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by Scott Wiser

Theater review: All the world's a rowdy stage in a punked-out 'Midsummer Night's Dream'

Set in a 1940s parallel world where the Amazons and Athenians are still at war, fairies rule the night, and Sarah Vaughn rules just about everything else, Theatre UAF's hi-tech production of William Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream" creates a dieselpunk dystopic depiction of the Bard's classic comedy.

Shakespeare's story of true love and fairies gone wild is given a retro-futuristic makeover. Characters with near-cyborg technology walk around next to cowboys and fight Amazons with sniper-style eyepieces. Other characters lip synch to Sarah Vaughn standards and participate in spontaneous dance sequences.

There is a lot going on but strangely enough, it is not an all that untraditional a telling. Forbidden lovers flee to the fairyland forest realm where relationships go all cockeye: Lovers hate each other; a hater falls in love with the object of his scorn; a fairy queen falls for a Bottom turned into an ass. "Lord, what fools these mortals be." Cue the laughs. It's all pretty much on par for a dreamy night out with the Bard.

As many words as Shakespeare created, dieselpunk is not one of them, and it is a testament to the mutability of the poetry that such a setting can blend well with a story more than 400 years old. Puck's (Annabel Heyne) opening roar acts as a de-facto prologue, a text edit as this speech falls much later on in the play, and the audience quickly adapts to this parallel universe. The production aids the adjustment by hitting all the traditional comedic high points.

Naturally, the biggest laughs fall to the company of comic relief in The Players. This is especially true after Puck, played with full body attitude by Heyne, interrupts their rehearsal of "Pyramus and Thisbe," by turning Nick Bottom, (Alexander Gloger) into a jackass. Gloger plays Bottom with an overly enunciated, affected English

accent. His mispronunciation of the words Pyramus, Thisbe and Quince is a joke that never gets old. Sam Thompson playing Francis Flute playing Thisbe breaks away from the comedy to give a particularly powerful performance when mourning the tragic death of Pyramus. Eric Heyne's Peter Quince, the leader of the ragtag company, commands the stage and has a strong grasp of Shakespeare's language.

Hermia (Ariana Polanco) ate her Wheaties and in this alternate reality is a powerful Athenian soldier. Gone are the hair-pulling fights. This Hermia will throw your head into a tree stump and pull a crossbow on you if you mess with her man, Lysander (Darren Napoli). Elsbeth Cheyne, playing Helena, shines in what can typically be the most annoying role in the play. She plays the part in such a likeable way and her uniquely comedic talents help the audience to root for her doting on the intentionally unlikeable Demetrius (Jared Olin). When Helena says to him, "I am your spaniel" and gives a seductive shake, it is so preciously awkward. You just want to give her a big hug.

Andrew Cassel directs this urban fantasy and orchestrates the technical movements of the production. And technically, there are a lot of moving parts. The set design (Adam Gillette) consists of a floor capable of being raised and lowered to imagine different settings particularly emphasizing tree stumps during the forest scenes and a cylindrical tunnel through which the cast enters and exits the stage. The ever present roar of bombs exploding suggests the imminent dangers of the ongoing war with the Amazons (sound design — Chris George). Having dust fall from the ceiling from these bombing attacks during a meeting in a bomb shelter really creates a cool effect. It was almost like rice being thrown after a wedding. The work of the set, sound, costume (costume design — Jay

Paggi-Howe), and lighting (lighting design — Colby Freel) crews is strong and help this wild concept merge with the Bard's storytelling.

It isn't all seamless though. With Cassel's technical focus and so much activity on a small stage, at times the performers get lost in the pacing of their own speeches. This rapid-fire delivery glosses over some beautiful poetry and basic exposition. It hurts the audience's ability to relate to the characters and lessens some of the comedic payoffs. There is also an uncomfortably long scene break near the end of the production, pointing out how maneuvering a complicated set in a short timeframe can grind momentum to a halt.

While not everything works in this production, there is a lot to entertain. Strong performances, a uniquely fascinating set, and the Bard telling his crazy story display how much fun is happening in this showing. Throw in some Sarah Vaughn and you have yourself an enjoyable theatrical experience.

"A Midsummer Night's Dream" runs through April 8 with performances at 7:30 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays and 2 p.m. Sundays. For more information and tickets, visit www.uaf.edu/TheatreFilm.



From left, Hippolita (Rachel Blackwell) watches as Egeus (Siri Tuttle) holds daughter Hermia (Ariana Polanco) by the hair, demanding King Theseus (Michael Shaeffer) force her to marry Demetrius (Jared Olin) who is now in love with Helena (Elsbeth Cheyne) while Hermia's true love Lysander (Darren Napoli) looks on in Theatre UAF's "A Midsummer Night's Dream." Kade Mendelowitz photo