

The Barnstable Patriot

SHAKESPEARE'S SWEET, SWEET DREAM AT ELEMENTS THEATRE

Written by John Watters, *Barnstable Patriot*

A royal treatment in Orleans

William Shakespeare was born 450 years ago next April, and to celebrate the Bard's birthday Elements Theatre Company is kicking off a year-long presentation of his works. Starting the party early, they are staging a truly mystical and magical *Midsummer's Night Dream* on their Paraclete House stage at Rock Harbor in Orleans.

The theater wing of the Community of Jesus's Gloria Dei Artes Foundation, Elements Theatre's repertory stage company always delivers top-notch productions of the works of playwrights A. R. Gurney, Dickens, Faust, Simon, Wilde, and the like. This is not their first staging of Shakespeare, but it could very well be their best.

Setting the stage in three-quarter round, the production is intimate and imaginative with the famed Fairies' glen tucked into modern-day Central Park. With colorful streamers and Chinese lanterns descending from above, an ethereal otherworld is exquisitely conjured. Filling the beautiful costumes is a remarkably talented cast of actors who breathe articulate life into each line of Shakespeare's poetic prose.

The play, written in the mid-1590s, is one of Shakespeare's earliest comedies. The mid-night tale of Fairy King Oberon and his Queen Titiana's struggling over a young boy evolves into a complex story of would-be relationships that may or may not come to fruition. As youthful lovers strain to find each other, they become entangled in the whimsical sorcery that must be untangled by dawn's light.

Director Sr. Danielle Dwyer uses a deft hand to create a quickly moving montage of scenes. With a few simple set pieces carried on and off she never lets the play drag through scene changes. Her cast is well studied and sharply honed to present an impeccable Shakespearean piece.

Brad Lussier plays both the Athenian Duke Theseus and Oberon with a regal touch throughout. Not over-spilling emotion, he tries mightily to control the lives of the mortals and immortals in his sphere of influence.

Hippolyta and Titiana are played by Ellen Ortolani. As the soon to be Duke's wife or the Queen of the spirit world, Ortolani shows a luminous gracefulness.

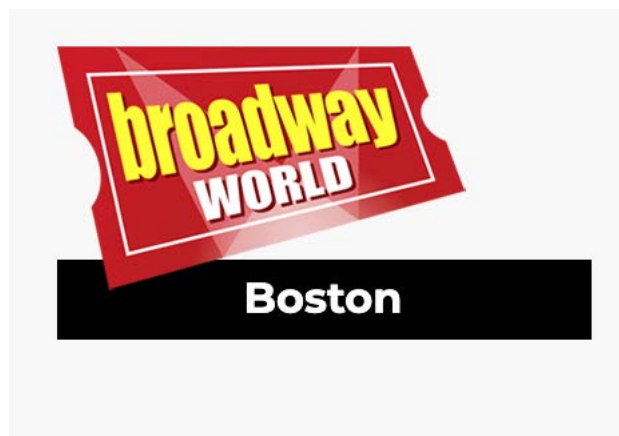
Kate Shannon is wonderful as Puck. With impish blunder she mixes up who she was supposed to spell and must work feverishly to undo her mistake.

Lindsey Kanaga, Sarah Hale, Kyle Norman and Jeremy Haig play the quartet of star-crossed lovers Hermia, Helena, Lysander and Demetrius perfectly.

Stealing the show's laughs is Br. Stephen Velie, who in an overzealous attempt to play all the roles in a theater production to be presented at the Duke's wedding literally makes an ass of himself as Bottom. His comical death scene had the audience rolling in the aisles.

Everyone from fanatics about the Bard to those uninitiated in his wonders couldn't do better than catching this production.

Sweet, sweet dreams at Elements Theater Company.



ELEMENTS COMBINE FOR WONDERFUL CAPE GETAWAY

By Nancy Grossman, *Broadway World*

All of the stress of spending three and a half hours in Saturday traffic bound for Cape Cod melted away in short order after a warm welcome from the staff of Elements Theatre Company and their B&B-style guest house adjacent to Rock Harbor in Orleans. Separated from the road by a wide expanse of green lawn and a driveway of crushed white seashells, the sprawling two-story cape has been lovingly restored and updated to accommodate visitors to the Church of the Transfiguration and the Community of Jesus, an ecumenical Christian community in the Benedictine monastic tradition. Founded in 1992, Elements Theatre Company is a resident ensemble made up of members of the community which performs year-round at Paraclete House on the church grounds.

Kicking off a year-long tribute to William Shakespeare, Elements is performing *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for two weekends (remaining shows are August 16, 17, and 18 at 7:30 pm), followed by an educational tour in New York City, a sonnet project (*The Word Made Flesh*) to record all 154 of Shakespeare's sonnets, and a full-scale production of *King Lear* next summer. Thanks to Set Designers Sarah Andre and Sr. Sarah Allen and their set construction and set painting crews, a large hall at Paraclete House is magically converted into a modern day New York City apartment and Central Park. A painted backdrop evokes the city skyline upstage, while a raised, circular synthetic grass-covered platform, under a ring of streamers and paper lanterns suspended from the ceiling, serves as the park. It is at once festive and simple, with additional atmosphere provided by dry ice fog and the sound of chirping birds. Costumes are artfully designed (by Amy Mitchell, Mary French, and Gail Gibson) and constructed in-house.

