

Reviving Desdemona*

by Lenore Kitts

My mother had a maid call'd Barbary:
She was in love, and he she loved proved mad
And did forsake her: she had a song of "Willow,"
An old thing 'twas, but it express'd her fortune,
And she died singing it. That song tonight
Will not go from my mind; I have much to do,
But to go hang my head all at one side,
And sing it like poor Barbary.

Othello, 4.3.26-33

Always ready to break new artistic ground, Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison has partnered with two like-minded innovators—American theater/opera director Peter Sellars and African singer/songwriter Rokia Traoré—to create *Desdemona*, a provocative reimagining of *Othello*'s tragic representation of the legacies of gender, race, and class domination. The *Desdemona* project grew out of Sellars' dialogue with Morrison about *Othello*—to which he initially responded by mounting a new production in Vienna for the Vienna Festival in 2009, and she by developing her script in conversation with Traoré. Having written about Morrison's relationship to music, I was intrigued by this new work combining music with dramatic dialogue. Previously, I interviewed Ms. Morrison concerning her opera libretto for *Margaret Garner* (2005), which revisits the historic case of a fugitive slave whose untold story she first imagined in her Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Beloved* (1987). I had the opportunity to talk with Mr. Sellars about their recent Shakespearean project, and I present a glimpse of that conversation in what follows.

Their project aims to rescue from obscurity "Barbary," the character whose "Willow Song" (adapted by Shakespeare from a popular English tune) rises to Desdemona's memory as a premonition of her imminent death. Up to now attentive readers have only known Barbary as Desdemona's mother's "maid." But scholars have long recognized that her name recalls Iago's description of Othello as a "Barbary horse"—one of several equivocal references to Africa in the text. Mr. Sellars explained to me why this term mattered to Shakespeare: "Two high diplomats from the Barbary Coast came to London in 1600 to meet with Queen Elizabeth. And it was the first time Londoners saw Africans of high degree, and that was widely commented on in the British press at the time. So for Shakespeare to use the term 'Barbary' in 1603 was extremely vivid." In those same years there was also public outcry about the enslavement of British sailors by "Barbary" pirates.

Sellars' colleague, Avery Willis, suggested to Morrison that, by calling the maid "Barbary," Shakespeare allows us to imagine Barbary as herself African, and her songs to Desdemona as a medium transmitting another history. The idea that Barbary was not just her mother's maid, but also Desdemona's own nurse, was the creative seed for the *Desdemona* project. It's Desdemona's prior familiarity with this African heritage, so *Desdemona* suggests, that allows her to *recognize* Othello's own history

Of moving accidents by flood and field,
Of hair-breadth scapes i' th' imminent deadly breach,

* *Note to the editor*: This title is tentative and may be changed by the author.

Of being taken by the insolent foe
And sold to slavery, of my redemption thence.... *Othello*, 1.3.135-38

Sellars proposed the collaboration with Rokia Traoré, he explained to me, because the project “required a voice of an African woman to speak as an African woman and to sing as an African woman.” It was important to him as well as to Morrison that Africa no longer be “ventriloquized” by Shakespeare, nor even by Morrison, for that matter. In *Desdemona*, finally, the voice of “Barbary”—Africa—is ... African.

Morrison gives her Barbary a real African name (Sa’ran, or “joy”) to challenge the concept—implicit in the name of “Desdemona” (“misery”)—that culturally assigned identities fix our doom. Barbary is performed by world music sensation Rokia Traoré and Desdemona by American actress Elizabeth Marvel. A native of Mali, Traoré sings (in her native Bambara with some French) her own songs together with music revised from the *griot* tradition in which she is schooled. The only exception is one set of lyrics that Ms. Morrison penned for her in response to the “Willow Song.” Traoré accompanies herself on acoustic guitar together with her small band of traditional string players (the *n’goni* and *kora*) and three backup singers.

It is fitting that as a singer, Barbary should come to life via Traoré’s translucent music. Traoré has distinguished herself within the vibrant musical culture of Mali by developing an unusually intimate style that promotes thoughtful consideration of her intricate lyrics. The root sound of traditional instruments to which she adds her guitars and vocal harmonies (also unusual for a female vocalist) pulsate quietly in layered rhythms as she sings with compassion about issues confronting her fellow Africans. She also has built a bridge with a Euro-American sensibility by partnering with noted ensembles and covering old favorites like Gershwin’s “The Man I Love” in her last album *Tchamantché*, which garnered France’s equivalent of the Grammy for Best World Album in 2009. She first worked with Sellars in 2006 when she created the imaginative and multimedia *Wati* with Klangforum Wien for his New Crowned Hope Festival in Vienna.

