

Alton Fringe Theatre

The Tempest, by William Shakespeare

Alton Maltings Centre, Wednesday 26th June 2013

Is Prospero a good man? Is he hero or anti-hero? Are his actions justified or is he merely conforming to the Gygian myth, unable to resist the use of power to inflict harm on those around him. Yet the outcome seems to justify his actions, the ends justify the means – surely always a dangerous principle. For Prospero to be judged a virtuous man must not his moral character be consistent? Whilst we might sympathise with Prospero, the rightful Duke of Milan can we find anything heroic in his actions against his usurping brother Antonio and his coterie of self interested courtiers? Conversely should we not save our ire for Antonio, Alonso and Sebastienne who are the cause of Prospero's plight? Shakespeare's improbable tale of power, love, loss and redemption filled with colourful characters from the comic to the grave and the grotesque to the beautiful can leave us wondering who we should side with. In the end, Shakespeare wraps it all up with young love being fulfilled, the return of the legitimate Duke, the freeing of slaves and Prospero begging for and receiving release from the audience. You can't help thinking there is something of the 'Bollywood' epic here, an Elizabethan Mahabharata, and as in the ancient Vedic myth the Lord Vishnu lies sleeping on the cosmic ocean and we are the stuff of his dreams, so Prospero conjures and then dissolves the illusions "We are such stuff as dreams are made on..."

AFT, never ones to shirk a challenge certainly had their work cut out with this play. Undoubtedly there would be stormy waters in bringing this production to life making demands on even the most experienced of companies, though one should never discount the ability of this company to come up with the goods. What we got on the first night was the product of all that experience combined with a frisson of youth and raw new talent, all of which breathed life into this story of magic, treachery and love.

James Willis brought gravitas with appropriate tenderness to the role of Prospero whose initial bitterness towards his usurpers causes him to instruct the magical Ariel to bring about the tempest and subsequent shipwreck. Barbara Rayner perfectly evoked the spirit of Ariel as the enslaved yet willing accomplice of Prospero. A particular mention for Rayner's singing which had an ethereal quality even though the space was acoustically unforgiving. The raw new talent came in the shape of Peter Cox as Caliban, a powerful performance yet with a humanity befitting his unjust enslavement at the hands of Prospero. AFT's open door policy allowed an

inrush of youth which added not just sparkle but depth to the performance. Ferdinand and Miranda performed with intensity by Chris Butler and Gemma Champness were the perfect couple. Henry Williams as the drunken butler Steffano showed no inhibitions and belied his years with a performance of consummate comic timing. His partnership with Trincula, in this production a washed up bar maid convincingly played by Lesley Willis made the most of the comic opportunities. Lizzy Willis and Katie Giles added a lightness of touch as the spirits along with Ann Scott and Chris Chappell.

Catherine Gerlach, Sebastienne and Mike Biddiss, Antonio delivered as the plotters whilst also sniping and scoffing at the pompous Gonzalo played by Morris Hopkins. Martin Saban-Smith grew into his role as Alonso who believes his son Ferdinand to be drowned.

Congratulations to directors Penny Cushing and Alison de Ledesma on producing a performance worthy of a place in AFTs impressive catalogue of entertaining and challenging theatre.

Steve Gerlach