

# BORN SMALL TOWN



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## Comedy, Tragedy and Magic, Unified

*Shakespeare in Hollywood* at the VLT

**O**beron's got all the lines; they've charmed women and fairies and anyone he wishes, but his current love interest already knows them. As a matter of fact, they've been around for a while — though not as long as he has.

The conceit of *Shakespeare in Hollywood*, now playing at the Very Little Theatre, is that Oberon, King of the Fairies (Michael Walker), and his helper Puck (Barbie Wu) accidentally end up on the mid-'30s Hollywood set of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, directed by legendary Austrian stage director Max Reinhart (Bill Campbell) who fled his country just before WWII.

Reinhart was real; he did direct *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in 1934. *Shakespeare in Hollywood* is playwright Ken Ludwig's loving farce about it, commissioned for the U.K.'s Royal Shakespeare Company in the early years of this millennium. This production has charm, sweetness and a surprisingly emotional resolution.

The VLT made wise choices about the script, the director (Chris Pinto), the cast — a strong ensemble with some newcomers and many familiar faces — and the costumes. The pretty, complex set, by Bill Campbell as well (does the man ever sleep?), takes a while to change, but sound designer Adrienne West fills that time with era-appropriate music that makes most of the audience want to dance.

Oberon, at first furious with Puck, soon finds the actress Olivia Darnell (Jessi Cotter, who plays an Iowa farm girl with a bit of a California accent) much to his liking. And he and Puck end up cast in the movie when the actual stars quit or get injured. Obviously, right?

This is a screwball comedy with depth. Sure, it affectionately lampoons Hollywood and the Warner brothers, but it also shows how an older, wiser creative type (and it's clear from Michael Walker's actions and moments of watching that he knows he's a stand-in for Shakespeare, Ludwig or any other maker of meaning) can turn vulnerable when faced with unexpected experiences and emotions.

The play gestures amusingly at theatrical conventions — when Oberon grows angry, lights flash and thunder rolls (one imagines VLT stagehands rattling the storm-making metal sheet from last year's *The Dresser*) — and Hollywood conventions. Puck finds sunglasses, decides he wants to be a star, figures out he can get a lot of women, tries to serve his boss and also get a hot car.

Ludwig cleverly uses Aristotle's unities to keep the action tight, and he also uses character conventions like the hapless servant (Puck, in this case) who's a physical comedian by design or accident and who causes some serious trouble in a wild night of wrongly directed lust — just as in the Shakespeare play.

Oberon (Michael Walker) shows Puck (Barbie Wu) the world



PHOTO COURTESY OF VERY LITTLE THEATRE

Nearly everyone in the cast makes a delightful turn on the stage, from Mike Hawkins playing a dangerous, powerful Jack Warner who's in love with a not-so-bright chorus girl, Lydia Lansing (played to the hilt by Leela Gouveia). Gouveia, who's much smarter in person than the roles she's been playing lately, makes Lydia a fine counterbalance to Cotter's Olivia, a thoughtful and bright hard worker who finds herself pulled toward a weird, powerful, unusual older man.

What unites the screwball moments — the farce of Lydia and reporter Louella Parsons (Jennifer Sellers) falling for Warner's assistant Daryl (Max Maltz); Paul Rhoden in drag; Lydia deciding Shakespeare makes as much sense backward as forward — becomes clearer as the play progresses. Oberon and Puck set scenes in motion; they watch; they're amused but don't show it; they, like the audience, want to see what happens next. But Oberon must figure out how to involve himself in the action, to use his magic (he can become invisible; he can briefly stop time) for helping instead of harming. Walker's final scene with Cotter plays out with a tenderness that gives the play heft. Campbell as Reinhart narrates the play, giving it a framework and another writer/director/creator layer; and at the end, though he has stopped mentioning the Nazis, we know what Oberon has avoided, and what's coming next for the soon-to-end *Dream*.

The play was packed the night I went, and no wonder: *Shakespeare in Hollywood*'s a rightfully hot ticket. **EW**

*Shakespeare in Hollywood* continues through Oct. 30 at the Very Little Theatre. Tix at 541-3434-7751.