

A Midsummer Night's Dream

Theatricum Botanicum

There is nothing that serves as a more inspirational example of artistic resiliency in the history of Los Angeles theatre than Theatricum Botanicum's annual presentation of Shakespeare's most charming and well-loved fantasy A Midsummer Night's Dream.

It was 1973 when Will Geer and his wife Herta Ware decided to open their bucolic secluded Topanga Canyon estate to the public and offer the Bard's most enduring classic to inaugurate their open-air performance space carved into the side of a wooded canyon ravine under a canopy of majestic and perfectly placed oak trees. Is there a quote in the vast Shakespearean lexicon having something to say about things that are meant to be?

Nestled in the richly verdant natural setting where Geer and many of his Hollywood colleagues fled in 1953 to escape the destructive aftermath of Joe McCarthy's blacklisting witchhunt, Theatricum Botanicum was an ambitious attempt to create a repertory company focused on presenting the great classics of theatrical literature in such a remote and special setting—and their quintessential mounting of Midsummer has been the cornerstone of the ensemble's much-anticipated summer season for the past 48 years.

Although I have not seen Midsummer presented here for well over a decade, I remembered fondly that my favorite time to schedule a trip up the canyon was to attend one of the early evening shows, where the magic of the familiar tale begins to unfold while the sun slowly sets and the enveloping woods surrounding the stage come alive with shadows of curious bats and the songs of frogs and crickets, as well as Zachary Moore's dreamlike lighting as Queen Titania (played by the show's perennial director Melora Marshall) and her otherworldly band of tittering extraterrestrials descend from the hilltop high above in costumer Beth Eslick's glittering, gossamer fairy-wear.

Under the leadership of Marshall, Ware's daughter who grew up performing on this very stage while living here in her family's idyllic Topanga enclave, there is a broadly kinetic, palpably tongue-in-cheek appreciation for and homage to ol' Will's most delightful and entertaining classic which permeates this welcoming return to Midsummer, something obviously elaborated upon and polished by the director over the years to a sparkling sheen.

The smoothly quirky physical comedy—presumably some “bits” perfected while continuously reviving Theatricum's signature event every 12 months for nearly a half-century, some surely added by the eager castmembers of this current incarnation—is the key to unlocking the wonders of this production and providing an overlying refreshing sense of absolution that easily transcends any roughness and unevenness in the playing style and general professionalism of the cast.

Theatricum employs a handful of AEA contracts each season, several of the Equity performers part of the hardworking Geer clan while other roles are usually fulfilled by longtime ensemble members who have returned each season for as long as two decades. Still, it is the inclusion of other notable LA performers who appear here almost as unspoken “guest artists” that so uniquely energizes these productions.

Other roles are assayed by less seasoned actors, some cast from the local community and many others artists being groomed from the ranks of Theatricum's many workshops and classes for both children and young adults. The result can occasionally be rocky but ironically for even the most demanding of theatrical purists, it matters not a whit—all is forgiven while enfolded in the enchanted spirit of Will and Herta's passionate dream so fiercely maintained by their talented and prolific descendants.

The most exciting thing about this year's return to Midsummer's convoluted romp through the haunted woods of Athens is the casting of world-renowned Shakespearean master Lisa Wolpe, founder of the LA



Photo by Ian Flanders

Women's Shakespeare Company and a guest artist-lecturer who has literally toured the globe playing the Bard's most powerful male characters. Wolpe is simply magnificent as Oberon, legendary Renaissance-era King of the Fairies, giving the role a depth and import that completely commands and energizes the stage with her every appearance. Hers is the definition of quintessential Shakespeare, a performance that rivals the work of my favorite Oberon of all time, Sir Ian McKellan.

Longtime Theatricum mainstays Earnestine Phillips and Thad Geer are well-seasoned assets as the play's resident buffoons Quince and Bottom, impressively leading their hilarious band of "rude mechanicals" ready to perform Midsummer's infamously clunky play-within-a-play with a great sense of comedic abandon, while the most impressive turn in the promising youthful performer-on-the-rise sweepstakes comes from Sara Mountjoy-Pepka, who dazzlingly assays the role of the gangly, lovelorn Helena with a little bit Lucille Ball, a little bit Meryl Streep, and a whole lotta Sutton Foster.

From the ranks of the huge and deliciously eclectic cast, Terrence Wayne Jr. brings a fascinating new contemporary spin to that mischievous forest sprite Puck, even breaking into a bit of hip-hop which works surprisingly well with iambic pentameter, and in an impressively sweet and achingly charming stage debut, the teeny-tiny puppydog-ish Aarush Mehta as the Changeling Boy is surely the cutest and most endearing woodland creature since Bambi.

I could not be more pleased to return to Theatricum Botanicum twice this summer, a place everyone needs to visit whenever they need a little dose of theatrical sorcery and give themselves a respite from the daily horrors of the evening news and revel once again in the resiliency of art and artists, clearly the last people on our troubled planet not ready to totally give up on the future.

THROUGH NOV. 7: Theatricum Botanicum, 1419 Topanga Canyon Blvd., Topanga. 310.455.3723 or www.theatricum.com