

## Hell Hath No Fury... : "The Tempest," at Riverside Theatre through July 9

Written by Audra Beals  
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A theatre company takes a risk when it changes key elements of Shakespeare, as Iowa City's Riverside Theatre has by switching the protagonist in its presentation of *The Tempest* from Prospero to Prosper

a

. Turning this male character into a female brings an entirely new dynamic to the performance, yet even though this makes for a unique production, it distracts from the tone of Shakespeare's text.

The play's original plot focuses on Prospero, a duke in possession of a magical cloak. Twelve years earlier, his brother forced him from Milan, and he has since lived on an island with his daughter, Miranda, and a band of spirits who are under his control. Conveniently, the very men who wronged him so long ago become shipwrecked on his island, and Prospero sets out to exact revenge.

However, when the central character becomes Prospera, and all of the servant-like spirits are also women, the production develops a different tone, one in which the women punish the trespassing men for the past, but also for simply being *men*.

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The play's plot seems to shift from a revenge-driven story to one involving a paranoid woman's desperate attempt to keep the world of men away from her daughter.

This anti-man vibe emerges throughout the text. One of the only male characters inhabiting the island, Prospera's servant Caliban, is constantly tortured by the sorceress. The newcomers are all immediately referred to as "traitors" from whom Prospera wants Miranda to stay away. And the good-intentioned Ferdinand, who falls in love with Miranda, is forced to work for Prospera, although it's hard to understand why she's so harsh with *him*. Even the spirits seem to be in on Prospera's anti-man scheme, certainly appearing to enjoy all the mischief they cause.

Really, as soon as the shipwrecked men set foot on this woman-controlled island, they never had a chance.

Along with this change in the protagonist, the production's intentionally angular choreography was similarly awkward. The dancing, a sort of robotic ballet, seemed out-of-place for spirits who, at all other times, were graceful and characteristically spirit-like, and the choreography was paired with a bizarre mix of music, ranging from very simple guitar melodies to a dark tuba chorus to Björk. Having a variety of music is one thing, but these choices made for abrupt transitions that detracted from the light, fluid tone conveyed in other elements of the production. Also, the magical sound effects accompanying the waves of Prospera's glowing staff were clichéd for an otherwise serious production of *The Tempest*.

Other aspects of the show, however, were fitting for both the outdoor venue and the play itself. The stage and surrounding areas of the theater were draped in a vivid blue that enhanced the magical feel of the piece, and the heavy use of purples, blues, and greens in the costumes suggested the water and the island itself.

As Prospera, Jody Hovland embodied the scorned woman in every aspect. While watching her spirit servant Ariel complete her revenge-driven tasks, Hovland stood proudly with a look of tranquility and evident enjoyment. And when she spoke about the men, she recounted the past in a voice filled with disdain. Hovland played the role with a harshness that bordered on heartlessness, making her ultimate transition to a forgiving Prospera abrupt.

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Leigh Williams played Ariel, the spirit who carries out most of Prospera's plans. The role comes with a significant amount of singing, and Williams' clear voice, paired with a dramatic echoing effect, enhanced the otherworldly tone of the production. Paul Riopelle, as the jester Trinculo, was probably the most lively and polished performer on-stage. And as an innocent and naïve Miranda, Cristina Panfilio's performance was one of the most genuine in the production.

Riverside Theatre put its own twist on a Shakespeare classic with this production of *The Tempest*.

Yet while the strong anti-men vibe wasn't an altogether bad approach, it's certainly far from Shakespeare's original version.

*For tickets, call (319) 338-7672.*