

Nashville Scene

Original songs enliven this summer's Shakespeare in the Park offering

Shake That Speare!

by MARTIN BRADY

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Shakespeare in the Park is celebrating its silver anniversary with yet another production in which the Bard gets cloaked in ways that defy conventional expectations and enhance the open-air theatrical experience.

This season's selection, *Much Ado About Nothing*, is a witty romance whose entertainment value — read: accessibility — is ripe for lighthearted adaptation. Director Denice Hicks scores big with this idea, serving up a colorful, musicalized, 1940s-themed version that is consistently engaging and exploits the many talents of a hard-working cast.

It's arguable that composers like Leonard Bernstein (*West Side Story*) and Cole Porter (*Kiss Me, Kate*) have done as much as anyone to help Shakespeare's standing with the average theatergoer. We always relate to music; iambic pentameter can be a tougher sell. In that spirit, Hicks commissioned original songs from Janet McMahan and David Huntsinger. The lively, well-integrated numbers are cleverly crafted, with challenging rhymes that usually work and a style that fits with the play's gaily imposed post-World War II time frame.

That's not to overlook the poetic dialogue, of course. Hicks' strong and varied ensemble — comprising NSF veterans and sundry newcomers — proves more than capable with the script's playful, gently sarcastic verbiage, which leads to a satisfying and happy ending. The players bring plenty of energy and attitude to their robust tasks, which include the elocution and singing, of course, but also the execution of choreographer Pam Atha's swinging dance moves.

Patrick Waller and Evelyn O'Neal Brush are the saucy leads, Benedick and Beatrice, and they are well-matched in every way. Together or solo, they effectively deliver the show's most pertinent original tunes, "You're Way Too Wicked to Woo," "That's the Day I'll Marry" and "I Will Be Horribly in Love."

Martha Wilkinson, Jeff Boyet, Brad Brown and Emily Webb offer excellent support, while Randall Lancaster as Dogberry and Phil Perry as Verges manage to evoke well-deserved laughter with their clownish antics.

Vanderbilt sophomore Steven Fiske makes his NSF debut a successful one as young lover Claudio, and Emily Marie Palmer as Hero, the object of his affection, is also very appealing.

The play's look, if not quite Hollywood Technicolor, is bright and sharp, with natty costumes by June

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Much Ado About Nothing
Presented by Nashville
Shakespeare Festival
Through Sept. 16 at
Centennial Park Band Shell

Kingsbury, a snappy set design by Jonathan Hammel and MadeFirst, and Anne Willingham's complementary lighting.

Musical director Ben Van Diepen leads the onstage "supper-club band," a quintet that cooks all night long.

For pure people-pleasing, this production might be NSF's best in many a summer moon.

Skin deep

The only bad news about newly formed Kirk-Burgess Productions' staging of *Mysterious Skin* is that the show closed after but three performances last weekend at Darkhorse Theater.

L.T. Kirk and Jonathan Burgess' co-direction of Prince Gomolvilas' adaptation of the Scott Heim novel — a searing tale of small-town dysfunction and the devastating effects of sexual abuse — was well-paced and offered terrific acting opportunities for cast members who merit more exposure. That includes young Burgess, a college undergrad at the University of Memphis, whose performance as a gay sex hustler appropriately evoked his character's sad psychosexual origins and disconnected, if compelling, personality. Also excellent was Will Butler as an emotionally grasping young man suffering recovered-memory issues that in fact are masking his own long-submerged abuse trauma.

Also contributing solid work were Francine Berk, Samantha Rogers and Kory Holden, with Chuck Long enacting three roles, including a startling turn as a violent john who beats and rapes Burgess in a particularly riveting scene.

First developed for the stage in 2003 at San Francisco's New Conservatory Theatre Center, Gomolvilas' script in fact predates the notable 2004 feature film. His adaptation varies from filmmaker Gregg Araki's: Gomolvilas eliminates the Mrs. McCormick character, played in the film with edgy frankness by Elisabeth Shue.

Ultimately, the play tells a better story: It stays well-focused on the dark themes but also allows events to unfold like a mystery tale, whereas the movie wallows a bit in its less-than-savory ambience. Too bad Nashville theatergoers didn't have a wider opportunity to catch this one.

Single again

After winning a one-act play competition at the 2012 D.C. Black Theatre Festival, Mary McCallum's *SingleVille* returns Friday, Aug. 24, to The Next Level at 1008 Charlotte Ave. The play, starring McCallum, Molly Breen and Tamiko Robinson, explores the lives of three ladies seeking love and survival in the modern world. Barry Scott directs. There's a celebration reception at 7 p.m.; curtain is at 8. Gus Edwards' *Louie & Ophelia*, a tale of a working-class couple and their struggle to maintain a relationship, will play at the venue on Saturday, Aug. 25, at 8 p.m.

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