

MSU to bring digital magic to Shakespeare's 'The Tempest'

Bridgette Redman, For the Lansing State Journal 12:06 a.m. EDT November 6, 2016



(Photo: Photograph by Jessica Steinort)

It's one of Shakespeare's more magical plays — a story 450 years old that's still popular with theaters around the world.

The Michigan State University Department of Theatre will stage a magical version of "The Tempest", using digital media and projections to add wonder to the use of spirits.

Directed by Deric McNish, the play is being presented by a mix of faculty artists, undergraduate students and graduate students. McNish moved the play from the usual tropical island to an arctic island where harsh conditions have meant new challenges for the central wizard.

Normally a male role, Prospero in this production is played by Christina Traister and is called Prospera, a single mother looking out for the best interests of her child, Miranda. Traister has a long resume of both performing and directing Shakespeare and declares that it is her passion.

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"This show is very, very fast-paced and alive. It's very easily understandable and a fun night at the theater," Traister said. "You get to see lots of blind casting in terms of gender and ethnicity. I'm not a 75-year-old Gandalf-type person, I'm not that traditional Prospero. It's showing the vein of a younger mother who is fighting for the survival of her child."

McNish said the casting of Traister as Prospera was about putting the best person in the role and not about making gender a theme of the play.

"The rest of the casting helped to make that clear," McNish said. "If it was a female Prospera oppressed by a male king and a male duke, it would be about gender. Instead, we have an undergraduate, Grace Hinkley, playing the queen and Prospera's sister is played by Beth Hendrickson. The most powerful characters, the ones driving the action, are females, so it becomes less about male oppression of women and more about this being a world in which gender doesn't have a strong relation to power."

When the faculty first met to decide on a play, McNish said they were looking for something that would work well with digital media and green screen acting. They started brainstorming titles of shows they could build from the ground up with projections in mind.

"The one that got me most excited, because I'm a bit of a nerd and I love anything to do with magic or fantasy, is The Tempest," said McNish.

"There are all these spirit characters that could be animated and there are instances of magic in the show when Prospera casts her spell. There are so many things we can play with — that's where it all began, as a wonderful opportunity to play in a world where there is magic and we could create things using digital design," he said.

The play's set, designed by MSU Department of Theatre Chair Kirk Domer, is an iceberg. This allows for the designers to project not just onto a screen, but onto the actual parts of the stage itself.

Projections are used to create the opening storm and then magical effects of the spirits and Prospera's spells. Spirits are able to move in and out of parts of the set as they transform from physical bodies to animated ones.

While many of the technical positions are being filled by faculty members, Graduate assistant Heather Brown, in her second year of graduate studies in production design, is doing the lighting design. She said the intricate set and the mass amounts of media being used created a fun and interesting challenge when it came to lighting.

Ryan Duda, a junior in the MSU Theater program and an experienced actor who is tackling Shakespeare for the first time in a major way, is the spirit Ariel. He has some of the most intense interactions with the digital media, making his part one that transcends the usual elements of a Shakespearean role.

"This is the first time I have worked with digital media in stage productions," said Duda. "They're trying to take advantage of this magical element of him, to balance my stage time with times they can project my image on the wall to create a magical feel."

He said early in the rehearsal process they put him in makeup and recorded him doing numerous facial expressions and motions so they could use it with projections. These are used for the times when he is invisible. There are also times where he appears to break up into pieces and bursts into specks of lights that fly around the stage.

But ultimately it is the story and not the special effects that drive such actors as Traister and Duda. Traister says she always relies on the text and what she finds there.

"All of my choices come from the text," Traister said. "We have a physical presence of Ariel and we also have one that is projected onto the set and in those moments I'm literally acting to nothing. We get to see the shipwreck on stage and the story of Caliban's mother—things we usually see poetically, we're actually going to see. But it is still all coming from the text. The media enhances what Shakespeare already wrote."

The text dictates for her character that everything she does is done for Miranda's benefit and for her future. She could remain on the island if it were not for her young teenage daughter. Duda also draws the backbone of his character from the script.

McNish said Shakespeare continues to be powerful for student actors for the reasons Duda and Traister mention and also because all the demands of a working actor are present in Shakespeare.

"There is the physicality that actors need to make these characters feel alive," McNish said.

However, the staging of a Shakespeare work isn't just about the actors and technicians. Apart from a learning experience, it is also entertainment for the audience.

"I think that some people are intimidated by Shakespeare," McNish said. "This is one of the most accessible of Shakespeare's plays. It's also one of the shortest — our production is about 90 or 95 minutes. It's short, it's fun, it's magical"

If you go

What: The Tempest by William Shakespeare

Who: Michigan State University Department of Theatre

Where: Pasant Theatre, Wharton Center, MSU campus, East Lansing

When: 7:30 p.m. Thursday, Nov. 10, 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday, Nov. 11-12, 2 p.m. Sunday, Nov. 13, 7:30 p.m. Tuesday through Thursday, Nov. 15-17, 8 p.m. Friday, Nov. 18, TBA Saturday, Nov. 19, 2 p.m. Sunday, Nov. 20.

Tickets: \$17, \$12 MSU students with ID www.whartoncenter.com

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