

Rockin' with
the Bard
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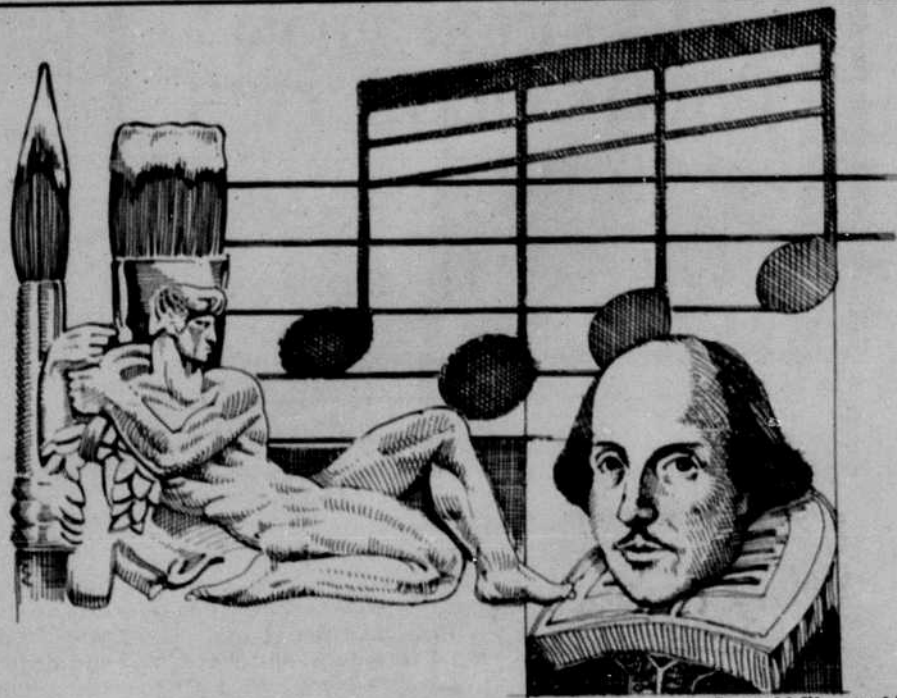
Arts and Entertainment

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SHAKESPEARE transcends time



(r.) The monstrous fish-man Caliban (Howard Swain) is one of the spirits living on the magical island in "The Tempest," on stage in Ashland through Oct. 31. (b.) University Theatre is currently presenting "The Winter's Tale" in Robinson Theatre through June 7.



Emerald file graphic

'Tempest' a visual and aural spectacle

We are such stuff as dreams are made on — Prospero Shakespeare's spellbinding fantasy, "The Tempest," was probably the last play he ever wrote.

In many ways it was Shakespeare's farewell tribute to theater. The themes of love, servitude, power and self-awareness that he so brilliantly explored in other plays are reviewed in "The Tempest" with characteristically shrewd psychological insight.

But perhaps more than any Shakespeare play, "The Tempest" conveys to the audience a sense of wide-eyed wonder about life and humanity. It is arguably the most visually and aurally spectacular of Shakespeare's plays, replete as it is with supernatural beings, dreams, hallucinations and hypnotic sounds.

One looks forward to modern productions of this play, especially by theater companies that can afford high-tech staging, with a mixture of excitement and trepidation. We can hardly be satisfied with a production that doesn't blow our socks off. However, the indiscriminate use of special

effects can easily mar or confuse Shakespeare's subtle treatment of the issues involved in this play.

Director Edward Hastings' presentation of "The Tempest" at this year's Oregon Shakespearean Festival in Ashland is no disappointment. Despite several minor flaws, superb visual and sound effects combined with sensitive directing made this performance a memorable feast for the senses and the soul.

Shakespeare aficionados may be upset by Hastings' decision to cut the entire first scene, effectively depriving the play of its central metaphor: the storm. But Hastings makes up for that, somewhat, by having Prospero open the play by conjuring an absolutely spectacular, if short-lived, storm.

Scenic designer Richard Hays evidently decided to shoot for surrealistic rather than idyllic in his choice of sets. A row of trees that look like they were welded from junkyard metal stood in a semi-circle around Prospero's cell on the revolving part of the stage. The only hint of the pastoral was the smudges of green paint on the trees. Behind the

trees stood short, bush-like bundles of curved sticks. Prospero's cell, with its yellowish stone facade, was completely mirrored on its back half.

This distinctly modernistic set, combined with skillful use of subdued lighting throughout the play, worked surprisingly well in conveying the magical, dreamy atmosphere of "The Tempest," without being overly incongruous with the Elizabethan setting.

