

Stage Review : Styles Mix In 'Tempest'

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There's a difference between magic and tricks, and the innovative and the arbitrary. Into the breach tumbles the Grove Shakespeare Festival production of Shakespeare's "The Tempest."

Ken Sonkin, dressed in a tux, plays some very witty magic tricks out front before curtain, before he metamorphoses into a spritely onstage Ariel (Sonkin is an acrobat as well as a magician, and he's a real find for the theater). What the magic act has to do with the play, beyond setting a mood for frivolity, is anybody's guess; but it does set a keynote for the production: disparateness.

Shigeru Yaji's costumes and Cliff Faulkner's austere, versatile set broadly suggest a Japanese design (the busy stagehands are dressed in black, in Kabuki fashion) and if that were all, a Japanese conception--fierce energies generated along stylized lines--might serve "The Tempest" well.

For the wedding of Miranda and Ferdinand, however, we have dancers dressed in bright Caribbean costumes, dancing an African number (the program notes revive the speculation that "The Tempest" is set in Bermuda, but Bermuda isn't, strictly speaking, a Caribbean island). And when Alonso and his band of usurping schemers arrive on the scene, they're in contemporary formal dress--whose implied officiousness the actors don't play up. Bud Leslie's Trinculo, the jester, is a Borscht Belt/Vegas-style comedian done up in the kind of tux that's never seen outside a show-biz act.

It may be that this variety of looks and styles is a director's expedient to cloak the efforts of a very intermittent ensemble. This "Tempest" works from the outside in; there's no conceptual hub to keep the actors from wandering off into random playing styles. Charles Lanyer's performance as Prospero is a clue. Normally Lanyer is a clear, strong, uncluttered actor who finds a logic to his character before he looks to embellish it. But his

Prospero is lackluster and down-in-the-mouth, and Yaji's costume lends him the look of a retirement-hotel geezer padding the halls in a grungy night shirt.

Kim Gillingham and Jeff Wittman make an attractive Miranda and Ferdinand, but neither has a classical style. The company of usurpers lack the authority of their mission and social station--though Carl Reggiardo's suave Antonio has an excellent moment when he views the sleeping King Alonso and exclaims a conspiratorial, "What might!" (Reggiardo is exceptional.)

There's an energy and joyousness to Sonkin's Ariel that makes the part, in relation to the rest of this production, an added blessing. Matt McKenzie's feral Caliban is small and powerful--he looks like someone who could rip your arm off and chew it up--but McKenzie hops to distraction over his own lines.

Leslie and Terrence O'Brien as Stefano make a pair of likable comedians, but their inclusion of contemporary solecisms ("Hey, we're talkin' boodles here, guys," Stefano cries at one point) is a further indication of this production's mistrust of basic Shakespeare. As tempests go, this one is fairly becalmed.

John C. Fletcher directs. The good original music is by Chuck Estes.

Performances Thursdays through Sundays, 8:30 p.m. at 12852 Main St., Garden Grove, (714) 636-7213, through Aug. 3.