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YEONG-LUNG YANG

The 1920s era is the setting for South Shore Theatre Experience's "The Taming of the Shrew," which moves from Babylon in July to Lindenhurst in August.

The changing of the Bard

Shakespeare gets shaken up with modern twists in local productions of his classics

BY JIM MERRITT
 Special to Newsday

Shakespeare is taking a dramatic leap into the 21st century this summer in local theater productions that update two of the Bard's no-holds-barred comedies for modern sensibilities.

South Shore Theatre Experience of Lindenhurst is taming the misogynistic "The Taming of the Shrew" for the #MeToo era and Eastline Theatre in Wantagh is making some relationship changes to the course of true love in "A Midsummer Night's Dream."

"Midsummer" is going to have

lovers that are either transgender or are same sex," said director Danny Higgins of Malverne.

Hofstra drama professor Royston Coppenger said Shakespeare might not have objected to such changes because he "loved to write plays in which something happens that destabilizes the world."

And while Elizabethan-era groundlings may have applauded the psychological and physical tortures on taming Katherine, the titular "Shrew," times have changed. As originally written, "one of the methods used to tame her is a lot of sexual violence," said Thaddeus Plezia of West Babylon, directing South Shore's production at parks in Babylon and Lindenhurst throughout July and August. "Obviously, that can't be performed in 2019 — that would be terrible."

'A Midsummer Night's Dream' and 'Macbeth'

WHEN | WHERE ("Midsummer") Aug. 9, 11, 17, 18, 23 and 25; "Macbeth" Aug. 10, 11, 16, 18, 24 and 25 (call for show times), Eastline Theatre, 2123 Wantagh Ave., Wantagh
INFO \$22, \$18 seniors, \$15 students for one show, \$40 adults, \$30 seniors for both; 516-749-5047, eastlineproductions.com

'The Taming of the Shrew'

WHEN | WHERE 6:30 p.m. Wednesday and Aug. 11 and 14 (rain date: Aug. 18), Town Square and Gazebo, 132 N. Wellwood Ave., Lindenhurst
INFO Free; 631-669-0506, southshoretheatre.com

'The Tempest'

WHEN | WHERE 8 p.m. Friday, Suffolk County Vanderbilt Museum, 180 Littleneck Rd., Centerport
INFO \$20, \$15 ages 12 and younger, 516-557-1207, carriagehouseplayers.org

'As You Like It'

WHEN | WHERE 7:30 p.m. Friday

and Saturday and Aug. 1, 2 and 3; 2 p.m. Sunday, Theatre Box, 35 Verbena Ave., Floral Park
INFO \$17, \$12 seniors and \$7 ages 18 and younger; 516-900-2031, theatrebox.org

'Measure for Measure'

WHEN | WHERE 7 p.m. Saturday, East End Arts Council, Riverhead; 7 p.m. Tuesday, Shorefront Park Bandshell, Smith Street, Patchogue; 7:30 p.m. Aug. 1, Train Park, Route 112 and Route 347, Port Jefferson Station; 7 p.m. Aug. 2-4, Mitchell Park, Front Street, Greenport
INFO Free; 631-765-1409, northeaststage.org

'A Midsummer Night's Dream' and 'Richard III'

WHEN | WHERE ("Midsummer") 7:30 p.m. Aug. 23, ("Richard III") 7:30 p.m. Aug. 24, Agawam Park, Main Street, Southampton
INFO Free; 718-729-8567, hiptohip.org

Shakespeare Festival productions and helmed an all-female "King Lear" in Los Angeles.

In his production, Higgins said, "there is only one couple in the entire 'Midsummer' ordeal that is traditional. Lysander and Hermia is male-female." While he didn't set out to make the play about "gender reversal," Higgins said the "in-your-face" changes came about because he decided to cast actors "who could present the character more truly, regardless of their sex or race or anything else."

As a result, he said, "you are going to see a woman Oberon kissing a female Titania."

He said that audiences should take away a message that "it doesn't matter what your gender is or if you are transitioning genders or are straight or gay or black, love is love."

Not everyone is brushing up their Shakespeare in a nontraditional way. Northeast Stage in Greenport, which is doing "Measure for Measure," found that Shakespeare's themes are as timely as ever. The comedy "is already about #MeToo, and that was the reason we picked it," said Colin Palmer, director of the production being done starting Saturday through Aug. 4 at parks in Riverhead, Patchogue and Port Jefferson. Palmer said the plot about "a powerful man who tells a woman that he won't execute her brother if she sleeps with him" is so "incredibly relevant, we haven't had to change any of the action."



Sinead Atkinson, left, and Lynda Gaug rehearse for "A Midsummer Night's Dream" in Wantagh.

WOMAN POWER

Plezia reset the action from 16th century Padua, Italy, to America's 1920s women's suffrage era.

"I've been working with the actress who's playing Katherine to make the role more of an empowering female by the end instead of a destroyed, obedient girl," he said.

In this updated script, "Petruchio takes a less violent route" and instead plays "witty mind games" with Katherine. In another break from Shakespearean tradition, Plezia said, "There's no spanking scene."

SOCIAL COMMENTARY

The fantastical world of "A Midsummer Night's Dream" is frequently used to make comments about current society, said Copenhager, who has directed Hofstra's

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