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Performing *Ot(h)ello*: Verdi, Salvini, and the Staging Manual*

Enza De Francisci

Abstract: This article retraces Giuseppe Verdi's *Otello* (1887) to the great Italian *mattatore* actors, particularly Tommaso Salvini (1829–1915), whose ground-breaking performances of the Moor of Venice, in a translation by Giulio Carcano, coincided with the time when Verdi and his librettist, Arrigo Boito, were collaborating on their *Otello*. Italy's *grandi attori* enjoyed a reputation for realistic immediacy and impulsiveness readily associated with cultural stereotypes about Italy's perceived 'otherness'. In the ethnographic context of nineteenth-century Italy, it is argued here that the actors' interpretation of Shakespeare's Moor not only synthesised the multilateral cultural threads of the Jacobean Othello, but also partnered this racial alterity with a new dramatic language, which went on to influence Verdi's opera and prompt book, and, ultimately, to perpetuate an exoticised 'brand' of Italian artistic culture on stage at a time when Italy was fashioning its own national identity.

Nineteenth-century Italy saw Shakespeare become a prominent figure in the public eye. Shakespeare's popularity and success, particularly in an operatic context in post-unification Italy, was secured, largely, through Giuseppe Verdi's re-visionings of his works, notably with his Shakespearean opera of *Otello*, his *dramma per musica*, completed in 1887 following an approximately seven-year collaboration with his librettist and close friend Arrigo Boito. By this time, several adaptations of *Otello* had already circulated on the Italian peninsula, including Rossini's homonymous opera of 1816, Salvatore Viganò's Milanese ballet of 1818, and early performances of the spoken play with Gustavo Modena, beginning in 1842, in a

translation by Michele Leoni (1814).¹ Hilary Gatti in her book on Shakespeare and Milanese theatre, for instance, provides a list of performances from 1788 to 1899 and one of the most frequently performed plays was, indeed, *Othello*.²

Verdi was a great admirer of Shakespeare and would go on to contribute significantly to his canonisation in Italy. As this history is well known to opera scholars, it will be summarised briefly here in order to highlight the larger context of the nineteenth-century reception of Shakespeare in Italy. Though he ultimately based more operas on Schiller than on Shakespeare, with his *Giovanna d'Arco* (1845), *I Masnadieri* (1847), *Luisa Miller* (1849), and *Don Carlos* (1867), it was Shakespeare whose works inspired Verdi from an early age. Despite not actually being able to read a single word in English, Verdi claimed to have had Shakespeare 'in my hands from earliest youth'. In a letter to Léon Escudier, his publisher in Paris, Verdi maintained that he had read – and reread – Shakespeare his entire lifetime,³ presumably in French and later Italian translation. Verdi's three Shakespeare operas were his *Macbeth* in 1847, *Otello* in 1887, and *Falstaff* in 1893, the first based on a libretto by Francesco Maria Piave and Andrea Maffei, and the latter two with libretti by Boito. Verdi had also considered adapting *King Lear* with the librettist Antonio Somma, but this project never materialised. Given the success of Verdi's *Macbeth*, it is surprising that it took him almost another forty years before producing his second Shakespeare version. In fact, by the time *Otello* premièred in Milan, Verdi had been unofficially 'retired' for sixteen years. His last opera before *Otello* had been *Aida* in 1871. He was enticed back to work in the opera by

* I would like to express my sincere thanks Benjamin Walton for all his support throughout the drafting process of this article. I would also like to thank Axel Körner for inviting me to present an earlier version of this paper at a conference in Brown University in 2017 as part of the Leverhulme-funded international research network 'Re-imagining italianità: opera and musical culture in transnational perspective'. In addition, I would like to extend my thanks to Roger Parker for his comments during the early drafting stages of this article; the peer reviewers for their feedback; and Eva Moreda Rodriguez for her comments on my final draft.

¹ For more examples, see Claudia Polo, 'L'Otello di Verdi nella traduzioni dell'Ottocento', *Nuova rivista musical italiana* 3 (1995), 419–30.

² Hilary Gatti, *Shakespeare nei teatri milanesi dell'Ottocento* (Bari, 1968).

³ Roberta Montemorra Marvin, 'Verdi and Shakespeare', in *Macbeth* (London, 2011).

the editor Giulio Ricordi and the conductor Franco Faccio, playing on Verdi's friendship with Boito, who was to write the libretto as part of what they would indifferently refer to as their 'progetto di cioccolata'.⁴ This may explain why Verdi returned to the opera, but the reasons why he returned with Shakespeare's *Othello* remain unclear. George Bernard Shaw has suggested that Verdi might have been drawn to the operatic qualities of the play: 'Instead of *Otello* being an Italian opera written in the style of Shakespear [sic], *Othello* is a play written by Shakespear [sic] in the style of Italian opera. ... With such a libretto, Verdi was quite at home'.⁵

By the time Verdi and Boito adapted *Othello*, Shakespeare's Italian reception had already gathered momentum as a genuine Italian Shakespeare began to develop (to paraphrase Susan Bassnett).⁶ The two most significant landmarks in the historiography of Shakespearean reception in Italy were undoubtedly Carlo Rusconi's prose translation of Shakespeare's complete works, published in 1838, and Giulio Carcano's complete verse translations, published between 1875 and 1882. Though there had been some earlier attempts at translating the complete works of Shakespeare, above all by Giunio Bazzoni and Giacomo Sormani in their *Opere di Guglielmo Shakespeare* in 1830, their three-volume translation did not actually include all the Elizabethan writer's plays, despite the implication of its title. Instead, it was Rusconi and Carcano who were largely responsible for Shakespeare's dissemination and gradual canonisation in Italy. Whereas early Italian translations of Shakespeare tended to be facilitated via French and German intermediaries, their translations

⁴ Rene Weis, 'Verdi's Shakespeare: Musical Translations and Authenticity', in *Shakespeare, Italy, and Transnational Exchange*, eds. Enza De Francisci and Christopher Stamatakis (New York, 2017), 137–50. Also Julian Budden, *The Operas of Verdi*, vol. 3: *From Don Carlos to Falstaff* (London, 1978); and Giuseppe Verdi, *Otello. English National Opera Guide*, ed. John Nicholas (London, 1981).

⁵ George Bernard Shaw, *Shaw on Music*, ed. Eric Bentley (New York, 1995), 142.

⁶ Susan Bassnett, 'Foreword', in *Shakespeare, Italy, and Transnational Exchange*, eds. De Francisci and Stamatakis, xi–xvi, at xiii.

were based on the original English, making them key figures in assimilating Shakespeare in Italy both in print and on stage.

