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# Theater: *Tempest* Brews Off Broadway



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Mandy Patinkin is a wonderful actor I'd never seen perform live. So it was a treat to check out the **Classic Stage Company's new production of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*** last week. This vital Off Broadway venue regularly attracts big names for short runs in their intimate space and obviously having Mandy Patinkin available was reason enough to mount Prospero's tale. Certainly director Brian Kulick hasn't radically rethought the play and that's all to the good. Too often, people feel obliged to put some novel spin on Shakespeare or twist a character 180 degrees

away from the original intention. Not here. This is *The Tempest* with no muss or fuss or bizarre spin. That doesn't, however, make it satisfying.

When seeing the show, I hadn't known Patinkin was reportedly wary of Shakespeare, but it doesn't surprise me. My initial reaction was that he spent most of the play declaiming the text rather than performing or living it. Patinkin is always commanding (he's too fine an actor to avoid that) but only rarely did I feel the words getting under his skin, as they did for the poignant final speech. The surprise here is how well the other actors fared. Usually, in an American production you're lucky to get one or two leads who can speak the text rather than treat it as poetry. The rest of the cast typically mumbles along and the words make no sense to anyone who hasn't read the play intimately and knows the action. But much of the cast here is solid and even though I hadn't read *The Tempest* in years, the action was crystal clear throughout. The young lovers (Stark Sands and Elizabeth Waterston) were unaffected and charming. (After a rough first scene in which she has to act especially silly, Waterston shines nicely.) The comic relief is bearable, though my guest enjoyed it more than I. And the modest revelation was Ariel, performed by Angel Desai with warmth and humanity.

Then, of course, there's Caliban (Nyambi Nyambi). Caliban is the black Shylock of Shakespeare's canon and this production doesn't try to elide or avoid it but simply accepts the ugly attitudes of Prospero as they are. This makes for some of Patinkin's best moments since a straightforward

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*Tempest* reveals Prospero to be quite a dick: his treatment of Caliban and Ariel is simply indefensible. Prospero's race-baiting denunciation of Caliban is softened just a tad by having the black actor Michael Potts play Alonso, but that's it.

It all takes place on a simple square stage. In the first act, a giant pile of sand in the middle of the floor is a constant reminder of the island setting (perhaps my homeland, Bermuda). A square piece of "sky" hangs over the stage with some vivid imagery flashing on it and this is raised and lowered by discrete (and in one case quite handsome) stagehands. In repose, it's quite a beautiful image. As the storm rages at the beginning, the "sky" dramatically lowers to reveal a small model ship on the backside with actors roaring around the whole bulky affair to save their lives. Unfortunately, this is practically the only imaginative use of the background, except for a brief moment when it lowers down onto an actor in an amusing touch. Similarly, the giant pile of sand the actors walk over is removed for no good reason in the second act. You spend the second act overly aware of the "sky" and sadly missing the "island" as symbolized by the sand.

Patrick Stewart dominated his *Tempest* years ago -- even when he wasn't onstage (which is much of the show) you felt his presence. When Patinkin reappeared, it was often a modest jolt. I'd joked beforehand that he would work in a song and darned if there wasn't one, with Patinkin's lovely distinctive voice cutting through the others with simple grace. Another grace note was a dance, with the two young lovers seemingly connected by invisible strands. Patinkin might well grow into the role, so I wouldn't be surprised if he was more effective at the end of the run than he was at the beginning. But how nice to see even a so-so production of Shakespeare where so many roles are convincingly played, especially the young lovers and Desai as Ariel. Sometimes an airy spirit can seem the most substantial creature of all.

The other critics:

**The New York Times'** Charles Isherwood said: "While it brings no revelatory ideas to bear on the play, Mr. Kulick's production flows naturally to its beneficent conclusion. The tense urgency of Mr. Patinkin's Prospero subsides gradually, as the achievement of his ends seems to leave him serenely depleted of will, becalmed at last."

**Variety's** Marilyn Stasio says: "Mandy Patinkin has a beautiful voice, as warm and golden as honey spooned from a jar -- the perfect voice to sing us through "The Tempest," the most musical of Shakespeare's late plays. Toplined by Patinkin's commanding Prospero, this Classic Stage Company production slips through some earthbound staging constraints to soar on the lyrical wings of the play's poetry. One might carp about certain visuals or cringe from the slapstick comedy, but what a joy to hear every line enunciated -- and understood -- by a cast whose ears are attuned to the music of the spoken word."

**The New Yorker's** Hilton Als says: "The only actors who seem to connect are Waterston and Sands. In the lovely scene in Act III when Ferdinand professes his love, we're given a glimmer of what this production might have been had all the actors interacted: a kind of homage to forgiveness."

**The New York Post's** Frank Scheck gave the show 3 out of 4 stars and says: "As the sorcerer Prospero, [Patinkin] delivers Shakespeare's poetry with lilting vocal cadences and swirling hand movements in what isn't so much a dramatic performance as a musical recital.... While not exactly magical, this is a "Tempest" that makes some pretty notes."

**The Associated Press's** Jennifer Farrar says: "From the first thunderclap to the final soliloquy, this "Tempest" is a triumph that will please all lovers of Shakespeare and good theater." She calls the production "eloquent" and says of Patinkin, "[He] exudes glowering, simmering forcefulness even in tender moments with Miranda, who is sweetly portrayed with ethereal innocence by Elizabeth Waterston. Patinkin doesn't merely act as Prospero, he seems to become Prospero, seething with repressed rage and hubris at his power and sudden chance for revenge."

**Theatermania's** Dan Bacalzo says, "Mandy Patinkin's portrayal of Prospero in Classic Stage Company's revival of *The Tempest* is ill-conceived, at best. The actor evidences blatant disregard for Hamlet's advice to the Players by sawing the air with his hands, and generally indicating his character's intentions. He lowers his voice to growl the majority of his lines, and while his brusque demeanor is occasionally funny, it also lacks dimension. However, that's not the only problem that afflicts Brian Kulick's haphazard staging of Shakespeare's grand play. The main difficulty is that the production lacks a coherent vision."

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And **Bloomberg's** John Simon is typically acerbic: "You would never know from the sorry mess on view at New York's Classic Stage Company that ``The Tempest'' is one of Shakespeare's most poetic and humane plays, a final summoning of the master's artistry and philosophy."

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