

Written by Mike Schulz  
Tuesday, 04 April 2006 18:00

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### ***A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the Rock Island Masonic Temple**

Theatre audiences are often witness to romance and, with the right director and performers, occasionally even to true love on stage. Yet it's rare to find passion and even rarer to witness *ca*  
*rnality*

, two qualities that the Prenzie Players present in abundance in their juicy new production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the Rock Island Masonic Temple.

To those familiar with the innovative Prenzie group, the news that *Midsummer* is imaginatively conceived and staged should come as no surprise. Given the caliber of acting talent Prenzie continues to recruit, the marvelous performances should shock no one. But while I was expecting to be impressed by

*Midsummer*

, I still wasn't quite prepared for its depth of feeling; the Prenzie Players and the show's inspired director, Cait Bodenbender, have managed – again – to make a work that's nearly a half-millennium old feel revelatory. The show doesn't just have emotional pull; it has *erotic*

pull, and on the stage, that is unexpected indeed.

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* is widely considered one of the Bard's most lighthearted pieces,

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its pre-screwball comedy and romantic roundelays easily accessible to audiences. (Along with *Romeo & Juliet*, *Midsummer* is probably the Shakespearean title most frequently performed in high schools.) And Prenzie's *Midsummer* has more than its share of comedic delights; the banter between the play's traveling-thespian clowns, preparing to enact a hopelessly inept production of *Pyramus & Thisbe*, is especially endearing.

However, thanks to Bodenbender's inventive staging and the powerfully focused work of the actors, what lingers in this production is the hunger, the naked desire, that propels *Midsummer*'s romantic entanglements. Hermia, Helena, Lysander, and Demetrius are still puppets amidst Oberon's cheeky romantic experiments. Yet the audience is so close to the action – figuratively and literally – that the characters' passions have an almost tangible energy. With no traditional stage in the Masonic Temple's playing area, the Prenzie Players perform both in front of and within the audience; characters chase one another while gliding between rows of folding chairs, and will occasionally confront one another – angrily, aching – directly in front of you.

The results are often extraordinarily effective. Suddenly, the romantic suffering – often treated lightly in *Midsummer* productions – carries real weight, and your proximity to the actors gives the performers no chance to be phony. They enact the pain of love splendidly. Yet they also revel in love's glory, and *Midsummer* is never more brazenly, exquisitely risky than in Bodenbender's imagining of the fairies. Simultaneously ethereal and animalistic, they're often less fairy than feral. The suggestiveness of their couplings, and Oberon's and Robin Goodfellow's glee in disrupting the natural state of human affairs, is presented with unapologetic candor. These figures elight in their wicked playfulness, and as the staging makes the audience *de facto* accomplices to their deeds, we do, too.

The downside to the show not being performed on a stage proper is that there are times when only a fraction of the audience is able to watch a dramatic moment unfold. Thankfully, the actors' voices are so strong that this barely counts as a liability; their character interpretations, nearly actor for actor, are so thrillingly good that you almost don't need to see the *dramatis personae*. Maggie Woolley is a fiercely strong Hermia – she has a beautiful voice for Shakespeare – and Linnea Ridolfi is a tender, shattered Helena; they're the emotional center of this *Midsummer*. Jeremy Mahr, an intensely giving actor, makes a heartfelt Lysander, and when he and Andrew Koski's Demetrius both fall victim to the same fairy spell, the men joyously play fools of the highest order.

Surrounding *A Midsummer Night's Dream*'s romantic quartet are a number of sensationally

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gifted actors, most of whom assume two roles each, and the breadth of their talents proves downright intimidating. Jeff De Leon and Stephanie Burrough are magnificently imperious (and sexy as hell) as Oberon and Titania, then perform delightful sketch-comedy caricatures as Snout and Snug; Karl Bodenbender is a vibrant, devious Robin Goodfellow; Denise Yoder earns huge laughs as the acting troupe's flustered director; and Aaron E. Sullivan, whose talents are slightly underused as Theseus, exudes effortless authority. And the spectacular Tracy Skaggs, who would seem to have license to ham as Francis Flute, does something subversively hysterical with Flute's performance in Thisbe drag – he plays it *honestly. Everything* about this production feels honest. It also feels deeply imagined, and unique, and alive – a *Dream* you don't want to wake from.

