

BREAKING NEWS Shutdown extends into workweek, as Senate talks continue

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Review: More free Shakespeare pops up, and it's worth your time



Mary Eisenhart/Inferno Theatre

Inferno Theatre presents a lively and enjoyable take on "A Midsummer Night's Dream" at Berkeley's John Hinkel Park through Aug. 13.

By **SAM HURWITT, CORRESPONDENT** |

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William Shakespeare's most popular plays often come in clusters, and this summer "A Midsummer Night's Dream" is all over the place. Inferno Theatre's free show at Berkeley's John Hinkel Park is the third production of this particular comedy in the East Bay in a couple of months, right after versions by We Players and Livermore Shakespeare Festival. Yet another one by Theatre of Others opens in San Francisco in October. Fortunately, it's such a multifaceted and reliably funny play that there's plenty of room for multiple interpretations.

Adapted, directed and designed by producing director Giulio Cesare Perrone, the Inferno production is appropriately sprightly for a play so full of faerie folk. It sports a large cast of 18 and involves less doubling than usual. Perrone keeps the set simple — just a few carpets and bundles of bamboo poles — and the costumes just a basic suggestion of period dress.

Among the fairies, Akaina Ghosh is a cheerfully impish Puck, the troublemaking servant of Jacob Ritts' strutting, prankish elfin king Oberon. Indigo Jackson is an forcefully agile and lustful faerie queen as Titania, bewitched by her squabbling mate into loving a buffoon half-transformed into a donkey.

The offbeat object of her desire is Jack Nicolaus' amusingly overzealous Nick Bottom, the hammy prima donna of a group of laborers turned amateur theatrical troupe, led by Joshua-Morris Williams' animated and enthusiastic Peter Quince.

The four rival lovers who chased each other into the forest provide some of the play's funniest moments, after they've been dosed with love potions by the fairies haphazardly to try to make them settle into mutually adoring couples. The plan only makes matters worse. Kira Zabrowski's bewildered and overwhelmed Hermia already has her hands full fending off the advances of her boyfriend Lysander (Ben Elie, laying it on thick with the nice-guy schtick) and the unwanted attentions of stubborn suitor Demetrius (competitive Nick Gallagher), while Sharon Shao's hilariously doting Helena pursues Demetrius even more unrelentingly. But when the love-drugged gents start fighting over Helena instead, everything explodes into pleasingly hectic chaos.

A lively physicality runs through the production from the beginning. Daniel Friedman's King Theseus does some wonderfully fierce sparring with Alyssa So's crouching, near-feral Hippolyta, but when he speaks he's awfully quiet and subdued.

Musical director Carol Braves roams around fiddling at people with an original score that nicely accentuates the action. On the other hand, some of the speeches are sung as if they were folk songs in a way that tends to lessen their impact and general comprehensibility.

There are a few awkward patches, such as an oddly placed courtly dance right after the lovers awaken from their drugged stupor. The mechanicals' play within a play at the royal wedding is as humorously ludicrous as it should be, but the various couples' mocking commentary is limp and half-hearted.

Skipping characters such as Hermia's father and Theseus' party planner, Perrone's edits are a mixed bag. Bottom's waking from his transformation is blended with his reunion with his fellows in a way that works pretty well but leaves no time for him to learn the news he gives them about their upcoming performance. The oft-elided return of the fairies at the end is performed in full, as this is a rare production in which the Theseus and Hippolyta that just exited aren't played by the same actors as the Oberon and Titania that enter on their heels.

On the whole it's a lively "Midsummer" that doesn't dwell overmuch on the otherworldly aspect and just revels in the fun of it all. That makes it an agreeably entertaining way to pass the afternoon in the park.

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'A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM'

By William Shakespeare, presented by Inferno Theatre

Through: Aug. 13

Where: John Hinkel Park Amphitheater, 41 Somerset Place, Berkeley

Running time: Two hours and 40 minutes, one intermission

Tickets: Free; details at www.infernotheatre.org

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