

A Whole Lotta Shakespearin' Goin' On

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LA's midsummer Shakespeare festival is bigger and better than ever this summer.

The Shakespeare Center has returned to summertime programming, this time in Brentwood. Crowds continue to stream into Griffith Park's Old Zoo for Independent Shakespeare Company's free fare. The Theatricum Botanicum is blossoming yet again. Smaller festivals and productions are cropping up here and there – including two fascinating takes on the Scottish Play within a few blocks of each other.

No one is marketing all this activity as one big, citywide festival. Perhaps it's too widespread, geographically, for that kind of marketing. But if you're an informed Shakespeare fan, you have more than enough options to put together your own festival, as you like it.

This brings us to the biggest Shakespearean news of the season – the return of the Shakespeare Center to summer activity with *As You Like It*, after two summers without a centerpiece alfresco production. This time the venue is the Japanese Garden on the grounds of the VA in Brentwood – another return for the troupe, which visited the same garden in 1994-1996 under the group's former name, Shakespeare Festival/LA.

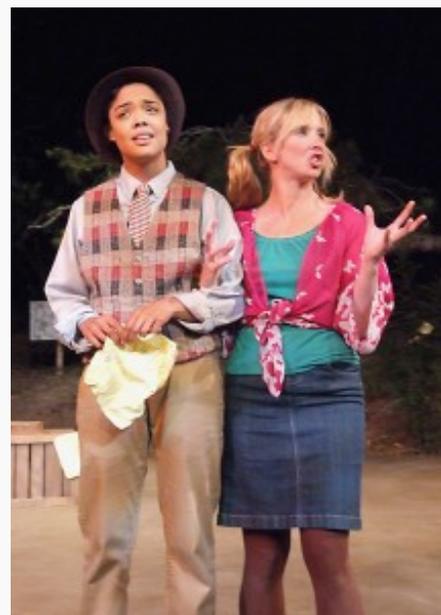
Stratford on VAvon.

That's how Donenberg described the Brentwood location in 1994. I haven't noticed the use of that nickname this year, but "Stratford on VAvon" is a lot easier to remember than "the Japanese Garden on the grounds of the VA West Los Angeles Healthcare Center Campus," which is how the venue is described in the program.

Whatever its name, it's a great place for a summertime idyll, located a few hundred yards north of the Brentwood Theatre, which became a rather well-known site among West Side theatergoers for a little more than a decade

beginning in 1997 and extending through 2008. However, unlike some of the previous users of the Brentwood, the Shakespeare Center offers free parking adjacent to Stratford VAvon.

Tessa Thompson and Lindsay Rae Taylor in "As You Like It"



On the other hands, the Shakespeare Center is no longer offering free general admission to the play itself (in its earlier incarnations, this policy was usually coupled with a plea to bring non-perishable food items for the homeless). Although active military, veterans and their families are still admitted free of charge (while supplies last, reservations required), regular ticket prices start at \$25.

But much of the audience gets at least one important amenity that has been missing from most of the company's previous, free productions. Behind three rows of flat seating at the front, on three sides of the stage, the rest of the seating is raked, using risers. Yes, this production comes with much better sightlines for the majority of the audience than could be found at the company's recent homes at the downtown cathedral plaza and Pershing Square.

At first it might seem repetitive for the company to return to *As You Like It* – which was also the subject of the company's last summertime production, back at the cathedral in 2009 – and with the same director, Kenn Sabberton. The composition of that previous cast, however, was quite different – it was an imported seven-actor ensemble from New York-based Aquila Theatre. This year's production has twice as many actors, working on an Equity contract, and many of them are LA-based, albeit with a sprinkling of previous Aquila actors.

The company's artistic director, Ben Donenberg, always likes to set his summertime productions in "Los Angeles" and "the present," and that's how the program identifies this

Diane Venora, Peter Cambor, Tony Abatemarco, Tessa Thompson and Michael Dorn



one. However, compared to many a production from his company or especially compared to Cornerstone Theater's *As You Like It: A California Concoction* (Pasadena Playhouse, 2006), this new *As You Like It* is surprisingly light on specific Southern California references. Of course, most of Holly Poe Durbin's costumes are contemporary, but the place names haven't been changed, nor did I notice a single skateboard.

