

MEDIA RELEASE

Level 5, 10 Hickson Road The Rocks
Sydney NSW 2000 Australia
Phone 61 2 8248 6500 Fax 61 2 8248
6599
sydneyfestival.org.au



Desdemona

The story of Desdemona from Shakespeare's *Othello* re-imagined by Peter Sellars, Rokia Traoré and Toni Morrison



Photo: *Desdemona* © Mark Allan

"This is a remarkable, challenging and bravely original work."

The Guardian

"In a ritual of spellbinding beauty, staged by Sellars, these two women, of different generations and continents, stand up to Shakespeare."

LA Times

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

New York Times

This October, Sydney Festival launches its 40th anniversary year with the Australian premiere season of *Desdemona*, an extraordinary narrative of words, music and song, with Festival alumni **Peter Sellars** and **Rokia Traoré**.

The story of *Desdemona* from Shakespeare's *Othello* is re-imagined by Nobel Prize laureate **Toni Morrison**, Malian singer songwriter **Rokia Traoré** and acclaimed stage director **Peter Sellars**, featuring actress **Tina Benko** as Shakespeare's doomed heroine.

Desdemona, the most fiery angel in Shakespeare's creation, is a radiant and radical woman of independence, courage, and love. Toni Morrison creates an astonishing and provocative voice for Desdemona from the grave, revealing secrets in *Othello* that will forever change our reading of the play.

In a time outside of time, we discover the other African in the story - Barbary, the maid who raised Desdemona on African stories and songs, embodied by award-winning Malian singer-songwriter Rokia Traoré. From the afterlife, Desdemona fills in the gaps in her history through an intimate dialogue with Barbary. As the story unfolds, an unheard history emerges and the audience discover a different Desdemona, a woman of flesh and blood who speaks powerfully about racism, war and oppression.

Part play, part concert, *Desdemona* was inspired by the fourth act of *Othello*, in which Desdemona, facing death, sings "*Willow Song*", taught to her by Barbary. With her mesmerising voice, Rokia Traoré performs compelling original songs and is accompanied by two musicians, on stringed instruments (n'goni and kora), and two vocalists from Mali.

The work developed from a heated conversation more than a decade ago between Toni Morrison and Peter Sellars on the relevance of Shakespeare's *Othello*. Whilst Sellars questioned the play's usefulness, Morrison wholly disagreed. From this discussion the pair made a creative pact: Sellars would stage his own version of *Othello*, whilst Morrison would find a way to talk back to Shakespeare. Morrison did so by questioning the underlying themes of racism and repression of women, with one of Shakespeare's stoutest characters, Desdemona.

MEDIA RELEASE

Level 5, 10 Hickson Road The Rocks
Sydney NSW 2000 Australia
Phone 61 2 8248 6500 Fax 61 2 8248
6599
sydneyfestival.org.au



"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.

With original songs by Rokia Traoré and under the direction of 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.

Desdemona premiered in May 2011 at the Akzent Theatre in Vienna, Austria and subsequently toured London, New York and Berkeley, as well as many other cities, with great success. Join us for this powerful and unique show marking the beginning of our celebrations for the 40th Sydney Festival.

| | |
|--------------------------|---|
| 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 |

Where Roslyn Packer Theatre, Walsh Bay

When 23-24 October at 8pm
25 October at 2pm

Duration 120 minutes

Price Premium \$129
A Reserve \$109 - \$98
B Reserve \$85 - \$77

Bookings Sydney Festival on 1300 856 876
Roslyn Packer Theatre on 02 9250 1999
sydneyfestival.org.au/Desdemona

Artist Talk: Rokia Traoré and Peter Sellars in conversation with Robyn Archer

25 October at 4.30pm / FREE
Roslyn Packer Theatre, Walsh Bay

***Limited ticket offer: Book tickets to both *Desdemona* and the 2016 Festival theatre highlight *Wozeyck* for \$170 on sydneyfestival.org.au/early**



MEDIA RELEASE

Level 5, 10 Hickson Road The Rocks
Sydney NSW 2000 Australia
Phone 61 2 8248 6500 Fax 61 2 8248
6599
sydneyfestival.org.au



For interviews and further information contact:

Jessica Keirle, Publicity Manager, 02 8248 6525 / 0438 805 109 jessica.keirle@sydneyfestival.org.au

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.