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A Wild Midsummer Night

MPC finds the heat in Shakespeare's hottest play.

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By Ryan Masters



Enchanting: From left, Omar Hussain, Tara Lucido, Melina Franks, and Alec Head give Gary Bolen's update its supernatural naughtiness.

At its best, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is not simply a light romantic comedy. Shakespeare's classic tale of bewitched love and tangled triangles is a hard-rock bacchae of lust unleashed beneath the dark chaotic canopy of our repressed desires. It is a play about being young, getting high and forgetting oneself. It is about laughter and obsession and death and hallucination, and the overpowering urge to just take off all your clothes and roll in a great pile of faery dust. The most magical of plays, it is one great, grand spell.

Unfortunately, many directors don't listen to the language, and ignore the deeply-rooted sexual subtexts that Shakespeare has woven into his most erotic play. Thankfully, MPC director Gary Bolen listened. He understands that what makes or breaks a strong production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is beautiful young people pouring intoxicating language over each other in an ever-building orgy of sensate poetry.

By setting the play in a semi-contemporary world of horse-nostrilled Carmelite snobs dressed in a dozen shades of khaki and a wispy legion of stoned Big Sur faeries, Bolen has managed to co-opt Shakespeare's language and present it in a fresh and subtle way. If you've spent any quality time in Big Sur during the summer, you know that Shakespeare very well could have written *A Midsummer Night* while sitting up at Sykes Hot Springs with quill, parchment and candles.

When Oberon (Gavin Crain) tells the Faery Queen (Julie Hughett), "Thou rememb'rest/Since once I sat upon a promontory/And heard a mermaid, on a dolphin's back,/Uttering such dulcet and harmonious breath/That the rude sea grew civil at her song,/And certain stars shot madly from their spheres/To hear the sea-maid's music," it conjures the epic marine terraces of Julia Pfeiffer State Park. When he says, "I know a bank where the wild thyme blows,/Where oxlips and the nodding violet grows,/Quite over-canopied with luscious woodbine,/With sweet must-roses, and with eglantine," it conjures the lush gorge up Soberanes Canyon. In other words, Bolen gets a lot of mileage out of his "update" simply by suggesting the setting of Big Sur.

Granted, at times the acting in Bolen's production is wooden as a dryad, but the incantation of Shakespeare's spellbinding language keeps the magic alive. However, Scott McQuiston's turn as Nick Bottom, the grotesque mechanical at the heart of the play, is luminous. His unique Tom Arnold-meets-Jim Carey take on Shakespeare's character is hilarious and thrilling to watch. He burns the stage down and, quite frankly, relegates much of his supporting cast to shadows on the wall.

Standout performances in the faery world include Julie Hughett as the Nepenthe-esque Queen Titania, Gavin Crain as an

official, posturing, but humor-inflected Oberon, and Katelyn Myer, a surprisingly talented Carmel High student, as Puck.

The mechanicals, on the whole, are excellent foils to McQuiston, especially Tristan Scott-Behrends as the fey Francis Flute. In fact, the mechanicals' lengthy production of Pyramus and Thisbe within the production is brilliant. McQuiston's performance is a comedic tour de force and worth the price of admission alone.

As for the lovesick young lovers, they manage to believably convey privileged Carmel teenagers while reeling off Shakespeare's gossamer iambs. Tara Lucido shows some spark as the punkish Hermia and Melina Franks is enjoyably goofy as the clumsy, field hockey stick-wielding Helena. Meanwhile, Omar Hussain and Alec Head do an adequate job of playing off each other in their respective roles as a pseudo surf-punk boy and sniveling Abercrombie and Fitch victim. In the roles of Carmel's nobility, James Brady does an oddly effective Mel Brooks-like take on Theseus and John Brady exudes an unsavory corruptness as Egeus.

However, Bolen's production seems to forget that Egeus wants to see young Lysander die for doing his daughter. It's a dire undercurrent of tension that goes unexploited in this production of the play. Like Perry Farrell of the seminal LA band Jane's Addiction, Shakespeare understood that sex can be violent.

<>A Midsummer Night's Dream plays Saturday at 8pm and closes Sunday at 2pm on the Morgan Stock Stage at Monterey Peninsula College. Tickets are \$15 in advance and \$25 at the door. call 646-4213 or visit www.ticketguys.com.</>

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