Desdemona
by Toni Morrison and Rokia Traoré
with Tina Benko directed by Peter Sellars

Thu, Oct 8 at 7PM
Fri, Oct 9 at 8PM
Sat, Oct 10 at 8PM
Sun, Oct 11 at 2PM
Freud Playhouse

RUNNING TIME
Approximately two hours; No intermission

This presentation is supported in part by the National Endowment for the Arts Challenge Grant Endowment, Shirley & Ralph Shapiro Director’s Discretionary Fund and the Merle & Peter Mullin Endowment for the Performing Arts. Additional support provided by Diane Levine & Robert Wass and Anne-Marie Spataru.

Toni Morrison
Rokia Traoré
Peter Sellars
Tina Benko
Mamah Diabaté
Fatim Kouyaté
Virginie Dembelé
Toumani Kouyaté
James F. Ingalls
Alexis Giraud
Antoine Audibert
Anne Dechéne
Pamela Salling
Diane J. Malecki

Text
Music and Barbary
Director
Desdemona
Ngoni
Vocals
Vocals
Kora
Lighting Design
Sound Design
Sound Engineer
Production Stage Manager
Assistant Stage Manager
Producer

Desdemona was commissioned and co-produced by Wiener Festwochen, Théâtre Nanterre-Amandiers, Cal Performances, Berkeley, California, Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, New York, spielezeit’europa I Berliner Festspiele, and Barbican, London, Arts Council London and London 2012 Festival. The commissioning of Desdemona was made possible in part through the generous support of Jon and Lillian Lovelace.

The premiere performance took place on May 15, 2011 at the Akzent Theater in Vienna, Austria.
MESSAGE FROM THE CENTER:

In this age of big spectacle, what we celebrate and ruminate upon here today is how rich and deep is an individual human life.

Tonight, in an utterly magical stage performance, we explore the stories within the stories. We hear voices that have lain mute or stifled for centuries—women’s voices, women’s stories. We gain a new perspective on a classic character, one who will no longer be bound by the dramatic fate that has defined her for so long and throughout so many renderings of her tale.

A wealth of stories lies within each of us and yet, beautifully, we are each so much more than the telling of any one of them. We are more than the names we answer to, the faces we see in the mirror, more than the external perceptions, expectations and imaginings of those around us.

It comes at no surprise that our guiding light in such an intimate, elusive and profound exploration is Toni Morrison. She has sung the songs and told the tales of men and women who become so real to us, because within their stories we are reminded of how rich and deep is every human life, how rich and deep are our own lives.

At the heart of it all, as it so often is with this remarkable master of language, is the question so fundamental to our concept of self and humanity at large, that, whether we are aware of it or not, we find ourselves asking and answering it with our words and thoughts and actions.

What do you know to be true?

And, perhaps, also... how do we decipher what is true, one human to another? What will our legacy be? What parts of us do we share and configure, master and reclaim once and again, over and over in this all-too-fleeting time on earth?

This moment, here in this place, is a reckoning, a remembrance and an opportunity. Every moment in time is such a thing. But this moment is especially so, as it comes wrapped in the transportive trappings of artistic eloquence, of performance excellence and of vibrant possibility.

Thank you for being here.

ABOUT THE PROGRAM

Desdemona is the most fiery angel in Shakespeare’s creation—a radiant and radical woman of independence courage and love. She is now given an astonishing and provocative further voice by Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison, who reveals secrets in Othello that will change forever our reading of the play. In a time outside of time we discover the other African in Shakespeare’s play—Barbary, the nurse who raised Desdemona on African stories and songs, stunningly embodied by the great Malian singer Rokia Traoré.

As women’s voices fill the night air, we are in an intimate, spellbinding theatrical séance, both haunted and liberating, that moves in words and music across continents and centuries, connecting Elizabethan England to the Courts of Timbuktu to the future of the race—the human race—on this earth.

“This is a remarkable, challenging and bravely original work.”

—The Guardian (U.K.)
DIRECTOR’S NOTE:

This project is a literary and musical collaboration between Toni Morrison and Rokia Traoré, moving across continents, shared and divergent histories, imagined “other worlds,” and the darkly resonant, open-ended poetry of William Shakespeare’s Othello.

