

Westside Theatre Reviews

Sunday, June 25, 2017

Experience Theatre Project Whips Up a Steampunk Tempest



Robert Amico (Ferdinand) and Nicole Richwalsky (Miranda)
Casey Campbell Photography

By Tina Arth

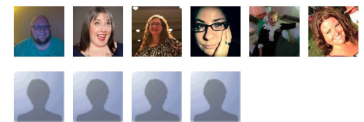
Beaverton's "Experience Theatre Project" is a local leader in the movement to bring new audiences to the works of William Shakespeare by offering free or low-cost productions to the broadest possible audience. In keeping with this, their current staging of *The Tempest* has a fun steampunk style, is offered outdoors (at The Round in Beaverton) with no set admission fee (\$10 donation suggested, \$15 for reserved seating with a drink and dessert), and provides both sign language and Spanish interpreters. Director Jen Waters has done a great job of integrating the audience into the show, as the cast frequently moves through the seating areas and occasionally interacts directly with individual audience members. All of this makes for an enjoyable, accessible experience that will captivate adults and their kiddos. Of course the youngsters may not understand everything (realistically, few of the adults will follow every nuance!), but the movement, costumes, clowning and broad dumb show are enough to give the broad outlines of the story and keep everyone engaged.

Unless you're a real Shakespeare fanatic, I recommend that you read the show synopsis in the program before the performance begins – a crutch I was denied since I attended the dress rehearsal. An even briefer guide: Alonso (King of Naples) and friends are shipwrecked by a huge storm, and all aboard are tossed into the sea. They arrive safely (but missing Alonso's son Ferdinand) on an apparently deserted island. The island is actually inhabited by the exiled Prospero (former Duke of Milan), his daughter Miranda, and the half-wild native, Caliban, and several spirits. Ferdinand, who has landed on another part of the island from the rest, encounters Miranda – love at first sight! Prospero's chief spirit/slave, Ariel, desperately wants his freedom, and Prospero offers it in return for a few small favors (primarily leading Alonso and his party to Prospero). The court jester, Trinculo, and Stephano the butler form a drunken alliance with Caliban, and vow to usurp Prospero as leader of the island. Prospero agrees to allow Miranda and Ferdinand to marry, Ariel foils the evil plot by Trinculo/Stephano/Caliban, Alonso and his party find Prospero and are thrilled to find Ferdinand alive and betrothed, Ariel is released from bondage, and the (miraculously intact) ship carries all of the good folks home.

One great strength of the production is its physicality – the amazing simulation of the tempest by the storm-wracked passengers, Sam Schultz's crab-like crawl as Caliban, Sullivan Mackintosh's bawdy, staggering acrobatics as Trinculo, and Charles Grant's leaping, soaring Ariel. Greg Barrett paints the drunken Stephano with a broad brush, and his magic trick is a real audience pleaser. Schultz and Grant are particularly effective at creating the aura of magic and mystery essential to the tale.

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The loving couple (Nicole Richwalsky as Miranda, Robert Amico as Ferdinand) express their infatuation so clearly that it doesn't matter if a few lines of dialogue are drowned out by passing trains (always a risk at the Round), and Richwalsky injects the right notes of childish, wide-eyed innocence into the role. Bill Bernsohn's portrayal of the loving father conveys his guilt at depriving his daughter of a normal life; he also segues nicely from seeking revenge to forgiving his old rivals. Alisa Stewart's costumes are quite stunning – in particular, Ariel's wings and Caliban's terrifying mask, as well as the fantastical makeup designs on these key characters. The steampunk theme is carried out effectively on the set with a huge machine resembling a giant, mechanized, steam-belching teapot.

As mentioned above, passing trains (and ambient noise from outdoor seating at nearby restaurants) sometimes interferes with dialogue, but the production really doesn't suffer much from those obstacles. Only the reserved seating offers chairs, so I'd recommend bringing a portable camp chair if two hours on concrete or grass doesn't sound appealing. The weather may be very hot at the Sunday matinees – wear sunscreen and a hat!

Experience Theatre Project's *The Tempest* runs at the Round at Beaverton through Saturday, July 8th with performances at 7:30 Fridays and Saturday, 2:00 pm on Sundays. There will be a special show on Thursday, July 6 at 7:30. For reserved seating, go to www.experiencept.org.

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