“THE TEMPEST” RAGES AT SHAKESPEARE THEATRE OF NJ

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“Be not afeard; the isle is full of noises,/ Sounds and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not./ Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments/ Will hum about mine ears, and sometime voices/ That, if I then had waked after long sleep,/ Will make me sleep again: and then, in dreaming,/ The clouds methought would open and show riches/ Ready to drop upon me that, when I waked,/ I cried to dream again.” — Caliban, Act III, “The Tempest”

Sometimes a story is just so powerful, its characters so memorable, its themes so compelling that it just “goes viral” straight throughout the culture.

This is definitely true for Shakespeare’s “The Tempest” (1610-1611), a magical play, literally, with lots of magic in it. Over the centuries “The Tempest” has been adapted as an opera many times. The play has inspired composers, choreographers, painters and novelists. Movie versions include the 1956 sci-fi classic “Forbidden Planet” and Peter Greenaway’s jaw-dropping “Prospero’s Books” (1991). More recently, Julie Taymor did a gender-bending film, starring Helen Mirren as a female Prospero, and Cirque du Soleil adapted the play as “Amaluna,” a touring production.

Shakespeare’s plays have traditionally been divided into three categories, comedies, tragedies and histories, but in more modern times a fourth category has increasingly found favor – the romances. These are late plays, including “Cymbeline” and “The Winter’s Tale,” that rise above the confines of comedy and tragedy, and often feature magical and fantasy elements, or else Pagan deities. “The Tempest,” thought to be Shakespeare’s last play, is the most famous and performed of the romances, and features a master magician, Prospero; an elemental spirit, Ariel; and a half-human servant Caliban, a “monster,” whose mother is a witch and his father, by implication, a demon. Still, one can say that the play is a comedy in the broadest sense, that is, all ends happily.

The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey will be opening its 52nd season May 28th with a new production of “The Tempest,” being staged by STNJ artistic director Bonnie J. Monte. STNJ hasn’t done the play in more than 10 years, and it’s something of a touchstone for Monte — it was the first play she directed as STNJ’s newly appointed artistic director in 1991. This writer saw that production, having dragooned his 15-year-old son and one of his friends into a live theater adventure. They weren’t at all sure — trust me — that they were going to have a good time. Within minutes they were transfixed. And Shakespeare videos, quite a few of them, suddenly became cool for home viewing.

“You’ve just made my day,” says Monte when she hears this tale.
The mark of any masterpiece is that when you think you’ve gotten to the bottom of it, there’s more, and Monte says that she has been waiting, purposely, to get back to “The Tempest.” She has been giving ideas time and space to germinate.

“I’ve watched and produced, aided and abetted, other productions since then,” she says, “but at the back of my mind, I wasn’t happy with much of the ’91 production. I was naïve, I think. I know much more about Shakespeare now than I did then. I mean, I knew how to tell the story, but now I think I know how best to approach the play.”

“The Tempest” opens with a shipwreck, and away we go on a magical, mystery tour. Monte has come to feel that “we directors often let the real play get lost, because everybody feels compelled to offer a two-and-a-half-hour parade of magic tricks. It becomes all about the showmanship used to create the play’s magic world, and the play gets swallowed up in that. People sit there wondering how the tech team did that.”

What Monte is out to do this time around is “a scaled down production, a much more organic production, employing the audience’s imagination as a tool. I’m going for a stronger sense of magic, where everything that happens could happen in some strange sense in our reality. You could say that the magic is in the eye of the beholder. Imagine if you were born 400 years ago and you found yourself in the Blue Grotto at Capri. You might think that was magical. Prospero wields a lot of man-made magic. Look at what David Copperfield does – that’s very convincing. The magic that can exist in people’s perception gets ignored by directors.”

This is actually pretty close to the thinking of the real “magicians” who may have inspired the character of Shakespeare’s Prospero – John Dee (1527-1609) and Cornelius Drebbel (1572-1633), both of whom were well known within the highest levels of English society. Dee was Elizabeth I’s personal astrologer, which wasn’t at all remarkable at a time when no clear line existed to divide the “occult” sciences from the “natural” sciences. Drebbel was an inventor who astounded the court of James I with his contraptions; he is credited as the inventor of the submarine, for instance.

In line with this naturalistic vision, Monte is working with set designer Brian Clinnin to “model the landscape after Sicily and Tunisia,” and she has actually identified a real-world island, Pantelleria, southwest of Sicily, as the production’s setting. “It’s an active volcano, and has been described as the moodiest island in the world. There are instantaneous flips of the weather. It’s perfect,” she says, for a story in which a magician (Prospero) controls the weather, through an elemental spirit (Ariel), and changes in the weather drive the plot.

