

Shakespeare & Company, Lenox, MA

A Midsummer Night's Dream by William Shakespeare; Directed by Allyn Burrows.

Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman

“What fools these mortals be!”

It had rained. In fact, it *was* raining. Still, the assembled audience in the Tina Packer Theatre lobby was willing; the cast was eager. The performance, delayed over half an hour would go on and “A Midsdummer Night’s Dream” was played out in a midsummer nightmare of weather and whether or not the company could complete the evening. For those who stayed with it, the show was a triumph for director Allyn Burrows, the cast of twelve players and the small but loyal attendees whose laughter and applause was appreciated by everyone on both sides of the performance space at the New Spruce Theater.



Gina Forseca as First Fairy; Photo: Nile Scott Studio

That the play is a funny comedy goes without saying but that this 1970's concept is even funnier must be said. Burows has planted his troupe of players into a time-frame that sounded wrong but proved right. His cast of internationally based players would occasionally lapse into Spanish when emotions grew strong and it was wonderful. His cast would lapse into stand-up comedy technique when the moment was right and they were superb in their improvisations. Nigel Gore, a player famed for his Antony and his Prospero was an Iggy Pop clone as Oberon, King of the Fairies. His Queen, Titania, was a glamorously bedecked goddess played by Elizabeth Aspenlieder, renowned for her work in over 40 productions with the company.



Nigel Gore, Elizabeth Aspenlieder;
Photo: Nile Scott Studios

But Shakespeare's fantasy is about more than just fairies; it's about love and its consequences. Theseus loves the Amazonian Queen he has conquered and is about to wed her in Athens. Egeus's daughter Hermia loves Lysander, but is engaged to Demetrius who is loved by Hermia's best friend, Helena. In the historic play within a play, lovers are besieged by angry parents, attacked by a roaring lion and separated by fate and a talking wall. Love is on the playwright's mind and he explores it in many ways. In this company's production there are loving surprises to watch for. They are wonderful.

Hermia is played by Naire Poole. Lysander is played by Carlos Olmedo; Helena is played by Sara Linares; Demetrius is played by Blake Hamilton

Currie. They are a marvelous, eager, enthusiastic quartet who provide passion and emotional peaks to the performance. They exemplify human love very well. Their conflict plays out nicely in the time period chosen by the director for this production; it felt remarkably familiar to someone who lived through it.



(left) Blake Hamilton Currie, Sara Linares;
(right) Carlos Olmedo, Naire Poole;
Photo: Nile Scott Studios

Puck, or Robin Goodfellow, the meddlesome fairy who screws things up, was played by a brassy young actress, Sheila Bandyopadhyay, who pulled off the role with a surprising mastery that pleased the audience well. And then, inevitably there were the “Mechanicals,” a troupe of players made up of lower class Athenian workmen who perform their play for Theseus and Hyppolita and their wedding guests. At least most of them do.

Led by Michael F. Toomey as “director” Peter Quince, they overcome the loss of both Flute, a bellows-mender, and egotistical Nick Bottom, a weaver. Flute, shy and embarrassed to be playing a woman disappears prior to the performance and is replaced by Theseus, the Duke, for whom the play is being performed. Both characters are played here by Javier David. His acting is exceeded only by his acrobatic skills. He is deliciously funny. While all of the folks are funny, Bottom, Jacob Ming-Trent, is absolutely delightful with his off-the-cuff improvisations and his stand-up stylings. As Bottom he is a company stand-out whether working with his confreres or making awkward love to the fairy queen in his ass-like manner. The quintet of players make the show worth sitting through under a plastic poncho (rain protection) or a deeply beautiful sunset.



Gina Fonseca, Michael F. Toomey, Jacob Ming-Trent, Madeleine Rose Maggio, Javier David;
Photo: Nile Scott Studio

The production is period pleasant if not perfect. It could have been more design precise but it certainly gave a 1970 perspective. Jim Youngerman’s set on the outdoor stage worked very well and had some jokes of its own. Stella Giulietta Schwartz’s costumes ranged from perfection to approximate. Brendan F. Doyle’s sound design work was fascinating and strange. For purists this will not be the perfect production but for an audience greedy for Shakespearean fun it will more than suffice, it will please.

Is it worth sitting through in bad weather? You betcha. I’d do it again.

+ 08/11/2023 +

A Midsummer Night’s Dream plays on Shakespeare & Company’s New Spruce Theater stage, 70 Kemble Street, Lenox, MA through September 10. For information and tickets go to Shakespeare.org or call 413-637-3353.