Writing from Bamako, in Mali, Rokia Traoré is one of a new generation of African women, a clear and courageous citizen of the world stepping forward into leadership, musical heir to the griot traditions of the Mande royal courts and the particular alchemy of Malian music that gave birth to the blues in North America. Her music is a rich blend of cross-Atlantic traditions in a distinctly feminine voice.

Toni Morrison has created fiction that imagines, evokes and honors the missing histories of generations whose courage, struggles, achievements, loves, tragedies, fulfillments and disappointments have gone unrecorded, but are still very much with us.

Shakespeare’s Othello is a permanent provocation. For four centuries it has been the most visible portrayal of a black man in Western art. It is a play seething with innuendo, misinformation, secrets, lies, self-deception, cruelty, and strangely luminous redemption. It has been read by generations as a coded, indirect reference to the coded, indirect layers of justice and injustice that move across racial lines in Western societies. Because the play is so intricate and ultimately disturbing, much of its performance history has reduced it to a kind of puppet show of a brilliant but dangerously mad black man framed by a devil on his left (Iago) and an angel on his right (Desdemona).

What was the reality of Africa for Shakespeare?

Did he know any Africans? Clearly the man who called his theater The Globe was interested in Africa, and his two multicultural plays set in Venice, Othello and The Merchant of Venice, are filled with references to Africa.

This project grew out of an astonishing line which appears late in Act IV of Othello. Othello has just visited Desdemona in her bedroom and threatened her with terrifying and pointed menace. He leaves, and Desdemona, deeply shaken, asks her companion, Emilia, to help her get ready for bed.

Entering an eerily emotional twilight that will lead to her violent death, she tells Emilia that she can’t get a certain song out of her head. She learned this song, she tells Emilia, from her mother’s maid, Barbary, who died while singing it, of a broken heart.

In one line, Shakespeare has suddenly given us a series of startling images. The appearance of the word mother tips us off—Shakespeare’s plays are filled with mysterious, missing women and this is only the second reference to Desdemona’s mother in the entire play. But it is the word Barbary which triggers surprising associations. In 17th century London, Barbary meant Africa. The Barbary pirates were hijacking British vessels off the coast of Africa, enslaving their white, British crews.

In 1600, a delegation of ambassadors from the Barbary court, Africans of high degree, splendidly dressed, arrived in London to negotiate with Queen Elizabeth. That advent stirred much discussion in London. That Shakespeare, writing Othello in 1603, uses the name Barbary implies that there is another African character in his play.

Shakespeare has already been at pains to demonstrate in Act I that Desdemona’s parents don’t know their own daughter, and now as she sings her famous “Willow Song,” the quiet, dark, emotional still-point of the night, we are left to reflect that Desdemona—this tender, brilliant, courageous, generous young woman—was raised by an African maid with African stories and African songs. Barbary is one of Shakespeare’s powerful and enigmatic missing women—he did not write for her, but he imagined her. In Toni Morrison and Rokia Traoré’s Desdemona, we meet her at last, and Desdemona meets her again.

As a young woman, Desdemona rejected the usual suitors from the Venetian court—it was a black woman who taught Desdemona how to love and now, Desdemona chooses to offer her love to a black man. In Act I of Othello, Shakespeare has Othello tell the Venetian Senate that he and Desdemona fell in love as he told her stories—stories of his youth as a child soldier, stories of suffering, reversal, privation, salvation, transformation, and unexpected human generosity. Stories of other worlds. And with the image of Barbary lingering in our minds, we can now imagine that Desdemona could have grown up hearing some of those stories.

And of course Toni Morrison wanted to write those stories.

In Desdemona, Toni Morrison has created a safe space in which the dead can finally speak those things that could not be spoken when they were alive. And finally, the women inside Shakespeare’s play and those in the shadows, just outside of it, find their voices: Othello’s mother and Desdemona’s mother meet, and hidden histories are shared and begin to flow.

Desdemona was Shakespeare’s ideal creation—like Dante’s Beatrice, a vision of perfection, a woman offering love and forgiveness in the face of hatred,
mistrust, and murderous lies. In Shakespeare’s late tragedies, the ideal woman—Desdemona, Virgilia, Cordelia—was mostly silent. For Toni Morrison, the ideal woman is not silent. Finally, she speaks. And as she speaks, she reveals secrets, hopes, dreams, but also her own imperfections. Shakespeare’s Desdemona is divine perfection, but Toni Morrison allows her to be human, to make mistakes, and finally, with eternity stretching before her, to learn, and then to understand. Shakespeare’s play spans two days.

