

Theater: A Moody, Melancholy 'Midsummer Night'

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A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM ** 1/2 out of ****

PEARL THEATRE COMPANY

You'll find more shadows than light in this moody, melancholy Midsummer Night's Dream. You'll also find a menagerie of animals: dogs and wolves and owls and birds and countless other creatures caw and growl and hoot and stomp their way through a forest where young lovers are ensnared and set free, not wiser but certainly warier.

And you'll find many, many ideas -- jumpsuit costumes and a vague suggestion of a set that look like leftovers from Logan's Run, musical references that span popular culture, a stage floor filled with pebbles that a small child leaving the theater rightly said with astonishment was just like a playground at her school and more. Much more.

Director Eric Tucker has 37 ideas for every show; while all of them may be good, they are not necessarily all good at the same time in the same production. This is not an ideal introduction to Shakespeare's messy but enduring comedy. Yet for those who know it well, some new notes are struck and that's nothing to pass over lightly.

Though darkness prevails in a way, the playful tone of the evening begins at the start, when Pearl's marvelous player Sean McNall puckishly announces that "Tonight's performance of Uncle Vanya is about to begin..." A slightly bewildered audience was immediately put off kilter. Indeed, this co-production between Pearl and Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival was perhaps especially challenging for subscribers more used to dependably traditional Shavian productions by the excellent Pearl repertory, as opposed to somewhat avant-garde deconstructions.

Nonetheless, we dove into the deep end, with concrete walls for a backdrop and that playful pit of a stage floor filled with pebbles that emphasized the free spirited nature of the acting on display. Performers barked and trotted on all fours, fused into a clump of humanity, somehow disentangled themselves and then were drawn ineluctably back together again, all the while giving us the story we know so well.

Two young lovers are denied the possibility of happiness by the woman's implacable father. He insists she marry the young man he prefers instead. Rather than marrying a man she doesn't love or face death by royal decree or worse (a nunnery!), the two meet in the forest and plan to spirit away to another land. She is pursued by the man betrothed to her by her apparently bi-curious father (one idea of many that go nowhere) while that man in turn is pursued by another young woman who adores him with slavish -- and thus unwelcome -- devotion. In the forest, all four would-be lovers are set upon by fairies who delight in toying with the vagaries of love.

Wandering about this rather crowded forest we also find some local workers who fancy themselves a troupe of actors. They are rehearsing a play in hopes of performing it for the king during his wedding nuptials. Thus they may curry favor and perhaps even make their (modest) fortune. Fairies being fairies, the actors too are set upon. A full-of-himself lead player named Bottom is turned into a genuine ass by the fairy Puck. Bottom is then paired off with the magicked fairy queen who has earned her husband's wrath and thus this scornful prank.

All will be set aright by the end, but not without a little wear and tear on the heart.

This isn't the first Dream to play more like a nightmare. But the shadows do prove Tucker's most memorable gambit. While most tech elements are minimal and add even less, the lighting is exceptional. (Credit to The Lighting Syndicate with assistant lighting designer Leslie Smith.) The switch to fairy land is ominous and beguiling while the late night confusion where lovers wander aimlessly in the dark is especially vivid. These fairies are dangerous, as is falling in and out of love. Every time someone is bewitched into one false love or another, their bodies convulse as if their very soul were being plucked out. (I'm less certain why McNall collapses every once in a while, only to be revived with a comforting word.)

The visual flair of director Tucker is especially strong. His ability to move the actors in concert, to create absurdist moments that feel natural and inevitable (such as scenes where the actors deliver their lines entangled in a giant ball of humanity) are consistently successful.

And Tucker's cast is a true ensemble, working as one. Joey Parsons is convincing as both a delightful wall and an imperious fairy queen. Nance Williamson works equally well as a besotted would-be lover and a stone-faced monarch. Mark Bedard charms as a "dude" of a lover and a squeaky-voiced mechanical and the vengeful fairy king. Sean McNall remains the Pearl of great price, a marvelous actor of endless empathy who imbues each character he plays with full-bodied humanity. If Jason O'Connell runs rampant as Puck and Bottom (doing everything from wrestling with himself to an overly extended Brando imitation), the fault lies with the director, not him.

Tucker has produced some of my favorite theater of the last few years, including Bedlam's Twelfth Night take dubbed What You Will earlier this year and a Sense And Sensibility, which is making a welcome return soon. If he has a weakness, it is embracing all ideas, whether or not they serve the particular production at hand. Stronger editing will serve him better in the future.

Laughs are not the point here so when the shadows are darker, the emotions should run deep. But we feel little when lovers are torn apart and even less when they are reunited. And you know a Midsummer is not wholly successful when you worry about the drawn-out ending -- with its goofy play within a play -- even before it's begun.

Still, the cast is energetic and winning and some rewards are earned. Puck is a quietly menacing figure (and would be even more so if the quiet were emphasized). Bottom's metamorphosis into an ass is poignant and scary instead of silly. It feels more akin to the frightening transformation of those bad little boys in Pinocchio rather than the cheap laughs it is usually played for.

Nonetheless many ideas prove fleeting, transitory. That fey father? The random snippets of pop culture and anachronistic touches like an elevator ride? Those puzzling costumes? Too often they flash into view then dissipate in a puff of smoke, like fairy lights that glow alluringly and promise much but can never quite be grasped.

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