Specifically, Shakespeare's Venetian Moor began to have a serious impact on Italian theatre audiences following early performances by *grandi attori* such as Ernesto Rossi, who interpreted the role of Othello in 1856, and above all Tommaso Salvini, who starred as the eponymous role in 1875. Both actors performed in a translation by Carcano, who worked closely with a range of Italy's celebrity actors, including Adelaide Ristori and Salvini. While his collaboration with Ristori did not go beyond the adaptation of *Macbeth* in 1848, his collaboration with Salvini was his most substantial, starting with *Othello*, which would become the actor's most important role.⁷

Moreover, by the time Boito came to write the text for Verdi's *Otello*, he had already produced a Shakespearean libretto in the form of Faccio's *Amleto*, which premièred on 30 May 1865 at the Teatro Carlo Felice in Genoa.⁸ In between completing the libretti for *Otello* in 1887 and *Falstaff* in 1893, Boito was working on an experimental approach to translating Shakespeare's theatre, together with Italy's star actress, Eleonora Duse. The first play they launched together, *Antonio and Cleopatra*, premièred on 22 November 1888 at the Teatro Manzoni in Milan, without much critical acclaim.⁹ The second, *Romeo and Juliet*, was translated in 1889 but remained unfinished.¹⁰ And the last, *Macbeth*, was never staged.¹¹

Despite Boito's experience producing adaptations of Shakespearean plays, it seems that his *Otello* was adapted from pre-existing Italian translations by Rusconi, Carcano, and

⁷ Marvin Carlson, *The Italian Shakespearians: Performances by Ristori, Salvini, and Rossi in England and America* (Washington, 1995).

⁸ Annina Ahola, *Amleto by Franco Faccio and Arrigo Boito: Music, Text and Context* (Dublin, 2009).

⁹ Giovanni Pontiero, *Eleonora Duse: In Art and Life* (Peter Lang, 1986). Duse's annotated prompt book for the role of Cleopatra, her 'Cleopatra books', have recently been uncovered at The Murray Edwards Duse Collection in Cambridge. See Anna Sica, *The Italian Method of La Drammatica: Its Legacy and Reception* (Milan, 2014).

¹⁰ Vincenza Minutella, *Reclaiming Romeo and Juliet: Italian Translations for Page, Stage, and Screen* (Amsterdam, 2013).

¹¹ Duse's prompt book for *Macbeth*, in Boito's handwriting, remains in the Fondazione Cini archive in Venice. Anna Sica, 'Eleonora Duse as Juliet and Cleopatra', in *Shakespeare, Italy, and Transnational Exchange*, eds. Enza De Francisci and Chris Stamatakis, 151–65, at 162.

their contemporary Andrea Maffei, who is said to have also inspired Verdi.¹² While Linda Fairtile has acknowledged that ‘Verdi probably consulted the Italian translations by Andrea Maffei and Carlo Rusconi that resided, throughout his life, in a bookcase near his bed’,¹³ it appears that he also drew from the translations of Carcano: a close friend of his who regularly sent him his work.¹⁴ As well as using these Italian sources, Boito’s re-writing of *Othello* also drew on the translations of the German Schlegel and the French François-Victor Hugo.¹⁵ James Hepokoski has shown that Hugo’s 1860 translation of *Othello* greatly inspired Boito’s refashioning of the Willow song.¹⁶

Critical literature has tended to take a text-centred approach, examining Boito’s own reworking and remediation of prior translations.¹⁷ This article offers a new perspective on the intercultural exchange between Shakespeare and Verdi by treating it as an exchange facilitated by the performances of Italy’s nineteenth-century star actors. I argue here that Salvini’s influence, above all, can be detected in Act IV of the stage manual or production book (the *disposizione scenica*). Produced shortly after the opera’s première at La Scala in 1887 by Verdi, Boito and Ricordi, the stage manual illuminates how the Verdi-Boito-Ricordi collaboration envisaged the actual performance of his opera. Though the importance of the stage manual has already been explored by critics and scholars,¹⁸ this article offers a close

¹² Arrigo Boito and Giuseppe Verdi, *Carteggio Verdi-Boito*, vol. 1, eds. Mario Medici and Marcello Conati (Parma, 1978), 103.

¹³ Linda B. Fairtile, ‘Otello’, in *The Cambridge Verdi Encyclopedia*, ed. Roberta Montemorra Marvin (Cambridge, 2013), 317–27, at 324.

¹⁴ Mary Jane Phillips-Matz, *Verdi: A Biography* (Oxford, 1993), 134.

¹⁵ For more about the translations, see David R.B. Kimbell, *Verdi in the Age of Italian Romanticism* (Cambridge, 1981), 522–3.

¹⁶ James A. Hepokoski, ‘Boito and F.V. Hugo’s “Magnificent Translation”: A Study in the Genesis of the *Otello* Libretto’, in *Reading Opera*, eds. Arthur Groos and Roger Parker (Princeton, 1988), 34–59.

¹⁷ Elena Sala Di Felice and Laura Sanna, eds., *Tre secoli di Otello* (Rome, 1990); also the critical works outlined in Gregory W. Harwood, *Giuseppe Verdi: A Research and Information Guide*, 2nd edn (New York, 2017), 297–307.

¹⁸ See James A. Hepokoski and Mercedes Viale Ferrero, *Otello di Giuseppe Verdi* (Milan, 1990). For more on the production book: Andreas Giger, ‘Staging and form in Giuseppe Verdi’s *Otello*’, in *Fashions and Legacies of Nineteenth-Century Italian Opera*, eds. Roberta Montemorra Marvin and Hillary Poriss (Cambridge, 2010), 196–218; and Doug Coe, ‘The Original Production Book for *Otello*: An Introduction’, in *19th-Century Music*, 2/2 (1978), 148–58.

reading of the manual in order to make visible, for the first time, the central role Salvini arguably exerted on the performative aspects of the opera. My argument hinges on the term *naturalezza*, which appears frequently in the staging manual. As James Hepokoski points out, ‘[o]ne of the key words throughout is *naturalezza* (*naturalness*), a call to perform an action “as if it were happening in reality”’.¹⁹ One of the intentions of this article is to unpack what this term meant for Verdi and his contemporaries, asking why the manual insisted on naturalistic realism, and trace this term back to Salvini’s dramatic approach.

Taking our cue from Alessandra Campana, who identifies Salvini’s interpretation of *Othello* ‘as one of the very sources for Boito’s re-writing of the tragedy, and a fundamental influence upon Boito and Verdi’s conception of the Shakespearean tragedy and of the character of Otello’,²⁰ I propose that the insistence on ‘*naturalezza*’ points to, and actually recalls, the celebrity star actor. Salvini’s passion in the role of Othello took international theatre houses by storm, but it was his violent rendition of Desdemona’s murder scene which allegedly caused some female members of the audience to faint. By means of analysis of nineteenth-century Italian theatrical and operatic versions of Shakespeare’s *Othello*, this article will seek both to emphasize the interchange between music and drama, and to throw new light on the relationship between Salvini’s aggressive performances and the construction of Act IV in the production book.