Director Sr. Danielle Dwyer has made *Dream* accessible by choosing to set the story in modern day New York. It works well for distinguishing between the two locales: the court of

Theseus, Duke of Athens, and the woods, home to a band of fairies ruled over by King Oberon and Queen Titania. Many in the cast play dual roles, first representing a character in the court, and then appearing as the mirror image in the woods. The members of an acting troupe known as The Mechanicals also play Titania's fairy servants; as such, they wear the most colorful costumes of tights and tulle, with funky headpieces, and speak in the style of verse called "catalectic trochaic tetrameter" which sounds like harmonic buzzing.

Brad Lussier gives a nuanced performance as the autocratic Duke and the softer Oberon. While her Hippolyta stands in the shadows of Theseus, Ellen Ortolani dives into the role of the free-spirited Titania and makes a splash. Rachel McKendree is appropriately strident as Egea, mother to Hermia, but down-to-earth as Peter Quince, the leader of The Mechanicals. Of the four young lovers, Sarah Hale (Helena) is the most natural and consistent, and Kyle Norman (Lysander) is ardent and likable. Jeremy Haig (Demetrius) is rather wooden and Lindsey Kanaga (Hermia) is convincing, but sometimes shrill. Kate Shannon transforms from Theseus' uptight aide-de-camp Philostrate into Oberon's servant Puck, but her choice to play the fairy not so much as an imp, but more like an ogre didn't work for me.

Br. Stephen Velie is a standout as Bottom and pumps air into every scene in which he appears. His physicality, comedic skills, and ability to project add to his presence. He shares great chemistry with the other Mechanicals, especially Peter Haig (Flute), a clear audience favorite when he takes the stage dressed in drag as Thisbe and cavorts in red high-heeled shoes. Sr. Phoenix Catlin and Stephanie Haig, who are also credited with selecting the music for the production, round out the troupe, along with Chipper the dog. Numerous musical excerpts are from Felix Mendelssohn, with additional pieces by Grieg, Mozart, Chopin, Britten, Ravel, and Beethoven, to name a few. The entire company participates in a joyous finale of *The Weasley Stomp* from *Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince* by Nicholas Hopper.

A Midsummer Night's Dream is an excellent choice for a summer production at a venue by the shore. This was my first experience with Elements Theatre Company and their professionalism and commitment to their craft are unmistakable. Theirs is a labor of love, stemming from their ecumenical foundation and their beliefs, as well as their mission to explore existential questions through the art of storytelling before an audience. Combining the elements of hard work and love of what they are doing results in a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. Add in the culinary artistry of the pre-show dinner and the friendly, relaxed atmosphere, and the total package is a worthwhile Cape getaway.



CAPE COD TIMES

HEX IN THE CITY

By Lee Roscoe, *Cape Cod Times*

Elements Theatre Company has made Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream" new, fresh, majestic and magical.

Director Danielle Dwyer sets the piece in present-day New York City, a very original, yet very Elizabethan, take on the witchery of the fairy world, and it works perfectly.

Most of the actors in this Shakespeare cast speak with superb clarity and the words, as actor Brad Lussier (Oberon/Theseus) noted at a talk-back Friday night, create the action and character. More than mere declaration, the actors show they believe in the reality of their situations — the pain, anger, frustration — and this ability, along with an abundance of excellent physical theater, makes the comedy come alive.

It's a typical convoluted Shakespeare plot: Hermia wants to marry Lysander against her mother's wishes. Mother pleads with Theseus, the not-so-modest king of Athens, to prevent the marriage. Hermia and Lysander decide to elope, ending up in the fairyland of the woods.

Meanwhile, Hermia's best friend, Helena, loves Demetrius, who loves Hermia and hates Helena. As Helena pursues Demetrius, they too end up in the midnight woodlands. At the same time, a troupe of "rude mechanicals," workingmen turned actors, rehearses a play in the same fairy woods.

Also there is Oberon, the King of Shadows (or fairies), who has argued with his stubborn Queen Titania (Ellen Ortolani) over a changeling he wants as his page. Titania is surrounded by an eerie, chanting entourage of the spirits of plants and cobwebs. Oberon summons his indentured sprite Puck (played more as demon than angel by Kate Shannon) to find the proper herbs with which to cast spells. Those herbs wreak havoc not just on Titania, but on everyone in the woods that night. "Reason and love keep little company," notes Bottom, one of the workers.

Sarah Hale portrays Helena's unrequited love and maidenly outrage with hilarious credibility. Lysander (Kyle Norman) and Demetrius (Jeremy Haig) pull off nastiness while still somehow maintaining their gallantry. But the two most charismatic performers are Lussier and then Stephen Velie as Bottom, providing a vivid counterbalance of dark magic and light buffoonery.

The play offers indelible poetry, such as when Puck says, "Lord, what fools these mortals be." Or when Oberon gives one of my favorite speeches ever, the one that includes "I know a place where the wild thyme grows."

With the Elements production, the somewhat institutional theater-in-the-round is made intimate, transformed by streamers, colored lanterns, fog and imaginative costumes of regal greens and purples.

Come and be enchanted.