No matter. Sabberton has assembled an accomplished cast, led by the ever-luminous Tessa Thompson – previously seen on many LA stages – as Rosalind and the dashing Peter Cambor – previously seen on few LA stages but a regular on the TV series *NCIS Los Angeles* – as Orlando. They make a sexy couple, especially during their rounds of role-playing in which she's pretending to be a man. John Lavelle keeps us watching

Touchstone even when we're not sure what he's talking about, and Tony Abatemarco does great quadruple duty as Adam, Corin, William and the priest who marries the couples at the end.

Diane Venora cross-dresses to play Jaques (which is spelled "Jacques" in the program, although the actors still pronounce it in the usual two-syllable "JAY-kweez" manner – go figure), but she otherwise doesn't do much of anything distinctive with the role, although she delivers the money lines very well.

The stark contrast between the court world and the forest is illustrated when the almost bare stage with a gold curtain dissolves into an atmospherically lit slope centered around an actual tree with a strangely horizontal main branch. Trevor Norton's lighting helps create the suggestion of a mini-Theatricum Botanicum.

***As You Like It*, Japanese Garden, VA grounds, enter from the north side of Wilshire Boulevard, just west of the 405, follow the signs. Tues-Sun 8 pm. Closes July 29. www.shakespearecenter.org. 800-838-3006.**

*****All *As You Like It* production photos by Ed Krieger**

The mantle of free and fully professional Shakespeare is now solidly on the shoulders of the Independent Shakespeare Company, in its encampment on the lawn near the Old Zoo on the east side of Griffith Park. Not surprisingly, it has quickly become the city's most popular Shakespearean locus. Recorded attendance at Saturday night's performance was 1,795 – which approaches the size of some of the audiences at the Ahmanson.

The first two of this year's three productions, *The Winter's Tale* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, are consistently better than what the company has previously staged in Griffith Park. At least for those of us within easy earshot of the stage, the productions emphasize – in accordance with the ISC aesthetic – creatively thought-out and clearly spoken smaller moments instead of big, imaginative concepts. Although some of the costumes look contemporary, ISC is – more than any other LA Shakespeare company – the place to go for lively and coherent but traditional interpretations, with no artificial amplification. The money is spent on the actors — \$120,000 in salaries and benefits this season – instead of design details or audience amenities.

Melissa Chalsma and David Melville in "The Winter's Tale"



Of course because it's all free, with no one compelled to make the after-show donations that are requested, it's not an ideal business model. So say the company's artistic director Melissa Chalsma and managing director David Melville – the mom-and-pop marrieds who also play some of the leading roles. They showed me around their temporary stage last week before one of the performances.

As the audiences grow, Chalsma and Melville are concerned about how to maintain the quality of the experience, especially for those near the back of the bigger crowds. They hope that one way to do this would be with a permanent stage, with permanent underground power cables attached to it.

Each summer, it takes four weeks for ISC to install the temporary stage and run power cables to it. Every night after the show, the cables are securely stowed away. This year's temporary stage is two feet higher than last year's and slightly angled at the back, which they hope helps project their voices to the back of the audience. Melville and Chalsma hope that a permanent stage, although it would lack a roof, would at least allow them to erect temporary lighting over the stage in order to enhance the views from the back, and perhaps it would also enhance the natural sound quality.

The stage they have in mind wouldn't be just for them – the Symphony in the Glen, which has presented concerts in the Old Zoo area, would also use it, as might other groups and even picnickers or yoga classes when it isn't in use by arts organizations. The hoped-for source of funding would be Proposition K, a voter-passed property tax assessment on city residents that was designed to generate \$25 million a year over 30 years for improvements and maintenance of city parks and recreation facilities. Four cycles of funding projects from Proposition K have already been authorized since 1997.



