

Published July 1st, 2015

Cal Shakes 'Life Is a Dream' Opens July 8

By Lou Fancher



Front, from left: Kaiso Hill, Carlos Berrera, Tristan Cunningham, Sarah Nina Hayon, Jomar Tagatac, and Jason Kapoor; back row: Amir Abdullah, Julian L pez-Morillas, Adrian N. Roberts, and Sean San Jos  in California Shakespeare Theater's *Life Is a Dream*, directed by Loretta Greco. Photo Kevin Berne

dream experienced by actor Julian L pez-Morillas, who plays the character Clotaldo and spoke of projecting his voice on an outdoor stage without a backdrop? After all, it was he who "set up" Jaeger's showing the model.

Astrologists alive at the time during the 17th century when the play was written might look to the stars for answers. Calderon's Catholic colleagues after he left the military and became a priest might pivot to spiritual explanations for the cause of life's blessings and sufferings. Secularists would undoubtedly point to gravitation and friction to explain the disasters attributable to a slippery slope and inclined surfaces.

Thank goodness for live theater, which entertainingly wraps into a tidy, two-hour bundle the questions of fate, faith, futility and the fearsome few years of life afforded human beings.

"Dream" tells the story of Prince Segismundo, who has been locked up by his father, King Basilio, because of an early omen predicting he'd grow up to be a disaster. Released after a childhood with only one man as his educator (Clotaldo, the young prince's tutor), Segismundo is full of rage and violence.

"The 21st century would say, 'What can you expect of a boy brought up without any maternal care, no discernible love, only natural or early science?' When he has a trial run, he fails miserably," L pez-Morillas said.

Kelly said that Cruz's script is economical, taking a third of the original play's language and running a vein of humor through the challenging conflicts presented. Concerned with issues of love and honor, the characters are pinched by irreconcilable demands. "Fate: what did that mean 400 years ago?" Kelly asked. "Viewed from our society, which says you can be who you want to be, it's fascinating."

Jaeger likened the Cal Shakes production to a modern fairy tale - not set in a specific period or country - and said the play's director, Loretta Greco, has called it "muscular." Emphasizing

The fate of miniature figurines at Cal Shakes' Inside Scoop perfectly illustrated the central theme behind the outdoor theater company's upcoming production, "Life Is a Dream."

Tipping a scaled-down model to provide the audience with a better view of the streamlined, circular set upon which Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Nilo Cruz's adaptation of Pedro Calder n de la Barca's classic Spanish Golden Age drama will play, costume designer Alex Jaeger sent tiny actor replicas tumbling.

"Oh no - I thought they were glued down," Jaeger said.

Imagined and realistic forces that control destiny are the nexus of Calder n's complex tale. Extrapolated as a physicalized metaphor, was Jaeger a god, omnipotently acting upon men and women and flinging them to their terrible fate? Or, having been asked by dramaturg Phillippa Kelly to show the model to people gathered in the Orinda Library auditorium, was Jaeger a pawn and Kelly the true agent behind the action?

Or was the entire 10-second episode the result of a dream acted out in real life - perhaps a dream experienced by actor Julian L pez-Morillas, who plays the character Clotaldo and spoke of projecting his voice on an outdoor stage without a backdrop? After all, it was he who "set up"

character over historical recreation, Jaeger said period research influenced, but did not dictate, his designs. "Things that take place out of the court have a modern sensibility," he said. Jaeger approaches costume design from a distinguished lineage: he's the son of a family of high-fashion couturiers in France. Ranging from riding outfits to gowns suitable for a wedding to semi-military outfits with leather, high boots and capes, design drawings he displayed showed velvet robes occasionally paired with tight jeans.

Audience questions about classifying "Dream" as a tragedy, comedy or morality play, had Kelly answering that it is a romance play with thick add-ons. "The plot is extremely complicated, but it helps to know about this child, imprisoned his whole life. Is he a monster because of his condition, or is it what he's meant to be?" she said.

López-Morillas said the play had "serious moral purpose we associate with tragedy" and dares to ask questions about whether or not events of the world are real, or merely illusions.

Unlike the answers to "Dream's" central philosophical questions, the play's end is known - there's forgiveness and characters waking from dream states to a happily-ever-after finish. Like figures sent catapulting over a spiral ramp, the rest of us will be left to wonder, to talk, to think, and to hope we're firmly glued to the foundation upon which fate dictates or we choose to stand.

"Life Is a Dream" runs from July 8 to Aug. 2 at Bruns Amphitheater, 100 California Shakespeare Theater Way (formerly 100 Gateway Blvd.) in Orinda. For more information, visit calshakes.org.

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