

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

A Singular 'Tempest' at South Coast Repertory

Sylvie · Wednesday, September 17th, 2014

Modified versions of Shakespeare's plays are certainly nothing new. They have been tweaked, stretched, disassembled and reassembled in any number of ways. Some work, some don't, and I say bring them on. I've always felt Shakespeare himself would say as much. We'll never know, but we're allowed to speculate. As long as it does not disrespect it, such tinkering only shows an abiding interest in the deeper value of the original.

It also feels like vindication to be making such a statement in the wake of the version of *The Tempest* currently on the boards at South Coast Repertory, produced in association with the American Repertory Theater at Harvard University and The Smith Center of Las Vegas. This production, to which the word "unique" may safely be applied, was created and honed at those other two theatres before putting in its appearance in Costa Mesa. It is Shakespeare tweaked alright — by modern magic and by happy invention. But it also is Shakespeare appreciated and in some ways magnified. There is a strong sense that its travels may not be over, although no one is talking about future plans. At least not yet.

The cast of offstage characters — the principals involved in imagining and putting this together — may give you an idea of what to expect. Aaron Posner (author of the fanciful flight of *Stupid F*g Bird*, that bracing take on Chekhov's *The Seagull* that was a recent hit at Pasadena's Theatre @ Boston Court) and Teller, the *über*magician of the enduring Penn & Teller duo. Posner and Teller did the nearly seamless tweaking (and minor reinventing) of the text itself, inserting the modern magic into the staging of this event.

Add to that some creative recasting of the clowns in this production, from Trinculo and Stephano to the "monster" Caliban (the movement choreographed by Pilobolus associate artistic director Matt Kent), and the entire enterprise propelled by some elegant haunting songs by Tom Waits and Kathleen Brennan, delivered with great flair by the Rough Magic quartet, consisting of Miche Braden, Joel Davel, Liz Filios and Matt Spencer.



(l to r) Tom Nelis, Charlotte Graham, Joby Earle and Nate Dendy in THE TEMPEST. Photo by The Smith Center/Geri Kodey

But with Teller on board, this show is inevitably focused on providing the palpable magic. That is at once the big draw and the big peril. Can we do modern magic in Shakespeare without Las Vegas echoing too loudly in our head? The answer is no. And yes. The endless card tricks are at once great visual fun and a bit overdone. But the independent movement of inanimate objects and other

levitations (yes, levitations) are — as levitations tend to be — quite amazing.

Yet the most arresting of all the feats of conjuring are not these, but the ones we're less familiar with and don't see coming. No spoilers here, but those are the moments that also seem most pertinent to Shakespeare's wishful intentions in *The Tempest*, as opposed to the ones that feel merely superimposed. They are what we believe Ariel and Prospero to be capable of and intent on doing — not for our entertainment (a shallower goal), but as an introduction to the more serious purpose of their shadow world. Their transformative black arts. And some of those really nifty tricks are quite breathtaking.



Nate Dendy as Ariel in THE TEMPEST at South Coast Rep

However, I know that what you've been waiting for is a final and simpler determination: Does it all work? Astonishingly, it does. It takes a while to set aside a sense that parts of the play are being bent to serve the magic rather than the other way around. But as the production develops, and especially as we get deeper into the gorgeous lyricism of Prospero's elegiac speeches, Posner and Teller have the good sense to leave well enough alone. It is an unmistakable show of respect for Shakespeare's own brand of magic. The verbal kind.

It's all there in the speaking. And it feels as if the production almost pauses, insisting that we listen and hear the exceptional beauty of the language and fully understand the poetic melancholy and sadder needs that assail us as we near the end of life. While Tom Nelis' trim and assertive Prospero seems in total control of his world and all the creatures in it, his delivery of those speeches — measured and tempered — is a way of acquiescing the relinquishing to come. He may not be ready to give it all up quite yet (is anyone ever?), but he knows in his bones what must follow.



Tom Nelis and Charlotte Graham. Photo by Debora Robinson/SCR.

The very substance of this play is nothing but a ceremonial preparation for this endgame, something Shakespeare himself was no doubt beginning to feel. It is Prospero's life struggle, the conquering of his anger, his quest for resolution before it's too late and, through his actions — the releasing, the embracing — his exhortation of forgiveness as the only pathway to redemption.

The individual performances are clear and satisfying, with Joby Earle giving us a delightful puppy-dog of a Ferdinand and Nate Dendy delivering unending physical magic as a worthy Teller stand-in.

However, as we all know, human magic is never entirely magical. In addition to Posner and Teller, the unusual demands of this production invoke a design team that deserves special mention. It includes Daniel Conway (scenic design), Paloma Young (costumes, especially the gown worn by Miranda that is almost entirely made up of the stitching together of her old baby clothes), Christopher Akerlind (lighting), Charles Coes and Darron L West (sound), Johnny Thompson (magic design), Thom Rubino (magic engineering and construction) and Kenny Wollesen (instrument design and Wollesonics, whatever those might be).

And, oh, I must not forget to mention: there is no island setting here, just a steampunk traveling tent with a magician's stage. The magic on it — past and prologue, Shakespearian and non — is all that is required.



The cast of THE TEMPEST before the vanishing banquet... Photo by Debora Robinson/SCR.

WHAT: *The Tempest*

WHERE: South Coast Repertory 655 Town Center Drive, Costa Mesa, CA 92626

WHEN: Now through September 28

HOW: Tickets: (714) 708-5555 or at www.scr.org/tickets or at the box-office

FOOTNOTE: On September 7, **California Artists Radio Theatre** held a very special recording session of George Bernard Shaw's *Heartbreak House* for an invited audience sprinkled with significant celebrities, all friends of the man being informally honored that day.



Norman Lloyd

What made the event so special is that it fulfilled a long-held desire of man-of-the-hour **Norman Lloyd**, the vigorous producer/director/actor/jack of all theatrical trades and master of them *all*, to celebrate his 100th birthday by playing the role of Captain Shotover.

Play it he did — to absolute perfection. Assisting him was a stellar cast that included Charlotte Rae, Ed Asner, Samantha Eggar, Monte Markham, Phil Proctor, Diane Mercer, Charles Shaughnessy, Paul Keith and Jane Windsor. John Harlan was the announcer and Leonard Maltin the host. Peggy Webber produces CA Radio Theatre.

There is still time to wish Lloyd a very happy birthday. It doesn't actually happen until November 8...

Top image: (l-r) Zachary Eisenstat, Manelich Minniefee and Tom Nelis in THE TEMPEST at South Coast Rep. Photo by The Smith Center/Geri Kodey.

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