Moreover, I illustrate how the theatrical and operatic interpretations of Shakespeare’s Moor of Venice helped to develop Italian artistic culture, or notions of ‘Italian-ness’, shortly after political Unification in 1861. Indeed, the decision to perform the role in an explicitly aggressive way must be placed within the wider historical and cultural framework of a newly united Italy, and needs to be understood in the context of prevailing racial stereotypes of the

¹⁹ James Hepokoski, ‘Staging Verdi’s Operas: The Single, “Correct” Performance’, in *Verdi in Performance*, eds. Alison Latham and Roger Parker (Oxford, 2001), 11–22, at 14.

²⁰ Alessandra Campana, *Opera and Modern Spectatorship in Late Nineteenth-Century Italy* (Cambridge, 2015), 108.

Italian. While it could be argued that actors like Salvini appeared rather naïve in taking advantage of this stereotype of the aggressive Italian, they were at the same time skilfully introducing a ‘new’ type of realism on stage.²¹ It is suggested here that Salvini’s performances not only synthesised the multilateral cultural threads of Shakespeare’s Othello, but also partnered this racial ‘otherness’ with a new dramatic language which went on to inspire Verdi’s conception of the closing act, and to perpetuate an exoticised ‘brand’ of Italian identity on stage. A close examination, therefore, into how Salvini’s acting method might have influenced Boito and Verdi’s thinking about the character will thus provide the basis for new insights into the interconnectedness between opera and spoken theatre as performance – an area still relatively overlooked in recent scholarship.

Importantly, an analysis of this nature allows us to rethink questions of racial stereotypes, and reconsider emergent debates around the representation of the ‘other’ in both theatre and opera. There has been extensive scholarship around ‘orientalism’ and ‘exoticism’ within opera studies, including in the works by Claire Mabilat, Ralph P. Locke, and Nicholas Tarling.²² Equally, the theme of performing ‘blackness’ is a dominant preoccupation in current musicology, especially in the works by Jo Haynes and Naomi André.²³ Recent edited collections on black roles in opera include those edited by Naomi André, Karen M. Bryan, and Eric Saylor, as well as by Mary Ingraham, Joseph So and Roy Moodley.²⁴ Drawing on recent studies on cultural representations of Italy, aided by the scholarship of authors such as

²¹ See Enza De Francisci, ‘Giovanni Grasso: The “Other” Othello on the London Stage’, in *Shakespeare, Italy, and Transnational Exchange*, eds. Enza De Francisci and Chris Stamatakis, 195–207.

²² Claire Mabilat, *Orientalism and Representations of Music in the Nineteenth-century British Popular Arts* (Farnham, 2008); Ralph P. Locke, *Musical Exoticism: Images and Reflections* (Cambridge, 2009); Ralph P. Locke, ‘Beyond the Exotic: How “Eastern” Is Aida?’, *Cambridge Opera Journal* 17/2 (2005), 105–39; and Nicholas Tarling, *Orientalism and the Operatic World* (Lanham, 2015).

²³ Jo Haynes, *Music, Difference and the Residue of Race* (New York, 2013); and Naomi André, *Black Opera: History, Power, Engagement* (Illinois, 2018).

²⁴ *Blackness in Opera*, eds. Naomi André, Karen M. Bryan, and Eric Saylor (Illinois, 2012); and *Opera in a Multicultural World: Coloniality, Culture, Performance*, eds. Mary Ingraham, Joseph So and Roy Moodley (New York, 2015).

Nelson Moe and Rhiannon Noel Welch,²⁵ I hope to bring these areas together to offer new insights into the different processes involved in translating and circulating *Othello* in nineteenth-century Italy. My goal is to broaden our understanding of the representational, sociocultural, and ethical dynamics invoked by *Othello* on theatrical and operatic stages.

The ‘Other’ Othello

Inevitably, *Othello* has had a problematic performance history. The Othellos that appeared on British stages during the first half of the nineteenth century tended to promote a gallant, noble, heroically tragic character. The English actor William Charles Macready, who performed Othello in Warwick in 1829, described his adopted persona as very much ‘like us’, in an effort to erase cultural and racial difference.²⁶ However, attitudes changed in the last decades of the nineteenth century as Britain witnessed a continued expansion of its Empire and the emergence of Social Darwinism, which fomented the conditions for a cultural assumption that ‘races’ could be divided into different categories, such as, in Edward Saïd’s terms, the ‘advanced and backward, or European-Aryan and Oriental-African’.²⁷ Already as early as 1904, Othello was described in a lecture by Andrew Cecil Bradley, Oxford Professor of Poetry, as someone who ‘comes before us, dark and grand, with a light upon him from the sun where he was born’, leading him to conclude that ‘[h]e does not belong to our world’.²⁸ This was a view which travelled across the Atlantic. By the 1870s, in the wake of the American Civil war, *Othello* was no longer the regular feature that it had been in the

²⁵ Nelson Moe, *The View from Vesuvius: Italian Culture and the Southern Question* (Berkeley, 2002); and Rhiannon Noel Welch, *Vital Subjects Race and Biopolitics in Italy, 1860–1920* (Liverpool, 2016).

²⁶ Virginia Mason Vaughan, *Othello: A Contextual History* (Cambridge, 1994), 159. Also James Shapiro, *Shakespeare in a Divided America: What His Plays Tell Us About Our Past and Future* (London, 2020).

²⁷ Edward Saïd, *Orientalism* (London, 2003 [1977]), 207. Also Robert J.C. Young, *Empire, Colony, Postcolony* (Oxford, 2015); and Robert J.C. Young, *Torn Halves: Political Conflict in Literary and Cultural Theory* (Manchester, 1996).

²⁸ Mason Vaughan, *Othello: A Contextual History*, 158.

American South during the first half of the nineteenth century, and was seldom seen except in parodies, or when the Venetian Moor was deliberately ‘whitened’.²⁹

Coinciding with this branding of Othello as ‘other’, the decades at the turn of the new century saw the arrival *en masse* of Italian migrant communities in London. Rossi and Salvini were therefore performing in London during a period in which Italian emigration became a mass phenomenon in Britain. In 1888–9, Italian immigrants in Britain were described by the Select Committee appointed to adjudicate on foreign immigration as ‘immoral, illiterate, vicious, and low’; in sum, they were described as ‘a degraded class, which must cause undesirable results among the surrounding population’.³⁰ Indeed, the image of Italy as ‘other’ can be traced from as far back as the Grand Tour, when early accounts helped to foster the perception of Italy as an island of ‘inertia, negligence, indolence’,³¹ populated by promiscuous behaviour among women in Mediterranean Europe.³²

Just as Italians were being portrayed as ‘other’ in turn-of-the-century Britain, so too Sicily and Sicilians were regarded as ‘oriental’ in post-unification Italy, at a time when racialised studies began to emerge in Italy, notably Cesare Lombroso’s *L’uomo delinquente* [*Criminal Man*] (1876). Following years of post-mortem examinations on criminals, Lombroso proposed a theory of the born criminal, placing Southern Italians among what he called a class of ‘savages’. Lombroso claimed that, having been conquered over the centuries by various invaders, such as North Africans and Arabs, Southern Italians were predisposed to criminal behaviour.³³

²⁹ Mason Vaughan, *Othello: A Contextual History*, 160.

