

Midsummer Nights' Mutants

Shakespearizing it up, with a blue-footed booby. Or pirates

By F I I FN GAMFRMAN



LISA HANEY

Every summer, as theaters around the country dust off their crushed-velvet doublets to produce more classic Shakespeare, others strive mightily to shake things up.

In 1970, the Royal Shakespeare Company allowed director Peter Brook to stage "A Midsummer Night's Dream" in a plain white box. The Fairy King flew on a trapeze and the young lovers dressed like hippies. It was a palpable hit, and many an impresario tries to top it.

Acting companies have long seasoned the bard's work with pop-culture references, avant-garde interpretations and mash-ups of diverse settings and styles. This season, expect upside-down chandeliers and trees in one production, sea-faring buccaneers in another and references to a famous Tom Cruise movie not generally associated with Elizabethan England. Also, one blue-footed booby.

Is it vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself?
Does that way madness lie? And dude, where's my
bard? A sampling from the class of 2010.



Bill DeLoach

'Shrew: The Musical'

THEATER: Georgia Shakespeare Festival, Atlanta,
June 11-Aug. 8

TWIST: The feisty lovers don tap shoes and pitch woo in Miami in the 1930s, accompanied by original music reminiscent of George Gershwin. When Kate first meets Petruchio, she sings "I Don't Have to Listen to You," with lyrics that include: "You're just a big talkin', slow walkin' bag of hot air. You get your way with a lot of hoop-dee-doo. You're holdin' all the cards and still you never play fair, but I don't have to listen to you."

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WEIRD? The play starts in the present: Two men in Padua become dudes on spring break in Miami: "This sure beats winter in Boston," one says.



Agence France-Presse/Getty Images

'Love's Labour's Lost'

THEATER: Nashville Shakespeare Festival, Nashville, Tenn., Aug. 19-Sept. 12

TWIST: Each pair of lovers matches their movements to those of birds while a clown flits around in a fuzzy, black-and-yellow vest. The actors are not actually birds and bees; the moves are meant to amplify the physical humor and echo Shakespeare's message that love is a force of nature. Artistic director Denice Hicks hopes the animal theme won't occur to audiences until the very end, when the lovers break out into full-on bird dances.

WEIRD? The character modeled after the blue-footed booby—a black and white Galapagos Islands seabird with turquoise feet—will wear bright blue spats and emit awkward "Aaaaah" sounds between his lines.



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'Othello'

THEATER: Shakespeare on the Sound, Rowayton and Greenwich, Conn., June 15-26 (Rowayton); July 2-11 (Greenwich)

TWIST: Stew and Heidi Rodewald, creators of the Broadway musical "Passing Strange," composed a mix of rock-funk music specifically for the play.

WEIRD? Watching a traditional sword fight was "actually kind of restful" instead of disturbing, says artistic director Joanna Settle, who decided to modernize the weapons to fix the problem. She's toyed at different points with using folding chairs, riot batons and a baseball bat.



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'Jesters Dead'

THEATER: Philadelphia Live Arts Festival & Philly Fringe, Sept. 3-11

TWIST: Actors reenact the movie "Top Gun" using lines from Shakespeare plays. Co-creator Nathaniel McIntyre says the story of a conflicted hero, his wingman and forbidden love is "completely Shakespearean." Watching a scene between Goose and Maverick set to "Henry IV, Part 1" he says: "For the first time, I actually sort of understood the monologue."

WEIRD? The show features some "Top Gun" lines, including "I feel the need...the need for speed."



LAWSC

'Macbeth3'

THEATER: Los Angeles Women's Shakespeare Company, Los Angeles, through June 27

TWIST: This "Macbeth" uses three actors—all of them men—with Satan taking the place of the witches and a male version of Lady Macbeth suppressing the urge to punch someone. The play is pared down to an hour: to save time, Birnam Wood does not come to Dunsinane.

WEIRD? In the play, set in a postapocalyptic oil field in Baghdad, Macbeth starts out dead, is roused back to life by Satan and then makes all the same mistakes before dying again. "I'm focusing on the cycle of violence," says Lisa Wolpe, the company's producing artistic director.



