

'The Tempest' sets new gold standard at DTC

Written by By TERRY MATHEWS, News-Telegram Arts Editor
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The opening scene of the Dallas Theater Center's current production of "The Tempest" evokes the popular TV series "Lost." DTC's artistic director Kevin Moriarty uses a modern-day plane crash instead of a 17th century shipwreck to jump start the action, forcing the audience immediately into the heart of the plot.

Twelve years earlier, Prospero, a nobleman, was stripped of his title and banished, along with his young daughter, Miranda, to a deserted island. Prospero has mastered the art of magic and has enslaved Ariel, a spritely spirit, and Caliban, the deformed offspring of a witch, to do his bidding.

Because of his supernatural insight, Prospero knows the man who unjustly took his title, along with a host of other political players, is passing near his island. He conjures up a storm that results in the plane crash, setting a collision course for the usurper and his minions, including a handsome young prince, a wise old man, a jester, and a butler with a drinking problem.

The play's many subplots begin with Miranda falling in love at first sight with the king's young son Ferdinand. The young couple is the embodiment of puppy love.

The mood turns darker when a conspiracy to kill one of the crash survivors takes shape.

Comic relief is provided by the jester and the drunken butler joining forces with Caliban as the monster fantasizes how he'll overthrow Prospero and rule the island.

In the end, of course, neither of the dangerous plots succeed, transgressions are forgiven, and the characters, including Prospero, Miranda and Ferdinand, make plans to return to Milan.

Moriarty condensed the play's five acts into an hour and 45 minutes without intermission. For the most part, the action on the stage keeps the audience engaged. While Moriarty's time travel and the stark, impressive scenic and costume design of Beowulf Boritt can take partial credit for the play's success, it is the actors who really elevate this production.

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As Prospero, Chamblee Ferguson is this production's motivating force. He embodies every facet of his complex character – the protective father, the avenging ruler and an all-knowing island version of Merlin the Magician.

Although full of blood lust in the beginning, by the end of the action Prospero is able to release everything he's held dear for a dozen years.

He willingly gives his daughter permission to build a new life with Ferdinand.

He frees Caliban from indentured servitude and even forgives the creature for plotting against him.

He forgives the brother who betrayed him.

He releases Ariel, fulfilling a promise made long ago.

And, then, in a final, moving soliloquy, he asks the audience to release him with their prayers and approval. It's been a long time since I've seen such an effective, believable performance. Bravo.

If Ferguson is the rock anchoring this production, it is Hunter Ryan Herdlicka's Ariel who gives it wings.

Herdlicka seems to defy gravity as he scampers across the play's huge stage, not missing a single opportunity to send bursts of magic into the audience.

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It is when Herdlicka sings, however, that the true enchantment begins.

He offers a beautiful lament to Ferdinand ("Full Fathom Five") as he guides him to Miranda. As the couple exchange vows later on, he blesses them with a lovely melody.



After hearing his voice, it's easy to see how Herdlicka won a spot in a Steven Sondheim musical in his very first professional audition.

It's hard to warm up to a monster like Caliban, but Joe Nemmers' take on this freak of nature is commendable.

Without any special effects, save white makeup and strategically placed smudges, Nemmers is able to meld with the creature. He slouches, contorts and twists across the stage. He spends most of the play in a crouched position, which must play havoc with his leg muscles. He was at once horrible and mesmerizing. Good job.

While Shakespeare is the master of dramatic tension, he is also capable of hilarious comedy.

In this production, the comedic relief is provided by Trinculo (Cliff Miller), a jester, and Stephano (Lee Trull), the drunken butler.

Trull, fresh from a starring role in DTC's "Arsenic and Old Lace," should give classes in physical comedy. It's easy to overplay slapstick, but Miller pulls it off without stepping into silliness. In fact, he makes it look easy.

The theater's acoustics are crisp, sharp and very well-managed. The play's technical crews were on top of their game Sunday. From the quick-fire scenery change in the first act to the

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dramatic appearance of Caliban, the unseen stars of the show did their jobs to perfection.

Kudos to DTC for bringing their audience a rock-solid production of a classic. This "Tempest" sets a new gold standard, thanks to its deft direction, intricate design elements and the polished performances of the cast.

"The Tempest" is playing through Oct. 9 at the Wyly Theatre, located at 2400 Flora St., in the AT&T complex in the arts district.

Editor's note: The main entrance to the theater is at the bottom of a small ski slope that, in colder, wetter conditions, could get scary in a hurry. There are concrete steps to the far right of the space, but they are hidden so well we didn't realize they were an option until we were half-way down.

The lobby is all about polished concrete and the brightest shade of apple green I've ever seen. It's not initially a warm and inviting space, but maybe the effect will soften after several visits. I suspect the halls leading to the women's bathroom probably glow in the dark. Two elevators ferry patrons to the theater, which is intimate, yet feels spacious and unconstrained.

If possible, allow time to stay after the performance. Actors come onstage in street clothes and answer questions about the play. It's a great way to top off your overall theater-going experience.

Tickets for "The Tempest" are \$15 to \$25. Call the box office at 214.880.0202 or log on to dallastheatercenter.org for more information.