

In Shenandoah Valley, a Shakespeare tradition has taken root

By **Peter Marks** April 27, 2012

Out in the Shenandoah Valley, they make Shakespeare the old-fashioned way. And by old-fashioned, I don't mean stodgy or rigid or by trilling the lines as if every word were an opportunity to trot out the glazed ham.

No, the American Shakespeare Center, located on a hilly side street of this college town just over the mountain from Charlottesville, takes on the Bard and his classical contemporaries in a manner as charming and adaptive as Staunton itself. Keeping the house lights on — because theaters in Shakespeare's time would have left the candles burning throughout the shows — the 24-year-old company puts on 16 productions a year, many of them using modified versions of the stage practices of Renaissance drama.

You quickly discover as you take your seat in the Blackfriars Playhouse, the eye-pleasing re-creation of Shakespeare's own indoor theater, that in this unlikely locale for 400-year-old plays, the ASC wants to provide an experience that is both serious-minded and exuberant. So each performance begins with a musical pre-show, not with harpsichords and recorders, but with actors on drums and acoustic guitars, rocking out ironically to Guns N' Roses' "Sweet Child of Mine" before "The Winter's Tale," or to Sam Cooke's "Cupid" as a prelude to "A Midsummer Night's Dream."

The pleasantly subliminal message to audiences, both rigorously schooled in dramatic literature and utterly new to the form, is "Relax." No classical company presenting such titles as Christopher Marlowe's "Dido, Queen of Carthage" in the same year as "Hamlet" and "The Tempest" could be described as just doing the same old stuff. Clearly, though, what the ASC is attempting is to remind theatergoers that these works were originally unveiled not with future Oxford dissertations in mind, but as the raucous, popular entertainments of their time.

So on my recent, inaugural visit to Staunton, I made it my business, as I watched all three of the ASC's current offerings — "Winter's Tale," "Midsummer" and a mounting of John Ford's "'Tis Pity She's a Whore" — to absorb the ASC's ethos, and relax into its ingratiating approach. That meant freeing myself from the expectation for scenic distraction: The 11 actors perform on a bare thrust stage, entering from a pair of doors or a curtained alcove, with audience members seated on three sides. And it also entailed an even more intense embrace than usual of the communal nature of playgoing, of remaining hyper-aware of the faces all around me, and not just those of the people being paid to allow us to lose ourselves for a spell. While the intensity of satisfaction varies from show to show, the cumulative takeaway is an admiration for the careful treatment of text and the liveliness of the results.

Performances in five 'seasons'

The company divides its 52-week-a-year roster of plays into five "seasons": The coming summer season (June 19 to Sept. 2), for instance, will feature Shakespeare's "The Merchant of Venice" and "The Two Gentlemen of Verona" and James Goldman's modern comedy-drama about King Henry II, "The Lion in Winter." Now playing is the spring season, traditionally the time when the group's offshoot touring company brings its shows onto South Market Street for a run in Staunton's historic downtown.

The troupe's eight men and three women — there are a lot more male than female roles in Renaissance plays — double, triple and occasionally even quadruple up in parts, sometimes to illuminating effect: having vivacious Denice Mahler play both Mamillius and Perdita, for example, the son and daughter of Leontes and Hermione in "The Winter's Tale," stamps on these two characters, one of them long-lost, a clear genetic link. (It's a relief to report the ASC ignores the bygone code that required men to play all of the women's roles.)

Drawn in many cases from the ranks of graduates of classical acting programs, the Shakespeareans of Staunton know their way around the verse. But in a theatrical style that places so much emphasis on the language as the paintbrush of a world, the actors with the less colorful vocal palettes threaten to steer a show toward tedium. (In an effort to combat ennui, the ASC trims its classics to a fairly consistent two hours' running time, plus intermission.) It turns out that of the three productions I sampled, the most successful was the one that seemed to rely least on pure oratorical gifts and gave the actors license for the broadest comedy.

That, of course, was "A Midsummer Night's Dream," crisply and cannily directed by Kathleen Powers. Mercifully, this "Midsummer" is free of the high-concept distortions rampant in classical theater these days: the eschewing of scenery acts as a kind of liberation from the burden of reinvention, of transplanting the

action to the Gobi Desert, or Cyprus in the 1890s, or the grounds of a defunct circus. No, here — with Powers’s encouragement — the actors simply do the play. And without makeup or spotlights, the production manages to fully evoke Shakespeare’s magical night.

Between the spirit-guided misapprehensions in the forest of the play’s young lovers, and the antics of the village dolts who stage Shakespeare’s funniest play-within-in-a-play, “Midsummer” can be surefire farce. The ASC production allows an audience to see how naturally the laughs do come. Led by Rick Blunt’s masterly Bottom — imagine Norm of “Cheers” fame stranded in Elizabethan times — and the athleticism of Michael Amendola’s Puck, the cast nimbly adds its own luster to this most agreeable and familiar of Shakespeare comedies.

Creativity in costumes

It’s in costuming that the ASC seeks to append some extra dash of personality; the company produces Shakespeare on a shoestring — 16 productions on a \$2.5 million annual budget — so the wardrobe is one of the few reliable embellishments. Here, costume designer Victoria Depew, cleverly taking a cue from the story of the changeling Indian boy, over whom fairy king Oberon (Eugene Douglas) fights with his queen, Titania (Stephanie Holladay Earl), wraps the fairy royalty in the fashions of India. The sensual Earl and the actors playing her retinue of woodsy sprites are given undulating choreography that further underlines the exoticism of the subcontinent.

Some of this ambient suppleness would not have been amiss in the thorniest of the three offerings, the rather listless “’Tis Pity She’s a Whore” that I saw a few hours after the vivid “Midsummer.” This difficult tragedy, regarding the incestuous love between fervent Giovanni (Patrick Earl) and his sister Annabella (Mahler), lacks Shakespeare’s poetry and narrative sophistication, deficits that are underscored in ASC’s pared-down style and particularly, director Jim Warren’s staging. Aside from Earl’s virile central portrayal, the performances never rise to the passionate demands of the scandalous story.

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Warren and his players recover in the second serving of ASC Shakespeare. With an appealing straightforwardness belying “The Winter’s Tale’s” outrageous premise — a queen who is falsely accused of infidelity by her husband and comes back to him 16 years later as a living statue — the production moves confidently from the mournful domain of Leontes’ Sicilia to the invigorating spirit of rebirth in Polixenes’ Bohemia.

The special accomplishment on this occasion is in the far more challenging scenes in the court of King Leontes. His paranoia is so extreme that the segue from his doting on Hermione (Stephanie Holladay Earl, again) to accusing her of sleeping with visiting King Polixenes (Patrick Earl) can seem inexplicable. Here, however, courtesy of Douglas's understated performance as the jealous king, Leontes is made persuasively to seem as if he's been secretly brooding for some long, troubled time. This impression aids greatly in balancing the play's tragic arc, with its far more comic one.

I have no doubt that my close perch in the Blackfriars — along the side of the stage, just behind the row of playgoers seated onstage — gave me an advantage. It allowed me to gaze right into Leontes' eyes, and imagine that I could figure out exactly what he was thinking. That sort of unfiltered connection seems to be on ASC's appealing agenda, too.

American Shakespeare Center

"The Winter's Tale" and "'Tis Pity She's a Whore" are in repertory through June 16. "A Midsummer Night's Dream" is performed through June 17. All at 10 S. Market St., Staunton, Va. Call 877-682-4236 or visit www.americanshakespearecenter.com.

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