

Review: 'The Tempest' Starkly Amplifies Prospero's Evolution

A strong ensemble, music and movement round out the Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival's last production in its longtime home at Boscobel House and Gardens.



By Laura Collins-Hughes

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GARRISON, N.Y. — Prospero's grievance has been gnawing at him a dozen years when at last he speaks of it to his teenage daughter, Miranda, explaining how they were forced from their noble life in Milan into island exile.

His own treacherous brother snatched his dukedom away, propelled by "an evil nature" and a craving for power that Prospero — bookish sorcerer, kindly father, distracted ruler — hadn't suspected in him.

Does he sense his own darkness, though? His own lust for dominion? The way Prospero spins his tale, he is a great man and a good guy wronged. But in Ryan Quinn's fitfully magical production of "The Tempest" at Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival, the cruelty that lurks in him is abundantly on display.

The long-lashed, gold-dusted spirit Ariel (Britney Simpson), forced to do Prospero's bidding, desires her freedom from him more than anything. The brutish Caliban (Jason O'Connell) wants the same, and to be left in peace on the island that was his before this enslaving invader arrived. Both of them call him master.

What's curious is that Howard W. Overshown's Prospero, played with a recessiveness consistent with a character most at home in his library, does not dominate the play. He does, however, orchestrate all that happens in it, starting with the storm he whips up to shipwreck his brother (Sean McNall), the queen of Naples (Nance Williamson) and others in a quest for retribution.

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Comedy is the strongest suit here, led by O'Connell's bedraggled, delicate Caliban, who sounds like John Lithgow might if he were a downtrodden brute with a sympathetic case to plead. The production's rollicking high point comes with his discovery by the delightfully put-upon Trinculo (Ralph Adriel Johnson), and their joint discovery by the drunken butler Stephano (Kurt Rhoads).

The young lovers Miranda (Kayla Coleman) and Ferdinand (an extraordinarily charming Tyler Fauntleroy) are sweet to watch, while much of the magic of the island comes from the lovely sung enchantments of Ariel.

Plumped up with music (sound design and music composition are by Charles Coes and Nathan Roberts) and movement (choreography is by Susannah Millonzi), this production is the festival's last in its longtime home at Boscobel House and Gardens, where performances take place in an airy tent that frames the expansive lawn and the hills beyond as background scenery. (The company is moving just a few miles away.)



Cast members emerge from billowing clouds of fog at the beginning of the play. — Charles Erickson

When the show begins with clouds of fog billowing just where the lawn slopes down, and the figures of the company rising through it and coming toward us, we know that Quinn will use the landscape well.

There is some flatness to the production, though. At the performance I saw, the first frisson of pleasure came with Caliban's initial scene: the laughter of an audience that suddenly finds itself in the palm of an actor's hand. Standout performances — by Simpson and O'Connell, Fauntleroy and Johnson — are more memorable than the storytelling as a whole.

But in Overshown's finely understated interpretation, Prospero's evolution is starkly clear. When he asks Ariel how the shipwrecked queen and nobles are, she suggests that they are pitiful from his torments: that if he could see them, his "affections would become tender."

"Dost thou think so, spirit?" he asks.

"Mine would, sir, were I human," she says, with such gentleness and dignity that compassion seems the only proper course.

And we feel him, very subtly, doing something that wounded, angry rulers seldom do. He begins to let go of his vengefulness.

The Tempest

Through Sept. 4 at Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival, Garrison, N.Y.; hvshakespeare.org. Running time 2 hours 15 minutes.

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