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**Tragic rap? 'Othello' is the Q Brothers' best yet**

**By Chris Jones**

Even for fans for such prior endeavors as "The Bomb-itty of Errors" and "Funk it Up About Nothin'," a hip-hop version of "Othello" sounded like a stretch for the Q Brothers, that bizarre pair of theatrically inclined Caucasian rappers, born and raised in Chicago.

It's one thing to rap your way through a comedy, entirely another to take on William Shakespeare's most personal tragedy. Remixed or not, "Othello" is tricky beast of a play revolving around sexual betrayal — with a heavy undercurrent of racial complexity. The whole notion sounded absurd. What was this going to be? "Yo, Desdemona, I'm gonna kill ya?"

Would there be a DJ spinning through suffocation? Was Desdie going to rap as her light was put out?

But, you know, "Othello: The Remix" turns out to by far the best the work the Bros. Q have done (and I've seen 'em all). I think one of the clues here was the little patch of gray visible on the head on that buzz-cut hipster JQ: the Qs are growing older, which means wiser, slightly sadder, considerably darker, massively more saturated with craft and thus a whole lot more interesting.

Chicago Shakespeare Theater clearly is hoping "Othello: The Remix" will have a long run. It should. The Qs have made Shakespearean rap their own powerful brand. Thursday night's show not only attracted an audience with an average age about half that of your typical theatrical crew, but was notable for the abundance of parents with teenagers in tow: a desperate attempt, perhaps, to make the case that the boring old Bard could be relevant. I rolled my eyes at that when I walked in (there was gritted teeth aplenty, on both sides of the generational divide) and then regretted the cynicism some minutes later, as "Othello" tracked elements of the original, certainly its major themes, with remarkable veracity and fluidity. It won over both the enthusiastic ticket buyers and those dragged there — no mean feat, that.

For sure, there is more comedy in the remix than the original, not that the original exists any more in any kind of pure state. But humor was part of the playbook here, even back in 1603, when the DJ wore a doublet. "Othello: The Remix" is funny, poetically penned and, best of all, suffused with ideas of striking complexity.

The Qs came up with the notion of turning Othello (O to his friends, not that he has any he can trust) into MC Othello, the rap star. Cassio, whose rise in favor with the Moor is what sets Iago off, is a Justin Bieber-like, "boy-band lightweight," a pretty arriviste whose legitimization (thanks, Othello) drives Iago crazy. Iago has been reduced, he tells us, sourly, "to opening for the opener," while the dumb pretty boy headlines. Meanwhile O has fallen in love with a white vocalist— in a very shrewd notion, the Qs keep Desdemona entirely off stage. All we hear is the gorgeous voice for which O swoons. That avoids the need for a literal smothering, thank goodness, but, on a deeper level, you also get the sense that the Qs are confronting the complexity of their own identity as aging white hip-hop artists. Desdie sounds a bit like one of white English girls who've co-opted the best of R&B and mixed it with a little Kate Bush.

Although new to Chicago, where it was workshopped and developed at CST, "Othello: The Remix" has been around for a while — it played in London at the Globe Theatre (the small Navy Pier space is much better, I'd have thought) and then in Edinburgh and elsewhere. Unsurprisingly, the production is by far the tightest, quickest paced and most disciplined of the various Q enterprises and is the only one that comes close to being a full-blown hip-hop musical. The show has a huge asset in the actor Jackson Doran, who plays both Cassio and (in a wig) Emilia, here presented as sexually needy comic relief. Doran looks a bit like Prince Harry of England, which means you reduce your expectations of eloquence and profundity when he walks out on stage, only for the fellow to surprise you aplenty.

Meanwhile, Postell Pringle's Othello is shrewdly underplayed and strikingly sympathetic, capturing the guileless quality of the guy. And by the way, a rapper's chain is a pretty fine substitute for a handkerchief.

With Clayton Stamper spinning above, GQ (a caustic, lacerating Iago) and JQ (the brother with the comic chops) are left to dance around all these edges, encapsulating minor characters into their backstage story of betrayal on the urban circuit. Their writing here is superb: sardonic, wise, smart, funny and, of course, mostly in rhyming couplets. The piece could, for sure, go further down the rabbit hole of jealousy in a world that still has sharp lines of division. It shies away at some junctures.

But finally, these fascinating Chicago brothers are writing about themselves, their role in culture, their identity as artists, their co-options and creations. And their "Othello" is a killer show.

**Running time:** 1 hour, 50 minutes