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# Review of Lord Denney's Players' *The Tempest* (February 2017, Ohio State University), and Cincinnati Shakespeare Company's *The Tempest* (April 2017)

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her new sexual persona, she happily flirted with the audience. But after her sexually and emotionally ambiguous scene with Orsino (2.4), Viola wiped away her mustache, took off her turban, let down her hair, dropped to her knees, and sang: though the lyrics seemed happy, she sang them despairingly, and at the end collapsed prone onto the floor. The Sebastian-narrator then entered and, failing to rouse her, announced, in English, “a ten-minute break.” It was one of those rare occasions when one feels that an adaptation is better than Shakespeare.

Watching *Twelfth Night*, we are all aware that Shakespeare wrote it. But in *Piya*, Shakespeare was himself a part of the script and the story. “All hail Shakespeare!” the Sebastian-narrator exclaimed. Sebastian told Feste, “Call up Shakespeare and ask him. I am not Cesario.” He complained about what a badly written and unsatisfying role it is, as well as the hapless task of a translator. “I’m doing all the work, and everybody praises Shakespeare!” The pleasure this production gave me had much more to do with the Hindi author and Hindi actors than with the English playwright.

Thanks to L. P. Hartley, we all know that “the past is a foreign country.” But the corollary of that axiom is that sometimes a foreign country gives us the best view of the strangeness of our own overfamiliar, washed-out past. *Piya Bebrupiya* was a better tribute to Shakespeare than the busy, expensive, but uninspired National Theatre adaptation of *Twelfth Night* I saw a few months later in London. These three immigrant Shakespeare productions, imported to Chicago, co-produced by the Chicago Shakespeare Theater, were better theater, and taught me more about Shakespeare, than any Anglophone Shakespeare revivals I saw in 2016.



### *The Tempest*

Presented by **The Lord Denney’s Players** at the **Columbus Performing Arts Center**, Columbus, OH. February 9–18, 2017. Directed by Manuel Antonio Jacques. Assistant Director, Emory Noakes. Stage management by Hannah Grace. Dramaturgy by Dan Knapper and Victoria Muñoz. Music directed by Clara Davison. Choreography by Kimberly M. Wilczak. Sound design by Ciru Wainaina. Set design by Miranda Johnson. Creative direction by Sarah Neville. Costumes by Qynn Cook and Tabitha Davies. With Joanna Bruskin (Alonso), Taylor Davis (Trinculo), Joseph Galndorf (Ferdinand), Tony Harper (Caliban), Joey Hoffmann (Adrian), Isaiah Johnson (Sebastian), Cat McAlpine (Stephano), Levi Prudhomme (Antonio), Anthony Shuttleworth (Prospero), Mary Grace Thibault (Ariel), Matthew Wiese (Gonzalo), Hannah Woods (Miranda), and others.

*The Tempest*

Presented by **The Cincinnati Shakespeare Company**, Cincinnati, OH. April 28–May 20, 2017. Directed by Sara Clark, Jeremy Dubin, and Brian Isaac Phillips. Set design by Shannon Robert. Costume design by Abbi Howson. Lighting design by Justen N. Locke. Sound and projections design by Douglas J. Borntrager. Stage management by Carolyn Fast. With Geoffrey Warren Barnes II (Caliban), Kyle Brumley (Sebastian), Billy Chace (Stephano), Jim Hopkins (Alonso), Justin McCombs (Trinculo), Caitlin McWethy (Ariel), Kelly Mengelkoch (Antonia), Paul Riopelle (Gonzalo), Nicholas Rose (Prospero), Aiden Sims (Miranda), and Crystian Wiltshire (Ferdinand).

NIAMH J. O'LEARY, *Xavier University*

Two recent productions of *The Tempest* in Ohio, geographically close though interpretively distant, showed the power of costume and theatrical magic, whether low or high tech, to tell stories that feel real and present today. The Lord Denney's Players (LDP), founded by Professor Sarah Neville in 2014, is a student company at Ohio State University. In her program notes for *The Tempest*, Neville describes the company as "student-driven, research-based" in its approach to performance. This is borne out in the cast and crew: Manuel Antonio Jacquez, a PhD student in the English department at Ohio State, directed the show as part of his dissertation research on stage directions. The two dramaturgs were also graduate students. The cast pulled widely from students and faculty; from Marketing, Computer Science, Electrical Engineering, and Anthropology majors. LDP sees each production as an "investigation" into Shakespeare, and this production investigated the play as a beginning, rather than an end. In his program notes, Jacquez reminds us that, though written late in Shakespeare's career, *The Tempest* was the first play readers of the First Folio encountered. Thus, Jacquez notes, "our production considers how *The Tempest* acts not as a final chapter or epilogue to the rest of Shakespeare's plays, but how it can act as a preface or introduction to the recurring ideas and concepts his plays engage." A black box theater production on a thrust stage, this production featured little in the way of special effects or theatrical magic. Instead, it focused attention on the characters themselves, while costuming and sound design helped highlight some of the play's major relationships.

