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Theater: Phyllida Lloyd's "Tempest" The First Triumph Of 2017

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THE TEMPEST *** 1/2 out of ****

ST. ANN'S WAREHOUSE

We're only two and a half weeks into 2017 so there was no reason to be impatient. The year began theatrically with a string of festivals in New York City, curated events that let us take a gander at envelope-pushing theater from around the country and the world. But now it gets serious: Over five days of theater-going, we get the finale of a trilogy of Shakespeare at St. Ann's Warehouse, a revival of the August Wilson play *Jitney* that becomes the final show of that genius to debut on Broadway (and the buzz is growing for the fantastic cast led by John Douglas Thompson) and finally a David Ives translation of the French comic classic *The Liar* at Classic Stage Company. So: British talent at one of the city's jewels for great theater, a splashy Broadway production of a classic American playwright and a vibrant Off Broadway showcase for Ives and his string of brilliant new translations of comedy classics.

This exciting week of theater is kicked off in high style by director Phyllida Lloyd, the great actor Harriet Walter and their exciting ensemble. They've collaborated on a trio of Shakespearean plays, starting with a brilliant *Julius Caesar* then a strong *Henry IV* and now this thoroughly satisfying *Tempest*. Take your pick on what to admire the most: the joy of seeing a repertory company tackle multiple plays, the insight offered by an all female cast and what that says about the play at hand, the ever-rich multiplicity of Shakespeare or simply great actors doing great work with a singular focus. It's all there.

All three plays in what is now clearly a significant trilogy are set in a prison. We are watching prisoners stage their own productions of Shakespeare with the material at hand. Such framing devices are common in Shakespeare today but rarely are they so deeply felt. These actors embrace the life of specific, real prisoners and then tackle the roles of Shakespeare in the role of the prisoners they identify with. Hence, Harriet Walter plays Prospero but she begins this *Tempest* by stating she is Hannah, a woman imprisoned for being the driver during a failed bank robbery in which two innocent people died. (Hannah considered it a political act though doubtless the family of those murdered feel differently.) That's it. No more interpolations by Walter, though the prison setting does intrude at various points throughout the show. But this layering of performance

and character upon character unlocks new meaning. We all know how Shakespeare can mean different things to different people in different societies at different times in history. Here is that fact made explicit and powerful.

Now forget all the politics because that informs the show but it doesn't define or limit it. Often for me *The Tempest* is a tricky show, but when you get Prospero right, you're going to be just fine. (Patrick Stewart's acclaimed turn comes to mind.) Here, Lloyd and her actors have created a *Tempest* that feels very much of a piece — the clowns, the young lovers, the tale of revenge all have weight and meaning and build upon each other. You never sit waiting for one scene to end so you can return to the good stuff. It's a unified whole in a way that was slightly missed by the solid *Henry IV*. Looking back, we have the thunderbolt of *Julius Caesar* (a four star masterpiece), the fine *Henry* (a three star production which benefitted the least from the framing device) and now this very good *Tempest* (which ends things on a grace note that is very moving indeed).

So what happens? As with the two earlier productions, the setting is the open area of a modern prison. Guards are always present, observing and watching and ready to intercede if things get out of hand. Walter stands alone, tells her story and the awful crime she has committed without varnish and then it begins. Old soda bottles and garbage bags and milk cartons are strung together to create the outline of an island on the floor. Prisoners grab other hand-made props and the story begins. Prospero had his title and power stolen by a nefarious brother and was exiled on a distant island. A great storm that Prospero called up has stranded those very people who did him wrong. He will watch as his daughter and a prince fall in love and then create some minor turmoil for the villains who did him wrong and then in an act of benevolence forgive them all.

Aiding him in this are the spirit Ariel and the much-maligned Caliban.

It's all delivered by an exceptional cast, with the interpolation of music and dance and modern flourishes (like a bucket of KFC chicken) making perfect sense since this is in fact a play being put on by prisoners.

Of course, many Shakespeare plays have challenges and this one certainly has that in the racist overtones of Caliban, the misshapen slave that is cruelly treated and then mocked for being so ungrateful and petty. Those concerns all but disappear — an all-female cast, numerous women of color in central roles and Caliban (Sophie Stanton) being played by an unruly white woman who seems stuck in the mindset of a career criminal places this troublesome character in a fresh new light.

Similarly, the sometimes tiresome comic relief subplot of servants on a drunken spree with the half-assed idea of killing Prospero and becoming masters of the island works beautifully. Here it plays like a poorly thought-out caper by not-so-bright criminals and they are played to perfection by Jackie Clune and Karen Dunbar (who had me in stitches with her Scottish brogue and perpetual look of besotted amazement). The young lovers: a pleasure when embodied by Sheila Atim and a thoroughly winning Leah Harvey as Miranda. Watching Walter as Prospero observe their slow falling in love has rarely been so pleasurable. Ditto the mercurial changes in emotion that flit across the face of Jade Anouka as Ariel, here informed by the changeable nature of a kid who isn't hardened yet by time behind bars.

Then comes the final master stroke. The flurry of forgiveness that takes place at the end of *The Tempest* can be as hard to swallow as the rush of marriages that climax a Jane Austen novel. But Prospero's willingness to show mercy to others is crystal clear when one understands how very much Prospero/Hannah yearns for similar mercy herself. Then the prisoners/performers say their goodbyes to her, thanking their friend for her companionship and guidance, wishing her the best as they escape to parole and new lives while she is left behind, trapped on her island forever.

It's a moving finale and by all accounts the last in a trilogy. But one struggles to understand why Lloyd and Walter would stop now.

THEATER OF 2017

The Fever (The Public's UTR Festival) **

Lula del Ray (The Public's UTR Festival) **

La Mélancolie des Dragons (The Public's UTR Festival at the Kitchen) **

Top Secret International (State 1) (The Public's UTR Festival at Brooklyn Museum) **

The Present **

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Note: Michael Giltz is provided with free tickets to shows with the understanding that he will be writing a review. All productions are in New York City unless otherwise indicated.