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Theater: Taymor Spins Web Of Magic; A Promising "Lady In Red"

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A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM ** for show but ***1/2 for theatrical pizzazz so make it ** 1/2

THE LADY IN RED CONVERSES WITH DIABLO ** 1/2 out of ****

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THEATRE FOR A NEW AUDIENCE AT POLOSUNKY SHAKESPEARE CENTER

The lights dim, a bed is spotlighted in the middle of the stage, it slowly begins to rise from the ground raised up on an altar of tree branches... and is that a sigh of relief one hears from offstage? It's just a fancy, but one can't help imagining that after the hellish experience of *Spiderman: Turn Off The Dark*, director Julie Taymor has been waiting to exhale for quite some time. That release comes in a burst of creativity for this production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that inaugurates the shining new home of Theater For A New Audience.

It is a spectacle, endlessly imaginative in flourishes like a forest created out of a few bamboo-like poles, fairies that float down from the sky or rise up from the ground and that endlessly malleable character actor the white sheet which provides sky, earth, a bower for the Fairy Queen and much more. But it's telling that Taymor's biggest success came with *The Lion King*, a show very long on such brilliant staging and very short on acting. (Barely any is called for at all in that long-running smash hit.)

Here the acting is very uneven and one wonders if Taymor even noticed or cared. All the special effects -- and they are very special indeed -- can't make up for poor performances. The story is one of Shakespeare's most popular, in part because it can usually be delivered in a relatively brief running time. Not here: this *Midsummer* takes its own sweet time. And thank goodness, since most of the pleasure to be had comes in those passages, like the pillow fight or the way Puck is floated up into the clouds on a bed sheet and so on. These moments are aided immeasurably by the bewitching score from Taymor's long-time collaborator Elliot Goldenthal.

They gild the tale of would-be lovers. Helena is besotted with Demetrius but he won't give her the time of day. Demetrius is promised to Hermia but she has eyes only for Lysander (and who can blame her, when he's played by the handsome Jake Horowitz?). Hermia's father is beside himself with fury and the Duke of Athens warns the wayward daughter she must abide by her father's wishes or face life in a nunnery (or even death).

The Duke would like a happy ending to go along with his impending nuptials, but kids will be kids. The two lovers run away into the woods and are trailed by her betrothed Demetrius and his besotted Helena. This mayhem is mirrored in the world of fairies, where Oberon is feuding with his icy love Titania. She's nuts about her new plaything and all he wants is for Titania to hand the changeling over to him. Titania refuses and Oberon sends the mischievous Puck off to fetch a magical potion that can force someone to love the next person they see. Before you know it, Titania has fallen for a half-man, half-donkey named Bottom and the lovers are all mixed up in a tangle of confusion. Never fear: all's well that ends well (though that's a different play).



(photo by Es Devlin)

It's light fare, though certain passages can cut to the core when handled with grace. Other than a desire to create stage magic, it's hard to discern what Taymor is driving at in this show and numerous actors just drift about. The men of authority handle their roles well, with Roger Clark fine as the Duke and David Harewood even more imposing as Oberon. Okwui Okpokwasili certainly looks regal but I haven't a clue as to what her attitude was to much of anything throughout the show. Tina Benko has a Tilda Swinton-like glamour as Titania that served her well during her first big speech, where she

got lost in the poetry a bit. She gained her footing as the show went on and was

intriguingly nonplussed by having bedded a donkey.

The lovers were much weaker, with Mandi Masden best of the bunch as the frustrated Helena. Lilly Englert sported an out of place British accent -- the sort of voice Americans once mistakenly thought Shakespeare should be delivered in -- and Zach Appelman was weak of voice and paid too much attention to his flowing hair. Horowitz was certainly better as Lysander, but that's a low bar. Until the fail-safe scene where the young lovers almost completely disrobe, their appearances felt like time-killers until Taymor could deliver some new magic.



