

Desdemona's Plea at the Fundamental Monodrama Festival

Jolanta Juskiewicz was re-enacting the unflinchingly devoted wife

BY ANDRÉ LINK

No, it is not the revenge-seeking humiliated wife who wields the banner of rebellion at the Niedervan Kulturhaus. In her monodrama presented in English and often in the very words of the Bard, Polish-born actress Jolanta Juskiewicz does not go against Shakespeare. Instead of a tale of anger and retaliation which would have overjoyed her expectant audience, she overwhelms us with what seems to be a rare example of perfect masochism.

Modern-time feminists won't be too happy with this. But writhing in sheets of white – the colour of innocence –, this Desdemona is pushing the uxorial virtues of fidelity and submission to the point of self-denial. Instead of laying the blame at her husband's door, she just wants to know what she has

done to incur Othello's wrath. Yet what is poor Desdemona to blame for? After all, she is frail, meek and blonde, so everything a man could possibly wish. If she married a freakish and pathologically jealous Moor, it was her own choice.

Delighting in humiliation

Pleading for one's life with a madman who is firmly determined to cut one's throat is not exactly ingratiating. Desdemona, however, delights in humiliation, the same as she revels in the doom that is about to engulf her. Rarely have death and martyrdom syndromes been driven home with such insistence.

Guided by her director (Anatoly Frusin) and her own intuition, Jolanta Juskiewicz writes what is after all the alphabet of despair with letters of fire. Not so much with words which are not too well



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(PHOTO: MAX GINDT)

served by an all but flawless accent. But this Polish actress can do without the words. The keys are right, and so are the intonations. The same goes for the music. Ver-

di's poignant operatic portrayal of the death-scene may have stood Juskiewicz in good stead, but she prefers to have her agony lulled by other tunes.

The fateful handkerchief worming out of her garments in the hues of blood is a significant clue, another is the song of the weeping willow. And when Desdemona lies like a mummy and taps on the stools that are to be her death-bed, it is already the thumping of her beloved lord and master who comes strutting in to butcher her.

Othello's wife stands alone in her fight. Everything else – including scheming Iago, simpering Cassio and helpless Emilia – are but fleeting shadows, unable to assist her. All she can fall back on are her maiden dreams of times bygone and her own self-beguiling foolishness.

In the end, shrouded in white, Desdemona is a little undine, pure, triumphant and unblemished, though she has come in touch with the indescribable filth of human affairs.