

# CALENDAR

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IAN FLANDERS

MELORA MARSHALL plays Titania to Thad Geer's Bottom in "A Midsummer Night's Dream" at the Theatricum Botanicum.

## A frolic in the woods

Of all the places I've seen William Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream," the Will Geer Theatricum Botanicum has to be the most idyllic. On a tolerably warm Sunday afternoon, I sat in bliss as a butterfly joined the cast of this outdoor production, tracing parabolas of enchantment as though a new member of Titania's fairy train.

The Topanga landscape serves as a lovely stand-in for the Athenian woods, where four frenzied young lovers frolic at cross-purposes on a mystical night. The environment is the star of this production, directed by Melora Marshall, who plays Titania, the fairy queen whose battle with Oberon (Lisa Wolpe), king of the fairies, over the possession of an adorable changeling (Aarush Mehta), charges the night with so much supernatural mischief.

Composer Benjamin Britten already turned this lyrical comedy into an opera, but Marshall's production flirts with converting the play into a musical.

Spirited outdoor productions of 'Julius Caesar,' 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' kick off Theatricum Botanicum's return.

By CHARLES McNULTY  
THEATER CRITIC

Original music by Marshall McDaniel and Ellen Geer occasionally shades into Gilbert and Sullivan territory, with songs that are a hybrid of singing and reciting.

Sky Wahl, who plays Snout, tantalizes the air with chimes, cymbals, Tibetan *tingsha* bells and a hunting horn, among other instruments. The sound system could use an upgrade, but the eclectic underscoring accentuates the play's charm.

Helena (Sara Mountjoy-Pepka), who's in love with Demetrius (Ethan Haslam), and Hermia (Julia Lisa), who's in love with Lysander (Joey Major), are more persuasive when expressing themselves non-musically. But then, the singing business comes and goes, as though no one were sure how seriously to treat it, except perhaps for Thad Geer, who lustily attacks the role of Bottom as though auditioning for a one-man version of "The Pirates of Penzance."

Marshall, who has a melodious voice as Titania, perhaps realizes the produc- [See Botanicum, E6]



# Frolic in the woods

[**Botanicum**, from E1] tion's vision most effectively. There's quite a bit of off-key quavering in the company. But as the rude mechanicals teach us through the special performance they're preparing for the upcoming nuptials between Theseus (Jose Donado), Duke of Athens, and Hippolyta (Oyemen Ehikhamhen), Queen of the Amazons, amateurism can be endearing.

At Botanicum, the collective spirit matters more than perfection. After the extended COVID-19 pandemic closure, the theater reopened with "Julius Caesar," directed by Ellen Geer, and this production of "Midsummer," in which Puck (Jackie Nicole at the reviewed performance) and the other forest sprites swing, leap and gambol on the surrounding hills with joyful abandon.

The plays were abridged and presented without intermission. The faithful audience seemed delighted to be back at this rustic venue for Shakespearean delights, no matter how well the stories were told.

As a critic who hasn't been to Theatricum Botanicum in a number of years, I felt a bit like the serpent making a return appearance at the Garden of Eden. Critical judgment seems counter to the tenor of the place. I basked in the warm audience glow that heeded Theseus' playgoing advice: "The best in this kind are but shadows; and the worst are no worse, if imagination amend them."

My imagination was in an amending mood, but I did have a eureka moment during "Julius Caesar" that I'll risk sharing in the hope that it can be of some future use. The insight came via the performance of Gerald Rivers, who assumes the role of an emcee narrator in addition to playing the soothsayer.

Rivers introduces himself to us as an amateur sociologist, setting the stage for



IAN FLANDERS

**GERALD RIVERS** plays narrator and soothsayer in "Julius Caesar" at the Theatricum Botanicum.

## 'Julius Caesar' and 'A Midsummer Night's Dream'

**Where:** Will Geer's Theatricum Botanicum, 1419 N. Topanga Canyon Blvd., Topanga

**When:** Check theater for schedule. 'Julius Caesar' ends Oct. 30, 'Midsummer' ends Nov. 7

**Tickets:** \$26-\$60

**Info:** (310) 455-3723 or [theatricum.com](http://theatricum.com)

**Running time:** 1 hour, 30 minutes for 'Julius Caesar'; 1 hour, 40 minutes for 'Midsummer'

Shakespeare's tragedy about the end of the Roman republic and drawing pointed contemporary parallels. His approach to his lines, not written by Shakespeare, is so relaxed and direct that when he returned at the end, I could hear the audience breathe a subtle sigh of relief.

Why was his manner of diction so much more gripping than the performers in the play proper? He was speaking in contemporary language, but it wasn't simply the familiarity of his words. It was his relationship to them. Rivers' mind was connected to his mouth and heart.

"Julius Caesar" has a fair amount of glorious oratory. Shakespeare was on the cusp of a revolution in his handling of dramatic poetry, as Frank Kermode brilliantly illuminates in "Shakespeare's Language." But it

wouldn't be until "Hamlet" that he would attain the ability to tailor expression to the subtlest shifts in consciousness. The divided character of Brutus (a reasonably good Christopher W. Jones), the protagonist of "Julius Caesar," however, offered him an ideal test run.

To awaken the power of the play, actors must enter the thought processes of their characters. The cast of Geer's production, unfortunately, gets entangled in the rhetoric. Cumbersomely, phrases are italicized to the point of unintelligibility. At points, I wished I could call a time-out and ask the actors to exhale and speak their lines as though they were confiding them to a close friend.

Too often, in both "Julius Caesar" and "A Midsummer Night's Dream," what's being performed isn't Shakespeare but a stereotype of Shakespeare. The theatricality is jacked up, as though out of fear that an audience would lose interest.

But it's the human dimension of the plays that ensnares our attention. The actors must give us something true to believe in, a reflection of our own conflicts and contradictions and a growing awareness that history (as revealed in "Julius Caesar") is too large and unpredictable to be under our control and that the universe (as demonstrated by "Midsummer") is more wondrously strange than we can comprehend.

Theatricum Botanicum shouldn't quell its spirited approach. But a little more stillness might endow these pleasant outings with deeper meaning.