(photo by Es Devlin)

Of course, once the lovers are all soothed and paired off appropriately, we must watch the "bad" acting of a troupe of local workingmen -- the Rude Mechanicals -- who hope to gain favor and a few coins. Bad acting is notoriously hard to pull off when it's not what you're going for and this final passage of the show often drags. Despite some stronger acting and a genuinely good Bottom in Max Casella, that remains true here. (Is Constance Hoffman responsible for Bottom's donkey head and the clever device that let the actor buried under it manipulate the mouth with dexterous ease? It's one of

the best I've seen: a little creepy and very effective.)

So we are dazzled again and again by Taymor's stagecraft. But the best magic of all came from Kathryn Hunter as a Puck for the ages. It almost seems like typecasting to put the diminutive, magical Hunter in the role of Puck but she makes this showcase of a part her own. Hunter scored recently in New York with the limb-twisting work she delivered in *Kafka's Monkey*. And I'll not soon forget her wonderful Richard III at the Globe in London. Her voice is a distinctive rumble, her presence impish in the most playful and dangerous sense of the word, her spirit soaring even as she splays on the ground. Hunter is so good she almost made me believe the rest of the show surely was better than it seemed.

I'm sure she'd rush to Taymor's defense but I believe Hunter herself is almost entirely responsible for this performance, as is Harewood and the others who manage to create a coherent part. Taymor is a genius at spectacle but clearly has little interest in casting actors or finding the heart of their performances. Why not pair with a co-director or assistant who could focus on the actors while Taymor does what she does best? Or be done with plays and focus on pure spectacle, an arena of the arts which is no less worthy? It's as easy as pie to see where her heart lies and no one can deny the brilliance with which she succeeds. I just wish I didn't consistently leave her shows marveling at the stage craft rather than being moved by the story.

POLONSKY SHAKESPEARE CENTER -- This production is the inaugural show at a new theatrical venue in Brooklyn just a stone's throw from BAM. It boasts a handsome exterior and thoughtful courtyard that works well on first glance. The lobby is awkwardly narrow with poor egress going in and out or up to the theater space. I'm a stickler for restrooms (though you know the last thing people building a theater want to do is devote tons of space to restrooms). Unfortunately, the men's room is a sliver with just five total slots, including two stalls and three urinals. It too reflects terrible planning (in a classic but common blunder, the paper towels are only located at the far wall between the last sink and a urinal so everyone must thread their way through a crowd just to grab something to dry their hands). Don't feel bad, the Public made a similar blunder with their ground floor restroom and the trash can though they corrected it a bit.

None of this matters if the theater space succeeds. Certainly this one offers what must be a large backstage and underground facilities; Taymor showed off every bell and whistle imaginable. It's an elegant black box with the audience on three sides, much like the Cottesloe at the National in London. Let's withhold judgment until we see the various configurations the space can offer. Certainly this space allows for more elaborate productions. But the Cottesloe is far more intimate despite holding 400 max compared to this venue's 299. Even the people in the balcony feel right on top of the action while here the people in the balcony seemed rather far back. Of course, with a big spectacle like Taymor offered, that's perfectly fine. You need to stand back a bit to enjoy her widescreen vision. And perhaps less technically demanding shows will be able to bring the audience in much closer. It's certainly a handsome venue and time will surely show that if the productions are good almost any space can become beloved. It's a welcome addition to New York. Just make sure you hit the loo early.

THE LADY IN RED CONVERSES WITH DIABLO ** 1/2 out of ****
ARTS@RENAISSANCE

It's always fun -- and a little scary -- to give a new theatrical company a shot at

capturing your attention. In The Basement Theater Co. is a group made up of primarily Carnegie Mellon grads who want to create new myths via immersive theater and dance. Think of them as a cross between the immersive masters at Punchdrunk (whose *Sleep No More* is *still* running) and the brilliant myth-makers of PigPen for an idea of their ambitious agenda.

Like Pigpen, they want to draw on folk tales and legends to tell a new story. Like Punchdrunk, they want to present it in an immersive environment. While In The Basement Theater Co. certainly doesn't match either of those two groups, it's a noble early effort with enough talent on hand to hope they have a future.



