

A Contemporary Makeover for a Convoluted Reverie



T. Charles Erickson

FACE-OFF Danny Scheie and Pegge Johnson in “A Midsummer Night’s Dream.”

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Nick Bottom is top banana in the riotously broad “Midsummer Night’s Dream” directed by Aaron Posner at the Two River Theater Company in Red Bank. Shakespeare’s popular comedy gets a refreshing contemporary makeover in this new co-production with the California Shakespeare Theater in Orinda.

As Bottom, Danny Scheie’s outrageously flamboyant, in-your-face portrayal — in one scene the actor, while stage front and center, solicits a telephone number from a member of the audience — threatens to take the play hostage. This works well through much of the evening, though by the time he leads a troop of local “mechanicals” in a performance of “Pyramus and Thisbe,” the relentless clowning and indulgent pace of the action has become tiresome.

This production swings to its own beat, starting with the pitched and boldly patterned ramp, designed by Brian Sidney Bembridge and lighted by Peter West, that swoops into the front rows and then steeply careers back to provide a moonstruck perch for the fairy sprite Puck (Doug Hara, in a haunting performance).

It's hard to imagine two polished bald pates more stylish than those of Keith Randolph Smith and Pegge Johnson, paired first as Theseus, Duke of Athens, and his bride-to-be Hippolyta, queen of the Amazons, then later as Oberon, king of the fairies, and his queen, Titania. The action begins to heat up with the entrance of Egeus (Bradley Mott), followed by his recalcitrant daughter Hermia (a spunky, hip Erin Weaver), her newfound love, Lysander (Avery Monsen), and her spurned betrothed, Demetrius (Richard Thieriot). (The actors' gimmicky use of a standing mike to underscore some of the dialogue in the first scene is mercifully short-lived.)

Spiking the temperature, and the decibel level, is Lindsey Gates as Helena, Hermia's best friend and the ex-girlfriend of Demetrius. Tall and gangly — Olivera Gajic's rather ugly ensembles don't help — she loudly bewails her plight with a Valley Girl affect while scheming to get Demetrius back. Sending him into the woods in pursuit of the eloping Hermia and Lysander, she sets in motion the convoluted reverie of competing lovers, meddling fairies and bumbling locals that Shakespeare magically invokes.

Mr. Posner does whatever it takes to enliven the proceedings, injecting incongruous elements of pop culture whenever he senses an opening. Having the amorous Lysander serenade his bride-to-be with "Let's Get It On," accompanied by the ukulele, is just such a moment, and the audience eats it up. Another comes when Bottom breaks into a rueful "I Whistle a Happy Tune" after discovering that everyone has run off after seeing him wearing an ass's head.

If it is a given that "the course of true love never did run smooth," to quote Lysander, then the happy endings that Shakespeare pulls out of the hat are no surprise either. Mr. Posner's jubilant, life-affirming chorus adds the perfect exclamation point to the playwright's tidy, celebratory finale.

"A Midsummer Night's Dream" is at Two River Theater, 21 Bridge Avenue, Red Bank, through Nov. 15. Information: (732) 345-1400 or trtc.org.