There was no set save for a raised platform upstage with steps on either side. In the absence of set, props, and elaborate technical effects, the costumes read strongly. Miranda, in britches, a loose white blouse, and close-cropped haircut, appeared almost androgynous. Her costume

echoed her father's, though Prospero initially topped his shirt and slacks with a long jacket in splendid blue brocade, lined in violet silk—his “magical garment.” Caliban wore rougher, dirtier versions of the clothes worn by Prospero and Miranda—a sleeveless, once-white shirt and torn knee-length britches with holes. His thick beard contrasted with clean-shaven Prospero and he crouched when he moved, giving him a wild but clearly human appearance. In the post-show discussion, the company explained that they kept Caliban human to make it more striking when he took abuse and was called monstrous: Caliban's otherness became something Prospero saw but we did not. The similar costuming was intended to highlight Prospero's attempt to make Caliban into a son, to acculturate him—a failed project.

Ferdinand, who was to become the successful son, was also costumed thus: in 3.1, when carrying wood for Prospero, he lost his doublet, revealing a matching outfit of white shirt and brown slacks. Even Ferdinand's floppy brown hair seemed to echo Miranda's boyish hairstyle, so that they appeared almost interchangeable (fig. 3). Their endearing love scenes communicated the hesitation and nervousness of a middle school dance. As both actors were college freshmen, their gawkish, awkward performance of adolescence worked well. I found this more compelling than the heightened romance or miraculous enchantment we often see in productions, such as Julie Taymor's 2010 film, in which Felicity Jones and Reeve Carney stun one another into worshipful silence.

The visual sympathy in the costumes of Miranda, Prospero, Ferdinand, and Caliban was striking in contrast with Alonso, Antonio, Adrian, Sebastian, and Gonzalo, who remained distinct and aloof in their Milanese and Neapolitan finery. Alonso even wore a heavy gold crown throughout the play. Stephano and Trinculo, however, were affected by their time on the island, at each entrance appearing more disheveled, losing bits of their costume as they went. At the outset, Stephano was in a loose white blouse, a long open doublet, and black trousers, while Trinculo was in yellow doublet and knee-britches with white stockings and blouse. As the play progressed, both lost their doublets, their shirts came untucked, and their hair undone. Thus, costume set up affinity groups among the people on the island, indicating the island's power and who might be most susceptible to its effect, and pointing up the self-importance of the noble lords. It was a powerful storytelling tool for this low-tech production.

Even in the absence of dramatic lighting or elaborate set and props, the production had its share of magic. The primary source of this magic, as in the play text, was Ariel. Performed by Mary Grace Thibault, Ariel was a



Fig. 3. Joseph Galndorf as Ferdinand and Hannah Woods as Miranda in The Lord Denney's Players' production of *The Tempest*. Photo by A. J. Zanyk.

graceful, other-worldly figure of incredible musical talent. Costumed in a blue, green, and purple-hued tunic over white leggings, Ariel stood out against the bland palette established by Prospero and Miranda's costumes. She wore white face makeup with a blue powdered band across her eyes, creating the effect of a mask. She also had white powder in her hair that shook out as she moved so that she was followed by a misty cloud. But the most affecting aspect of Thibault's performance was her haunting soprano singing voice. The production used Richard Johnson settings from the 1620s and Thibault herself wrote additional songs with text from other Shakespeare plays.

While most of Ariel's songs were performed a cappella, occasionally music was piped in via the sound system. Caliban's 3.2 speech, "Be not afraid," was the first of these occasions. A brief segment from the finale of Stravinsky's *The Firebird* (1910), performed on cello and recorded by the production's music director, Clara Davison, dramatically altered the mood of the scene. Because no music had been heard save for Ariel's singing to that point, the moment felt magical. Tony Harper, an aggressively shouting Caliban, suddenly spoke softly, his reverent tones adding to the sacred feel. The audience, caught off guard, swiftly shifted from roaring laughter at Stephano and Trinculo's antics to hushed contemplation.

