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An iconoclastic romp with Shakespeare: 'A Midsummer Night's Dream'

By Sophie Braccini



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Who says that Shakespeare's plays were elitist and hard to access? Shakespeare wrote for all the classes of the society of his day, with language that included sophisticated poetic stances as well as puns; after all, he needed to fill up a theater that included seats for the commoners. He wrote at a time when language was still fluid and he invented many words (up to 1,700 in all of this plays). It is in this vein of accessibility and contemporary creativity that Tyne Rafaeli led the 2019 production of "A Midsummer Night Dream" in Orinda: true to the spirit of a popular Shakespeare, the dynamic and entertaining production warms the heart and ignites the audience's imagination, in spite of the sometimes very cool weather at the Bruns.

Entering the space of the outdoor amphitheater in the hills, the audience discovers a massive cube about three stories high on stage. Puck comes out of one of the many doors/windows that will open and close during the performance. The mischievous and quick-witted spirit

that sets so many events in motion in the play zooms through space with grace and agility and the tone of the play is set: imagination and magic will predominate the unfolding of each scene.

"A Midsummer Night Dream" was written by a young Shakespeare on the heels of "Romeo and Juliet." Here again, young love is confronted to the intransigence of the older generation, but here we are in a comedy, meaning that all will end well. The 17th century playwright sets his story in Athens, giving the playwright the possibility to add magical characters to the play that will influence the destiny of men at whim.

Two sets of young people escape into the woods in search of love and freedom. There, nature reigns and Athens' socializing rules are gone. Anything can happen, and Shakespeare takes that opportunity to explore the randomness of who one falls in love with, the effect of letting the most basic instinct turn people into animals, and the potentially wild nature of women, who were still considered second class citizens at the time. There are many aspects of feminism in this play that Rafaeli takes great pleasure in highlighting.

The director also manages to insert the issue of skin color in the Shakespearean equation. Marcel Spears, casted as Bottom, is a well-known, quite funny actor (known for his role in the CBS TV comedy "The Neighborhood") who dominates the stage, especially toward the end of the play, with his remarkable comedic qualities. The casting of such a popular actor leads to a bit of unbalance in this production, however. The classic interpretation of the Dream underscores the coarseness of the workmen, but with Bottom as one of them, the light and beautiful world of the fairies is opposed. Rafaeli in this production puts them all into the same weird basket. It makes for more laughs and may be more in tune with our times where being "popular" comes first, but poetry suffers as a result.

Kudos to scenic designer Nina Ball and the invention of the scenic cube. It looks massive and distracting taking most of the stage before the play starts, but the minute actors come in and out of it, appear in windows on the upper floor, and it gets opened in the middle, the cube adds fluidity and depth to the movements of the play. The costumes by Asta Bennie Hostetter are also very creative and daring, especially for the queen(s) - Hyppolita and Titania - played by Jerrie Johnson, a magnificent actress; and Bottom, who gets transformed into the most loveable donkey. All the actors add significantly to the comedic impact of the play: Robyn Kerr as Puck, Rami Margron as Theseus and Oberon, and Jenny Nelson, who goes from a touching Hermia to a hilarious member of the workers' team, to name a few.

This very approachable and funny interpretation of the Dream should not be missed. It will be on stage at the Bruns Amphitheater close to the Caldecott Tunnel until June 16. Pack a picnic and have dinner on the wood tables set in the grove before the play to complete the experience. For more information, visit www.calshakes.com.

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