



The Festival of Colors, Festival of Love NEW



Jennifer Kramer April 12, 2015

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Midsummer Night's Dream

by William Shakespeare

The Philadelphia Shakespeare Theatre

April 3 - May 17

Acting ★★★★★
 Costumes ★★★★★
 Sets ★★★★★
 Directing ★★★★★
 Overall ★★★★★



Photos: Kendall Whitehouse



At the Philadelphia Shakespeare Theatre, the Indian city of Jodhpur and the Hindu religious festival of Holi serve as inspiration for director Carmen Khan's production of *A*

Midsummer Night's Dream. The festival is a particularly apt setting for *Midsummer*: according to Khan, Holi (known as both the Festival of Colors and the Festival of Love) "is a time to come together, to laugh, love, repair broken relationships and celebrate life to the fullest."

Bethanie Wampol's simple but effective set design recalls Jodhpur's Mehrangarh Fort district. A single wall with a triptych of pointed trefoil arches is the only solid structure, and both it and the stage floor are painted the city's signature blue. Two aerial silks hang from the ceiling in purple (the color of "love's wound," as Oberon reminds us).

During Holi, participants douse each other with brightly-colored paints and powders, and the costume design by Vickie Esposito picks up on this theme where the set leaves off with a whole bedazzled rainbow of vibrant colors. In form, the costumes roughly approximate traditional Indian clothing

rainbow of vibrant colors. In form, the costumes roughly approximate traditional Indian clothing, occasionally incorporating more western looks like the lovers' sneakers and slacks, Tom Snout's overalls, and Puck's trendy neon jogging outfit.

Esposito also uses color to underscore the play's societal themes. In their first appearances, the clothing of all the Athenians follows a unified palette in shades of burnt sienna and maroon (probably the most somber hues in the entire production). Once the lovers resolve to enter the woods, however, their more functionally practical attire explodes across the color wheel: Lysander and Demetrius in lemon yellow and turquoise shirts with contrasting Chuck Taylors in red and purple; Hermia in an orange scarf and lime green spangled skirt over matching pants; Helena in a coral tunic with purple slacks and rainbow sneakers. (The effect is heightened by Puck, who adds sneakers and hoodies to an ever-changing parade of mix-and-match separates.) But in the final scene, when the lovers resolve their personal lives and rejoin society, they once again follow their leader's sartorial cue: they, Theseus, and Hippolyta all appear in nuptial white and gold.

The cast possesses the energy of impassioned festival-goers, channeling their enthusiasm into some highly entertaining performances. Melissa Dunphy as Puck embodies pure mischievous glee with an engaging vitality (and her own theme music). Meanwhile, the actors' intriguing characterization choices for the Athenians lead to some larger-than-life performances without slipping into caricature. Jessica Gianone gives the lovelorn Helena a hilariously manic intensity in her quest to manhandle Demetrius into returning her love, which makes her showdown with Hermia (Jenna Kuerzi) in III.2 that much funnier: it is not a lack of physical ability or maidenly shyness that prevents her from fighting, but a (completely reasonable) terror of Hermia's berserk mode. But when the two are not fighting over betrayal and short jokes, Gianone and Kuerzi have a warm and natural chemistry that nicely sets their friendship apart from the torrid state of their romantic relationships.

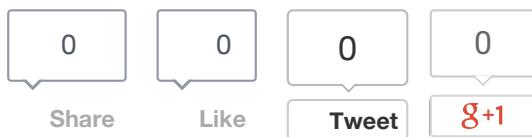
Among the rude mechanicals, John Zak plays Bottom with an over-the-top affectation that has apparently gained the respect and awe of his peers, and he happily provides the leadership for which they look to him in the uncharted waters of community theater. The whole ensemble nails the deeply funny portrayal of enthusiastic yet hopelessly amateur auteurs. Aaron Kirkpatrick is particularly excellent as Tom Snout, beautifully capturing the awkward stiffness of a first performance and somehow pulling off several hilarious pratfalls while standing in one place pretending to be the Wall.

In addition to the physical comedy, Khan complements the cast's high energy with exciting music and some flashy special effects, often at the same time. The production opens in darkness with a wild violin solo from Dunphy as black-clad company members re-enact a fairy revel with glowing fingertip lights, a cross between interpretive dance and Tinkerbell attending a rave. Dunphy accents Puck's pandemonium with discordant screeches from her handheld vibraphone, and the fingertip lights also represent the fairies' magic, resulting in some impressively well-timed exchanges between Puck, Titania (Eleni Delopoulos), and Oberon (Brian Anthony Wilson) where sleight of hand creates the illusion of magical light hurled back and forth. The effects with the aerial silks are somewhat less successful, as

the cast seems rather tentative in exploiting their full acrobatic potential; however, they are not totally ignored, as when Delopoulos' Titania sings her own lullaby as she knots them into an airborne cradle. Khan ends the production with a powerful sung version of Puck's final soliloquy performed by Dunphy and a Bollywood-inspired dance sequence, a perfect blending of Shakespearean tradition and the production's modern influences.

The one area where this marriage of cultures falls short is the cast: one wishes the production more closely reflected Philadelphia's multicultural makeup by also featuring onstage representation of its South Asian population. However, for the most part the setting adds an enjoyable and thought-provoking angle to the production. Titania and Oberon's fight over her Indian page boy is transmuted from an exotic aside to a local concern drawing attention to their similarly amoral treatment of the Athenians. The use of aerial silks, meanwhile, recalls Tim Supple's famous multilingual British, Indian, and Sri Lankan co-production of *Midsummer*.

Spring festivals like Holi mark both natural and personal transformation. By connecting this to the themes of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the Philadelphia Shakespeare Theatre presents both a celebration of Shakespeare and love — in all their many shades.



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