Desdemona and Othello elope Monday night at 2 a.m., are thrust into a wild media-centric marriage as they travel in the public eye into a theater of war, and he has murdered her by Wednesday night. The play strangely offers no one much room for reflection.

It is pointedly odd that the author of Hamlet affords the title character in Othello only a single 12-line soliloquy. For the rest of the play, this black man is performing in front of white people and we have very few clues about his inner life. Desdemona is an astonishing teenager but is suffocated before she or we have a chance to learn her thoughts or feelings. In Toni Morrison’s creation, Desdemona is no longer a teenager but a mature woman with perspective and the opportunity to gradually recognize and let go of her own illusions.

And so in Desdemona, we begin to glimpse some of the mysteries of Shakespeare’s Othello with new insight in the light of deepened histories. What was the dark secret that held Othello and Iago in a bond of mutual dependency and hatred? What were the moments of happiness and promise and fulfillment in the great love between Desdemona and Othello before it was tainted by the world?

One other silent woman in Shakespeare’s play enters into a new dimensionality: Emilia, Iago’s terrified wife (“I nothing, but to please his fantasy”).

She appears in nearly every scene of Shakespeare’s play and she almost never speaks.
She is the one person who knows the truth of the lie of the handkerchief—at any moment she could speak up and prevent the injustice and bloodbath that overwhelm the play. Shakespeare creates a portrait of silence that is complicit with mass murder, that hopes by not uttering the truth to save its own skin, but that will in fact become the next victim when the lie follows its inexorable course.

Shakespeare’s foil for Othello, the gifted, inspiring black leader, is Cassio, an ambitious, glib, weak career politician with a crippling addiction to alcohol and sex. Othello’s first act as Governor of Cyprus is to fire him, with cause. Desdemona, whose openness of spirit urges rehabilitation, redemption, and forgiveness, challenges her husband to reinstate Cassio, privately, and then in public. Shakespeare’s mature tragedies strike a bitter note on their last page—the future will be even more bleak—after the flawed greatness of Hamlet we get Fortinbras. After Othello’s death the terrible irony is that he is replaced as Governor by the mediocrity and venality of Cassio. Was Desdemona wrong to support Cassio at the cost of her own life?

Toni Morrison responded to lacunae and poetic ambiguities in Shakespeare and to her own sense of unspoken truths. In communication with Toni by email, Rokia Traoré responded to Toni’s unfolding story with songs that answered or deepened the human questions and the metaphysical aspects in an African context.

Her work references African tropes and traditions. 

Dongori for example, refers to a woven cloth of thorns, a lament and an image that evokes a bitter African proverb for young women: your bridal veil will be your funeral shroud.

In Rokia Traoré’s new version, young women rewrite that proverb and defiantly, tenderly and respectfully claim a different future. The dah and kaicedrat in the overwhelming refrain of Dianfa are fruits with a pungent, acrid taste. The song Kemeh Bourama offers a brief sample of the centuries-old griot tradition. This is the way that the exploits of great warriors were recorded, sung and celebrated in the courts of Segou and Timbuktu, and we begin to hear the epic mode in which Othello’s story would have been told in Africa in Shakespeare’s lifetime.

In performance, dialogues spoken by the actress playing Desdemona are in dialogue with songs sung by Rokia Traoré as Barbary. The only song lyrics not written by Rokia Traoré are Shakespeare’s “Willow Song” and the pendant which Toni Morrison wrote in counterpoint to Shakespeare’s “Willow Song,” “Someone Leans Near.”

Four hundred years later, Toni Morrison and Rokia Traoré respond to Shakespeare’s Othello, offering some missing pieces and wider perspectives.

Women now have the scope to speak their minds and their hearts, and Africa is real, not just imagined. The women speak to us from the other side of the grave, older now, no longer teenagers.

In African traditions, the dead are quite undead and very present, and for them, as Toni Morrison says, the past and the future are the same.

Desdemona and Othello meet again in the afterlife.

