



Published September 5th, 2018

"The War of the Roses" an epic production at Cal Shakes

By Lou Fancher

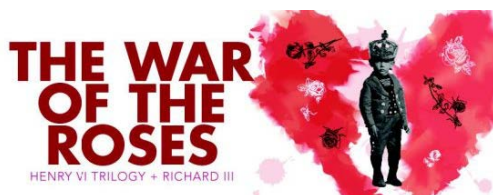


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from Twitter or Hollywood films - War of Roses' condensed history plays are an adequate if imperfect entry point for those whose historical awareness is lacking. Suffice it to say there are kings, queens, dukes, duchesses and government and church dignitaries whose rivalries to gain or retain power exploit soldiers, citizens and often, their closest family members. Audiences get the gist, which is enough to know a foul odor emanates from the channels of oligarchy and patriarchy.

The production hosts a bold cast with the chops to barrel into counter-type, gender crossover, and multiple role casting. Actors balance each other so that each is spectacular but no one person steals the shine from another actor, and a versatile set design (Nina Ball) instantly brackets both past and future. The overhanging "cage" bears modern style subtitles and name labels to assist in following the complexities of plot and characters. Costumes (Anna R. Oliver) and lighting design (Jiyoun Chang) extend and magnify themes related to class, competition, ghostly afterlife, violence and peace. There's even live electronic music (Josh Pollock) that adds gritty, contemporary edginess throughout the production.

Because the play gives more voice to women in ways that traditional versions tend not to, especially developing the arc of Queen Margaret, "War of the Roses" deepens understanding. Not only that, but the ghostly mothers who haunt and throw curses upon Richard III, having received fuller profiles in Act I, become not just vengeful spirits but real souls whose pain resonates with extra intensity. It's not just fine acting that produces this result; it's time and careful directorial and script considerations courtesy of Ting and Kelly.

But it is an homage to language where the production most excels. Credit Kelly to large extent (and come early to her pre-show chats for an extra treat). The script is soaked with Shakespeare's gems that emerge like brilliant showstoppers out of the confusion of names, titles and family feuding: "Things ill-got have ever-bad success," or "Virtue is choked by foul ambition." And the Duke of York's description of Queen Margaret's "tiger's heart wrapped in a woman's hide." And many more.

The production is not perfect. There is a skipping stone feel to the first act and a recent trend to have disembodied voices broadcast from speakers in the back of the amphitheater, which worked in a previous production, had audiences searching for the source instead of focusing on the stage at crucial moments.

As a four-hour experience, however, "The War of the Roses" offers a parallel thinker ideas to take away. Is leadership a corrupting force? Are alliances doomed to fail? Will a marriage founded on fortune ever result in love? What forces will trust, kindness and allegiance endure and which ones will cause them to tumble and fail? But mostly, the remarkable afterthought is how much fun it has been to be in the company of truly creepy people.

The Cal Shakes production, "The War of the Roses," runs through Sept. 15 at the Bruns Amphitheater in Orinda. For tickets or information, visit www.calshakes.org.

Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

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