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Last Show by Cal Shakes' Moscone a Mystery

By Lou Fancher



Liam Vincent and Danny Scheie get their silly on. Photo Kevin Berne

The biggest mystery surrounding "The Mystery of Irma Vep" might be why artistic director Jonathan Moscone chose the play as he leaves Cal Shakes after 16 seasons. It is the last of 22 productions Moscone has directed at the outdoor venue in the Orinda hills.

It was a mystery partially cleared up - then clouded - during a pre-show Grove Talk by resident dramaturg Philippa Kelly. "I don't think he knew he was leaving when he chose it. He's directed it twice before. ... Oh well, I never truly know what goes on in the mighty mind of Moscone," she said, laughing.

All of this was not to say that playwright, director and actor Charles Ludlam's ambiguous, intriguing, oftentimes spoof-like 1984 homage to theatrical, cinematic and literary icons, conventions and traditions isn't deserving of a prominent place in Cal Shake's history. Nor is the play a mismatch for Moscone, whose unequivocal desire for genre-stretching work, jolly sense of humor and fine ear for well-written lines is arguably unquestionable.

Under his direction, the theater has grown from an obscure but respected summer Shakespeare Festival known for great acting - and poor backstage and restroom facilities - to a nationally-recognized organization with a \$5 million budget, completely refurbished, environmentally-sustainable facilities, a 5,000-student Artistic Learning program, and multiple collaborations and outreach initiatives throughout California. In 2014, the board established the Moscone Permanent

Endowment fund to ensure that Cal Shakes' work will continue for future generations to enjoy. Moscone departs to become chief of civic engagement with Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco.

The history suggests seriousness, but bump into Moscone on BART, or attend his Inside Scoop panel talk at the Orinda Library Auditorium, or witness one of his boisterous "curtain warmer" greetings (the Bruns Amphitheater has no actual main curtain), and see that there's no doubt: the man likes to have fun.

"Irma Vep" bears shades of Alfred Hitchcock, vaudeville, ancient and contemporary horror films, gothic literature, victorian melodrama, and what contemporary society has learned to call "avant garde theater." The play has two male actors playing eight characters, both male and female. Longtime Bay Area favorites Danny Scheie and Liam Vincent whip themselves silly, changing costumes and wigs in sometimes as little as five seconds. Scheie goes from swine-herder Nicodemus to newlywed Lady Enid to Egyptian guide Alcazar to other lesser roles. Vincent defies the laws of transformation with multiple switches between the dazed Lord Edgar (Lady Enid's husband and the widow of former wife, Lady Irma) and a stiff-as-a-bristle housemaid, Jane. A healthy smattering of partial portrayals, sometimes simple voiceovers or appendages reaching from behind scenery, are either Scheie and Vincent or crew members who occasionally sweep across the stage

to clear props and whatnot.

The action takes place under the keen "eye" of Lady Irma, whose painted portrait presides above the fireplace mantle and sometimes bleeds or erupts with animated screams. Suffice it to say that spirits, werewolves, vampires, mummies and the smartest, magenta-haired Egyptian princess to travel outside of San Francisco's Gay Pride Parade are involved in the murky moors surrounding Lord Edgar and Lady Enid's Mandercrest estate.

Despite the admirable script, with all of its insider intelligence, scenic designer Douglas Schmidt's dazzling set, Katherine Roth's rich, imaginative costumes and sparkling performances from Scheie and Vincent, the play itself falls a little flat. The remarkable costume quick-change humor is hit too often, or perhaps with too much emphasis - and surely Scheie's comedic physical capabilities extend beyond the twirls and occasional sautés (jumps) that grew repetitious by Act II.

Even so, the cast, crew and director are to be admired. A play at Cal Shakes is an adventure and live theater is unpredictable and wildly rewarding exactly because we can't control it or predict our reactions to it. It's speculation, but in the "mighty mind of Moscone," that might sound perfect.

California Shakespeare Theater announced Aug. 19 the appointment of Eric Ting as the company's new artistic director. Board president Jean Simpson said the now-outgoing associate artistic director of Connecticut-based Long Wharf Theatre stood out among the "extraordinary candidates" vetted during a 7-month interview process. Ting assumes his official duties Nov. 1.

"The Mystery of Irma Vep" runs through Sept. 6 at the Bruns Amphitheater, 100 California Shakespeare Theater Way (formerly 100 Gateway Blvd.), Orinda. For more information, visit calshakes.org.

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