

'Pericles' saucy mayhem makes for stage magic

By Howard Shapiro
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

If the gods — the ones Shakespeare's characters are constantly beseeching — could awaken the Bard for just one season of theater, they'd plop him onto the East Coast, for sure.

Here, the Philadelphia Shakespeare Festival is doing for his little-produced *Pericles, Prince of Tyre* what Lincoln Center did earlier this season for his even-less-produced *Cymbeline*. They're transforming a confusing mess of

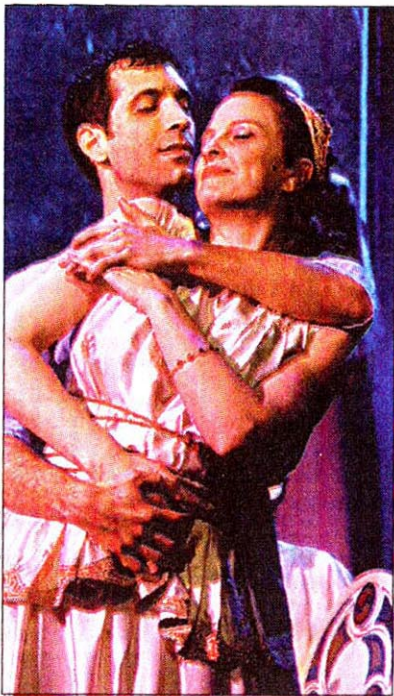
Pericles, Prince of Tyre

Through May 18 at the Philadelphia Shakespeare Festival, 2111 Sansom St. Tickets: \$28. 215-496-8001, www.phillyshakespeare.org

a plot — both plays suffer more twists than a decent Philly pretzel — into a riveting, beautiful piece of stage magic.

What's more, Philadelphia Shakespeare Festival is doing *Pericles* in its space on Sansom
See **'PERICLES'** on E5

Damon Bonetti sizzles as Pericles; his scenes with Christie Parker's tender Thaisa, his eventual bride, are sweet indeed.



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of *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* has been running in theaters, and who won a screen-

like a birthright. Drucie McDaniel's character is the most fragile in mental facul-

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The "Quartet" (from left): Tom Markus, Strong ensemble acting — each portra

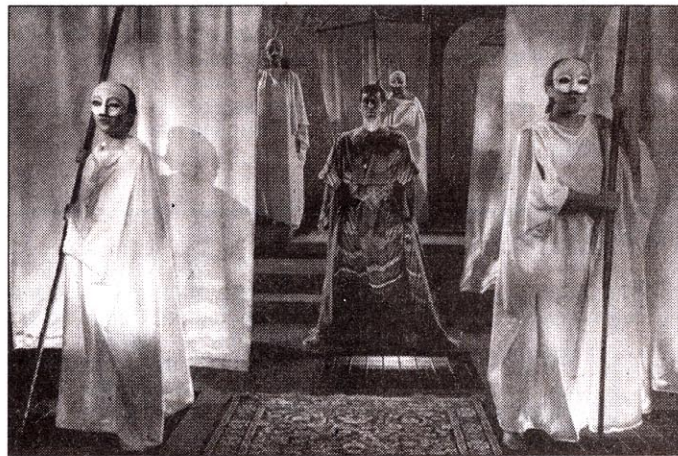
'Pericles': Tough play, great production

'PERICLES' from E1 Street, about a fifth the size of Broadway's Lincoln Center Theater. And spending a pittance, compared with a Broadway budget.

Incest! Famine! Political plotting! Murder! Killer storms! Prostitutes! *Pericles* has enough saucy mayhem to ink the National Enquirer for months. I read the disjointed muddle of a play for the first time within minutes of seeing the Festival's opening Friday night. I was dazed.

Scholars say it's doubtful Shakespeare wrote the first 40 percent; he took on the remainder late in his career, possibly as the Elizabethan equivalent of a script doctor. Indeed, only the second half bubbles with fine language.

Nothing proves that a great production can overcome a tough play better than the staging by Carmen Khan, the Shakespeare Festival's artistic director. She started with a well-massaged script from the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. Then she ripped out the Bard's narrator, energizing his lines by creating a masked chorus



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The Philadelphia Shakespeare Festival staging starts with a revised script, and substitutes a chorus for the Bard's narrator.

that sings them to Fabian Obispo's music. (Obispo did the show's captivating sound design — but the decibel level and intense bass overwhelm much singing in the first half.)

Khan then forced zing on the pacing that makes the play feel as if it's being done in chapters — not the disconnected pieces of writing you get when you read *Pericles*.

The cast, performing *Pericles* in repertory with *Romeo*

and *Juliet*, play it like they own it. In their hands, it's not just accessible, it's charming, this story of a prince who discovers that the dream princess he desires, in a neighboring kingdom, is sleeping with her dad. He returns home, dejected, then flees after realizing the neighboring king is now out to kill him.

Thus begins his dizzying odyssey, which takes him through two brutal sea storms (thumbs up for Jer-

old R. Forsyth's lighting) and into several curious nations.

Damon Bonetti's *Pericles* sizzles — commanding when necessary, playful if it seems right, abject in his pain, always a mensch. Christie Parker is huggably tender as the woman he eventually marries, with the prodding parental oversight of her father (Buck Schirner, who delightfully nails three major roles). Bonetti and Parker, falling in love, create the sweetest scenes you'll see here this season; when she sings him a soul-restoring pep talk, you want to burst.

Melissa Dunphy is the picture of virtue as *Pericles'* daughter, and David Raphael's sudden nobility comes naturally when he's enchanted by her. They all look great in Vickie Esposito's handsome costumes.

The Festival maintains that *Pericles* has not been produced in Philadelphia in more than 150 years. Yo! It was worth the wait.

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