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Senior Moments: *Midsummer Night's Dream* and Singing Beach

David Sheward · Wednesday, August 2nd, 2017

An elderly woman in a nightgown slowly walks across the back of the stage like a ghost in a vision or a lonely soul wandering the halls of a nursing home. This is the haunting final image of Lear deBessonet's unexpectedly fresh production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at Central Park's Delacorte Theater. Shakespeare's comedy of mismatched lovers, fairies, and a donkey-headed weaver is such a popular choice that it's hard to imagine a new approach—in addition to acting in it as a rude mechanical and a sprite, I've seen at least seven stage productions. But deBessonet has managed to find an original concept: she makes the tale one of the aged wisdom informing rash, impetuous youth in the ways of love and art.



Kyle Beltran, Annaleigh Ashford, and Alexander Hernandez in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

In most stagings, the ethereal minions of Oberon and Titania, the rulers of fairyland who treat mortal like marionettes, are played by athletic youngsters or even children. Here, the inventive director has cast mature performers as the other-worldly spirits. That one at the end is played by Vinie Burrows, a veteran performer whose Broadway credits stretch back to *The Wisteria Trees* with Helen Hayes in 1950. The magical monarchs are give majestic life by the mature and dignified Richard Poe and Phylicia Rashad while Puck, the principal impish practical joker, is enlivened by the magnificent character actress Kristin Nielsen. All the fairies are attired by costume designer Clint Ramos in variations of white pajamas as if they were attending a senior slumber party.



Phylicia Rashad and Benjamin Ye (center) in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

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Thus the inhabitants of the spirit world influencing the human one become the elders and holders of experience. The bedeviled quartet of lovers spin their wheels but finally wind up in the right pair of arms thanks to the ministrations of these mature pixies. Shalita Grant (Hermia), Kyle Beltran (Lysander), Alex Hernandez (Demetrius), and a brilliantly daffy Annaleigh Ashford as the hapless Helena are a fearsome foursome of lovestruck lunatics. Likewise, the fumbling but good-hearted

amateur Athenians staging *Pyramus and Thisby*, led by Danny Burstein's delightfully braggartly Bottom and Jeff Hiller's hilarious Flute (a hoot in drag as Thisby), learn and benefit for the other-worldly elders.

In addition to this novel interpretation, De Bessonnet provides dazzlingly funny direction as the multiple plots play out on David Rockwell's revolving pastoral set, perfectly suited to the park's natural milieu. Add some spicy battle-of-the-sexes chemistry between Bhavesh Patel's pompous Theseus and De'Adre Aziza's sexy Hippolyta and you have the perfect *Dream* for a midsummer night.



Naren Weiss, Tuck Milligan, Devin Haqq, Elodie Lucinda Morss, John P. Keller, and Erin Beirnard in *Singing Beach*

Credit: Joel Weber

Fantasy and elder issues also figure in *Singing Beach*, the first new stage work by prize-winning author Tina Howe in eight years, now playing at the HERE Arts Center. While the seniors in the Central Park *Midsummer* are invisible spirits playing pranks, Howe's elderly figure is facing an all-too-serious dilemma. Just like the father in her *Painting Churches*, *Beach*'s Ashton Sleeper is a renowned poet succumbing to senility. As his daughter Merrie resists her second husband Sebastian's efforts to place Ashton in a nursing home, a Category 4 hurricane is baring down on their seashore summer home. The main action is granddaughter Piper's fantasy-tinged voyage to save her grandfather from a miserable future. Bullied by her older brother Tyler, ignored by her mom, stepdad, and father Owen (now in London with his male spouse), Piper retreats into a fantasy world where oceans freeze and she and Ashton are valued and praised.

Howe has not lost her knack for the fascinating detail, poetic yet realistic dialogue, and captivating, eloquent characters she displayed in such plays as *Coastal Disturbances*, *Pride's Crossing* and *Chasing Manet*. Everyone in the play has an interesting resume. Merrie is a novelist, Owen an artist, Sebastian a lecturer in Ovid, etc. Even Piper's dream characters who include her science teacher and the star of her favorite TV show, would make stimulating dinner companions. But at a scant 75 minutes, the play feels underdeveloped. The theme of catastrophic climate change mirroring the family's inner turmoil is touched upon but not fully explored. In addition, Ari Laura Kreith's staging feels as limp and slow as the unfortunately-named Sleeper. The actors—all except those playing Ashton and Piper double as the real and fantasy figures—are tentative and hesitant in their characterizations. This *Beach* could benefit from some further shaping by the playwright, one of our best and most imaginative.

A Midsummer Night's Dream: July 31—Aug. 13. Free Shakespeare in the Park/The Public Theater at the Delacorte Theatre, Central Park West at W. 81st St., NYC. Tue—Sun, 8 pm. Running time: two hours with no intermission. Free. (212) 967-7555. www.publictheater.org.

Singing Beach: July 30—Aug. 12. Theater 167 at HERE Arts Center, 145 Ave. of the Americas, NYC. Wed—Sat 8:30pm, Sun 4pm. Running time: 75 minutes with no intermission. \$20—\$40. (212) 352-3101. www.here.org.

This review previously appeared on ArtsinNY.com and Theaterlife.com.

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