³⁰ Lucio Sponza, ‘The 1880s: A Turning Point’, in *The Supplement to The Italianist. A Century of Italian Emigration to Britain 1880–1980s: Five Essays*, eds. Lucio Sponza and Arturo Tosi (Reading, 1993), 10–24, at 12.

³¹ Silvana Patriarca, *Italian Vices. Nation and Character from the Risorgimento to the Republic* (Cambridge, 2010), 21. Also Simonetta Chiappini, ‘O Patria Mia’. *Passione e identità nazionale nel melodrama italiano dell’Ottocento* (Florence, 2011).

³² Franco Cassano, *Southern Thought and Other Essays on the Mediterranean*, eds. and trans. Norma Bouchard and Valerio Ferme (New York, 2011). Also Roberto M. Dainotto, *Europe (In Theory)* (Durham, 2007).

³³ Cesare Lombroso, *Criminal Man*, trans. Mary Gibson and Nicole Hahn Rafter (Durham, 2006 [1876]).

These years in Italy were marked by intellectual wrangling over the so-called ‘Southern Question’, whose roots lay in the period of the Risorgimento. On 27 October 1860, only a few months after Giuseppe Garibaldi’s triumphant arrival in mainland Italy, Luigi Carlo Farini, the chief administrator of Southern Italy, wrote despairingly to Camillo Cavour describing Southern Italy as ‘Altro che Italia! Questa è Africa!’ (‘Some Italy! This is Africa!’).³⁴ From 1861 onwards, Italy was faced with the challenge of self-fashioning a stable national identity. As the Piedmontese statesman and man of letters Massimo d’Azeglio famously stated, ‘L’Italia è fatta. Restano da fare gli italiani’ (‘Italy has been made. We now need to make Italians’). Yet Italy remained a fundamentally fractured nation-state.

Popular journals enthusiastically exploited this emerging image of Sicily as the *Africa of Italy*. The *Illustrazione Italiana*, based in Milan, hardly ever mentioned Southern Italy during the first six months of its print run in 1873. However, following unification, not only did the South feature more regularly, but these representations tended to focus on a distinct brand of southern people. For the Christmas edition in 1890, journalist Raffaello Barbiera was sent to report on Palermo, and the language he used reinforced Sicily’s pairing with Africa. He makes reference to a boy’s physical features (black curly hair and olive skin), remarking that ‘proud haughtiness and cunning are mixed together in the way he looks at you. For all that Norman blood mixed with Moorish blood, the latter is still dominant.’³⁵ Images of Sicily’s ‘otherness’ continued to emerge in the *Illustrazione Italiana* throughout the well-known Mostra Etnografica Siciliana (Sicilian Ethnographic Exhibition) at the Esposizione Nazionale in Palermo from 1891 to 1892. This exhibition displayed various Sicilian cultural materials collected by the doctor-turned-folklorist Giuseppe Pitrè, together with a living

³⁴ Nelson Moe, *The View from Vesuvius: Italian Culture and the Southern Question* (Berkeley, 2002).

³⁵ John Dickie, *Darkest Italy: The Nation and Stereotypes of the Mezzogiorno* (London, 1999), 102–4.

exhibit of colonised Ethiopians residing in a fictional village, Villaggio Abissino, '[c]omplete with sand, palms, and huts'.³⁶

These years were also marked by Italy's territorial expansion in Africa. The massacre of Dogali, which has since been considered the beginning of the first Italo-African war, came ten days after Verdi's première of *Otello* – a detail overlooked in critical reviews of the opera, as Campana reminds us.³⁷ Thus to return to why *Othello* was such a popular role in Italy, and why Verdi would return to the works of Shakespeare specifically via the route of *Othello* it would seem that the intercultural context actually problematised and complicated the decision to place Shakespeare's Moor of Venice centre stage, especially when this 'other' role was performed by an actor from the 'other' part of the Mediterranean.

It is therefore intriguing that the role would become a staple of both Italy's theatrical and operatic repertoires at this very moment in the country's history. Indeed, Verdi and Boito, like the Italian *grandi attori*, would have been well aware of the racial tensions in post-Unification Italy. Not only were tensions rising in Ethiopia, but this was also a time when the newly united nation-state was self-fashioning its own artistic culture, and, curiously, Verdi and Boito, as well as the star actors, were not alone in their choice to stage 'exoticised' roles. Examples include Giovanni Verga in his *Cavalleria rusticana* (1884), which would become the basis for Pietro Mascagni's homonymous opera in 1890, with both versions placing rural Sicily – the 'Africa of Italy' – on the typically bourgeois stage.³⁸ Similarly, as is also well known, early 'veristi' composers such as Ruggero Leoncavallo would also place 'other' roles centre stage in his operas, including in his *Pagliacci* (1892) set in Calabria. As a result, it could be said that early theatrical and operatic productions of *Othello* paved the way for such 'other' roles to develop on Italian stages, and, in so doing, contributed to an exoticised brand

³⁶ Vivien Greene, 'The "Other" Africa: Giuseppe Pitre's Mostra Etnografica in Siciliana (1891–2)', *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 17/3 (2012), 288–309, at 300.

³⁷ Campana, *Opera and Modern Spectatorship*, 133–4.

³⁸ Moe, *The View from Vesuvius*.

of Italian artistic identity just as cultural and racial associations between Italy and Africa were rising.

Tommaso Salvini

Given the powerful influence of Salvini's interpretation of Othello, Verdi's conception of the character would have inevitably been shaped by the new quality of 'naturalness' pioneered by the star actor. Salvini's dramatic technique flourished in Italy at a time when the popularity of the celebrity star actor soared – a time when a different kind of theatre prevailed in Italy, an *actor's theatre* ('il teatro dell'attore') in which audiences were drawn not necessarily by the play but by the star of the show. According to Cesare Molinari, 'parlando di teatro di attore ci si riferisce a quel genere di teatro in cui la funzione progettuale è affidata all'attore' ('speaking about the theatre of the actor one refers to that dramatic genre whose main design function is entrusted to the actor').³⁹

It can be argued that actors' theatre developed in Italy because of the lack of a common spoken language. Tullio De Mauro estimates that, in the wake of Italy's relatively late political unification in 1861, only 2.5 per cent of the population was able to speak the Italian language, based principally on the Florentine dialect of Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio, with the majority communicating in their native regional vernaculars.⁴⁰ Little changes if we accept the correction of Arrigo Castellani, who suggests that the percentage is approximately 10 per cent.⁴¹ For a medium so reliant on speech, the lack of a common spoken language would seem to inhibit the growth of an early national theatre, a growth hindered further following the collapse of public subsidies for the performing arts.⁴² As a

³⁹ Cesare Molinari, 'Teorie della recitazione: gli attori sull'attore. Da Rossi a Zacconi', in *Teatro dell'Italia unita. Atti dei convegni Firenze 10-11 dicembre 1977, 4-6 novembre 1978*, ed. Siro Ferrone (Milan, 1980), 75–100, at 77.