By Patrick Low
Photo by Hank Kranzler

The strange and mesmerizing synthesizer music that floated in and out during the course of the play gave full impact to Caliban's speech in Act III Scene ii: "... the isle is full of noises, sounds, and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not."

While the ambience of the play was created with imagination and taste, Hastings' zealous approach to the comedy of "The Tempest" was only partially successful. It worked best during Ferdinand's encounter with Prospero in Act I, when the numerous visual gags captured perfectly the humor behind Ferdinand's arrogance and Prospero's paternal protectiveness. Rick Barbour, who played Ferdinand, did a splendid job miming the effects of Prospero's magic spells on him.

But Hastings' enthusiasm for humorous spectacle almost ruined the long comic scene in Act II between Caliban and the clowns. Here the director seemed embarked on a do-or-die mission to prove that Shakespeare can be totally accessible to a modern American audience. Every trick in the book, some brilliant and others shamelessly cheap, was pulled to elicit laughter from the audience. Steven Martin-Beck, who played Trinculo, even delivered some of his

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'Winter's Tale' boasts talented cast

As the houselights dim, panpipes play a courtly air, and a chorus intones a Gregorian melody as from a well.

University Theatre's production of Shakespeare's "The Winter's Tale," begins with movie-like music, and the appearance of Time (Johanna Lee Schmitz). Painted in gold-face, with the headpiece of an Egyptian pharaoh, she is silhouetted in a partially opaque fiberglass device on a cart, and carries a pike with a stylized sun on top.

By William Homans
Photo by Lynne Casey

This esoteric introduction is followed by a neat improvisation: the birthday party of young Prince Mamilius, the son of King Leontes of Sicilia (Mikel MacDonald). The party, and the appearance of Mamilius' pregnant mother, Hermione (Kimberly Anderson), are fitting shows of familial harmony, and appropriate contrasts to the alienation which comprises the driving force in the first half of the play.

Polixenes, King of Bohemia (Wade Johnson), Leontes' lifelong friend, has tarried in Sicilia nine months. Whether or not there has been any grounds for suspicion, Leontes has become jealous of Polixenes, and the apparent affection of his wife for his friend at the birthday party fans the flames. Leontes' angry countenance well befits a cuckold. Both the appearance and the delivery of Camillo (Tom

Nadar), Leontes' chief counselor, reminds one of the character of Gloucester in last year's presentation of "King Lear" at Ashland. Camillo identifies Leontes' problem, which, of course, is everyone else in the play's problem: he is "a master in rebellion to himself."

As he and Polixenes flee to Bohemia, Leontes' suspicions are (apparently) fulfilled, and he imprisons his wife. Leontes' rage is handled very well.

One of the satisfying aspects of this play is that although, according to the program, the cast consists entirely of University undergraduates, the youth of the cast does not detract from the dramatic production. Those characters who should appear 16 years older than when we first meet them, do.

While in prison, Hermione delivers a daughter, later to be named Perdita. When Paulina (Nancy Julian), wife of another of Leontes' chief lords, Antigonus (Gregory Behrendt), presents the infant to her father, Leontes denies it is his issue, and condemns it to be abandoned in a desolate cline by Antigonus.

"Poor thing, condemned to loss (hence the name Perdita)," mourns Antigonus. He was speaking of the baby, but he might have been speaking of Leontes himself. The baby, Director Robert Barton's infant son, cried when condemned to abandonment, creating a neat piece of synchronicity.

However, there was one profound ebb in the flow of the production when, for some odd reason, the audience laughed at the scene when the scroll from the Delphic oracle was read, to Leontes' profound sorrow. This is not a funny

scene; it is one of the most crucial, gripping moments in the play.

"The Winter's Tale" is divided into two main parts, of which the main themes are, first, suspicion and alienation, and second, ordeal by absence, remorse, reunion and forgiveness.

This division is pointed to by the shepherd's words to his son, on his finding of the abandoned Perdita in the wilds of Bohemia: "You have seen things dying, I have seen things living."

The second half of the play is certainly meant to be more humorous as it includes the Shepherd (David Bull), and his Clown son (Scot Crisp), plus Autolycus (Stan Freitag), whose name means "lone wolf", the funniest character in the play. He is a memorable rascal, whose ragtag costume fittingly reminded one of "All's Well That Ends Well's" Parolles.

In addition, the contrast between the courtly dialogues of the first three acts, and the pastoral celebration of the last two, sends the audience out satisfied. One senses that Shakespeare was totally at home with shepherds and other such fustian folk, and the cast plays common people with enthusiasm.

The choreography of the sheepshearing festival is a pleasure to behold. The minor parts, particularly Dorcas (Diane DeHaven) and Mopsa (Zaxaro Kokkoris), rivals for the hand of the Clown, were handled with attention to

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