Another thing that held Monte back from taking on “The Tempest” again is that she was waiting, she says, for “the right Prospero, and I’ve found him in Sherman Howard. I can’t tell you how excited I am to have Sherman in this role. We first explored the character together last winter when we worked on parts of The Tempest in collaboration with the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra. Even in those brief scenes, it was evident what a force of nature Sherman’s Prospero is.”
This will be a seventh season with STNJ for Sherman Howard, a versatile and highly respected actor with extensive stage, film and TV credits. His is one of those faces you glimpse and say, instantly, “Oh yeah, I’ve seen this guy before!” With STNJ, Howard has played meaty roles — Henry II in “The Lion in Winter,” Spooner in “No Man’s Land,” Scrooge in “A Christmas Carol,” Lopakhin in “The Cherry Orchard,” Galileo in “Life of Galileo” and Benedick in “Much Ado About Nothing.” His Broadway and off-Broadway credits include “All My Sons,” “Inherit the Wind” and productions at the Public Theatre, the Ensemble Studio Theatre and Roundabout Theatre Company. His TV credits include “Homeland,” “Person of Interest” and “Seinfeld.”

“The real tempest in the play is not the storm,” Monte says. “It’s the tempest raging inside Prospero. Now that he’s growing old, how will he lead the rest of his life? Will he take revenge for the injustices he’s suffered, or will he take a higher path? Will he accept that his daughter (Miranda) has become a woman and acknowledge her love for Ferdinand? Will he keep his word to Ariel and set her free, and do right by Caliban?”

“The Tempest” offers audiences magic, mystery, romance, politics, laughs, songs and some of the most glorious poetry ever to grace the English-speaking stage. Many commentators believe that Prospero is, in fact, Shakespeare himself, looking back over a lifetime of experience, over a career of creating magical experiences on the stage, and doing some summing up. Many of us know this speech, which some think of as Shakespeare’s valedictory: “Our revels now are ended. These our actors, As I foretold you, were all spirits and/ Are melted into air, into thin air:/ And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,/ The cloud-capp’d towers, the gorgeous palaces,/ The solemn temples, the great globe itself,/ Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve/ And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,/ Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff/ As dreams are made on, and our little life/ Is rounded with a sleep.”

Would you like to “Know the Show?” Here’s a terrific guide, courtesy of the STNJ: http://www.shakespearenj.org/OnStage/current/Tempest/Documents/TempestKTS.pdf. Spend a little time with that and you’re good to go. Or don’t, and let experience be your guide. That works, too. Or read this one-paragraph plot summary, also courtesy of STNJ:

“The play opens in the midst of a raging storm, conjured by the magician Prospero to wreck a passing ship. The ship carries the conspirators who deposed Prospero from his dukedom 12 years earlier, forcing him from Milan with his infant daughter Miranda. Set adrift at sea, father and daughter came to live on the faraway island, on which the play takes place, inhabited by the elemental spirit Ariel and the feral Caliban. When the shipwrecked men come to shore, worlds collide as clowning drunkards meet the enslaved monster Caliban, handsome Prince Ferdinand encounters the lovely Miranda, and Prospero faces his past and his enemies.”

Major cast for STNJ’s “The Tempest:” Sherman Howard (Prospero); Jon Barker (Caliban); Lindsey Kyler (Miranda); Erin Parton (Ariel); Jackson Moran (Ferdi...
Creating the world of “The Tempest” are set designers Brian Clinnin, costume designer Murell Horton, sound designer Karin Graybash, and lighting designer Tony Galaska. Kathy Snyder serves as production stage manager.

Performances begin May 28th and continue through June 22nd at the F.M. Kirby Shakespeare Theatre, 36 Madison Ave. (at Lancaster Road) in Madison.

Individual tickets are now on sale and can be purchased by calling the box office at 973-408-5600 or by visiting www.ShakespeareNJ.org. Performances are Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Sundays at 7:30 p.m.; Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays at 8 p.m.; and Saturdays and Sundays at 2 p.m. Individual tickets range from $15 to $75.

Coming up this spring and summer from The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey: Molière’s “The Learned Ladies,” opening June 18 on the Outdoor Stage; George Bernard Shaw’s “The Devil’s Disciple,” opening July 2; Ben Jonson’s “The Alchemist,” opening August 6; and David Davalos’s “Wittenberg,” opening September 10.

The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey is an independent, professional theater company located on the Drew University campus in Madison, Morris County. One of the leading Shakespeare theaters in the nation, serving 100,000 adults and children annually, it is New Jersey’s largest professional theater company dedicated solely to Shakespeare’s canon and other world classics.

For a complete season schedule and to order subscriptions and tickets: http://www.shakespearenj.org.