

Final Cal Shakes' Season Production Falls a Bit Short

Strong cast and direction of 'King Lear' offers a visually striking performance, but leaves one wanting

By Lou Fancher



From left: Kjerstine Rose Anderson as The Fool and Anthony Heald as Lear in California Shakespeare Theater's production of "King Lear," directed by Amanda Dehnert. Photo Kevin Berne

Given Cal Shakes' bold approach to Shakespeare's canon and the temptations of a versatile, endlessly plumbable cast to be comedic or tragic, the Orinda outdoor theater's final 2015 season production, "King Lear," chooses to be both. Director Amanda Dehnert's split treatment travels in two too disparate directions to be entirely successful,

but the peaks are certainly high enough for applause. A commanding, two-stories-high set – an enormous steel grid box like a Rubik's Cube with grimy, frosted glass pane windows – pivots, opens to reveal, closes to capture and masks the actors. Set designer Dan Ostling's well-used construction is balanced by designer Melissa Torchia's costumes, marvelously suggestive of past elegance, slick trickery, provocation and decay.

Perhaps Dehnert was as captivated by the precocious Cordelia as was King Lear, whose favor for his youngest daughter is his – and everyone's – undoing. Casting the same actor (an energetic Kjerstine Rose Anderson) as both Cordelia and as the Fool who whispers or sings dangerous ditties in the ear of Lear (a rock-steady, beautifully vulnerable Ashland Shakespeare Festival veteran Anthony Heald) is a misstep that brings mixed results. While there is reason to draw parallels between the spirited Cordelia and the sprightly Fool, doing so confuses the father/daughter relationship. More egregiously, the poignancy of their bond and the eventual tragedy of their lives is lightened by the two actors

having shared silly antics and slanted glances as the Fool and Lear.

Nevertheless, the unraveling of a man, his mind, and his power makes for compelling scenes including the play's opening. When Lear demands that his daughters profess their love to earn a portion of his empire, Cordelia's two older sisters, Goneril (cool, devilish Arwen Anderson) and Regan (smoldering El Beh) create an astutely-toned buildup for Cordelia's "I have nothing to say" declaration. Lear's favorite daughter loves him only dutifully, she teasingly tells the King, setting off an inferno that leads to her banishment and all manner of behavior that tears the family bonds to shreds.

Alliances break throughout the kingdom, with the most compelling moments the electrocution and eye-gouging of Gloucester (Charles Shaw Robinson) and every scene in which the Earl of Kent rants or raves his philosophies (a stunning performance from Aldo Billingslea) or Edmund (immeasurably watchable Daniel Clegg) displays his wickedness and avarice.

At times, there is so much talent raging on stage a viewer wants to

freeze the action, laugh or cry, then shout "carry on!" It makes for excitement, if not a sense of connectivity and overall flow.

Dehnert can clearly stretch the tension of love, lust, lost mental powers and sibling rivalry into fierce, snapping scenes that escalate in the play's ultimate explosions of a storm, torture, poisoning, and deaths. So it is a mysterious choice to undercut the journey to total tragedy with digressions including a Monty Python-style death of a servant (marvelous physicality from charismatic Patrick Alparone), Kent's pink mohawk that jarred and seemed nonsensical, and Cordelia's scampering as the Fool.

Ultimately, a strong cast and a director with broad capabilities proves this "King Lear" could be either comedic or tragic. Aiming in both directions and loaded with a courageous director, excellent cast and striking visuals, it impresses, but never quite arrives at either destination.

"King Lear" runs through Oct. 11 at Bruns Amphitheater, 100 California Shakespeare Theater Way (formerly 100 Gateway Blvd.) in Orinda. For more information, visit calshakes.org.

Battle of the Bands is Back

Submitted by Patrick Brogan



2014 and 2013 Battle of the Bands winner Wild Guess. From left: Morgan Swanson, Alexa Heine, Mikey Deng and Niels Sorensen. Photo Jason Heine

Battle of the Bands at the Lafayette Library is back for its third annual performance. The teen event, which over 100 people attended last year, is set to take place from 5 to 8 p.m. Saturday, Nov. 7 in the library's Community Hall. Anyone aged 13-19 in the San Francisco Bay Area can audition, but only four bands will have the chance to grace the stage. Over \$200 in prizes will be

awarded as well as prizes from such sponsors as Red House Studios in Walnut Creek and local stores including Lamorinda Music, Campana Music and Mighty Fine Guitars. Radio station Live 105 will make a return appearance. Part of the grand prize includes being the opening band at a Red House Studios performance. There will also be raffle prizes and Walnut Creek-based food trucks,

Tonli Dumpling and United Bites. The judge lineup this year includes Alexa Heine, who is the lead singer of last year's winning band, Wild Guess, and local professional musicians Christopher Shirley, Jeff Kalmbach and Matthias. Email your audition video to pbrogan@ecclib.org by 11:59 p.m. Sunday, Oct. 18 for your chance to get out of the garage and finally on to the stage.

Zombies are Coming to Leshner

Submitted by Kenn Adams



Ben Weddell, left, is shocked to discover that his sweet, little sister Gretchen Salter, right, is really a blood-thirsty, brain-eating zombie in "Z is for ... Zombie: And Improvised Zombie Apocalypse!" Photo provided

Lafayette-based improv comedy company Synergy Theater is invading the Leshner Center for the Arts in Walnut Creek with its annual improvised horror spoof, "Z is for ...

Zombie: An Improvised Zombie Apocalypse!" at 8:15 p.m. Friday and Saturday, Oct. 16 and 17. "In Z is for ... Zombie," explains Synergy Theater's artistic director Kenn Adams, "some of the characters are regular townsfolk, and others are

shape-shifting zombies from space who have killed, eaten, and taken the form of their unsuspecting victims. When the story begins, nobody knows who is still human and who has been turned into a zombie – not even the cast! So, all through the show, the characters are trying to stay alive when, at any moment, the person they trust the most might suddenly go zombie and suck out their brains."

"It's really a kick," says longtime company member Lynn Shields, "because the cast and the audience are all playing the game at the same time: trying to figure out who's telling the truth and who's really a zombie."

"It's incredibly funny," adds Synergy veteran Ben Weddell. "It's part horror movie spoof, part improv comedy show, and part reality television. Who will be the last human improviser standing?"

Synergy Theater has a regular schedule of rotating improv comedy shows in Lafayette where they perform at Lamorinda Music on the third weekend of every month. Will they venture into Walnut Creek again? Well, you know those zombies. They're hard to keep down.

Tickets for "Z is for ... Zombie" are \$15 and can be purchased online at www.lesherartscenter.org or by phone at (925) 943-7469.

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