⁴⁰ Tullio De Mauro, *Storia linguistica dell'Italia unita* (Rome, 1995), 41.

⁴¹ Arrigo Castellani, 'Quanti erano gl'italofoni nel 1861?', *Studi linguistici italiani* 8 (1982), 3–26.

⁴² Axel Körner, *Politics of Culture in Liberal Italy: From Unification to Fascism* (New York, 2009).

result of these socio-linguistic conditions, only two forms of Italian drama met with any notable success in Italy or abroad when, subsequently, they were taken to a global market: the commedia dell'arte and the opera, which both subordinate the importance of the spoken word to, respectively, body language and music.⁴³

Salvini's interpretation of Shakespeare's Moor of Venice was generally acknowledged as remarkable. He opened the role of Othello in London at Drury Lane on 1 April 1875 and later performed it around the world. To overcome the language barriers during his international tours, Salvini opted for an unusual approach. During a performance in Philadelphia on 29 November 1880, he performed Othello in Italian alongside a supporting cast performing their roles in English. In his *Leaves from the Autobiography* (1892), Salvini documented various anecdotes of these multilingual performances, recording his initial sense of loss at his incomprehensible cues during rehearsals, but then noting how he gradually came to understand the lines of his fellow actors, in spite of the fact that he did not understand English.⁴⁴

Salvini subsequently gained a name for himself as one of the first actors to experiment with realist drama, bringing a physicality to the role which had never before been seen on the Italian stage. He was duly singled out as one of the early actors admired by Stanislavsky in his autobiography *My Life in Art* (1924). Here Stanislavsky recalls how Salvini, just before his performance, would undertake what can only be described as a series of rituals (such as wandering about the stage practicing his lines, then retiring to his dressing room to put his make-up on) in order to enable him to creep 'into the skin and body of Othello', and change himself 'not only outwardly, but inwardly'.⁴⁵

⁴³ Pietro Trifone, *Malalingua. L'italiano scorretto da Dante a oggi* (Bologna, 2007).

⁴⁴ Tommaso Salvini, *Leaves from the Autobiography* (New York, 1892), 201.

⁴⁵ Constantin Stanislavski, *My Life in Art* (London, 1962 [1924]), 273, 272.

We have a scene-by-scene description of Salvini's Othello from the American author Edward Tuckerman Mason, writing in 1890. Mason's account points to one realist element of the performance considered particularly unusual and unprecedented: 'At the end of the speech he embraces Desdemona more closely, kisses her, and stands with his lips pressed to hers'.⁴⁶ According to the scholar Virginia Mason Vaughan:

Salvini's nationality may have allowed him more scope in expressing Othello's sexuality than that enjoyed by respectable Victorians like Macready and Irving. Salvini was physical with Desdemona – he held her and kissed her – partly because that was the Italian way of displaying affection and partly because he relied on gesture rather than language for effect.⁴⁷

Indeed, nineteenth-century actors in Italy did rely heavily on mime and gestures, owing once again to the socio-linguistic circumstances. Without a common spoken language, Italian actors had to place more importance on their actions in order to convey the meaning of the play: a technique particularly suited to actors who embarked on international touring.

What is noteworthy here is that Salvini's explicitly forceful use of body language was associated with his nationality. Not only did Salvini portray 'an Italian way of displaying affection' during his more intimate scenes with Desdemona, but, in a similar vein, it appears from early reviews and critical accounts that he also portrayed an 'Italian' way of displaying aggression during his more violent scenes. As in Rossini's opera, Salvini performed the murder scene offstage, with the spectators left to hear only the agonizing noises of Desdemona's death behind the curtains. A critic writing for the *Boston Globe* on 27 November 1873 described her death scene as 'almost too horrible to endure'.⁴⁸ A sense of horror was captured in an account in the *Galaxy* the same year:

⁴⁶ Edward Tuckerman Mason, *The Othello of Tommaso Salvini* (New York, 1890), 22.

⁴⁷ Mason Vaughan, *Othello: A Contextual History*, 170.

⁴⁸ Mason Vaughan, *Othello: A Contextual History*, 168.

In the final distressing chamber scene ... he arouses only horror in his audience; he compels Desdemona to rise from her bed, where she should stay for her doom, and come to the front so that he may seize her struggling and screaming – and carry her in his murderous arms back to the peaceful couch to do a butchery, not perform a sacrifice.⁴⁹

As for Othello's suicide scene, Salvini chose to cut his throat, leaving some members of the audience feeling cheated of Shakespeare's original ending. As Anna Busi cites, some critics even condemned the play for being excessively 'oriental'.⁵⁰ Consequently, Salvini's violent rendition became known as an 'Italian' rendition. According to a reviewer in the *Galaxy* in 1873: 'The Italian's Moor has little dignity, no majesty, barely a flash of heroism amid all his lurid flashes of ferocity. He is superbly, though but physically, developed barbarian, whom the civilisation of Venice has simply veneered', calling the lead an 'Italian bandit ... a low butcher'. William Winter's *Shakespeare on the Stage* (1911) described the actor's Italian style as 'using Iago as a floor-mop', and considered Salvini 'an incarnation of animal fury, huge, wild, dangerous, and horrible, but he was consistently common and bestial'.⁵¹

Perhaps as a result of the criticisms he faced for his 'oriental' approach, Salvini felt the need to justify himself in a series of articles. These include *The Century* on 23 November 1881, the *Fanfulla della Domenica* on 23 September and 28 October 1883, and *Putnam's Monthly. A Magazine of Literature, Art and Life* in October 1907.⁵² In these critical writings, Salvini discusses his interpretation of his Shakespearean roles (namely Macbeth, Hamlet,

⁴⁹ Cited in Marvin Rosenberg, *The Masks of Othello: The Search for the Identity of Othello, Iago, and Desdemona by Three Centuries of Actors and Critics* (Berkeley, 1961), 114.

⁵⁰ Anna Busi, *Otello in Italia (1777–1972)* (Bari, 1973), 191.

⁵¹ Cited in Rosenberg, *The Masks of Othello*, 103 and 111.

⁵² Salvini's critical writings can be found in Donatella Orecchia, ed., *Tommaso Salvini: Sul teatro e la recitazione scritti inediti e rari* (Naples, 2014).

