

THEATER REVIEW

Theater Review--Dram Tree Shakespeare's magical 'Tempest' is a must-see visual feast

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For those of us who were excited about Michael Granberry's return to Wilmington, now you know why.

Dram Tree Shakespeare's visionary production of "The Tempest," which is running through May 1 at McEachern's warehouse in downtown Wilmington, is, if anything, even more magical and absorbing than the L.A.-based director's acclaimed and memorable work in Wilmington in the late '90s and early 2000s. With a

multitude of puppets big and small, projections whimsical and terrifying and even acrobatic aerialists, there's a heightened visual component to nearly every moment of the play, including actors using fabric hanging from the space's ceiling for everything from a cocoon to a swing.

The puppetized production design -- Granberry and Gina Gambony created these marvels -- drives "The Tempest's" famously supernatural tale about a fallen duke's healing journey from anger and isolation to forgiveness, love and redemption. But while Granberry and his outstanding cast and crew certainly probe the depths of Shakespeare's play, the jaw-dropping second-act wedding scene is itself reason enough to see the show, with its massive puppets -- one is probably 20 or 30 feet wide -- and choreographed aerialists moving in tandem to New Age music. It's a scene of mesmerizing, even psychedelic beauty.

It's a good thing, then, that the puppets aren't just a shallow visual distraction from Shakespeare's words, but rather serve to enhance the play's story of Prospero (a commanding Jon Stafford), the usurped Duke of Milan. He's living in exile on an island with his daughter, Miranda (Isabel Zermani, and, in younger form, Lily Zukerman), his servant spirit Ariel, enslaved monster Caliban and a host of "strange shapes" that are like a slinkier take on the Jawas of the "Star Wars" universe.

The play opens on a multi-part puppet boat filled by the inhabitants of Prospero's former world, including his brother, Antonio (Sam Robison), who took his title, and Alonso (Ashley Grantham), the Duke of Naples who helped him do it. The ship and its inhabitants twist and sway in the storm as they shout over din of storm effects created by sound designer Cole Marquis and dynamic lighting by Aaron Willings, while a couple of shark puppets circling the boat give you an idea of the visual depth that's going on here.

The storm was whipped up by Prospero, of course, and he soon scatters the ship's crew around the island, where he sends Ariel to spy on and manipulate them. The spirit is "played" by a slight, wraith-like puppet manipulated by Mirla Criste, clad all



From left, Jon Stafford plays Prospero, Ashley Grantham is Alonso and Tony Rivenbark is Gonzalo in "The Tempest." PHOTO COURTESY OF ALISA HARRIS

in black and in an impenetrable black mask. (When you're not looking she may have the puppet alight on your shoulder). Ariel's airy, gentle voice is provided by Jemila Ericson, who shows her range by using her pipes for the breathtaking scream of a harpy during one strobe-strewn scene.

The play's best entrance would have to go to Rick Forrester as the monster Caliban, who stomps scraping and bellowing into view, creating a scary mood while fully wearing his puppet, designed by Tymoteusz Dvorak, which is like a bullfrog crossed with an ogre. The dark mood doesn't last long, though, especially when Caliban gets drunk with Alonso's butler, Stephano (Adrian Monte, a fine fool) and court jester Trinculo (Alissa Fetherolf, putting on an impressive display of energetic clowning when she's not twirling from the aerialist's silks).

Robison and Justin Smith bring some cynical, smirky comedy as Antonio and Alonso's treacherous brother, Sebastian, gradually darkening the mood in proportion to the threat they pose to Alonso and his advisor, Gonzalo (Tony Rivenbark).

Most if not all of these characters handle puppets at some point, and there's even a "sea puppet" that deposits Alonso's son, Ferdinand (a solid William Li), on shore, where he soon catches the attention of Miranda, leading puppet master Prospero to manipulate their feelings for each other.

Stafford is a strong Prospero, creating the feeling of a man who's in control of his own dominion, but only because he's retreated from the world to focus on his adored child and his harbored grievances.

And while there's a lot going, the action never feels too busy. Rather the visual enhancements sometimes stand out enough to become the focus, from an array of super-tall puppets to tiny butterflies that are dangled over the audience.

Likewise, Gambony's back-lit projection screen adds a lot to the storytelling, illustrating what could be boring exposition (the weird baby Miranda is a highlight), creating a nice segue to an entrance by Stephano and conjuring a vision of the dead witch Sycorax that's horror-film scary.

You've got eight more chances to see "The Tempest." Get there.

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