

THE TENNESSEAN

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Nashville Shakespeare Festival marks 25th anniversary with vibrant 'Midsummer Night's Dream'

*By Amy Stumpfl
For The Tennessean*

Theater review

This summer marks The Nashville Shakespeare Festival's 25th anniversary season. And in honor of the occasion, Nashville Shakespeare Festival has crafted an especially vibrant production that celebrates the very community in which it thrives.

Full of romance, humor and mystical fairies, "A Midsummer Night's Dream" is a natural choice for Shakespeare in the Park. But by setting this "Dream" in modern day Nashville, director Denice Hicks once again demonstrates how timeless — and funny — the Bard can be. After all, this is "The Athens of the South."

Hicks has re-imagined Athenian royalty as "Old Nashville's" upper class. They arrive on stage via golf cart, complete with champagne, cigars and debutante daughters. But the fairy world has its own brand of royalty — free-spirited creative types who rule the night with indie music, dance and youthful revelry. And the aspiring Mechanicals? An offbeat collection of tourists and working stiffs that come to Music City seeking fortune and fame.

It's a clever set-up, but what makes this staging so dreamy is the infectious zeal and inspiring artistry featured onstage.

The young lovers lead the way in this spirited production, punctuating each line with physical humor and boundless energy. Lauren Ballard and Savannah Frazier are hilarious as Hermia and Helena — a pair of contentious sorority girls who wield their words (and cell phones) like finely tuned weapons. Raffael Sears and Houston Mahoney are just as strong as suitors Lysander and Demetrius — vying for their respective loves with crackerjack timing and He-Man feats of strength.

Newcomers Nat McIntyre and Apolonia Davalos also impress as Oberon and Titania, king and queen of the fairy world. And Andrew Gumm is perfectly cast as the mischievous Puck, working his magic as he moves through the audience, helping himself to picnic baskets along the way.

Bonnie Keen offers an unexpected interpretation of Peter Quince, with fine support from the Nashville Shakespeare Festival Apprentice Company and an uncredited four-legged starlet. And Craige Hoover's redneck-inspired Nick Bottom is a slice of hillbilly heaven.

Composer/Music Director Ed Haggard literally sets the pace for the evening with irresistible percussive rhythms. And Tony Speight's choreography pulses with youthful celebration. Jonathan Hammel's set is not as woodsy as other "Midsummers" I've seen, but it captures the old-meets-new theme with ivy-covered walls and a view of Nashville's skyline. And June Kingsbury's wildly inventive costumes incorporate repurposed materials such as bottle caps and shopping bags.

Such ingenuity and creativity is typical of Nashville Shakespeare Festival. At 25 years and counting, our Shakespeare in the Park is a tradition worth celebrating — don't miss it!

Additional Facts

If you go

What: Nashville Shakespeare Festival presents “A Midsummer Night’s Dream”

When: Through September 15. Performances are at 7:30 p.m., Thursdays-Sundays (plus Labor Day Monday), with pre-show entertainment at 6:30 p.m. (A special sign language-interpreted performance is set for Sat., Aug. 24.)

Where: The Bandshell at Centennial Park, 2600 West End Ave.

Tickets: \$10 suggested donation

Info: Blankets and lawn chairs welcome, although bleacher seating is available. Food/drink vendors available onsite, or bring your own picnic.

Contact:

www.nashvilleshakes.org
