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'A Midsummer Night's Dream'

Actors' NET does a delightful job with the Bard's famous romance

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By Stuart Duncan



Jerry Smith (left) and Joe Doyle in A Midsummer Night's Dream.

MANY directors of Shakespeare's works find themselves compelled to change the playwright's locations in apparent efforts to find new insights.

Thus we have had tragedies presented in the New York City subway, countless modern takes on Julius Caesar, and productions of A Midsummer Night's Dream set in the rain forest and a Japanese tea garden.

That's not the case with the current staging by Actors' NET of Bucks County at the Heritage Center in Morrisville, Pennsylvania. Director Cheryl Doyle has rather turned to immerse herself in the original famous illustrations of the play by Arthur Rackham.

Furthermore, she discovered that Mendelssohn wrote more than just the Wedding March when he composed incidental music for A Midsummer Night's Dream in the 19th century.

The result is a rather traditional production, enlivened greatly by a large, talented cast (23 speaking roles), some stunningly beautiful period costumes, gorgeous movements, and behold! One of the most satisfying Shakespeare shows in many years.

The central theme of the play is "a dream of Athens," not an historical reality, but a commentary on magic and fairy life. As Ms. Doyle puts it: "an imaginary Athens, near an imaginary forest, in an imaginary period, a few centuries ago."

Clearly what the author intended. Moreover, she then adds lovers running away to get married — simple chaps trying simply to put on a play that might please the court — and a ruler trying to enforce a silly rule enacted before he took over, exactly the sort of thing the playwright was writing about.

Now add a superb cast — led by the veteran couple George Hartpence and Carol Thompson, as Oberon, the Fairy King and his Queen, Titania. Both actors are so confident and powerful that the work is never in danger of losing focus.

Essentially this is a play of several parts: the fairy section, with the King and Queen challenging each other; the lovers, expertly played by Shawn Doremus, Andrew James Gordon, Elizabeth Rzasa and Maryalice Rubins-Topoleski who basically are manipulated throughout; "the rude mechanicals," led by a stunning performance from C. Jameson Bradley as Bottom, the weaver. And all three groups under the authority of the Athenian Court, with the duke, Scott Karlin and his Queen, Susan Fowler more or less in charge.

And if that is not enough, we have in the middle of Act 3, one of Shakespeare's immortal lines: "Lord what fools these mortals be."

A Midsummer Night's Dream continues at The Heritage Center Theatre, 635 N.Delmorr Ave., Morrisville, Pennsylvania, through March 22. Performances: Fri. - Sat. 8 p.m., Sun. 2 p.m. For tickets and information, go to www.actorsnetbucks.org or call 215-295-3694.

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