The modest story involves a fisherman (Luca Nicora) who is bewitched by a mermaid and becomes Diablo, a fearsome man who is never happy since he's never in the arms of his desire. Diablo in turn is desired by the Lady In Red (the pretty Katya Stepanov). She pines for this unhappy fisherman and as a changeling constantly changes shape in order to find the one that might please him. Needless to say, she fails. And of course her tragic beauty makes her appealing to others, like the Leather Maker (John McKetta), who spends his days making a new gift to hand to the Lady in Red, but tears it up as unworthy of her and starts over again the next day.

I may have messed up some of the details, since this story is a tad vague and spills out in bits and pieces. The audience is introduced to the main players at the start by the Bard (Adrian Enscoe), who sings a song and then leads us to the town square where the story begins. Then we're led off one by one to experience different aspects of the tale. The Hermaphrodite (Jesse Carrey) is a man in woman's clothing who dances in a long narrow room that might have contained showers while video of the Lady in Red and Diablo flash on the wall. The Mermaid (Jessie Ryan Shelton) reenacts the moment when she bewitched the fisherman/Diablo. The Tailor (Nick Lehane) fiddles with a mechanical creature (Lucia Roderique) he hopes to perfect. The Prophet (Aidaa Peerzada) speaks of the future while writhing about in a body-contorting dance that mirrors too much the choreography of the mermaid. (I suspect whichever one you see performed second will seem less impressive than the first.)

The tech credits are solid for a production clearly made on a dime. They took over the basement of Arts@Renaissance and went to town, adding album covers here, knick-knacks there, broken glass to stand in for the dangerous waters of the deep, an elaborate room for the Tailor and so on. It's all convincingly mood-setting if not so overwhelming in thoughtful detail that you forget it's a set a la Punchdrunk. (The scenic design is by Bryce Cutler.) That mood is aided immeasurably by the talented band Rabbit in the Rye, who play their score almost continuously throughout the show. It's Americana punch is the glue that often elevates the material on hand.

Writer-director Sophia Schrank has the outline of a tale, but it was too vague for me or my guest (who saw the show in a different order) to pull us through. The Lady in Red is constantly changing her appearance to try and win over Diablo. But that makes the fact that she is our guide rather confusing. Choreographer Stepanov plays her with wide-eyed sadness but since we see her repeatedly throughout the show it takes longer to realize it's her own self we keep seeing in these scenes. Perhaps confusion would have been reduced if the Bard (Enscoe) had remained our guide throughout. Or perhaps I just wanted to spend more time with the handsome Enscoe, who had presence, charm and a sweet voice when performing two oldies. By and large, the music was stronger than the choreography. And while the audience was encouraged to interact and talk to the cast, like most actors they're better when given a script than when improvising.

That's why my guest and I readily agreed on the strongest scene in the show. It boasted the clearest story with a beginning, middle and end. You're ushered into the workplace of the Leather Maker (McKetta). He sits you down and talks about the leather he works with. Rather abashedly, he shows the silly leather creature he's making to give to the Lady in Red, but soon admits it probably won't be worthy of her and he'll tear it up and start over again in the morning. As McKetta talks about the allure of leather and how the very imperfections of the skin are what give a piece of leather its distinctive and unique appeal, you're caught up in his strong performance and a story that actually takes you somewhere. It was an intimate, touching moment that wistfully captured the crippling power of love and why perfection is never a wise goal.

Like the gleaners they clearly were when putting this set and this show together, you leave with a few baubles, remembering this actor and that tune, while hoping In The Basement Theater Co. will build on their strengths to learn and grow and tell another story with enough focus and craft to match their ambition.

