

Theater Review: A lusty look at Desdemona behind the scenes

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Paula Vogel's "Desdemona: a play about a handkerchief" turns Shakespeare upside down.

By Keith Powers / Special to The Journal

PROVIDENCE, R.I. -- Shakespeare's premises remain useful. Especially when they get turned upside down.

Like in Paula Vogel's "Desdemona: a play about a handkerchief," onstage through Oct. 15 at the Burbage Theatre Company's home in Aurora Providence.

Vogel's "Desdemona" plays out not in Othello's grand palace, but literally backstage, in her servant Emilia's washing room. And here Desdemona (lustily brought to life by Valerie Westgate) undoes any idea that she's some helpless victim of Iago's plots and her husband's gullibility. In Vogel's reworking, she's the decidedly bored, sexually adventurous wife who goes to the wrong side of the tracks to get some action. A lot of it.

A trio of women bring the scenario to life: the sexually indefatigable Desdemona; Emilia (Christin Goff), the handwringing but still culpable wife of Iago; and Bianca (Rachael Perry), the town strumpet, and erstwhile BFF to Desdemona.

The handkerchief is the tell in "Othello" — dropped by Desdemona, found by Emilia, who gives it in turn to Iago, who, well, you should know the rest. Vogel does a humorous reconfiguration of the plot, but hardly a re-write. Desdemona still meets her unjustified end, undone by her simple maid

and Iago's murderous plotting. We never see it, but it happens.

"Desdemona" is hardly a feminist retelling of the story. She breaks free from her chains of innocence, but her only real power exists in badgering the hapless Emilia. Bianca might be the wise-cracking, Cockney-accented mistress-of-pleasure in town, but deep down she really just yearns for Cassio to marry her and change her life.

But Vogel's taut script doesn't aim high anyway. "Desdemona" is full of laughs — mainly at the expense of men — and little preaching. It's smart and accessible — and relevant because it makes clever allusions to a classic precedent, without trying to reform it or re-focus it.

The unchanging set stays simple: a washing chamber, a table. A couple of hanging sheets show real-time videos of the action above, but not to enhance it, simply to add sight lines. Director Allison Crews blocks it all so that characters engage the audience without sacrificing interaction.

A few lines could have been delivered more robustly; audibility became a problem at times. But this stalwart trio of actors had the notion of Vogel's script firmly in their heads, and brought "Desdemona" to life — even if they couldn't save Desdemona in the end.

"Desdemona: a play about a handkerchief" runs through Oct. 15 at Aurora Providence, 276 Westminster St., Providence. Tickets are \$10-\$20. Email boxoffice@burbagetheatre.org, or visit burbagetheatre.org.

Keith Powers is a veteran New England theater reviewer. On Twitter at [@PowersKeith](https://twitter.com/PowersKeith).

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