

# LA STAGE TIMES

## COLUMNS

### Adapting *Saturday Night Fever*, Shakespeare and Seneca

by [Don Shirley](#) | June 10, 2013

Here they come. In LA theater, summer is now known primarily for two annual phenomena — lots of alfresco classics and of course the flood of indoor [Hollywood Fringe](#) productions. Summer hasn't even begun, technically speaking, and the Fringe doesn't officially open until this week. But some of the Fringe productions are already up, and the [Theatricum Botanicum](#) has officially launched the outdoor classics season.

However, before these phenomena inundate the theater scene, let's pause for a glance at three classics that have been innovatively adapted for indoor stages.



Lisa Valenzuela, Rick Batalla and Mike Sulprizio in Troubadour Theater Company's "A Midsummer Saturday Night's Fever Dream" at the Falcon Theatre. Photo by Chelsea Sutton.

First and foremost, [Troubadour Theater Company](#) has revived A *Midsummer Saturday Night's Fever Dream*. Born in 2000 but significantly revised for 2013, this blend of Shakespeare's most popular comedy and the disco-era strains of the *Saturday Night Fever* [soundtrack](#) opened at the Falcon over the weekend. The laughter has already reached fever pitch.

In many productions of Shakespeare's *Midsummer*, the laughs hit their apex by the end of the third act. We see the four lovers chasing each other through the woods, accompanied by Puck's

interventions and the transformation of Bottom into an ass. After the lovers' fates are resolved and Bottom is back to normal, the last extended segment of *Midsummer* — the fifth act, when the mechanicals perform their play about Pyramus and Thisbe for the three couples — can feel protracted and repetitive in lesser productions.

The Troubies get all the expected laughs — and then some — in the traditionally funniest part of the play. Those who know the Troubies need to know only that Rick Batalla plays the vain Bottom, Beth Kennedy plays the geeky Helena, Troubie director Matt Walker plays Puck and Quince, and Katherine Malak plays a hard-edged Hermia. Tyler King makes his Troubie debut as Lysander,

throwing himself into the physical stunts with aplomb. A former Troubie favorite, Joseph Leo Bwarie, returns to the Troubies after a long absence devoted to touring in *Jersey Boys*, in the role of a Demetrius who's as vain as Bottom. Sondheimaniacs will appreciate a couple of allusions to *Into the Woods*. On opening night, an audience member in the first row, dubbed "Yellow Pants" by the Troubies, contributed to the general comic mayhem, but who knows how he'll be replaced at subsequent performances.

The company didn't break for the intermission until just before that potentially anti-climactic fifth act. Immediately I wondered how the Pyramus and Thisbe material could possibly fill what feels like the entire second half of the show.



Matt Merchant and Matt Walker. Photo by Chelsea Sutton.

I need not have worried. The peak of this production's hilarity occurs after the intermission. I won't give away too many of the gags, but I'll say that the one device that sticks most clearly in my brain is an ingenious lion costume, designed by Sharon McGunigle and worn by Walker.

Also, in terms of simply revving up the audience, the rendition of Leroy Green's and Ron Kersey's "Disco Inferno" — one of the few songs from *Saturday Night Fever* that wasn't written by the Bee Gees — probably hasn't been topped in Troubie history. For that matter, Eric Heinly's four-piece band and Molly Alvarez's choreography propel the entire the entire production with irresistible drive.

Two wonderful cross-dressing performances occur in this production — the tall Rob Nagle (also one of the artistic directors of Antaeus Company) as Thisbe and the short Lisa Valenzuela as Starveling. Nagle not only gets some of the funniest sound-effects-aided screams I've heard in a Troubie show,

but he has also brought his pug dog Roosevelt into the action, [as he did last year](#) in *Two Gentlemen of Chicago*.

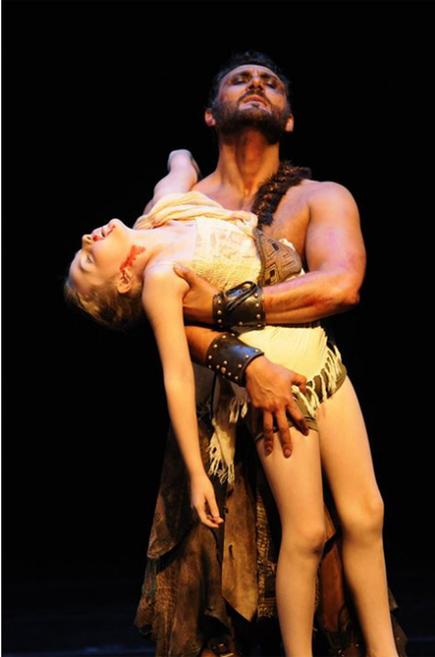
I'll be surprised if anything else I see this summer tops the ingenuity and sheer entertainment value of *A Midsummer Saturday Night Fever's Dream*.

