

MELBOURNE
FESTIVAL

08—25
OCTOBER
2015

MEDIA
RELEASE



"This is a remarkable, challenging and bravely original work.****" - *The Guardian*, UK

"Traore's rich and mesmerizing voice, regal bearing and fluid movement has enchanted critics."
- *New York Times*

"performed with incantatory brilliance by Benko...Beauty from ugliness is not trusted. But, trust me, this is a great, challenging, haunting and lasting work." - Mark Swed, *LA Times*

Southbank Theatre
The Sumner

Friday 16 – Monday 19 October

Fri — Sun at 8pm

Mon at 6.30pm

2 hrs, no interval

Premium \$119

A Reserve \$99 / \$89

Students \$25

Transaction fees may apply

www.festival.melbourne

Southbank Theatre 03 8688 0800

Ticketmaster 136 100

#melbfest

USA+MALI // Theatre+Music

Australian Premiere

Melbourne Festival and Union Pay International present

DESDEMONA

Text by Toni Morrison

Music & Lyrics by Rokia Traoré

Directed by Peter Sellars

Desdemona Tina Benko

Desdemona is an extraordinary narrative of words, music and song about Shakespeare's doomed heroine, who speaks from the grave about the traumas of race, class, gender, war — and the transformative power of love.

The most fiery angel in Shakespeare's creation, Desdemona 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.

A distinctive mix of play and concert, this mesmerising reimaging of *Othello's* tragic representation of the legacies of gender, race and class domination are brought to life as the title character — powerfully played by **Tina Benko** — and her African maid Barbary — stunningly embodied by the great Malian singer **Rokia Traoré** — reach beyond the grave.

With original songs by **Rokia Traoré** and direction by **Peter Sellars**, the audience is transported into 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 human race.

Lit in a dramatic contrast of spotlight and shadows, the stage is littered with glass, and glints like an African graveyard - the performers are dressed in white with their obscurities looming on a screen behind them.

A heated conversation more than a decade ago between Morrison and Sellars on the relevancy of Shakespeare's *Othello* was the catalyst for this epic production. As Sellars questioned the plays usefulness, Morrison wholly disagreed. In 2009 Sellars staged an ultramodern version of that very play whilst Morrison was set the challenge of talking back to Shakespeare and did so with one of his stoutest characters, *Desdemona*.

MEDIA CONTACT

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Text **Toni Morrison**
Music **Rokia Traoré**
Director **Peter Sellars**
Cast **Tina Benko, Rokia Traoré**
Musicians **Mamah Diabaté (n'goni), Toumani Kouyaté (kora), Fatim Kouyaté and Marie Dembelé (vocals)**
Lighting Design **James F. Ingalls**
Sound Design **Alexis Giraud**
Sound Engineer **Antoine Audibert**
Production Stage Manager **Anne Dechêne**
Assistant Stage Manager **Pamela Salling**
Producer **Diane J. Malecki**

Desdemona was commissioned and coproduced by Wiener Festwochen, Théâtre Nanterre-Amandiers, Cal Performances, Berkeley California, Lincoln Centre for the Performing Arts, New York, spielzeit'europa | Berliner Festspiele, and Barbican, London, Arts Council London and London 2012 Festival. The premiere performance, directed by Peter Sellars, took place on 15 May 2011 at the Akzent Theater in Vienna, Austria.

Desdemona for Sydney Festival
Roslyn Packer Theatre, Walsh Bay

Friday 23 - Sunday 25 October

Fri - Sat at 8pm

Sun at 2pm

Bookings Sydney Festival on 1300 856 876

Roslyn Packer Theatre on 02 9250 1999

sydneyfestival.org.au/Desdemona

"In Shakespeare's tragedies, the ideal woman – Desdemona, Virgilia, Cordelia – was mainly quiet. For Toni Morrison the ideal woman does not keep silent. At last she speaks out. And while she is speaking, she unveils secrets, intimates her hopes and her dreams, but also admits her own shortcomings. Shakespeare's Desdemona is divine perfection, but Toni Morrison allows her to be human, to make mistakes and, eventually, with eternity stretching out in front of her, to learn and to understand." writes Peter Sellars.

Toni Morrison is a Nobel Prize-winning American novelist, editor, and professor. Her novels are known for their epic themes, vivid dialogue, and richly detailed characters. Among her best known work is *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*.

American theatre, opera and festival director **Peter Sellars**, has gained renown worldwide for his transformative interpretations of artistic masterpieces and collaborative projects with an extraordinary range of creative artists across three decades.

Rokia Traoré is one of the most important voices in contemporary Africa. A Victoires de la Musique award-winning Malian singer, songwriter and guitarist, she has created a soundscape that illuminates imagined conversations between Desdemona and Barbary.

Tina Benko is an award-winning actor whose extensive credits in film, television and stage include the role of Titania in Julie Taymor's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and Marianne 3 in Ivo van Hove's reimagining of Ingmar Bergman's *Scenes from a Marriage* at New York Theatre Workshop.

Melbourne Festival Artistic Director, Josephine Ridge said: "Since its premiere in Vienna and subsequent seasons including those in New York and London, *Desdemona* has enthralled audiences and, when I first saw it in Amsterdam, I was no exception. I came away mesmerised by a new story that both breathed life into the character of Desdemona and created a fresh appreciation of the motivations at work in Othello himself. I raced up to Peter Sellars afterwards and immediately invited him to bring this wonderful production to us in Melbourne."

Connected events:

AFTER TRAGEDY, LISTENING – Sun 18 Oct at 11am

Southbank Theatre // FREE

ARTISTS IN CONVERSATION: Peter Sellars – Fri 16 Oct at 1pm

Clemenger Auditorium, NGV // FREE

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