The proposal for a permanent stage has already begun a long route through various city panels and agencies, and ISC hopes its ardent fans will support the proposal at various opportunities along the way. Some opposition might arise from those who try to keep the park as development-free as possible. But one such group, Friends of Griffith Park, did not respond to my email last week requesting comment.

The ISC leaders point out that the Old Zoo lawn long ago left its natural state, so building a stage on it – without any permanent seating – wouldn't gobble up any additional untouched park land. And the underground installation of power cables would actually make their stage “less of an eyesore” than it is now, Melville notes.

Currently the company provides a few low-slung lawn chairs for more generous donors

and critics. I don't think anyone should complain if this service were expanded to the general public, with perhaps a small rental fee for the chairs. It might help encourage more focused attention from the audience. As it is, the comings and goings of picnickers right in front of the stage or alongside it can be somewhat distracting – although, during *The Winter's Tale* the other night, it didn't bother me much when a baby in the front row started crying, because it coincided perfectly with action involving a (fictional) baby in the play itself.

Julia Aks, Kelsey Porter, Lovelle Liquigan, Mary Claire Garcia, Ashley Nguyen as fairies and Melissa Chalsma as Titania in "A Midsummer Night's Dream"



So far this year, I've actually missed the sound of coyotes, who provided a couple of [aural grace notes](#) to the action last year. Melville speculated that perhaps because of the increasing recovery of the park interior from fire damage, the coyotes aren't venturing as far afield as they did last year.

Maybe the company should try having casting calls for coyotes. But let's not tell them about the Equity wages and benefits.

***The Winter's Tale* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Griffith Park Old Zoo lawn, near 4730 Crystal Springs Drive on the park's east side. In repertory, to be joined by *The Comedy of Errors* in August. Thur-Sun, 7 pm. (that's 7 pm). Through Sept.2. Free. www.independentshakespeare.com. 818-710-6306.**

*****All *The Winter's Tale* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* production photos by Grettel Cortes**

My favorite venue for summertime Shakespeare in LA remains the Theatricum Botanicum. None of the other facilities offers the same combination of a company with professional standards, plus fixed seating facing the mainstage with excellent sight lines and acoustics, plus panoramic views across a wide spectrum of hillside and dry stream bed, with staging areas on all sides for virtually in-the-round experiences. While Topanga Canyon isn't nearly as easily accessible as, say, Griffith Park, it's usually worth the trip.

Fortunately, the Theatricum's Shakespearean centerpiece this year is a *Measure for Measure* that manages to pull off a big directorial concept yet also serves to enhance our

appreciation of the original play. Director Ellen Geer plants the action in 1968 in “California”, but by California she doesn’t mean Fresno. She surrounds us with images and sounds of the protest movements of the era, which are an apt fit for a play about a society that’s chafing under seemingly arbitrary and harshly punitive laws.

Aaron Hendry plays the leader who places authority in the hands of his by-the-book deputy (Aaron Mondschein), who finds himself tempted by the sister (Willow Geer) of a man (Colin Simon) he has refused to

Melora Marshall and Willow Geer in "Measure for Measure"; photo by Ian Flanders



spare from the electric chair. Simply suspend any disbelief about whether someone in 1968 would have been sentenced to death for the crime of becoming an unwed father or for doing it with a woman of another race (the Supreme Court invalidated anti-miscegenation laws in 1967). If you can do that, you’ll probably go with the flow of the rest of this production, because it makes just about every corner of this somewhat problematic play quite clear.

There is a lot of space to fill on the Theatricum stage, and a cast of 49 (!), including eight Equity members, fills it admirably. Special kudos for Melora Marshall’s cross-dressing turn as the rascal Lucio, and for her singing early on, in a voice that sounds straight from the Topanga folkie tradition.