King Lear and Othello) and reveals that he researched all his roles by consulting literary criticism in English, German, Italian, French, and Spanish. In relation to *Othello*, he points out the conflict he faced as an actor in both emphasizing the protagonist's nobility and showing how he came to be deceived by Iago. Salvini also highlights how Othello's love for Desdemona 'is not a sensual love, it is the pure affection of a soul', defending the protagonist by stating that 'he is no more jealous than any other man in the same circumstances would be'.⁵³

Salvini defends his interpretation of Desdemona's murder by drawing a comparison between the portrayal of her death in the original source from which Shakespeare had derived his own ideas for the play, Cinthio's 'Un Capitano Moro' in his collection of short stories, *Gli Hecatommithi* (1565), and the resulting portrayal in the play:

In this regard Shakspeare's [sic] Othello differs from that of Cinzio Giraldi, who, after having killed his wife with a blow, causes the ceiling of the room to fall on her that her death may be attributed to accident, thus concealing his crime. Shakspeare's [sic] Othello, on the contrary, far from concealing the deed, believes at first that he has accomplished an act of justice; and when he becomes aware of his fatal error, with more care for his honor [sic] than for his life, he desires that his deed should be narrated in all its horrid details; then, making himself at once judge and executioner, he sacrifices himself as he has sacrificed Desdemona. This last act reveals his true character, the basis of which is his perfect loyalty.⁵⁴

As Salvini puts it, while Cinthio's protagonist disguises his brutal crime by arranging for the roof to collapse on his wife's body, Shakespeare's protagonist admits to being responsible for her murder and, after acknowledging his fatal error, tragically ends his own life in the same

⁵³ Tommaso Salvini, 'Impressions of Some Shakspearean [sic] Characters', *The Century* (1881), 117–25, at 123. Salvini almost repeats the same words in the *Fanfulla della Domenica* (23 October 1883) and *Putnam's Monthly*, so given the similarities between the texts, I will quote from *The Century*.

⁵⁴ Salvini, *The Century*, 124.

way as he ended his wife's – an act which, according to Salvini, reveals the character's loyal nature. What this implies is that his performance of the murder scene was not carried out callously by a character, as in Cinthio's version, but by an actor who recognised his character's underlying loyalty. As for Salvini's approach to the suicide scene, he states the following:

If it should be asked why I represent the suicide of *Othello* in the way I do, rather than by stabbing, in accordance with the general custom on the stage, I reply that, in the first place, this manner is more in accordance with the custom of the people of Africa, who usually execute their criminals and enemies in this way; then the arms used by these people are of a curved form, and, as such, are more adapted to this mode than to any other; moreover, we have the authority of Shakespeare himself, who puts into the mouth of *Othello*, in the act of committing suicide, these words: 'I took by the throat the circumcised dog. And smote him – thus'.⁵⁵

Salvini thus appears to almost 'correct' Shakespeare's script, making the character act as he would have done in accordance with an African heritage and with Shakespeare's own words from the play. So while Shakespeare's Othello is referred to as a Venetian Moor – the Moor of Venice – Salvini's Othello's is much more of a supposed embodiment of 'Africanness', who acts purely on the grounds of his long-standing African customs and traditions, rather than a hybridity of African-Italianness or a cultural melting-pot of Moorish North Africa and Southern Europe. As Henry James later summed up:

My remarks may suggest that Salvini's rage is too gross, too much that of a wounded animal; but in reality it does not fall into that excess. It is the rage of an African, but of a nature that remains generous to the end; and in spite of the tiger-paces and tiger-springs, there is through it all, to my sense, at least, the tremor of a moral element.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Salvini, *The Century*, 124.

⁵⁶ Henry James, *The Scenic Art* (New York, 1957), 175.

Placed within the ethnographic context of late nineteenth-century Europe, we begin to understand what it was about Salvini's physical approach to his character that caught his audiences' attention. Pioneering a physical and bodily form of communication, Salvini, much like his contemporaries, transcended language barriers and mediated the foreign text through a kind of translation which went beyond the written word, thus enabling the actor to communicate the play both to a linguistically fragmented national audience and, later, to international audiences during his world tours.

Moreover, we begin to understand how it is that this Italian actor (considered a Euro-African himself) came to forge a sense of an 'other' Other on stage just before the première of Verdi's opera. While Rosenberg has argued that, following early performances of Salvini, his contemporary Ernesto Rossi would 'take advantage of the "Italian" vogue with a loud, savage, sensual Othello', I would argue that one of the main Othellos to exploit this *Italian vogue* was, in fact, Verdi's.⁵⁷

Verdi's Othello

The contemporaneity of Salvini's Othello and the Verdi-Boito collaboration makes for a compelling new way of thinking about the various contexts and set of processes that enabled this role to travel onto late nineteenth-century Italian stages. Verdi and Boito's representation of Othello bears a number of similarities to Salvini's. Just as Salvini's approach to Othello differed from Cinthio's source text, so too did Verdi and Boito's. First of all, Boito was struck by the fact that Cinzio's Othello is not named, and is only ever referred to as 'il capitano Moro'. In Boito's sketch about *Otello*, 'The Characters' Traits', he mentions the tale's lack of name – the only character in the source to have a name is 'Disdémona', 'a name of unlucky augury' because Disdémona translates from the Greek as 'unfortunate'.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Rosenberg, *The Masks of Othello*, 118.

⁵⁸ Arrigo Boito, 'The Characters' Traits' in *Otello* (Royal Opera House programme, 2012).

Moreover, just as Salvini wanted to bring the protagonist back to his African roots, so did Verdi. The composer appeared to be dismissive of Othello's appearance in the play, as he wrote in a letter to the painter Domenico Morelli, who was providing him with sketches for *Otello*: 'But I don't understand why you should dress Othello as a Venetian! ... You can hardly have Othello dressed as a Turk, but why not have him dressed as an Ethiopian, without the usual turban'.⁵⁹

Further, Salvini's so-called 'oriental' approach to his acting seemed to have filtered into Verdi's dramatic approach to *Otello*. Boito knew well of the performances by the *grandi attori*, and as he wrote to Verdi on 21 December 1886 about the tenor Francesco Tamagno, who was to perform the lead role, 'Rossi e Salvini, ecco i due giganti! Da quelli Tamagno avrebbe potuto imparare qualche cosa' ('Rossi and Salvini are two giants! From them Tamagno could have learned something').⁶⁰ Salvini's presence continued to be felt in some of the opening tributes to the opera. In a special edition of the *Illustrazione Italiana* in February 1887, in honour of the *Otello* première, the journalist Ugo Pesci referred to Salvini's embodiment of Othello, the ideal personification of Shakespeare's protagonist:

Tommaso Salvini è stato per due generazioni intiere di spettatori l'*Otello* per eccellenza: lo sarebbe ancora per una terza se non riserbasse la forza dei suoi polmoni ancora vigorosi per i viaggi artistici fuori d'Italia. Tommaso Salvini ha del moro di Venezia, della vigorosa passione fatta uomo, i muscoli poderosi, la figura atletica, la voce tonante. ... Chi ha sentito Salvini nell'*Otello* deve compatire che non sa gustare o non gusta la tragedia di Shakespeare recitata da altri.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Giuseppe Verdi, *Letters of Giuseppe Verdi*, ed. Charles Osborne (London, 1971), 216–7.