With difficulty, humility and remorse, a space of reconciliation is created. The apologies that we have waited four hundred years to hear are finally spoken. We are not simply left with tragedy.

In a time outside of time that illuminates and infuses the present, Desdemona confronts her demons, reconciling the past, and now, no longer alone, prepares a future.

--Peter Sellars, June 2012
Toni Morrison (Author)


She has received the Ordre national de la Légion d’honneur, the Commandeur Ordre des Arts et des Lettres and the National Humanities Medal, among other honors. In 1993, Ms. Morrison was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Peter Sellars (Director)

Opera, theater, and festival director Peter Sellars has gained international renown for his groundbreaking and transformative interpretations of artistic masterpieces and for his collaborative projects with an extraordinary range of creative artists. Sellars has staged operas at the Glyndebourne Festival, Lyric Opera of Chicago, Netherlands Opera, Opéra National de Paris, Salzburg Festival, and San Francisco Opera, among others, and has established a reputation for bringing 20th-century and contemporary operas to the stage, including works by Messiaen, Hindemith, Ligeti, and Saariaho.

He has been a driving force in the creation of many new works with longtime collaborator John Adams, including *Nixon in China, The Death of Klinghoffer, El Niño*, and *Doctor Atomic*. His recent English National Opera production of Adams’ *The Gospel According to the Other Mary* received audience and critical acclaim. Sellars’ concert stagings of Bach’s *Saint Matthew Passion* and *Saint John Passion* with the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra garnered sweeping praise in Europe and New York. The *Indian Queen*, combining Purcell music, text, and dance, had its premiere at the Perm Opera and Ballet Theatre in 2013 and was presented earlier this year at ENO. Sellars has led several major arts festivals, including the 1990 and 1993 Los Angeles Festivals and the 2002 Adelaide Arts Festival. In 2006 he was Artistic Director of New Crowned Hope, a month-long festival in Vienna for which he invited artists from diverse cultural backgrounds to create new work in the fields of music, theater, dance, film, the visual arts, and architecture for the celebration of Mozart’s 250th birth anniversary. Sellars is a professor in the Department of World Arts and Cultures at UCLA. He is the recipient of a MacArthur Fellowship, the Erasmus Prize, and the Gish Prize, and is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. In 2014 he was awarded the prestigious Polar Music Prize and named Artist of the Year. He was honored as Musical America’s Artist of the Year for 2015.

Rokia Traoré (Barbary)

At once delicate and intense, the voice of Rokia Traoré takes us on a dreamlike journey into the world of an artist who has forged her own style. Inspiration, freshness and spontaneity, combined with timeless singing and delicate yet energetic instrumental sounds characterize the originality of her repertoire. Ms. Traoré hails from Bamako, Mali. Seeing her on stage, one cannot deny that her talent is considerable and imbued with strength and serenity. When she was just 25 years old, it was already clear that she was destined to become one of the great voices of Africa. Full of inventiveness and daring, and spurred on by a natural authority and great integrity in her artistic choices, Ms. Traoré is one of the most influential musicians of Africa.

Winner of the Radio France International Discoveries of Africa contest, and a revelation at the Angoulême Music Metisses Festival in 1998, Ms. Traoré has
invented a deliciously original and appealing music. Her innovations have established a singular style in contemporary African music, and she does it all as an artist responsible and aware of the proper way to fulfill her calling. In 2006, pursuing a career characterized by such brilliant works as her albums Mouneïssa, Wanita and Bowboï, Ms. Traoré was invited to collaborate with the American director of the New Crowned Hope festival, Peter Sellars.

This first collaboration with Mr. Sellars responded perfectly to Ms. Traoré's desire to pursue a career broader in definition than the narrow universe of so-called world music, which, for her, limits her artistic desires.

In 2010, after the success of her fourth album, Tchamantché, which won a Victoires de la Musique, the French equivalent of a Grammy, as well as a Songlines Artist of the Year Award, Traoré began her second collaboration with Mr. Sellars: Desdemona, for which she has composed the music.