***A Midsummer Saturday Night's Fever Dream*, Falcon Theatre, 4252 Riverside Drive, Burbank. Fri 8 pm, Sat 4 and 8 pm, Sun 4 and 7 pm. Closes July 7. [www.FalconTheatre.com](http://www.FalconTheatre.com). 818-955-8101. Also at the much larger, less intimate La Mirada Theatre, 14900 La Mirada Blvd., La Mirada, Fri July 14 8 pm, Sat July 15 2 and 8 pm, Sun July 15 2 pm. [www.lamiradatheatre.com](http://www.lamiradatheatre.com). 562-944-9801.**

[Seneca's \*Hercules Furens\*](#) is one of those classics that most of us have never seen on a stage. It's considered a classic primarily because of its antiquity rather than because of any consistent presence in the modern theatrical repertoire.

[Not Man Apart](#) is introducing it to us at [Miles Memorial Playhouse](#). NMA is the group best known for its highly choreographed adaptations of rather obscure Shakespeare plays — [Pericles Redux](#)

at the Kirk Douglas and [Titus Redux](#), also at the Douglas and later at LATC as part of RADAR L.A.



John Farmanesh-Bocca and Catherine Galanti in "Hercules Furens." Photo by Natalie Fong.

John Farmanesh-Bocca adapted and directed [Hercules Furens](#) and appears in the titular role (but in the cast list in the program, he uses the name John F. Bocca). He also choreographed, along with fellow cast member Jones Welsh and "NMA Co". And he's one of the sound designers, along with Adam Phalen, but the recorded music they use isn't attributed in the program.

*Titus Redux* explored post-traumatic stress disorder among American soldiers, using a contemporary setting. *Hercules Furens* continues that exploration, but this time the setting is the same as that of the original myth. The cast wears costumes associated with ancient Greek/Roman myth, and the choreography uses imposing positions that sometimes look like ancient sculptures becoming animated.

In this version, the half-mortal Hercules completes his heroic labors — ridding the ancient world of a dozen scourges — only to be lured by the scheming wife (Natacha Roi) of his immortal father Jupiter into momentary madness, during which he unwittingly kills

his own wife and two children. That's the PTSD link.

But the play actually seems more contemporary in an earlier scene, in which the Theban usurper Lycus, who has just deposed King Creon, woos the dead king's daughter — Megara (Courtney Munch), the wife of the absent Hercules. Played by Randolph Curtis Rand, Lycus wears a ridiculous-looking "turban" that makes him an almost funny caricature of a villain, and he uses nonsense phrases that sound brutally modern, with no apparent regard for how the gods might judge his actions.

In only this scene did the production resonate with me as *Pericles* and parts of *Titus Redux* did. Apollo Dukakis plays Amphytrion, Hercules' foster father who witnesses Lycus' abuse of Megara and later tries to provide a path forward for the grieving Hercules; his perspective also provides a path for modern audiences to enter the story more fully.

The rest of the production is well executed, but the herculean labors seem somewhat pre-packaged and predictable, compared to the scene mentioned above, in which we're not sure what might happen next. And with a running time of only 65 minutes, *Hercules Furens* occasionally looks more like a Classics Illustrated comic book than an actual classic.

You might say the same thing about Denise Devin's adaptation of Shakespeare's [Richard III](#) for [Zombie Joe's Underground Theatre Group](#). She has edited the Bard's second longest play down to only an hour.

I don't object to the severe editing per se. I've felt that many other productions of *Richard III* were too long and repetitive. And while seven out of 10 cast members play more than one role in Devin's staging, which can lead to some confusion, I've never seen a *Richard III* in which the story remained crystal-clear at all times.



W. Lochridge O' Bryan in "Richard III." Photo courtesy of Zombie Joe.

No, the problem here isn't the brevity — it's the relative lack of imagination. In my previous visits to Zombie Joe's, I've found visual flourishes that made me think anew about the material, even if it was as familiar as a Poe story or *Macbeth*. Not so with Devin's *Richard III*.

I do, however, applaud the casting of such veteran LA avant-garde actors as Tina Preston and Lee Kissman in this *Richard III*. It's fascinating to watch cutting-edge actors from an earlier generation work with their present-day counterparts.

***Hercules Furens*, Miles Memorial Playhouse, 1130 Lincoln Blvd., Santa Monica. Thu-Sat 8 pm, Sun 5 pm. Closes June 23. [www.notmanapart.com](http://www.notmanapart.com) or [www.brownpapertickets.com](http://www.brownpapertickets.com).**

***Richard III*, Zombie Joe's Underground Theatre, 4850 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood. Fri 8:30 pm, Sun 7 pm. Closes next Sunday. [Zombiejoes.homestead.com](http://Zombiejoes.homestead.com). 818-202-4120.**

