

## National Operatic & Dramatic Association London Region

Society : Shinfield Players  
Production : The Tempest  
Date : Friday 24<sup>th</sup> November  
Venue : Shinfield Players Theatre  
Report by : Nick Humby

### Show Report

#### Overall Production Impression

Shakespeare's last play solo play, The Tempest presents a big challenge for Amateur Dramatic societies with its magical island setting, strange or drunken characters and underlying theatricality which points to the author's retirement. At its heart is a tale of revenge and romance under the watchful and powerful force of Prospero and his magical servant, Ariel. As with all Shakespeare plays the key to the success is speaking the verse with the correct iambic pentameter so that the audience can easily tune in to the language and follow the story.

Shinfield Players and their director rose to this challenge well with an excellent versatile Island setting, interesting use of shadow puppets, a delightful soundtrack of voices, music and sound effects and some wonderful costumes and make up to define the characters. The opening storm scene was rather chaotic with overly dramatic action, far too bright lighting and too many shouted lines and much of language was lost but once they arrived on the Island the cast settled into a more considered calmer and clearer delivery of the verse.

The leading actors as Prospero and Ariel were magnificent complementing each other well and both creating magical stage presences, controlling the action, and orchestrating the chaos and ultimately resolving the conflict to a satisfactory outcome. So, when Prospero asks the audience to "release me from my bands, with the help of your good hands" and "Let your indulgence set me free", the audience readily celebrate their performances.

## Cast

**Mike Huxtable** dominated the stage as Prospero, the exiled Duke of Milan, capturing brilliantly the character's vengeful actions, care for his daughter, and gradual reconciliation. He looked every inch the part in the wonderful white tunic and white beard and spoke the lines perfectly with a strong clear rhythmic voice and projection, and good control even when he raised his voice in anger. There was an air of Derek Jacobi in the performance which helped sell the spell binding performance.

He was supported and matched by a wonderful **Lydia Stubbins** as the mystical spirit, Ariel. The character was cleverly defined by the magnificent face and neck makeup and well-chosen costume including excellent use of feathers and this transformation assisted immensely the characterisation. **Stubbins** moved with a flowing elegance, used the rocks and stumps well to give height variation and in doing so created this magical creature without the need to actual fly! The business of imitating voices was very well handled. She spoke the words with a light lyrical delivery that created an air of enchantress. And I was completely enchanted.

**Amy Taulbut's** Miranda by contrast was a quiet gentle young innocent girl, clearly signalling boredom to her father's long narrative setting speech but blossoming well into a besotted woman as we see her fall in love with Ferdinand. Occasionally lines were rushed or whispered so they were hard to hear clearly but **Taulbut** should grow in confidence from this performance and take the experience forward into her next Shinfield production!

Ferdinand was played by **Nick Gallo** and captured the sense of a "goodly person" and a "thing divine" and convinced that he had fallen for Miranda. He used facial expressions well to enhance his performance and sell his lines but there could have been more variation in the performance to convince us he was a bold and brave soldier or that he was overwhelmed to be reunited with his father. He was at his best in opening Act 2 when his relationship with Miranda flourished.

King Alonso, played by **Chris Pett** delivered his lines with a strong clear voice and conveyed the sense of being a broken man after the shipwreck and loss of his son. There could have been changes in intonation to express grief, joy and



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present him at times more as the King. Well done for tackling Shakespeare for the first time.

**Caroline White and Justin Wells** made a good double act as Trinculo and Stephano making the most of the comical opportunities. **White's** west country burr and costume positioned her as of a lower social status and her reactions to the "smell of fish" and to the "liar calling" business were very good. **Wells's** too was wonderfully comical as the drunken servant but managed to ensure he delivered the verse well with bold clear tone to his voice.

The double act of **Debora Rochfort** and **Adam Wells** as Sebastian (brother to Alonso) and Antonio (usurper and brother of the Duke of Milan) may have suffered a little from the late replacement. They both spoke the lines well, but we never got a sense of their status in the society or their relationship with Alonso or Prospero. **Rochfort** had a good physicality to her performance and reacted well in some of the asides to privately express her thoughts. **Wells** grew in confidence as play progressed and used his hands well to illuminate and explain his words.

