

## ETHEREALLY STUNNING: Dram Tree Shakespeare's 'The Tempest' is a remarkable, immersive experience

APR 19 • ARTSY SMARTSY, FEATURE MAIN, THEATER • NO COMMENTS ON ETHEREALLY STUNNING: DRAM TREE SHAKESPEARE'S 'THE TEMPEST' IS A REMARKABLE, IMMERSIVE EXPERIENCE

The highest compliment I could pay to any theatre production is they make me want to *be in the show*. Dram Tree Shakespeare's "The Tempest" is the first production I've seen in Wilmington in my 21-year history that actually had me dreaming of living in their world—forever. And for days after it ended.



*INNOCENCE AND MAGIC: Ariel (puppeteer, Mirla Criste), and puppeteers from the astounding production, "The Tempest." Photo by*

Directed by Emmy Award winner and former Wilmingtonian Michael Granberry, "The Tempest" brings to life the magical story of Shakespeare's 17th century play, following shipwrecks, a sorcerer, spells, young love, power struggles, and themes of betrayal and forgiveness, all set on a deserted island where creatures and spirits come from every corner to illuminate a mystique that's nothing shy of captivating. Granberry's vision for "The Tempest" elevates this story even more. He's set this world ablaze with his hand-built puppetry—amazing colossal ones and small ones, as well as Gina Gambony's dreamy shadow puppetry. They all interact with humans onstage to take us through a familial quarrel that comes to a head after 12 years of festering.

Prospero (John Stafford) and his daughter, Miranda (Lily Zuckerman, young Miranda; Isabel Zermani, older Miranda), have been cast away on a deserted island by Prospero's brother, Antonio (Sam Robison), and the King of Naples, Alonso (Ashley Grantham). Their goal is to strip Prospero of his title, Duke of Milan. While washed away, with only books and a few things for survival, Prospero learns the ways of magic and begins to cast spells on his enemies in order to restore his power, but also in a greater goal to forgive them. In the midst of it all, his daughter falls for the king's son, Ferdinand (William Li), and love begins to brew, with ethereal illusion carrying it all in beguilement.

From the opening scene—with Robison, Grantham, Tony Rivenbark as Gonzalo, Justin Smith as Sebastian, and Noah Farrell as Boatswain, steering a massive ship made from Granberry's hands—it's apparent the visual bounty offered to the audience at the onset will be unlike anyone in local theatre has seen. And it never stops.

The world created here is truly immersive. It is all-encompassing. It is truly magical in every way—not only in the dreamy text Shakespeare crafts so beautifully and inspirationally, but in the way Granberry and his technical team and superb actors transform McEachern's Warehouse into a world far removed from the bustle of Wilmington's downtown streets. I adore when theatre is done in alternative spaces; quite frankly, another space in town couldn't contain this production any better. The swirl of lighting that circulates the room when a spell is cast visually cues the audience on the text the actors are delivering. The whimsical, eerie music perfectly parallels quiet serenity that so easily becomes a bewitching power on its own accord. Four corners of fabric hang from the rafters, where aerial acrobats and even actors hang, twirl, climb, and jump, mimicking magical trees or branches floating over a sea. The stage becomes the island, only understood by the props and creatures inhabiting it—whether showing up as sharks circling the ship or seaweed-like-covered creatures bowing to Prospero's every need.

Ariel, Prospero's spirit who enacts all his magic, is a hefty calm of peace. The puppet, in all white, with mystical, sparkly eyes, is controlled by puppeteer Mirla Criste and voiced by the soothing tranquility of former WHQR personality Jemila

Ericson (who also does astounding vocals for one of the best scenes in Act II with the Harpy puppet). Together Criste and Ericson breathe life into Ariel like a perfectly controlled modern dance, halcyonic yet staunchly devoted to please. Because of Criste's ensemble in all black, including a face mask, when the lights shine just right on the stage, it truly looks like the puppet she controls is merely floating through the audience, around the space, sprinkling her power over anyone near. Her final exit is a testament to a powerful performance. I will not lie: Her goodbye to Prospero left me teary-eyed.

Stafford's Prospero offers a perfect balance of pain giving way to patience in order to reach a final, moral outcome. He is not the man so crossed by his colleagues and family that he wishes death—despite the power he so easily harnesses to attain it. Perhaps the most telling line of the show, "The rarer action is on virtue than in vengeance," sums up everything Stafford manages with this role. He tempers forceful trickery with steady quiescence, none of which is burdened by malicious intent. This not only comes through in his master plan against his enemies but in the sweetly attentive well-wishes he gently fells onto his own daughter after finding out she's fallen for the king's son. Stafford plays it with subtle longing, apparent in his soft eyes and gentility.

Zermani—portraying a wide-eyed, life-is-a-dream outlook as Miranda—brings grace to the stage unlike another. Her want for the world to continue in its magic, in her naiveté, is a blissful treat to watch. The ease in which she is giddy over love and forgiving in her awakening to what's unfolding around her is inspiring. Zuckerman as a young Miranda rather believably plays up the rebelling teen just wanting to live life her way. The way Zuckerman and Zermani trade off the lapsing years between young and old Miranda is a master in its simplicity, making great use of the aerial silk fabrics.

The ensemble of human characters are as united in this show as ever. Robison and Smith have a bond that seems organic in scheming for power, even bumbling at times. That's what years upon years of working together in local theatre will do: create believable interactions.

Rivenbark ups the ante on everyone in the show with his bombastic dialect and enunciation. No one can top this man when it comes to the pomposity of speech pattern with which audiences are used to hearing of Shakespeare. Well, maybe, except for Grantham. Grantham's Alonso manages to bring a grief-stricken yet better-than-thou, if not completely out-of-the-loop vibe to royalty (doesn't seem too farfetched from what we see today with political power).

William Li as Ferdinand is dreamy. He's as guileless as Miranda and completely syncs with her in his adoration for love. One of the most beautiful scenes comes in his arrival onshore to first meeting Miranda. The staging is breathtaking in its romance.

Rick Forrester as Prospero's servant/slave, Caliban, enlivens the show, especially when with his cohorts, a rambunctious Alissa Fetherolf as Trincolo and a drunken, boisterous Adrian Monte as Stephano. The trifecta bombard the stage with comedy and farce, and uplift show and the audience in over-the-top antics. Forrester's costuming and technique in staging the puppet is a technical feat to behold. He takes the "monster" from scary to downright lovable.

There are so many scenes worth attention in this show, there's no way one review could possibly give them due justice. Gambony's astounding shadow puppetry offers side plots and thoughts on the characters in mesmerizing ways. And the union ritual between Miranda and Ferdinand feels like a transformation into Burning Man (only with less sweat huts to hide into).

"The Tempest," without a doubt, is the best show I have seen in Wilmington theatre ever—hands down. At three hours long, Dram Tree and Granberry make it pure magic; it only feels like a mere hour. Its aftereffects have left me swooning over the most beautiful dreams since. But don't take my word for it; let them show you.

## **DETAILS:**

### **The Tempest**

**April 14 – May 1, Thurs.-Sun., 7:30 p.m.**

**Doors open at 7 p.m. • \$17-\$25**

**McEachern's Warehouse**

**121 S. Front St. • 910-726-3545**

**[dramtreeshakes.org](http://dramtreeshakes.org)**