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'The Tempest'

By: Stuart Duncan, TimeOFF

04/13/2005

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Actors' NET takes on one of Shakespeare's final plays.

Scholars agree that *The Tempest* is the last of Shakespeare's plays actually written entirely by him. The 1611 effort was followed by two works that some believe were written in collaboration with John Fletcher — *The Noble Kinsmen* and *Henry VIII*. But these are flawed works, and not all agree on the authorship. What is accepted, however, is the fact that *The Tempest* is one of only two plays for which Shakespeare conceived of the entire plot (*Love's Labours Lost* is the other).

Prospero, the exiled Duke of Milan, lives with his daughter, Miranda, on a lonely island; with Caliban, the misshapen, half-man, half-beast, son of the sorceress Synorax; and Ariel, a sprite, imprisoned by the same witch and freed by

Prospero. Through the years (apparently a dozen) Prospero has developed and honed his magical powers and now causes a ship carrying his former enemies to be wrecked on the shores of the island. Thus we are provided with enough villains for the piece as well as Ferdinand, the son of the King of Naples, who can be a romantic figure for Miranda (who, after all, has no males with which to compare him except her father). We also have a shipwrecked drunken butler and a jester for comic relief, plus assorted island creatures for musical and dancing interludes.

The current production of *The Tempest* at Actors' NET in Morrisville, Pa., is one of the best examples of what a truly dedicated company, armed with intelligence and imagination, can do with good material. We begin with a set that manages to combine Botticelli, the Italian painter, with woodland artifacts, including trees, caves and hillocks. We add some of the prettiest costumes seen in years. Designer Michael Ashby apparently had the efforts of at least a dozen seamstresses. Prospero's staff, an extraordinary bit of carved wood several leagues tall, was crafted especially for the production.

And all that before we even get to the cast which is superb. George Hartpence once again shows why he is a consummate Shakespearean performer — stunning diction, tempered with genuine emotion, so that every word is not only said and heard, but understood in context. One moment will suffice (and strangely, it's a moment I never felt before through several dozen different stagings by various companies). It comes late in the show, when Ferdinand already has claimed his Miranda and Prospero realizes that he may be gaining a son-in-law, but surely he is losing a daughter. It is an expression rather than a mere speech and it drives deep into the heart.



George Hartpence (left) and Kyla Marie Mostello star in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* at Actors' NET of Bucks County in Morrisville, Pa.

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It opens the questions that make *The Tempest* so intriguing. Did Shakespeare realize that the play was to be his farewell to the stage? Was "Now our revel all are ended" intended to be his adieu? After all, much is left to chance: Miranda knows so little of the male sex, can her marriage possibly work out? Prospero forgives his treacherous brother, Antonio, but gets no promise in return, not even gratitude. And Prospero's magical arts are ended for good. At the epilogue Prospero asks, no, begs the audience to free him by its applause. Did he know that really was it?

Mr. Hartpence gets lots of superb help: Carol Thompson is more than just a sprite; she is a whirlwind of joy, leaping around the stage in search of spells to cast. Kyla Marie Mostello is a charming Miranda, avoiding the pitfalls of coyness and replacing it with genuine awe. Chuck Donnelly also avoids the coarse brutality of Caliban to show rather than indeed he cannot help what has been bequeathed to him by birth. Marco Newton is a genuinely funny Trinculo, a jester who can charm as well as make people laugh. Rupert Hinton manages to avoid the obvious qualities of a drunkard, replaced by a stuffy attitude of the royal wannabe. Jim Petro, as Ferdinand, cuts a handsome figure without seeming to pose. The goddesses, Tess Ammerman and Rachel Lavery, arrive very late in the evening, then proceed to sing beautifully. In fact, the music in this production is extraordinary all by itself.

C. Jameson Bradley stands out as the faithful counselor Gonzalo. Steve Lobis is properly brooding and sour as Antonio. John Shanken-Kaye is commanding as the King of Naples. And bravo also to the various creatures of the island, nymphs and sprites: Alex Bartlett, Gracie Coscia, Addy Coscia, Sommer Shanken-Kaye, Brenna Bajor, Arne Nelson, Scott Lutz, Carolyn Kelly, Danielle DiLorenzo and Haley Keister.

You just plain aren't going to see a more charming and definitive production of *The Tempest*, probably in your lifetime. Don't miss it.

*The Tempest continues at Actors' NET of Bucks County, the Heritage Center, 635 N. Delmorr Ave., Morrisville, Pa., through April 17. Performances: Fri.-Sat. 8 p.m., Sun. 6 p.m. Tickets cost \$12, \$10 seniors/children. For information, call (215) 295-3694. On the Web: [www.actorsnetbucks.org](http://www.actorsnetbucks.org)*

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