



## BWW Reviews: Nashville Shakespeare Festival's SHAKESPEARE'S CASE

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by Jeffrey Ellis



Should Dick Wolf need any new fresh ideas for his aging *Law and Order* TV franchise (and recent events would indicate that he might), we would suggest he ring up Nan Gurley, Denice Hicks and Claire Syler - the scribes of Nashville Shakespeare Festival's current hit *Shakespeare's Case* - for an infusion of new blood and an influx of new

plotlines. Of course, those plotlines might not be new, since they'd probably hew pretty closely to the Bard's classics for which the estimable Nashville troupe is best known, but you can rest assured the trio would have a novel take on stories that audiences would enthusiastically embrace.

*Shakespeare's Case*, first mounted last year as an education outreach production of NSF and now mounted at Belmont University's Troutt Theatre for the company's winter show, is a fast-moving, witty and thoroughly engrossing work that challenges even the most Shakespeare-phobic of audience members to sit up, take notice and reevaluate their opinions. Performed with charm and grace - and not a little bit of tongue-in-cheek humor - the production is directed with confidence by Beki Baker, featuring impressive portrayals by Jon Royal as a Tennessee educator and Brian Russell as the man himself, William Shakespeare, with Gurley playing a prosecutor and Hicks as a gavel-wielding judge.

The set-up is simple and straightforward: An English teacher is suing to have Shakespeare eradicated from the curricula of Tennessee high schools. "I have one week...five hours...to teach Shakespeare," Royal's character tells the court, testifying that it's just not enough time to adequately teach the convoluted plots, the myriad characters and rather odd version of the English language found in the works of the master storyteller. With Gurley on point as the prosecuting attorney and Hicks keeping the courtroom action on course, the entire Shakespeare canon is put on trial when the courtroom machinations are put on hold briefly by the appearance of a surprise

witness: William Shakespeare, himself, played to the hilt by the charming Brian Russell.

Royal's teacher and Russell's Shakespeare both offer compelling and provocative testimony, augmented by Gurley and Hicks' expert performances as the court officers, and once the case is rested - but before it goes to the jury (made up of all the members of the enthusiastic and involved audience), Shakespeare casts his magical spell over the proceedings to deliver a "greatest hits," if you will, of many of his best known works. It all comes toward you at a fast clip, a cavalcade of memorable characters and famous scenes (peppered with some of the best known axioms to be found in the English language), presented in a colorful fashion. You will find yourself enlightened and informed by the amazingly deft and vivid portrayals of four superb actors at their very finest.

Special attention must be paid to 14-year-old wunderkind Anwen Wilkerson, whose musical score provides the perfect counterpoint to the onstage antics. Obviously, she is a talented musician, but perhaps more to her credit, Wilkerson has superb timing and adds to the overall impact of the performance with her contributions.

While the mood and tone throughout is fun and light-hearted, the task at hand is serious (without being at all didactic) and the cast approaches their work zealously and in good faith, ensuring that audiences are thoroughly entertained while being exposed to all sorts of knowledge, some of it old hat for certain, but most of it is perhaps fresh and new. Clearly, you would be hard-pressed to leave *Shakespeare's Case* without newfound respect for the playwright and his enduring literary legacy.

Baker's direction is fluid and helps propel the play's action along at an engrossing pace. Erica Edmonson's clever and attractive scenic design provides a lovely backdrop for the onstage action, while providing for the utilitarian needs of the storytelling, while Anne Willingham's lighting design helps frame the action and focus the audience's collective attention. June Kingsbury's excellent costume design, as always, helps the actors flesh out their characters with wit and style.

**- *Shakespeare's Case*. Written by Nan Gurley, Denice Hicks and Claire Syler. Directed by Beki Baker. Presented by Nashville Shakespeare Festival, at Belmont University's Troutt Theatre. Through Sunday, January 30. For further information, visit the company website at [www.nashvilleshakes.org](http://www.nashvilleshakes.org).**

Pictured: Brian Russell in NSF's *Shakespeare's Case*