AISA/Everett Collection

'As You Like It'

THEATER: Carolinian Shakespeare Festival, New Bern, N.C. Aug. 5-22

TWIST: The pastoral comedy is set in 17th-century India with actors in saffron and gold costumes, images of Hindu gods Ganesha and Lakshmi on the stage and a Bollywood-style musical number to accompany the marriage of four couples at the end. Festival producing artistic director Mary McGinley says she's trying to showcase ethnic diversity.

WEIRD? In the last scene, the wedding party will be joined by Sarasvati, the goddess of knowledge and the arts, who will bless them from a balcony.



FOX/Everett Collection

'H4'

THEATER: Summer Theatre of New Canaan, New Canaan, Conn., June 12-July 3

TWIST: "Henry IV" parts 1 and 2, normally comprising six total hours of drama, are distilled into a two-hour "political thriller" inspired by TV's "24." The play, with a title written like the numbers on a digital clock, includes cliffhangers and an announcer bringing audiences up to speed at key points in the action in the manner of the previous-episode recap at the start of "24."

WEIRD? The show created a sound that evokes the percussive metal clank of ticking seconds used in "24."



Francesco Bongiorno

'The Last Goodbye'

THEATER: Williamstown Theatre Festival, Williamstown, Mass., Aug. 5-20

TWIST: The musical adaptation of "Romeo and Juliet" interweaves the story with songs by Jeff Buckley, the late singer-songwriter perhaps best known for his haunting rendition of the Leonard Cohen classic "Hallelujah." The show features some of Mr. Buckley's hits, such as "Eternal Life," and is backed by a team that includes Broadway producers.

WEIRD? Mr. Buckley's lyrics themselves can sound Shakespearean: "My kingdom for a kiss upon her shoulder," he wrote in one song to be used in the show, echoing Richard III's "My kingdom for a horse."



Everett Collection

'A Midsummer Night's Dream'

THEATER: La Jolla Playhouse, La Jolla, Calif., July 20-Aug. 22

TWIST: For the alternate universe of the forest, artistic director Christopher Ashley is turning the Victorian setting upside down, with trees sprouting overhead and chandeliers rising from the floor. The metaphor seemed fitting for this play, he says: "It's an exploration of how the process of falling in love is like losing your gravity and losing your bearings."

WEIRD? When the world turns upside down, pages of music come to life and fall in love with the fairies, some of which will be played by puppets and aerialists.



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Steven Underwood

'The Taming of the Shrew'

THEATER: Marin Shakespeare Company, San Rafael, Calif., July 16-Sept. 26

TWIST: The love story is told in a "Pirates of the Caribbean" setting, with Petruchio as a sea plunderer who sets up house with Kate on his ship in the West Indies. A character will walk the plank, Petruchio will use flip-lock pistols and Kate will strip down to her 18th-century drawers. "One thing I've discovered over the last few years, you can't have too many pirates," says artistic director Robert Currier, whose two past "Shrew" productions featured Petruchio as Elvis Presley and a Wild West cowboy.

WEIRD? At the end of the play, Petruchio will raise the Jolly Roger.

Past Is Prologue: Good Old-Fashioned Shakespeare

'The Winter's Tale,' 'The Merchant of Venice'
Through Aug. 1
The Public Theater's Shakespeare in the Park, New York

'As You Like It,' 'The Tempest,' 'The Two Gentlemen of Verona,' 'The Winter's Tale' Through Oct. 31
Stratford Shakespeare Festival, Stratford, Ontario

'Much Ado About Nothing,'
'The Merchant of Venice,'
'Macbeth' | June 28-Sept. 4
Utah Shakespearean Festival, Cedar City, Utah

'King Lear,'
'The Taming of the Shrew'
The Old Globe, San Diego
June 12-Sept. 26

'Richard III,' 'The Winter's Tale'
Shakespeare & Company, Lenox, Mass.
July 2-Sept. 5