count shows such utter lack of remorse, it still sends chills down my spine.

Shows at Cinema Nouveau nationally today, Wednesday and Thursday next week. Also Cape Town at the Fugard theatre on November 10.

Flat biopic of a princess devoid of any crowning glory

ANTHONY QUINN

IS IT TOO soon to make a film about Diana's death? Certainly, it's too soon to make a bad one.

The German director Oliver Hirschbiegel, who made the epic *Downfall*, about Hitler's final days, looked an intriguing choice to helm this biopic of Princess Diana. Here after all was a film-maker who grasped the drama not just of bunker mentality and delusional narcissism, but also the way an individual could bewitch an entire country into soft-headed adoration.

Sadly, the reality has not matched expectation: this is "Shortfall" rather than *Downfall*. Where his brilliant Hitler film offered Sturm and Drang, *Diana* opts for Mills and Boon, a would-be tragic romance that spares us nothing in soppiness or banality. It is difficult to fathom what screenwriter Stephen Jeffreys was briefed

to come up with, but speakable dialogue was evidently not part of the deal. The characters in this movie talk an English that seems to have been translated, badly, from another language. It will provoke much mirthless laughter.

Hirschbiegel isn't the only top-drawer talent on board. Naomi Watts was stupendous in her breakout movie for David Lynch, *Mulholland Drive*, but this role, however, is beyond her; it would be beyond anyone. Her facial resemblance to Diana isn't strong, though she does her best to catch the coy upturned gaze, the outward poise, the inward fragility. She doesn't embarrass herself; the script does that for her.

It opens on that fatal August night in Paris 1997, before flashing back a couple of years to her troubled affair with a Pakistani heart surgeon, Hasnat Khan (Naveen Andrews). Diana, separated from



Charles for three years, struggles to keep this private and personable man away from the flashbulb glare in which she has lived her entire adult life. She disguises herself in a black wig to go out on dates with Hasnat, she hides him under a blanket in the car home, she even visits his large

extended family back in Pakistan. But their relationship unravels because, as the film keeps reminding us, she's "the most famous woman in the world" – and the paps won't give her a moment's peace.

Of course, it's not as simple as that, and the film occasionally gets up off its knees to suggest that Diana was, or had learnt to become, a shrewd manipulator. In the run-up to her TV interview with Martin Bashir, we see her practising her sorrowful phrases and martyred expressions in the mirror. Later, she summons her pet paparazzo for exclusive shots of herself on Dodi's yacht (Dodi is played by Cas Anvar), the strongest indication of the dance of death she conducted with Fleet Street's finest: she despised the attention and craved it at the same time.

Hirschbiegel wants to present Diana as a loving yet lonely soul, devoted to her young sons, but

piteously excluded from a grown-up relationship.

Diana seems one of those better suited to dealing with "humanity" rather than human beings in particular; perhaps it was this impersonal sense of charity that prompted her to take up causes in Bosnia, Angola and Australia.

What is surely the central failure is the film's desperate inability to make her even interesting. The public side we know about; but what of the individual whose personal charm conquered so many?

Watts's incarnation of the Princess is so wan and flat you wonder how anyone fell for her at all.

Granted a little perspective on her, a purposeful biopic would have tried to conjure a real woman from the babble of myth and gossip. This movie, on the contrary, has placed her even further out of reach. – Foreign Service