Another moment of low-tech magic occurred during the harpy scene (3.3), when Ariel stepped out from the curtains directly onto the raised platform, seeming to have floated into place. These very small elements of sound editing, costume, and blocking went a long way to establishing enchantment in a stripped-down production. But to work, they depended on audience engagement with the characters themselves. Through her graceful physicality, Thibault demanded the audience's admiration and sympathy: she performed so touchingly Ariel's otherness as to seem both tragically lonely and desperate to be left alone. This sympathy for Ariel translated into pity for Prospero at the play's conclusion. When Prospero opened his arms to Ariel, promising freedom (5.1.96), she did not approach his embrace, so he dropped his hands and stepped back, nodding his acceptance. Further underscoring that he had not won Ariel's affection, the play closed with a final sad moment: during the epilogue, Prospero handed his staff to Ariel, who seemed surprised, but took it and ran out through the house, slamming the door, offering no tenderness for her master. Refusing to build any relationship between the master and servant, this production passed Ariel's loneliness onto Prospero, rendering the old duke very alone and thoroughly dethroned at the end.

Taking a completely different approach, the Cincinnati Shakespeare Company staged *The Tempest* to bid farewell to the theater they had occupied since 1998. The production was designed both to demonstrate the best possible use of the company's former, limited space and to bid it farewell in anticipation of moving to their new venue—the Otto M. Budig Theater—in summer 2017. It began with a clever prologue: the stage was pre-set with a ghost light, and fairy lights suspended from the ceiling suffused the house with a soft glow. The house and stage walls were draped with blue and green fabric, giving it an oceanic feel. The house was hazy, too, making the place feel mystical. The only set was two small, wheeled pieces of scaffolding draped with blue cloth. Nick Rose, a founding member of the company, entered from the back of the house in khakis and a grey t-shirt. As he walked forward, a recorded audio montage played with company members delivering lines from Shakespeare. Rose, holding a copy of Shakespeare's *Complete Works*, climbed onstage where two actors costumed him in a white tunic, hooded cloak, and long grey wig. Rose, now Prospero, turned to face the audience and, opening the book, announced, "*The Tempest*, act 1, scene 1." Ariel entered, bringing a large bookcase, which she opened and presented to Prospero, who placed his *Complete Works* inside. When she closed it, a silver medallion on the cover lit up. Moments later, the sailors rushed onstage to begin

the shipwreck scene, while Prospero dragged the ghost light into the wings. With the audio montage, the onstage transformation of Rose into Prospero, and the use of the *Complete Works* as the origin of Prospero's magic books, the prologue clearly established that this was more than a single play: this was a culmination of all CSC had done in nineteen years on that particular stage, now become an island devoted to the theatrical magic of Shakespeare.

While the small proscenium stage has for years limited what CSC can do, they made excellent use of heightened tech and innovative set and sound choices to create magic in this production. In the dramatic opening storm the sound, light, and set created a tempestuous ocean. Actors pulled lengths of the fabric set across the stage to imitate waves, behind which we could see the lords and sailors appearing and disappearing, as though tossed on high seas. Buzzers on the seats made our chairs shudder when the thunder crashed, helping us feel the storm. The fairy lights blinked on and off while Ariel and Prospero worked magic. During the harpy scene, Ariel condemned the gathered lords while projections of giant wings and staring eyes filled the screen at the back of the stage. At the same time, audio feedback set the audience on edge, driving us to feel as distressed as the lords on stage, and an echo effect applied to Ariel's amplified voice suggested menacing omnipresence.

Because this production presented the play as a farewell to a particular stage, it did not engage with some of *The Tempest's* other dominant themes. Most notably, it de-emphasized the postcolonial potential of the play. The absence of concerted attention to Caliban's situation as an enslaved native was slightly troubling because the actor who portrayed him, Geoffrey Warren Barnes II, had just finished an extremely successful run as Walter Lee Younger in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*. But Barnes's Caliban, though angry, was not presented as an antihero or a comic butt. He was somewhat amphibian: costumed in a black unitard adorned with a brown leather breastplate and loincloth, with torn and knotted fabric all down his legs and arms, Caliban appeared sinewy and earthy. Ridges like gills lined his head, and he walked in a semi-crouched position, but often dragged himself along the stage with his arms, his legs trailing behind him in a serpentine manner. He struggled with how to express affection and was comically sexually aggressive. Under the gabardine, he gyrated and undulated with pleasure when offered liquor, and Trinculo reacted with horror and amusement. The "foot-licking" scene (3.2) went from funny to uncomfortable very quickly, until Stephano shouted, "Cut it out with the foot licking!" In the play's final scene,

Caliban cringed away from Prospero, expecting punishment, but instead Prospero leaned over and whispered something that made him smile. He leaned against Prospero, who stroked his head as though he were a loved pet. The pose recreated 1.2, when Caliban had sought Prospero's affection but had been rebuffed. Here, the master embraced his "thing of darkness" (5.1.278), suggesting his move to mercy made him kinder not only to the shipwrecked lords, but also his subjects.

