

Magic Moments: "The Tempest," at Lincoln Park through July 2

Written by Mike Schulz

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The Tempest is one of Shakespeare's most magical offerings - a wildly theatrical concoction set on an enchanted isle populated by fairies, sprites, and spirits, and governed by a benevolent (yet easily enraged) ruler in possession of a supernatural cloak.

Given the built-in limitations in budget and production design at Rock Island's Lincoln Park, though, no one attending Genesisius Guild's current production of the play should expect to be wowed by spectacle; Ariel, for instance, won't be flying in on any invisible wires. Yet from its first scene, this *Tempest* is graced by spectacle of a different variety: the sort of stage alchemy that occurs when fine performers tear into rich material, and when a strong director orchestrates the actors' contributions and stage pictures with inventiveness and grace. Imagination, of course, is its own *kind of magic*.

Genesisius Guild's production begins beautifully, with a ship's passengers at the mercy of the titular storm that will carry them to Shakespeare's otherworldly island. With two actors enacting the pull of the sea, two suggesting the tumult of the waves, and a half-dozen others shouting over the violent gales, director Jeff Coussens and his cast members turn low-rent effects into

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high drama. This prelude certainly casts a spell, yet Coussens helms the production with such a sure touch that the play's romantic and comedic elements are every bit as captivating, and for an audience (the Lincoln Park audience, at least), perhaps even more bewitching.

At Saturday night's performance, you could feel the crowd growing antsy during the lengthy introduction to Prospero (Pat Flaherty) and his daughter, Miranda (Emily Coussens). Both actors delivered Shakespeare's lines with aplomb, but *The Tempest's* early exposition between the two - while a necessity - is a letdown after the vibrancy of the show's opening, and those unfamiliar with the play may have worried that the production's first scene would be its *best*

Yet with the arrival of the sprite Ariel (a lively Heather Pugh) and the subsequent ire of Flaherty's Prospero, the audience's spirits seemed to lift right back up, and with only a few exceptions - notably during the unconvincing badinage among the shipwreck survivors once they reach land - had no reason to come back down. Coussens, particularly in his use of the *Te*

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-uous spirits,

stages the supernatural goings-on with savvy and is even better in the show's more overtly comedic sequences, and he guides his leading actors toward splendid portrayals.

Prospero is one of the meatiest roles in the Bard's canon, and one that Flaherty does exquisite justice to. His initial tirade against Ariel establishes the actor's ease with Shakespearean drama, but he's also robustly comedic - as he was in St. Ambrose University's *Much Ado About Nothing* this past spring - and marvelously sincere; Prospero's fear of losing his daughter carries real weight, as does the closing benediction of his enemies. It's first-rate work.

Flaherty, however, is just one of several *Tempest* actors whose ease and command of character prove inspiring. As Ferdinand, Jonathan Gregoire is an incredibly dexterous physical comedian - his attempts to deal with a possessed épée were hilarious, and his shuffling race across stage, with his ankles shackled, was a hysterical throwaway moment - and he and Emily Coussens form a goofily enjoyable pair of sweethearts. Wilder Anderson is sensationally inventive as the deformed slave Caliban; his Gollum-like movements and vocal stylings were both touching and extraordinarily clever, and once the lovable "monster" dipped into drink, Wilder's performance quickly became high-comedy heaven.

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And as Trinculo and Stephano, the drunken blowhards who *cause* Caliban's inebriation, Kai Swanson and James J. Loula give a master's class in performing comic drunkenness; their off-kilter line readings are madly inspired, as is director Coussens' staging of their antics. (Kudos for the - implied - on-stage urination.) When Swanson, Loula, and Anderson get a rhythm going, the effect is almost deliriously entrancing; talent, of course, is a type of magic, too, and a type on frequent display in Genesisius Guild's *The Tempest*.

For more information, visit (<http://www.genesius.org>).