⁶⁰ *Carteggio Verdi-Boito*, 119.

⁶¹ Ugo Pesci, 'Otello nel teatro drammatico e lirico', *Illustrazione italiana, numero unico: Verdi e l'Otello* (Milan, 1887), 31–5, at 34.

(Tommaso Salvini has epitomised Othello for two whole generations of spectators; he would also do so for a third one if he was not saving his still vigorous lungs for tours outside Italy. Tommaso Salvini has the muscular, athletic figure, the thundering voice of the Venetian, that is, of strong passion embodied in a man. ... Those who have seen Salvini's *Othello* ought to commiserate with those who cannot or do not enjoy Shakespeare's tragedy performed by other actors.)

Moreover, though it remains unclear whether Verdi ever attended a performance by the *grandi attori*, as Hepokoski has suggested,⁶² it appears from early anecdotes that Salvini nonetheless inspired Verdi's vision of the title role. In the piano rehearsals, Pesci reports the following:

A Verdi preme però che si cominci subito ad unire al canto l'azione, ed egli può essere maestro di attori come di cantanti. Raccomanda la massima naturalezza e con l'occhio studia ogni movimento, ogni gesto, per cogliere quello che gli sembra più naturale, più vero.⁶³

(Verdi, however, pressed the singers to unite their singing to the action, and he really can be a *maestro* for actors as he is for singers. He recommended the greatest naturalness and with his eyes studied every movement, every gesture, in order to capture the one he felt was the truest and most natural.)

This anecdote indicates a real insistence, on Verdi's part, to emphasise the naturalistic acting techniques of the singers, each of whom he selected and coached.⁶⁴ Though it remains unclear whether Verdi saw Salvini on stage, it seems that Verdi, at least during rehearsals,

⁶² James A. Hepokoski, *Giuseppe Verdi: Otello* (Cambridge, 1987), 167.

⁶³ Ugo Pesci, 'L'*Otello* di Giuseppe Verdi', in *Illustrazione italiana, numero unico: Verdi e l'Otello* (Milan, 1887), 35–41, at 39.

⁶⁴ Roger Parker, *The New Grove Guide to Verdi and his Operas* (Oxford, 2007), 215.

wanted a lead performance *à la Salvini*, particularly where Tamagno was concerned. Pesci in his article refers to an anecdote about Verdi's frustration with Tamagno's interpretation of the suicide scene during rehearsals. Pesci writes:

Verdi desidera una caduta tragica, salvinesca. Il Tamagno cade più volte, ma il maestro non è completamente soddisfatto. Rimanda le prove della caduta ad un altro giorno, vedendo l'artista stanco.⁶⁵

(Verdi desired a tragic fall, *salvinesca*. Tamagno fell quite a few times, but the maestro was not entirely satisfied. Realising that the actor was too tired, he postponed the rehearsals practicing the fall to another day.)

Verdi's frustration with Tamagno continued to wear thin during rehearsals, so much so that although in his seventies, he felt the need to show Tamagno himself how to execute Othello's suicide scene:

Altri resoconti successivi tramandano che Verdi perse la pazienza con Francesco Tamagno e che alla fine gli mostrò, mimando egli stesso l'azione, come doveva pugnalarsi e rotolare giù dai gradini del letto, mentre gli astanti erano allibiti, temendo per il maestro a causa dell'intensa, realistica vivacità della sua recitazione.⁶⁶

(Other successive accounts convey how Verdi lost patience with Francesco Tamagno and ended up miming the action himself, showing him how to stab himself and roll down the steps of the bed, while the bystanders, the alibis, were in awe of the maestro's intense and realistic vivacious acting.)

Despite his difficulties, Tamagno's interpretation eventually did catch on to Salvini's dramatic approach. The reviewer in *Il capitano fracassa* was reminded of Salvini when hearing Tamagno's very opening, remarking that he delivered his first lines

⁶⁵ Pesci, 'L'*Otello* di Giuseppe Verdi', 39.

⁶⁶ Hepokoski and Ferrero, *Otello di Giuseppe Verdi*, 14.

‘Salvinianamente’.⁶⁷ As Hepokoski points out, critics and audiences related the opera’s light *staccato* circling stops and starts of Othello’s entrance-music into the bed-chamber to Salvini’s cat-like steps,⁶⁸ which recall what Henry James said about the actor’s ‘tiger-paces and tiger-springs’.⁶⁹ What is more, the recurring ‘Bacio’ theme reminds us of the fact that Salvini was one of the first actors to actually kiss his co-star playing Desdemona on stage.

La disposizione scenica

Arguably, the best available evidence of the interaction between Salvini and the Verdi-Boito collaboration is the stage manual, in particular the general design and delivery of Desdemona’s murder scene. While in Shakespeare’s original play, this scene is described swiftly: ‘He smothers her’ (V, ii), with no stage directions as this was not a Renaissance convention – and, likewise, Boito simply writes ‘La soffoca’ (IV) in the libretto – the production book is much more descriptive and a great deal of detail is provided. At a closer look, the manual emphasizes the need for violence in this act:

Desdemona, indietreggia spaventata, poi tenta sfuggire ad **Otello**, gridando:
Otello... non uccidermi... ma esso l’afferra violentemente per le braccia ... **Otello**
continua a trascinare **Desdemona**, che tenta invano resistere ... **Otello** prende
Desdemona sotto alle braccia, e la getta violentemente sul letto, mentre le stringe
il collo colle due mani: **Desdemona**, tentando ancora una volta di svincolarsi,
getta un grido acuto, straziante, poi rimane immobile, sempre stretta al collo
dalle mani di **Otello**.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Hepokoski, *Giuseppe Verdi: Otello*, 172–3.

⁶⁸ Hepokoski, *Giuseppe Verdi: Otello*, 173.

⁶⁹ James, *The Scenic Art*, 175.

⁷⁰ Hepokoski and Ferrero, *Otello di Giuseppe Verdi*, 211 (99 in the original stage manual).

(Desdemona, pulling herself back frightened, then she tries to free herself from **Othello**, screaming: ‘Othello... don’t kill me...’ but he grabs her violently by the arms ... **Othello** continues to drag **Desdemona**, who, in vain, tries to resist ... **Othello** takes **Desdemona** in his arms, and he throws her violently onto the bed, while he is strangling her with his bare hands. **Desdemona**, trying once more to free herself, lets out an agonizing piercing cry, and then remains immobile, still with Othello’s hands around her neck).