***Measure for Measure*, Theatricum Botanicum, 1419 N. Topanga Canyon Blvd., Topanga. Plays in rep through Sept. 1. www.theatricum.com. 310-455-3723.**

It was fascinating to see John Pielmeier’s adaptation of *The Exorcist* at Geffen Playhouse followed the next night by Jessica Kubzansky’s direction of *Macbeth* for Antaeus. The former seems to suggest that we in 2012 should take the devil seriously as a force for evil. The latter suggests that even centuries ago, when everyone believed in supernatural explanations of evil, reasons more rooted in human psychology were closer to the point.

Kubzansky begins the play

with a silent scene Shakespeare never wrote, in which Mr. and Mrs. Macbeth mourn the loss of a child at that child's funeral, with support from everyone who is anyone in King Duncan's court. Later, the few lines that suggest such an interpretation in the original text are given special care.

This *Macbeth* also tries to humanize the witches, presenting them as three gossipy older women instead of – booga-booga – scary supernatural creatures. They even show up as guests at the Macbeths' famous dinner party, although surely we're supposed to see this as another figment of Macbeth's imagination – along with those of his dead victims, who do not show up in corporeal form in this rendition.

Well, why not? *Macbeth* is open to many, many interpretations. That's part of its greatness. Of the two Antaeus casts, I saw the one with compact Bo Foxworth as a kind of Napoleonic Macbeth, Ann Noble as his wife and partner in crime and Peter Van Norden as King Duncan *and* the porter *and* Seyton (although apparently this porter is actually named Seyton). It was thoroughly absorbing and quite moving, and not only because the Macbeths seem a tad more human. James Sutorius is older than your average Macduff, but he made his speech after hearing grim news from the home front as poignant as any performance of it that I've ever seen.

Speaking of the many faces of *Macbeth*, just down the block from Antaeus is *Blood of Macbeth*, Zombie Joe's Underground Theatre's hour-long version that turns Macbeth (Michael Blomgren) into an inmate of what is apparently a prison in a future dystopian version of the San Fernando Valley. The witches — far from being gossipy old women — are scantily clad vixens and the only women in the play. That's right — Lady Macbeth is missing, but Macbeth himself attempts to fill in for her, cross-dressing and choosing a tiara instead of a crown.

I'm not sure if this is meant more

Bo Foxworth
and Ann Noble in
"Macbeth";
Photo by Daniel
Blinkoff



for laughs or for chills, but it gets quite a few of both reactions, thanks to the razor-sharp discipline of just about everyone on stage.

Finally, Classical Theatre Lab is offering an example of free alfresco Shakespeare on a much smaller scale than the larger companies. Tony Tanner has turned *The Merchant of Venice* into a musical, *Something in Silver*, performing in two West Hollywood parks. I saw it in the courtyard of the Great Hall in Plummer Park.

I was a big [fan](#) of Tanner's adaptation of *As You Like It* for the same group last summer, but this new production doesn't catch the essence of its play nearly as well as Tanner's last musical. It feels much more genteel (why the elegant '30s costumes unless you're going to make a connection to pre-Nazi Europe?) and less brutal than *The Merchant of Venice* should feel. And despite the intimacy of the space, some of the voices sounded excessively muffled, as they competed with noises from the neighborhood and the adjacent basketball court.

***Macbeth*, Antaeus at Deaf West Theatre, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood. rep. Thu-Fri 8 pm, Sat 2 and 8 pm, Sun 2 pm. Closes Aug 26. www.Antaeus.org. 818-506-1983.**

***Blood of Macbeth*, Zombie Joe's Underground Theatre, 4850 Lankershim Blvd, North Hollywood. Sat 8:30 pm, Sun 3 pm. Closes Aug 19. www.ZombieJoes.com. 818-202-4120.**

***Something of Silver*, Great Hall of Plummer Park, 7377 Santa Monica Blvd., West Hollywood, Sat-Sun 5 pm through July 29. Then at Kings Road Park, 1000 N Kings Rd., Sat-Sun 4 pm through Aug 19. Free. classicaltheatrelab@gmail.com. 323-960-5691.**

Michael Blomgren in "Blood of Macbeth"; Photo by Zombie Joe

