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Cal Shakes Wraps Season with 'A Midsummer Night's Dream'

By Lou Fancher



Erika Chong Shuch (Hippolyta, Titania), Daisuke Tsuji (Oberon, Theseus) and Danny Scheie (Puck, Snug) in "A Midsummer Night's Dream," directed by Shana Cooper. Photo Kevin Berne

Love is a dirty battleground. Love is splendid.

The dichotomous words are never more true than in California Shakespeare Theater's season closing "A Midsummer Night's Dream."

Artistry is easily found in director Shana Cooper's brash take on William Shakespeare's tale of fairies who control mortals struggling with uncontrollable love passions. Vaulting through the play's two acts, Cooper is unafraid - perhaps roiling purists, but thrilling fans of non-conformity - to follow a line from the play and explore how "so quick bright things come to confusion."

"Dream" famously has a father rejecting a daughter, two fairies fighting, two female friends intermittently in love with each other's lovers, two men who war and waver in their romantic affiliations (all this largely due to intoxicating, poisonous flowers), six bumbling misfits in an oh-so amateur acting troupe, a fickle moon, a forest, a spritely protagonist/instigator named Puck and a wedding. The tangle of interweaving tales belies a simple story: Love is a dirty battleground. Love is

splendid.

Nestled within the confusion of love's impulse, Cooper and her collaborators explode with creativity.

Set design by Nina Ball is magical, with an opening backdrop that resembles white parachute material with webbing, or the backside of packing tape - and wood chips covering the entire stage. Rolling up the backdrop early in the production reveals terrific, gauzy tulle backing that floats, cloud-like for the duration. Operating under the tutu-like material cleverly positions the action in the very non-ethereal land of legs, a near-private, earthbound place where sensation burns, things churn, and there's risk of a swift kick. A scaffold of branches, a chopped-wood wall, and most hilariously (especially when turned upside down), a sheet of plastic with a hole cut out of it are like super heroes; performing a sure purpose and looking fantastic while doing so.

And then there are Katherine O'Neill's costumes; wicked and wonderful in palette and performance. Swathed in tones from muted mud to shining silver to bawdy red to creamy white, characters' colors tell the messy to marvelous story at the heart of the comedy. Imagination runs rampant, with Bottom, an "ass" in steel-studded black boots and fishnets, an asthma inhaler, bodacious braziers for ladies, a tinsel-wigged lion and more.

Erika Chong Shuch does double duty and earns twofold bravos as movement director and the fairy queen Titania. Paired perfectly with Cooper, Shuch's choreography establishes momentum in the play's opening scene - a cross between mud wrestling and carnal coupling - and continues the cathartic kinetics with ever-escalating physicality. Vertical feats shine: with a character's well-crafted dive off a step ladder, intricate but never obtrusive partnering and a glorious, towering moment of theater, when Shuch "grows" to cartoon-like proportions on the shoulders of the ensemble.

The sheer bravado of the cast doesn't preclude their sensitivity, with Daisuke Tsuji (Oberon)

striking a balance between other- and this-worldliness that could escape recognition, but shouldn't, due his masterful subtlety. Danny Scheie (Puck and other roles), a Cal Shakes favorite, is expectedly funny, so it's almost a pleasant surprise that Margo Hall (Bottom) steals the comedic brass ring playing a narcissistic "actor" and braying "ass." If a few of the ensemble and transitional scenes lag - a carnival-like dance scene, the play-within-a-play near the end - there's not a weak element in the individual actors. Special shout outs: Tristan Cunningham (Hermia) has astonishing power; mixing rage, revenge, jealousy and humor - often, while hooked on another character's shoulders or flinging herself into the air or rolling in wood chips. James Carpenter (Egeus and other roles) continues to be one of the Bay Area's finest actors. Shuch, smart and smacking with female ferocity, manages to be warm and win hearts.

Half nightmare, half dream: Love is a dirty battleground. Love is splendid.

"A Midsummer Night's Dream" will be playing through Sept. 28 at California Shakespeare Theater, the Bruns Amphitheater, 100 California Shakespeare Theater Way (off Highway 24), Orinda. For information, call (510) 548-9666 or visit www.calshakes.org.

The Great Tragedies: Mike Daisey Takes on Shakespeare Oct. 2-12

Submitted by Marilyn Langbehn

Created especially for Cal Shakes' 40th anniversary, master storyteller Mike Daisey will share hilarious and thought-provoking takes on "Romeo and Juliet," "Hamlet," "Macbeth," and "King Lear" - each presented on separate evenings for eight performances only, Oct. 2-12 at the Bruns Amphitheater. Each evening is unique and can be viewed independently; all four together form an epic oral accounting of triumph and folly told with Daisey's dark and hilarious intensity.

Cal Shakes Artistic Director Jonathan Moscone says, "I love the way Mike takes aspects of our culture on - he's fearless, fiercely articulate, but like a jazz musician, working from a theme - in this case, Shakespeare, and wrestling with it with the entirety of his wit and intellect, right in front of your eyes. The Theater of Mike Daisey is fully, undeniably alive, and I am thrilled to have him explore Shakespeare's great tragedies on our stage."

Daisey has been called "the master storyteller" and "one of the finest solo performers of his generation" by The New York Times for his groundbreaking monologues which weave together autobiography, gonzo journalism, and unscripted performance to tell hilarious and heartbreaking stories that cut to the bone, exposing secret histories and unexpected connections. His controversial work, "The Agony and the Ecstasy of Steve Jobs," was recognized as one of the year's best theater pieces by The New York Times, Wall Street Journal, The Washington Post, Seattle Times, Seattle Weekly, San Jose Mercury News, and The San Francisco Bay Guardian.

For information, visit http://www.calshakes.org/v4/ourplays/2014/2014_mikedaisey.html.



Mike Daisey Photo Ursa Waz

Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

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