THE THEATER OF 2013 (on a four star scale)

The Other Place ** 1/2
Picnic * 1/2
Opus No. 7 ** 1/2
Deceit * 1/2
Life And Times Episodes 1-4 **
Cat On A Hot Tin Roof (w Scarlett Johansson) * 1/2
The Jammer ***
Blood Play ** 1/2
Manilow On Broadway ** 1/2
Women Of Will ** 1/2
All In The Timing ***
Isaac's Eye **
Bunnica: A Rabbit Tale Of Musical Mystery ** 1/2
The Mnemonist Of Dutchess County * 1/2
Much Ado About Nothing ***
Really Really *
Parsifal at the Met *** 1/2
The Madrid * 1/2
The Wild Bride at St. Ann's ** 1/2
Passion at CSC *** 1/2
Carousel at Lincoln Center ***
The Revisionist **
Rodgers & Hammerstein's Cinderella ***
Rock Of Ages * 1/2
Ann ** 1/2
Old Hats ***
The Flick ***
Detroit '67 ** 1/2
Howling Hilda reading * (Mary Testa ***)
Hit The Wall *
Breakfast At Tiffany's * 1/2
The Mound Builders at Signature *
Vanya And Sonia And Masha And Spike *** 1/2
Cirque Du Soleil's Totem ***
The Lying Lesson * 1/2
Hands On A Hardbody *
Kinky Boots **
Matilda The Musical *** 1/2
The Rascals: Once Upon A Dream ***
Motown: The Musical **
La Ruta ** 1/2
The Big Knife *
The Nance ***
The Assembled Parties ** 1/2
Jekyll & Hyde * 1/2
Thoroughly Modern Millie ** 1/2
Macbeth w Alan Cumming *
Orphans ** 1/2
The Testament Of Mary ** 1/2
The Drawer Boy **
The Trip To Bountiful ***
I'll Eat You Last ** 1/2
Pippin *
This Side Of Neverland ***
A Public Reading Of An Unproduced Screenplay About The Death Of Walt Disney ***
Natasha, Pierre And The Great Comet Of 1812 ***
Colin Quinn Unconstitutional ** 1/2
A Family For All Occasions *

The Weir *** 1/2
Disney's The Little Mermaid **
Far From Heaven **
The Caucasian Chalk Circle **
Somewhere Fun **
Venice no stars
Reasons To Be Happy **
STePz *** 1/2
The Comedy of Errors (Shakespeare In The Park) ***
Roadkill ** 1/2
Forever Tango ***
Monkey: Journey To The West ** 1/2
The Civilians: Be The Death Of Me ***
NYMF: Swiss Family Robinson **
NYMF: Dizzy Miss Lizzie's Roadside Revue Presents The Brontes * 1/2
NYMF: Mata Hari in 8 Bullets ***
NYMF: Life Could Be A Dream **
NYMF: Mother Divine **
NYMF: Julian Po ** 1/2
NYMF: Marry Harry **
NYMF: Gary Goldfarb: Master Escapist ** 1/2
NYMF: Castle Walk ***
NYMF: Crossing Swords ***
NYMF: Bend In The Road *** 1/2
NYMF: Homo The Musical no stars
NYMF: Volleygirls *** 1/2
Murder For Two **
Let it Be **
The Cheaters Club *
All The Faces Of The Moon *
Women Or Nothing ** 1/2
Mr. Burns, A Post-Electric Play * 1/2
You Never Can Tell ***
Romeo And Juliet *
Arguendo **
August Wilson's American Century Cycle ****
The Glass Menagerie ** 1/2
Lady Day * 1/2
Julius Caesar at St. Ann's Warehouse ****
Honeymoon In Vegas: The Musical ** 1/2
Bronx Bombers * 1/2
Romeo & Juliet at CSC * 1/2
A Night With Janis Joplin **
The Winslow Boy ***
Juno And The Paycock **
How I Learned To Drive **
Fun Home **
Two Boys at the Met **
Big Fish **
A Time To Kill * 1/2
Year Of The Rooster ***
The Snow Geese ** 1/2
A Midsummer Night's Dream ** 1/2
The Lady in Red Converses With Diablo ** 1/2

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