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## REVIEW: This "Midsummer Night's" a scream at Two River

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Arrive hungry for laughs, leave feeling like you've been comped for life to a casino buffet. And if you're hungry again a few days later, well then, good cheer — they've extended the pigout another whole week.

Fresh is fresh and funny is funny — and with his new take on William Shakespeare's comedy "A Midsummer Night's Dream," Two River Theater Company artistic director Aaron Posner aims squarely for the laugh lobes of our beleaguered brains, with a surfeit of nervous energy and a smorgasbord of gags - some new and patently outrageous; others in excess of four hundred years old (and you thought "The Odd Couple" was timeless stuff).

Even if you're no great shakes on Shakespeare, you know the drill with "Dream" - the fairy royalty making mischief in the enchanted wood; the magically impish Puck and the plucky troupe of amateur actors; the guy who runs around for some reason with a donkey head, and the mix 'n match lovers who usually don't stand a chance against the swirling circus of the Bard's trippiest romantic fantasy.

If the play's done properly, it might tell you that Love conquers all, when it's not too busy destroying everything in its path. What you also might have taken away from those productions at schools and public parks was trees - as in an abundance of greenery upon which the characters clamber, climb, conceal themselves and curl up for a spell. Indeed, this particular "Dream" premiered at the open-air amphitheatre of California Shakespeare Company, whereupon the CalShakes co-production packed up and moved cross country (with the majority of the cast intact) and indoors, to the fall foliage tour that is Red Bank.

Which brings us to the play's first surprise, namely, what happened to the trees? Brian Sidney Bembridge's set design — a banked wooden abstraction that resembles a skatepark quarterpipe — leaves the actors with nary a fig leaf to hide behind. Director Posner has clear-cut the forest so that we can see the players as never before — and it's a "dream" cast that cavorts across the blue boards, equipped only with a few ladders, chairs and pillows. Well, that and some sleight of hand (a tip of the hat, perhaps, to the magical "Macbeth" that Posner directed with illusionist Teller), plus a radio-controlled puppy or two.

At about two and a half hours including intermission, this is a "Midsummer Night" that's been trimmed, tweaked, telescoped, and streamlined, with actors - sometimes dressed in blue jeans and sneakers - doubling up in parts, and entire characters gone the way of fairy dust. Not that there isn't room for a new bit of verse about ringing cellphones, an entire Smokey Robinson song, snippets of other Top 40 oldies and a fully choreographed production number that brought the opening night audience to its feet.

If these shadows do offend your purist sensibilities, well, lighten up already. There's extraordinary work on display here, with Doug Hara (so memorable in Posner's radical rethink of "Our Town") sounding the keynote as a sly, kinetic, almost acrobatic Puck — as effective in his mood-setting solo interludes as in his interactions with fairy king Oberon and queen Titania (Keith Randolph Smith and Pegge Johnson).

Posner's casting choices are at their most eclectic in the troupe of actors, led nominally by returning comic specialist Tara Giordano as a distaff version of Peter (or P.T.) Quince. Richard Ruiz (Two

River's "Frog and Toad") as Starveling, Duane Noch as the cautious Flute and Bradley Mott as loutish but sensitive Snug all garner major laughs — and nobody has ever portrayed a wall quite like Joseph Harrell, the rock-steady Marine sergeant of last year's "ReEntry" here having an enormous amount of deadpan fun in the silly world of civilians.

Then there's Nick Bottom, the Bard's eternal embodiment of actorly ego, played to the hilt and the point of TILT by Bay Area stage star (and Shakespearean scholar of national repute) Danny Scheie. Whether sporting the head of an ass or simply making an ass of himself, the affably flamboyant diva is the most hilarious interpretation of one of Shakespeare's funniest people we've ever witnessed, with Scheie milking every plummy pronouncement, executing every eye-roll and finding howling laughs in places where none before him had ever thought to look.

Puck and Bottom, of course, are among the most vivid gifts ever granted to an actor — and they're in the best of hands here - but what truly distinguishes this "Dream" is in its treatment of the four young lovers, a set of often indistinguishable figures who tend to get trampled underfoot by their scenery-chewing cohorts. As Hermia, who chafes at an arranged marriage to stolid Demetrius (a refreshingly human Richard Thieriot) and elopes instead with the more minstrelly Lysander (Avery Monsen), frequent Two River leading lady Erin Weaver displays the "soul of spunk" that carried the day in "Mary's Wedding" and "A Murder, A Mystery and A Marriage." Kicking, leaping, punching, biting and asserting her way through her role as "the little acorn" scorned, she gives us a dynamic Hermia as never seen before; one elevated to the center-square status enjoyed by costars Scheie and Hara. Monsen, Thieriot and Lindsey Gates (as Hermias lovelorn friend Helena) are fine comic performers who imbue their many scenes with an energy that, for once, had the crowd looking forward to their interludes.

Perhaps only Johnson — here cutting a striking figure as both Titania and Amazon queen Hippolyta — gets short-shrifted by the text cuts and shifting of focus, although she's a good match for Smith's sonorous authority and a worthy member of this star-quality ensemble. Mr. Posner has crafted one for the books here; a comic engine that hits on all cylinders — and Mr. Shakespeare, it seems, has penned the most honestly funny show of 2009.

"A Midsummer Night's Dream" continues with performances Wednesdays through Sundays until Nov. 15 (extended from November 8 as originally announced). Ticket prices, reservations and full schedule details can be obtained by calling 732-345-1400 or visiting [www.trtc.org](http://www.trtc.org).

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