**Ken Deeks** as Gonzalo was strong and clear, once they were marooned on the Island where the calmer, cooler and better paced delivery showed authority and status after the rushed and manic storm scene.

**Neil Pudgen's** Caliban certainly presented as strange creature with the strong black make up on his face, hands and bare feet suggesting a less than human character. His aggressive early tone seemed at odds with the subservient personality who is meekly seduced by those he meets. The rap of "isle is full on noises" speech was well delivered and effective.

**Alex Hobbs** had the inevitable task of Boatswain with a long gap between the opening scene and the final scene appearances! He delivered his lines in the final Act very clearly before making a rather sheepish exit!

## Creatives

Director **Adam Wells** showed he had a clear vision for the play with some creative ideas (like an effective shadow show) to provide variation and good use of the full stage including the apron wings and auditorium exit helping to give a sense of location. The use of the rocks and stumps to vary heights was very successful and the entrance to the Cell at rear of stage worked well. The blocking throughout was done well with good sight lines to each character although occasionally cast members spoke upstage making it harder to hear and impossible to see their facial expressions. The strange characters used to set and strike the untouched banquet did feel a little odd and it was unclear whether they were theatrical stagehands, animals, or dark spirits. There could have been a stronger differentiation in the status of the Nobles, and it was noticeable and slightly odd that some lost their jackets, some had them undone and some remained buttoned up. Was this to symbolise the degree to which their motives were revealed? The opening storm scene was ineffective with the lighting revealing the Island set and virtually all the lines being lost in frantic action. Choreographer **Imogen Lilley**, I imagine, oversaw the movement including that of Ariel which was hugely successful and the stagehand creatures' balletic actions (for which I was distracted by wondering what they were).

Stage Management under **Sam Turner** worked very smoothly with the screens covering gliding up and down, the door to auditorium being well managed for entrances and smooth transitions between scenes.

Lighting and Sound Design **Matt Chishick , Graeme Rhodes, and Phil Gowen** was generally very good. The underscore and voice over effects were very well done and added immensely to the atmospheric setting on the Island. The doubling up of Ariel's voiceover and her spoken lines gave an eerie quality to the speech. The opening scene (even with the pre-show) could have had much tighter lighting on the wheel and improved by being backed by a sail to give a better sense of on-board ship and reflect the lightning flashes. It is normal practice to warn about strobe lighting for the later scene, but it did make for an effective moment. The closing fade worked very well.



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Costumes and Props **Millie Naylor and Cate Naylor** were very good. Prospero tunic was magnificent and was enhanced by the green cape (although the hood did seem to cover his eyes at times!) Ariel too was a very well-coordinated outfit with clever touches. The red army tunic and black noble tunics with red lining were well chosen and looked good. The props looked appropriate with a good banquet spread, realistic looking pistol, and bottles. The apple sounded hollow when it was dropped!

Hair and Makeup **Millie Naylor and Amy Taulbut** was another huge success especially Ariel's face and neck make up which was outstanding. The very detailed dramatic make up on Caliban and his two-tone wig were, I am sure, a deliberate choice but were less successful in defining his character as a feral savage and made him look, to me, like a cross between a tree and a clown!

Set construction by **Di Capel, Natalie Clarke , Sam Turner, Yvonne Mitchell , Steve King , Dave Capel, Alex Turner, and Steven Toon** created a very good Island setting with good coordinated and practical elements. The wooden portals framed the action, and the rocks and stumps were effective devices for varying heights and location.

Programme by **Caroline White** was clean and well produced with an excellent cover design, good quality photography and interesting content on set and costume design, giving good exposure and credit to the backstage team. As always **Front of House** made it a very welcoming venue from Box office staff, to raffle seller and usher.

Tackling Shakespeare is a bold choice as the language is challenging and most people have seen versions of the show before. Even Professional companies sometimes don't get it right, witness Kenneth Branagh's King Lear in West End at the moment. However, Shinfield players are fortunate to have a director with a good coherent vision for the show and two performers for the central characters of Prospero and Ariel who spoke the lines well and carried the audience successfully through a very good production.

Thank you

**Nick**

Nick Humby - NODA Representative - London Region - District 14