

"The Tempest" Continues Prenzie's "Guerrilla" Style

Written by Jill Walsh

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The Prenzie Players are so serious about presenting innovative interpretations of Shakespeare's scripts, they promise audience members "won't forget our shows, ever." Pretty lofty standards for a small group of Quad Cities actors who hold performances in rented found spaces (currently the Rock Island Housing Authority building) and use minimal props, costumes, staging, and production. So far, the troupe – whose performers originate from the stages of Genesisius Guild, Playcrafters, Richmond Hill, and Comedy Sportz – has tackled the Bard's *Measure for Measure*

,
Hamlet

, and

Cymbeline

, and this weekend it will offer a one-weekend run of

The Tempest

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The Prenzie Players started in 2002, when Andrew Koski, J.C. Luxton, and Cait Bodenbender (all participants in Genesisius Guild) discussed the possibility of performing Shakespeare during the fall, winter, and spring, and having creative control of the productions. The outcome: a self-described "guerrilla-theatre troupe" whose members are not afraid to explore character possibilities most local Shakespeare productions will not.

During Prenzie's 2003 run of *Hamlet*, for example, it was subtly suggested that Horatio was in love with the title character. Other shows have also featured, in some scenes, scantily clad male and female performers.

Prenzie's interpretive choices are meant to "convey the emotions Shakespeare intended in such a way that contemporary audiences actually feel them," Bodenbender explained. "The characters that populate Shakespeare are most fully realized when directors and actors

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envision them as real people instead of literary fixtures. An Elizabethan audience would have been shocked and a little uncomfortable during a scene in which a man enters another man's wife's room and observes her sleeping. Contemporary audiences do not have the same reaction to that scenario. Now have the wife sleeping undressed and have the intruder pull back her sheets to expose her and gaze at her naked body – that's shocking and uncomfortable for today's audiences.

"I don't think we are pushing any boundaries. We are simply doing what is required to present the play in a way that impacts our audiences authentically."

Another interpretive choice has been the use of sparse props, staging, and costuming, a decision Bodenbender feels is more help than hindrance for both actors and audiences. "Actors are free to focus almost solely on character and emotion, without being burdened by a bunch of clutter to be responsible for or negotiate around," she said. "They also get to create their world entirely from their imaginations.

"We ask our audiences to join in our imaginings. A black bench is a throne because we treat it as a throne; later in the act it is a bed because we treat it as a bed. It's more honest, in a way – we're not pretending that what the audience is experiencing isn't theater."

But the practice also requires skilled performers who aren't afraid of being the main focus and are attentive to language detail. "The ideal actor is highly physical/in-touch with his or her body, and linguistically/vocally expressive, too," Luxton explained.

Luxton also believes that compared to performances of other local theatre groups, Prenzie's productions are "way more intense," because shows are put together in only 15 to 18 rehearsals. "We're obsessive-compulsive precise about language and movement details (having little else to create our universe from)," he continued. "We also work hard to eliminate small roles, and keep the troupe working as a team, delegating responsibilities for costuming, lighting, setting, combat, and verse amongst the players."

And while The Prenzie Players are currently happy producing *The Tempest* (about which they will divulge few details), their hope for the future is, as Bodenbender says, "to continue to mount productions as long as we have the resources to pull them off and audiences to come see them."

The Prenzie Players will present The Tempest at 8 p.m. on November 19, 20, and 21 at 2127 Third Avenue (the Rock Island Housing Authority building). Seating is limited, and not reserved. The suggested donation is \$8 for adults. For more information, call (309)236-3017 or e-mail (prenzies@yahoo.com).