

REVIEW: Shakespeare Festival creates an outdoor dream

By Rob Cline, Freelance writer – June 15, 2009

IOWA CITY — I was concerned when I first heard that this year's 10th edition of the Riverside Theatre Shakespeare Festival would include "A Midsummer Night's Dream."

The play was part of the festival back in 2003, as well, and that particular interpretation may well have been my least favorite production of all those mounted for the annual event to date.

But this production, under the direction of Riverside Theatre co-founder Ron Clark, is easily one of my favorites in the history of the festival. Pick a date, clear the calendar and get to Lower City Park's outdoor stage to see this show.

Although the program notes reveal that this production is set in a utopian community in 1905, only the energetic and delightful dancing at play's end and the lovely costumes designed by Colleen Combs McConegle hint at the time shift.

Performed on the barest of sets, designed by Paul Sannerud, the production is driven by the basics: good actors acting well.

That quality acting is driven by strong direction from Clark.

Take, for example, the opening moments of the play in which the reluctant bride-to-be Hippolyta (Saren Nofs-Snyder) listens to her fiance, Theseus (Steve Cardamone), deal harshly with young Hermia (Dawn Michelle Mancarella). Near the scene's end Hippolyta moves as though to speak to Hermia, but propriety stays her tongue. It's a strong early moment that undergirds this comedy with a layer of seriousness.

The comedy begins in earnest when the rustics take the stage to prepare the play within the play. Anchored by Tim Budd as Peter Quince, Dennis Fox as Francis Flute and the very funny Patrick DuLaney as Nick Bottom, the hapless sextet kept the sizable Sunday evening crowd laughing.

DuLaney's performance may well be the production's strongest, even during challenging scenes in which he must act while wearing a donkey's head.

Perhaps even more impressive, however, is this comedic troupe's ability to keep things engaging in the play's final scenes when the plot has been resolved and all that remains is the rustics' act. It's a section that tends to drag, but DuLaney and his comrades never flagged.

Meanwhile, Mallory Portnoy as Helena turned in the best performance among the four lovers and rivals who are bedeviled by Robin Goodfellow (Martin Andrews) in the woods. Portnoy is at her best when her character is at her most sarcastic and she provided the energy that was essential to a complicated and lengthy scene after intermission.

Among the fairies, Andrews deserves a nod for his affable portrayal of Puck, as does Kayla Prestel for her excellent turn as the fairy Mote. Each of them excels at one of the production's key skills: moving as though under enchantment.

For its part, the entire audience was under enchantment throughout the lovely evening.

"A Midsummer Night's Dream" continues through July 12 on the outdoor stage at Lower City Park in Iowa City. It will alternate with "Richard III," which opens Friday.