Though there are clear differences between Salvini’s interpretation and Verdi’s opera (with Salvini’s staging of the murder behind the curtains closer to Rossini’s opera than to Verdi’s), the presentation of this scene shares some striking similarities. In the production book, we get the impression that Verdi was attempting to re-create the sense of horror Salvini captured in his early performances. First of all, we are informed of Desdemona’s resistance: she is described as pulling herself back in fear, and struggling to free herself from her husband. Moreover, the wording of the production book emphasises Othello’s violence: he throws Desdemona on the bed and is said to strangle her with his own hands, among her cries of pain. The physicality in the descriptions is reminiscent of the moment when Salvini’s Othello seizes Desdemona ‘struggling and screaming’ and carries her ‘in his murderous arms’ before ending her life, as mentioned earlier by the reviewer in the *Galaxy*.⁷¹

Not only does the production book provide a lot of detail about the murder scene, it also includes some side-comments directed specifically to the singers in order to help them to deliver the scene effectively, reinforcing Verdi’s preoccupation with the staging of his opera:

Crediamo inutile davvero l’insistere sulla grandissima difficoltà di questa scena, difficoltà accresciuta a mille doppi dalle esigenze musicali, le quali impongono l’esatto rigore di tempo; è una scena che dovrà essere provata molte e molte volte

⁷¹ Cited in Rosenberg, *The Masks of Othello*, 114.

prima che i due attori riescano a ritrarla con tutta l'efficacia scenica e musicale, senza essere preoccupati dell'orchestra e della bacchetta del direttore.⁷²

(We believe it really futile to insist on the extremely great difficulty of this scene, a difficulty which is accentuated a thousand times over by the musical demands, which impose exact temporal rigour. It is a scene which ought to be rehearsed over and over before the two actors are able to portray it with scenic and musical quality, without being concerned about the orchestra or the baton of the conductor.)

Finally, as for the suicide scene, this is also depicted in great detail, with the production book placing strong emphasis on the agony of Othello's actions:

Otello, trascinandosi carponi, torna presso al letto, e con replicati sforzi riesce a collocarsi sui gradini, quasi ginocchioni presso **Desdemona**: con voce semispenta, interrotta, pronuncia ancora alcune parole di addio: poi con un nuovo e supremo sforzo tenta alzarsi per baciare **Desdemona**, ma le forze lo tradiscono, e dicendo: *un bacio*, riesce solo a baciare la mano, cadente penzoloni dal letto: con altro sforzo, riesce a baciarla una seconda volte e lo vorrebbe una terza, ma la voce si spegne, ed è in un singhiozzo affannoso che pronuncia l'ultima sillaba. **Otello** muore! ... il suo corpo si stende presso al letto, e rotolando dai gradini, rimane irrigidito ai piedi dei gradini stessi.⁷³

(**Othello**, dragging himself on all fours, makes his way back towards the bed, and with repeated force manages to get up onto the steps, almost on his knees next to **Desdemona**. In a fading voice, half-extinguished, he bids his final farewell. Then,

⁷² Hepokoski and Ferrero, *Otello di Giuseppe Verdi*, 212 (100 in the original stage manual).

⁷³ Hepokoski and Ferrero, *Otello di Giuseppe Verdi*, 219 (107 in the original stage manual).

with new and supreme force, he attempts to get up in order to kiss **Desdemona**, but his strength fails, and saying: ‘just one kiss’, he manages only to kiss her hand, then falls half off the bed. With more force, he manages to kiss her for a second time and attempts for a third time, but his voice falters, and with a gasping sob, he utters his last words: **Othello** dies! ... But his body lying beside the bed rolls down to the bottom of the steps where he rests motionless.)

Once more, this closing scene is meticulously described. Though the suicide itself is not described violently (the suicide is simply described as ‘[Otello] lascia cadere la scimitarra’ (‘[Othello] lets fall his scimitar’)), it nonetheless continues to emphasize Verdi’s attention to detail, and reinforces images of Italian ‘otherness’. Othello is said to be dragging himself, falling on his knees as he approaches Desdemona. His voice is described as fading as he attempts to kiss his wife, and, after several attempts, he tries to kiss his wife again but with a gasping sob, he dies as his motionless body rolls down to the bottom of the steps.

I would conclude here that, when analysing the origins of the opera, in light of the production book, we gain a greater understanding of how Verdi’s *Otello* was in dialogue with Salvini’s rendition of the work: the similarities, synergies, and affinities between the various renditions of *Othello* outlined here offer a different perspective on the interconnection between theatre and opera, and illuminate an important and frequently neglected dimension of wider cultural trends associated with cross-cultural representations on stage. While Phillip Gossett has maintained that Verdi’s staging manuals ‘provide us with a unique window into the original production of several of the most significant new operas performed in Italy between the mid-1850s and the early 1890s’,⁷⁴ I would argue that they also provide us with a unique window into how Italy’s star actors, writers, and composers (indirectly or not) reinforced stereotypical

⁷⁴ Philip Gossett, *Divas and Scholars: Performing Italian Opera* (Chicago, 2006), 461.

perceptions about cultural and racial associations between Italy and Africa – curiously – just as such associations were growing fast.

* * *

The audacious decision to adapt *Othello* for *both* theatrical and operatic stages begins to make sense when considered in the context of transnational cultural practices and expectations in the late nineteenth century. Presumably what attracted the star actors and composers to this role was, to some degree, the opportunities it afforded them (especially Salvini at the outset) to take advantage of the associative pairing between Italy and Africa that defined many ethnographic prejudices of the time. Salvini's exploitation of contemporary racial stereotypes, therefore, goes hand-in-hand with his pioneering of a new kind of realism. In combining a veneer of animalistic abandon with an underlying discipline worthy of the admiration of Stanislavsky, he garnered a reputation as a revolutionary Italian actor who – via Shakespeare – went on to inspire Verdi's opera, and to essentially perpetuate an exoticised 'brand' of Italian-ness on stage. The constant referencing to the 'Italian' approach to the role of Shakespeare's Moor of Venice, particularly during Salvini's performances (which, as argued here, formed the basis for Verdi's operatic adaptation), reminds us that Italy was forging its own national identity at the time, and this staple role in both theatrical and operatic repertoires, inadvertently or not, made a significant contribution to Italy's (self-) representation of 'otherness' on theatrical and operatic stages.

As well as promoting awareness of the cultural influence and value of Italy's late nineteenth-century star actors – notably Salvini – to the making of Verdi's opera, and offering new insights into Verdi's prompt book in light of wider socio-linguistic practices in Italy which led turn-of-the-century actors to rely heavily on their body language, this article has shed light on the historical contexts and cultural conditions that enabled Shakespeare's work to cross borders (England, Italy) and genres (drama, music). In so doing, it is hoped that

this analysis can go some way in further developing the interrelation between drama and music, and illuminating the multiple forms of translation engaged with performing Shakespeare in both fields.