

LAWEEKLY

Summer Shakespeare Smackdown in NoHo: Respectable vs. Radical

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ZJU's Rafael Goldstein and Antaeus' Rob Nagle go mano-a-mano.

Michelle Pullman

Why the works of William Shakespeare should be associated with the summer months is anyone's guess. Beyond having written *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Winter's Tale*, there is scant evidence to support any seasonal preference on the Bard's part when it comes to staging his plays. What is certain is that, here in Los

Angeles, no sooner does the smoke of Independence Day sparklers settle than fireworks of a more Elizabethan flavor begin in earnest.

For aficionados of Bard alfresco, the season has already reaped several crowd and critic pleasers -- a Summer of Love-set [Measure for Measure](#) from director Ellen Geer at Topanga Canyon's venerable [Will Geer Theatricum Botanicum](#) and director Sanford Robbins' suitably cool [Winter's Tale](#) at the Independent Shakespeare Company's [Griffith Park Free Shakespeare Festival](#) at the old L.A. Zoo.

Meanwhile, high in the San Rafael Hills above Pasadena, La Cañada Flintridge Shakespeare Festival upstart [VanguardRep](#) is unveiling director Matthew Kellen Burgos' three-person, deconstructed spin on star-crossed love in *Juliet and Her Romeo*.

This season, however, the attention of summer-stage oddsmakers is focused on the Lankershim Boulevard theater district, where a pair of celebrated companies and critically lauded woman directors have NoHo stages awash with blood in what amounts to dueling productions of two titanic Shakespearean tragedies.



Nagle, Jessica Kubzansky, Denise Devin and Goldstein make nice.

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This past weekend, director Denise Devin was first into the ring with [Zombie Joe's Underground's](#) radically trimmed production of *Hamlet*. Yesterday, the [Antaeus Company](#) was set to enter swinging with director and Boston Court co-artistic director Jessica Kubzansky's much-anticipated, full-text staging of *Macbeth*.

While more of a David vs. David contest than David vs. Goliath -- both houses boast seating in the midrange of studio-theater capacity -- the two companies are almost absurdly situated at opposite ends of small theater's aesthetic spectrum. Antaeus, L.A.'s premier actor-driven, classical stage company, with a roster of talent that reads like a heavyweight who's-who of stage and screen veterans, is nothing if not steeped in tradition and blue-chip respectability. The fiercely iconoclastic ZJU, on the other hand, with its closet-sized, clamp-lamp-lit stage and no-frills, hourlong productions of Grand Guignol horror mash-ups and original punk-poetic hyper-melodramas, may be the L.A. theater equivalent of The Ramones.



Kubbzansky and Devin, eye to eye

Michelle Pullman

where the two companies may most see eye-to-eye and meet toe-to-toe is on the Bard. On a recent afternoon, I sat down with the directors and stars of both productions, who all agreed on two crucial points: Staging any Shakespeare begins with a fundamental respect for the text; and the emotional key to

both *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* is found in the family.

At its heart, Devin insists, *Hamlet* is really just a story about family. "They [do not exist] within the normal boundaries that the rest of us live in, but it's a family drama," she says. "You know, there's the loss of a parent, there's the remarriage and there's the confusion that results in all that as people realign their place in the family. ... It's a dysfunctional family, if you will."

Devin, who last year staged a well-received, albeit radically abbreviated *Romeo and Juliet* as well as an award-winning, chopped-down *Tartuffe*, laughs when asked how she managed to get her 120-minute cut of Shakespeare's four-and-a-half-hour-plus tragedy past ZJU's strictly enforced, rapid-fire runtimes. "It is violating the one-hour rule, yes," she grins. "We're doing two hours. But the man himself, [ZJU artistic director] Zombie Joe, said, 'Denise, do the two hours.'"

The special dispensation is in honor of ZJU's 20th anniversary, which it's celebrating this year. But it's also a measure of the artistic self-confidence and maturity the theater group has developed since its debut in a San Fernando Valley garage with anarchic performances that featured smashing TV sets onstage. "So this [*Hamlet*] isn't a traditional Zombie Joe spin, if there is such a thing [here] as traditional," Devin explains. "This one stays within the bounds of [Shakespearean] tradition, but I think even with that, we take as many risks as we can, actingwise."



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The lion's share of those risks fall on the shoulders of Devin's movie-star-handsome, 26-year-old Hamlet -- Rafael Goldstein -- who was singled out last year for his fiery, translucent performances as first Mercutio and, later in the run, a replacement Romeo in ZJU's *Romeo and Juliet*. For Goldstein, tackling what is widely

considered the most challenging part in the entire Shakespeare canon is a daunting proposition. "I'm trying to just approach it as any other role," he explains. "Which is difficult, because it's so much a part of the collective unconscious -- people who have never read the play or seen Shakespeare know it. ... To do my work and mine the text," he shrugs. "Figure out who this person is in my head."

The Antaeus *Macbeth* also marks a two-decade anniversary of sorts. For co-artistic director Rob Nagle, who will be starring as the title Thane in one of the double-cast production's twin ensembles, it is the culmination of a 20-year-plus love affair that dates to seeing 1988's Kenneth Frankel-/Zoe Caldwell-directed *Macbeth* with Christopher Plummer and Glenda Jackson in Baltimore.



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"For some reason," Nagle says, "[the play] settled in me in a really intimate place."

That discovery led the then bantam-aged actor to recklessly step out of his undergraduate weight class and

attempt the role as "a fledgling" in a college production when he was 20. The experience only whetted his ardor. Then, after being elevated last summer from the Antaeus ensemble to its current artistic-directing triumvirate, Nagle realized that maturity, craft and opportunity had finally all coincided. Or at least his wife, Heather, did. "She was there when I was 20 and trying to do it," he recalls. "And she said, "It's time. It's time for you to revisit it."

Nagle eventually picked up the gauntlet. "[The play] resonates for me in a deeper way than it ever could have when I was 20 or 21," he says. "I wouldn't even have understood what marriage was then. I had no idea. Or a relationship. 'The dearest partner in greatness' [speech] -- which comes out of the letter that Lady Macbeth reads [from Macbeth] -- it's a huge thing to me," he adds. "It's beyond the relationships that I usually read about. Now I understand what that means -- what partnerships mean, whether they be working relationships or love relationships or even as you develop your relationships with your parents."

It was this insight into the play's relationship dynamics that ultimately persuaded Kubzansky to climb into the actor's corner as director. It's also at the heart of a staging that both Nagle and Kubzansky promise will not be your run-of-the-mill "butcher king and fiendlike queen."

"The thing I'm really passionate about and really interested in [is that] this is a play about parents and children," Kubzansky explains. "One of the things incredibly important to me about it is actually that the Macbeths have just lost a child. And that a lot of the decisions they make, I think, happen because they are grief-struck and half out of their minds with pain."



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NoHo-style, no-holds-barred Thane vs. Dane

Nagle emphatically agrees. "We were on the same page with one of the essential things," he says, "which is I'm not interested in seeing evil people committing evil acts. I want to see what drives good people to these things."

ZJU's [Hamlet](#) runs through Aug. 12; Antaeus' [Macbeth](#) runs through Aug. 26 at [Deaf West's Theater](#) which it's currently leasing.

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