Tina Benko (Desdemona)
Ms. Benko is thrilled to be back with the talented team of Toni Morrison’s Desdemona with whom she has performed in New York, London, France, Italy, Germany, and Holland. She recently starred as Marianne3 in Ivo Van Hove’s production of

Ingmar Bergman’s Scenes From a Marriage at New York Theatre Workshop where she also appeared in The Little Foxes and Restoration. Tina was nominated for a Lucille Lortel Award for playing Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis in Elfriede Jelinek’s solo play Jackie and she won the Bayfield award for her portrayal of Titania in Julie Taymor’s production of Midsummer Nights Dream at Theatre For a New Audience. Other theatre credits include the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation’s commissioned play Informed Consent, Katori Hall’s Whaddabloodclot!!!, Wallace Shawn’s Marie and Bruce, David Grimm’s Tales From Red Vienna, as well as Not About Nightingales and Irena’s Vow on Broadway. Film and TV credits include That Awkward Moment, Fair Market Value, Contest, The Avengers, The Good Wife, Blue Bloods, Mysteries of Laura, Person of Interest, VINYL, Brotherhood and the upcoming series Flesh and Bone.

TONI MORRISON AND THE UCLA MEDAL

As we prepared for the stage presentation of Desdemona, we were also proud to prepare for Toni Morrison to receive this university’s highest honor—the UCLA Medal.

The UCLA Medal is presented to those of exceptionally distinguished academic and professional achievement whose work embodies UCLA’s highest ideals. In a ceremony held in Royce Hall Monday October 5, Morrison was honored as one of the most celebrated authors and distinguished professors in American history. UCLA Chancellor Gene Block bestowed the medal and Morrison participated in the event via video conference.

The UCLA Medal citation reads:

“You are one of the most celebrated authors and distinguished professors in American history. A masterful storyteller, you have created works characterized by epic themes, vivid dialogue, and richly drawn characters. You have left a rich legacy at such distinguished institutions as Princeton University, where your vision and leadership fostered an unprecedented collaboration between students and accomplished artists. The first African American woman to win a Nobel Prize, you have advanced the standards to which great creative endeavors are held. For your remarkable body of work, your creative genius and your generosity in sharing your extraordinary talents, we proudly bestow upon you The UCLA Medal.”

As we worked toward showcasing a rare piece of theater from one of the most extraordinary writers in American literature, we are extremely grateful to the members of the UCLA community who joined us in admiration, commemoration and discussion around themes inherent in Morrison’s work.

As part of the UCLA Medal ceremony Oct., 5 we also held a panel discussion with Morrison titled Black Lives Matter: Artists and Intellectuals Creating a Movement. We thank the following panelists for joining us.

Robin D.G. Kelley, a distinguished professor of history and Gary B. Nash Endowed Chair in United States history at the UCLA College; Cheryl I. Harris, the Rosalinde and Arthur Gilbert Foundation Chair in civil rights and civil liberties at the UCLA School of Law; Shamell Bell, a community organizer, choreographer and Ph.D. student in culture and performance at UCLA’s Department of World Arts and Cultures/Dance; and Marques Vestal, Los Angeles native and doctoral student in the History Department at UCLA who organizes against state violence, police brutality and hyper criminalization.
COMING UP AT CAP UCLA

Miranda July
New Society
Sat, Oct 17
Sun, Oct 18
Freud Playhouse

Julia Wolfe / SITI Company / Bang on a Can All-Stars
Steel Hammer
Sat, Oct 23
Sun, Oct 24
Royce Hall

Phantom Limb Company
Memory Rings
Fri, Apr 8
Sat, Apr 9
Royce Hall

SPECIAL THANKS

Opening night of Desdemona, Thursday October 8, also marks the Center’s annual benefit dinner, this year a post-performance event that honors our Model Mavericks—women who have broken the mold in generous and bold fashion.

Our honorees are filmmaker and dedicated arts supporter Susan Bay Nimoy, Los Angeles arts leader Olga Garay-English and Desdemona librettist Rokia Traoré. Proceeds from the benefit support CAP UCLA programs and educational initiatives.

We thank our generous table sponsors for the inaugural Model Mavericks dinner.

GOLD LEVEL
Deborah Irmas
Ginny Mancini
Dee Dee Dorskind and Brad Tabach-Bank

SILVER LEVEL
Leslie White and Al Limon
Susan Bay Nimoy
Bill Resnick
Grey Bryan and Katie Marsano and Alan M. Schwartz
Anne-Marie and Alex Spataru