



Adelaide Theatre Guide

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Supporting live theatre in South Australia

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A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

Hills Youth Theatre

Stirling Community Theatre

Until 11 Aug 2019

Review by Sarah Westgarth

"A Midsummer Night's Dream" is the most performed of all Shakespeare's plays, beloved for its wit, cavalcade of endearing characters, and magical dramatics. For most of the Seniors at Hills Youth Theatre, this production is their first foray into the bard's work, which is always an exciting experience and a challenging, steep learning curve.

The young cast should be commended for their strong grasp of the material, and well-defined characters from the first moments of the show's opening. It is clear that dedication and disciplined time has been spent on making it all run as smooth as it does. Stumbles and errors are likely to be forgiven given the age and experience of the cast, but this is rarely even required. Director Hayley Horton also deserves praise for the work she has done to make the actors comfortable, particularly in the many lengthy monologues. While this production does not bring anything particularly new or fresh in its interpretation, and the characterisation often lacks the strength and gusto to sell a lot of the humour in the script, it is loaded with charm, and the design looks fabulous.

Set in the 1920s, the costuming by Yolanda Tree is divine, with each distinctive group – the Athenians, the Mechanicals and the Fairies – all having a well-defined and communal look, while also being of a piece with each other. The set is fairly minimal but provides enough environmental context to enhance the mood of every scene. There are two small platforms on either side of the stage, and a low catwalk running through the centre. These do provide some interesting visuals in the blocking, but on occasion become awkward as though they're just being used because they're there, rather than because the movement is natural.

Some of the staging throughout can feel a little clunky and rote, and the performances, while solid, sometimes suffer from a similar stiffness which means the inherent silliness, particularly between the Lovers, is never fully explored. It would have been good to see more exaggeration in the physicality and expression, as occasionally the energy feels a little lacking. This is not to say the actors are not able to convey the meaning of their lines, which they consistently are, but seeing the lines delivered with less self-seriousness might give the show a lighter tone and mean that more of the jokes land.

The highlight of the production is the Mechanicals' play of "Pyramus and Thisbe" in the final scene, which hits all the right notes and captures the earnestness of the characters and their lack of self-awareness beautifully. Several moments throughout got applause breaks on opening night. The Mechanicals in general do an excellent job, with Teliah Shepherdson as Bottom doing some of the most interesting character work of the entire ensemble, making some truly delightful physical and expressive choices. She does need to watch her diction though, as her words had a tendency to slur together on occasion. Her transformation scene was a little underwhelming, with the only costuming addition being a set of giant ears, so it is not even entirely clear what precisely has occurred if you do not already know the script.

Shepherdson is well supported by the others in the Mechanicals' party, who all ensure they are distinctive from one another in their characterisation. Again, this is most on show during their performance at the end. The Fairies are quite understated in their portrayals, but Puck (Lazuli



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Chittleborough) is still delightfully mischievous, Oberon (Lizzie Zeuner) powerful and proud, and Titania (Aislin Mowbray) stubborn and scorned, appropriately. One standout is Michelle Stewart as Theseus, who has a magnetic stage presence and captures the inherent high status of the role, while also maintaining his romantic heart and sense of fun.

The Hills Youth Theatre consistently provides unique and wonderful opportunities for its young ensemble, giving them the experience of performing in classic and well-known works, while clearly being given able and committed guidance throughout the rehearsal process. This take on Shakespeare's funny flight of fancy is well executed, and the command of the dialogue from these young performers is particularly worthy of praise. This show's pace never falters or wavers, and keeps the audience under its spell.