A Midsummer Night's Dream runs through April 8 at the Rock Island Masonic Temple. For information, visit <http://www.prenzieplayers.com>.

### **Cliffhanger at the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre**

You have to give credit to a playwright who really knows his audience.

In the comedy-thriller *Cliffhanger*, currently playing at the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre, author James Yaffe presents us with Harry Lowenthal (David Rash), an elder philosophy professor who accidentally kills Edith (Melissa Scott), his young successor. (And by "accidentally kills," I mean "didn't *intend* to murder her when he bashed her on the skull with a bust of Socrates.")

After mulling over the morality of the deed, Harry and his wife Polly (Peggy Freeman) dispose of the body, an act witnessed by Melvin (Chad Koker), one of Harry's students. Melvin blackmails the couple – if Harry gives Melvin a passing grade, the unpleasantness will be forgotten. And when Harry warns Melvin that his actions may lead to trouble, the kid sneers as the Lowenthals, "What are *you* going to do? You're *old* people!"

You should have heard the Barn Theatre crowd react. If they could have, they would have torn the little bastard apart *themselves*.

*Cliffhanger* is a show of a type I've never seen before – a comic thriller designed *specifically* for seniors. It's like *Murder, She Wrote* if Angela Lansbury did the killing. Harry, despite his act of violence, and Polly, despite her Lady MacBeth-like leanings, are unquestionably the heroes of the tale; the victim, whom Polly calls "a bitch," and the blackmailing punk are the villains. (The show's fifth character – a middle-aged cop played by the ever-solid Cal Taylor – is one of the good guys, as his character rails against the idealistic '60s generation and today's young people "with their pockets filled with dope.") And the play proved an utter delight to the mostly senior crowd at last Thursday's performance,

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who loved watching the elder couple turn the tables on their youthful oppressors. The standing ovation that greeted

*Cliffhanger*

's close started as soon as the curtain call began

Admittedly, it took a while to get on Yaffe's wavelength (identifying with murderers is a tricky business, even in a comedy), but once I did – once I realized we weren't *supposed* to hope that Harry would pay for his crime – I was able to enjoy

*Cliffhanger*

for the goofy nonsense it is. Yaffe's script is twisty without being *completely*

illogical, director Gregg Neuleib stages the action well for the Barn's theatre-in-the-round setup, and the show is blessed with two positively endearing performances.

Interestingly, however, they're given by the actors in the *villainous* roles. When Melissa Scott arrived in the opening scene, I was delighted, because this sincere, empathetic actress appeared to be having a fantastic time playing a contemptible shrew. I was also dejected, because I knew her Edith wouldn't be on stage (not

*alive*

, at any rate) nearly enough. Yaffe isn't at all subtle about Edith's hatefulness – at one point, he gives her a monologue about how misunderstood

*Hitler*

was – but in a contraption such as

*Cliffhanger*

, you don't necessarily want subtlety, and Scott delivers Edith's bilious resentment with electricity. I was sad to lose her so soon. And Koker, a laid-back riot, makes his slow-witted character fresh through great, quizzical facial expressions and perfectly delayed reaction time; he's like a devious Jeff Spicoli.

Rash and Freeman have some amusing bits. After Harry accepts his dark side and Rash no longer has to spend so much time acting anguished, the actor delivers a few snappy one-liners, and Freeman has a priceless moment when Polly complains about all the *laundry* the crime is forcing her to do. But at that opening-night performance – and there's no delicate way to say this – both actors' cue pick-ups were so tardy, and the uncomfortable pauses

*within*

their dialogue were so glaring, that I was continually on edge, and only because I was afraid that Rash and Freeman had forgotten their lines. The on-stage action never came to a complete halt – it

*threatened*

to during a lengthy piece of business involving Polly serving coffee – but the actors' discomfort was noticeable, and sadly distracting. The only thing that was being killed for much of the show's length was the momentum, and a silly, enjoyable romp such as

*Cliffhanger*

needs as quick a tempo as it can muster.

## Comedies Tonight: The Prenzie Players' "A Midsummer Night's Dream," and the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre

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*Cliffhanger runs through April 9 at the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre. For reservations, call (309)244-9944.*