

Thailand

Bangkok

Rama VI, king of Thailand from 1910 to 1925, adapted Shakespeare's *Othello*, setting it in south-east Asia. Somtow Sucharitkul's original idea for OPERA SIAM's new production (February 28) was for the audience to 'hear Verdi's *Otello* and see Rama VI's *Phya Rachawangsan*'. Scheduling problems, however, led to the absence of the planned director, leaving Somtow to conduct and direct, and the result was ill-prepared. The plan to use stylized acting of the time of Rama VI backfired particularly: some, including Thailand's leading dramatist, Patravadi, have breathed new life into Rama's

creations while retaining traditional acting conventions, but Opera Siam's *Otello* came out looking merely static and stilted, with a disconnect between Verdi's music and the supposedly Asian action on stage.

The singing was mostly disappointing, too. Javier Agullo, as Cassio, was the one consistently wonderful performer, a real Verdian lyric tenor with a sweet, expressive voice. Jeffrey Springer's voice, though strong and clear, lacked beauty, and his characterization of Otello was for the most part devoid of subtlety. The crisp-voiced Phillip Joll (Iago) also scored low in vocal expression. Nancy Yuen sang sweetly throughout, but her voice was short of power and her Desdemona really came to life only as she was about to die. Emanuella Barazia lent character to Emilia; Ralph McDonald, however, was cast well beyond his capabilities as Lodovico. The singing of the chorus, if not its acting, was adequate and at times better than that.

Happily, things did come together in the fourth act. Yuen was rapturous in her grief, her 'Ave Maria' affecting. Springer finally brought some nuances to his role, making us pity Otello. The drama was helped profoundly by the orchestral playing: in fact, it was the Siam Philharmonic that was the evening's saving grace, underlining Somtow's achievement in building world-class orchestral forces in Thailand. JONATHAN RICHMOND