

Theater review: Georgia Shakespeare's dazzling 'Tempest'

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For the AJC

10:29 a.m. Tuesday, June 14, 2011

A conch shell blows, conjuring a tempest of chaos and revenge. Yet out of this "rough magic," love and forgiveness shall be born, and a handful of shipwrecked souls will be washed clean again.

It's a pinnacle moment at Georgia Shakespeare, where the Bard's 400-year-old romance "The Tempest" is getting an exquisite and evocative treatment by director Sharon Ott, former artistic chief of two of the West Coast's most distinguished theaters (the Seattle Repertory Theatre and Berkeley Repertory Theatre) and now a professor at the Savannah College of Art and Design. Probably the least remarkable attribute of this production is the transformation of the banished Duke of Milan, Prospero, into female flesh. (Here, Prospero is called Prospera and played by Atlanta actress Carolyn Cook -- a gender-bending strategy not all that unusual in contemporary theater.)

What's so dazzling about this "Tempest" is the way Ott marries crude ogres with delicate fairies, fluid choreography with elemental design, superb clowning with abject degradation. From the opening scene, in which the ocean-going voyagers fairly undulate in a vertiginous onslaught of wind and waves, to the final moments, when Prospera relinquishes her desire for vengeance and sorcery, the story is elegantly told and lovely to look at.

As designed by Tyler Tunney, Prospera's fortresslike cell resembles a Japanese hut made of long slender reeds, and the misshapen, web-footed Caliban (Neal A. Ghant) is banished to a small, poignant-looking tent at the side. Ariel (the terrific Chris Kayser) and his fairies are nymphlike creatures with sinuous, athletic silhouettes and deliciously mischievous ways of tricking the mortals. Using an electronic echo effect, Ariel "throws" his voice to stir up mayhem, and the spirits turn a banquet scene into a ballet of dancing candelabras.

Costume designer Leslie Taylor dresses Prospera in a magical coat that sings like a chorus of jingling seashells, while the fallen Caliban wears little more than a crown of sticks, a flimsy loincloth and the kind of face paint that's long been the shorthand for voodoo priests and savage beasts.

But what of the emotions manifested within this displaced and malevolent duchy?

Cook makes a valiant effort at summoning the authority and paternal concern of Prospera, but she somehow looks rather small and diminished in this company of outsize players. (See the drunken tomfoolery of Bruce Evers' mountainous Stephano and the scene-stealing hysteria of Mark Cabus' comic