Traoré grew up traveling the world as the daughter of a diplomat and part of Mali’s elite; her becoming a professional musician violated conventional expectations. Although her award-winning albums blend folk with contemporary idioms, she puts down her electric guitar in *Desdemona* in favor of a purely acoustic sound that evokes her Bamana tradition, which she then reconceives. Songs praising new brides and ancient warriors are important in this tradition, and she presents both classic and sometimes startling new versions here. While facing what’s happening in Africa right now, Sellars remarked, she “retains this depth of sadness ... that feeds your yearning and your sense that the future has to be sought out and achieved.” It’s this same orientation toward the future, Sellars suggested, that motivates Morrison’s script: “Toni re-imagines and re-positions what is frequently told in Western historical sources as a story of failure, and let’s you see, actually, the human achievement inside what the world has decided is a failure. ... And that was also, needless to say, a Shakespearean project.”

The persistence of the past in the present through song, memory, and practice is a consistent theme of Morrison’s work. The two temporalities refer to and enrich one another, as when a jazz player or singer of spirituals reanimates the old standard even while reworking it. Here, in Morrison’s reimagining, Desdemona and Barbary (who is not listed in Shakespeare’s *dramatis personae*) meet in the afterlife. Their dialogue—also a dialogue between Morrison’s text and Traoré’s music—allows the trauma of race, gender, and class violence, those wounded identities at the heart of the tragedy of *Othello*, to reverberate in our own global present. “Toni

has reconfigured Shakespeare's early present-at-the-creation pictures of colonialism," Mr. Sellars pointed out. "She updates and reframes the colonialist project and its residue, as does Rokia from an African perspective." Morrison's work on early America for her last novel *A Mercy* (2008), specifically how slavery became associated with race, provided fertile ground for this project.

As America's only living Nobel Laureate in literature, Toni Morrison has come to occupy a unique place in the world of letters today. Translated into twenty-six languages, her novels chronicling the lives of African Americans are read by millions, taught at universities all over the world, and celebrated by critics and governments alike. Upon receiving France's *Legion d'honneur* last year, Morrison was dubbed "the greatest American woman novelist of her time" by Culture Minister Frederic Mitterrand, who saw in her "the best part of America, that which founds its love of liberty on the most intense dreams." Her work with Traoré is one of several musical partnerships that have carried her voice into major concert halls and opera houses since the early 1990s. She has collaborated not only with musicians, but also with dramatists, dancers, and visual artists in the Princeton Atelier Program, which she founded while the Robert F. Goheen Professor in the Council of the Humanities at Princeton University for nearly twenty years. In the process she transformed her lifetime appreciation of music, which permeates her novels, by writing musical lyrics premiered by the likes of Jessye Norman, Kathleen Battle, and Sylvia McNair (together with André Previn, Yo Yo Ma, and others), and more recently, by Denyce Graves who shaped the title role of *Margaret Garner*. This work, which represented the first foray into opera for both Morrison and composer Richard Danielpour, has enjoyed notable success (sold out performances in six American cities over four years and a national broadcast still available on NPR's "World of Opera" website).

Desdemona promises to reach an even wider audience, bringing a message of hope despite—or perhaps because of—the gravity of the issues it raises. The act of listening between Desdemona and Barbary models "a new set of relations," Mr. Sellars clarified, "and a different form of mutual recognition ... [based on] radical equality." The meeting between these women, then, symbolizes a much larger meeting among world cultures, showing how they are enriched when they encounter each other on equal terms. "Shakespeare went out of his way," he added, "to write stories that were all about how intricately wired and cross-woven the world is." He reminded me that there is no better symbol for this exchange than the Bard's theatre, the Globe. By finding a kindred spirit from Mali, Morrison brings this lesson back home to the United States where so much well-loved music has its roots in Africa, indeed, in Mali itself (think of the Mississippi blues, for one, or the American banjo whose likely precursor was the ancient African lute we still hear in Traoré's band).

To better disseminate this message, there is talk of adapting *Desdemona* into an African movie in Mali after it completes its long run in two American cities and several more in Europe, including at the Cultural Olympiad during the 2012 Olympics in London.

Currently a Visiting Scholar at UC Berkeley's School of Law, Lenore Kitts studies how nations cope with traumatic political histories through law and the arts. She is writing a book about Toni Morrison's use of music in her reckoning with slavery.