

The Bard goes digital

By David Winkelstern



Modern technology drives MSU's take on 'The Tempest'

What do a lavish opera sung in 16th century German and Michigan State University Department of Theatre's production of "The Tempest" have in common? Even if one doesn't understand the dialogue, they can still be very entertaining.

In the hands of director Deric Mc-Nish, William Shakespeare's play about sorcery, power, revenge and love was a dazzling visual and audio delight worthy of an ovation. Kirk Domer's colossal multi-level iceberg set, complete with secret entrances, was already remarkable, but using it as a canvas to reflect projected animations and computer images made it outstanding. Fabulously formulating fancy lighting to fabricate, fires, fissures, fairy tracks and foaming ocean waves made the fantasy fantastic.

Precise sound cues by Jason Painter Price accompanied the phantasmagorias, adding realistic noises that were like thick icing on a cake made of already-iced fudge. When a scepter struck the stage, the "ice" showed spreading and glowing cracks while loud pops and snaps matched each spreading tentacle.

Alison Dobbins deserves praise for media design and Heather Brown for lighting design. They took the play, which was first performed in a theater that was lit by sunlight, to a majestic level. The 100-minute, no-intermission show was closer to a Pink Floyd concert than a Globe Theatre presentation.

Caliban, played with humor and gusto by Matt Greenbaum, stood out as a grotesque half-man, half-fish mutant. Lavish wardrobes by Karen Kangas-Preston adorned the all-powerful Prospera, powerfully portrayed by Christina Traister, and Queen Alonsa, in a regal performance by Grace Hinkley. Period details like pointy and square-toed shoes, ornate jewelry and fancy buttons were a nice touch. Only the modern haircut of Trinculo, gleefully played by Evan Phillips, seemed out of place.

Shakespeare purists might be bothered by some of McNish's gender switching in his version of "The Tempest." Queen Alonsa replaces the original King Alonso, and brother Antonio becomes the sister Antonia, featuring Beth Hendrickson in a feisty performance. The duke, Prospero, becomes a duchess, Prospera, and the drunkard Stephano is changed to Stephana, played by Karen Vance. I found nothing bothersome about her beguiling boozier bits. While I don't mind the gender swaps, the decision made it harder to follow the Bard's already hard to follow family connections.

Thanks to a capable cast, connecting with 400-year-old dialogue was not difficult. Like most of the actors, Jen English, as Miranda, made complex lines filled with puns and layered inferences flow in a coherent stream. Her sprinkles of giggles were an extra treat. Ryan Duda, as Ariel, also stood out for his ease of delivery — and for his acrobatic skills. His Ariel often went aerial with stunning leaps and yoga-like moves. Everything Duda did was a joy to watch. Sean McKeon meekly portrayed the meek Ferdinand, sometimes amid more athletic and lithe dancers. Compelling choreography by Rosely Conz was, at times, as complex as the digital visuals, and the use of recorded music and on-stage singing were extra bonuses.

In the wrong hands, Shakespeare plays can be tedious affairs. So did I enjoy McNish's 21st century take on the 17th century play? Verily, me thinks I did.

"The Tempest"

MSU Department of Theatre

7:30 p.m. Wednesday, Nov. 16 and Thursday, Nov. 17; 8:00 p.m. Friday, Nov. 18 and Saturday, Nov. 19; 2:00 p.m. Sunday, Nov. 20

\$17/\$12 students Pasant Theatre Wharton Center

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