While this production did not emphasize the postcolonial potential of the play, a discerning viewer could still see moments that highlighted shared history between the island's two natives: Caliban and Ariel. During his chant, "Ban, Ban, Ca-caliban / Has a new master, get a new man," Barnes danced in a manner that precisely imitated Ariel's earlier dancing. Caliban delivered his "Be not afeard" speech (3.2.130–38) while engaged in beautiful, balletic dance with Ariel, though she was, presumably, invisible to him and the other onstage characters. Together, these two servants expressed wonder of, and devotion to, the island and its mystical beauty.

One of the production's greatest strengths was Ariel. Costumed in a flesh-toned unitard with a loose tunic of the same fabric as the set, tied at the waist with a rope, Ariel seemed dressed in sails and rigging, at one with the texture of the whole island set. The actress, Caitlin McWethy, wore white contact lenses and white makeup over her face and head, with blue whorls painted on the back of her shaved skull, extending in waves over her crown: a sea sprite in costume and makeup, made of air and water. She moved with birdlike twitches of her head, her arms and hands in constant, gentle motion, creating a sense of hovering flight. At times amplified via the house sound system, it appeared she could throw her voice, suggesting that she was everywhere at once. Uniquely, this Ariel did not operate alone, but had a posse of three mariners from Alonso's ship. They helped her create magic, playing instruments and singing, lifting her, dancing to illustrate her tales of how she had performed Prospero's commands.

The relationship built between Ariel and Prospero served as the central force in this production (fig. 4). In 1.2, as Miranda panicked and begged her father to stop the storm, he laughed in a demented fashion, reminding loyal theatergoers of Rose's performance as Titus Andronicus four years earlier. This signaled a major theme of the production: *The Tempest* very nearly became a revenge tragedy. Unlike other Prosperos, who are sententious and solemn about the sacredness of their quest, Rose teetered on the edge of sanity. His delight in his machinations edged into frantic laughter at times, heightening the fear that he could tip into mad revenge. Ulti-

mately, the opposite extreme—his tender affection for his daughter and his Ariel—would save him in the play’s conclusion. Prospero responded with mad laughter when Ariel exhorted him to be merciful to the lords (5.1.18–19). To calm him, she reached toward him, saying she would have mercy, “were I human.” Surprised both by her words and by finding Ariel’s hand a hair’s breadth from his own arm, Prospero calmed temporarily. When he edged toward anger again, spitting out “with their high wrongs I am struck to th’quick,” (5.1.25), she once more calmed him by reaching out as though to touch him. Once Prospero promised he would restore the lords to their senses, Ariel finally made contact, putting her hand on Prospero’s cheek as he leaned into it, offering a benediction. This production placed the responsibility for Prospero’s redemption squarely at Ariel’s feet: her love and guidance kept him from vengeance.

The show’s most powerful moments came at its conclusion. After Prospero bade farewell to Ariel in a touching scene, the actors onstage—previously frozen in tableau—jumped to life with a joyous jig. Percussive, tribal music drove a dance that eventually broke into bows as the audience leapt to its feet, applauding. Instead of disappearing into the wings, the cast rushed out into the house and took up stations along the walls, while the fairy lights came up. The actors swayed and extended their arms gracefully over the draping in time with stirring choral music. They tugged sharply, releasing the fabric set from the walls, and bundling it up, carried it onstage and into the wings. More actors did the same with the backdrop, until the stage itself was completely bare. At that point, Nick Rose, out of costume as he had been for the prologue, walked downstage, carrying the ghost light, reminiscent of his magical staff. The actors assembled behind him as he delivered the epilogue. Never have the words “now my charms are all o’er thrown” (Epilogue.1) had such vivid illustration—the uncostumed actor, relieved of his white wig, his staff, book, and cloak. As he spoke of “this bare island” (Epilogue.8), Rose gestured at the guts of the black box theater now fully visible to every audience member. When he finished, the cast bowed again and then turned their backs to the audience to wave farewell to the theater itself before exiting through the house.

From Prospero’s ghost-light-turned-staff to McWethy’s costume-asset, this entire production was imbued with the language and signs of theater. The old theater became the magical island, where Prospero’s “so potent art” could be displayed (5.1.50). In bidding farewell to Ariel, costumed with bits of the fabric set, he bade farewell to the location of his magic for many years—the twelve of the play, or the nineteen of CSC’s



Fig. 4. Nicholas Rose as Prospero and Caitlin McWethy as Ariel in The Cincinnati Shakespeare Company's production of *The Tempest*. Photo by Mikki Schaffner.

tenure at their old space. Removing the set, the company showed the gathered audience the theater sans magic, before trooping out past us and on to Milan, or the new stage. Brilliantly performed, this production took the tired notion of *The Tempest* as Shakespeare's farewell to the theater and rendered it vibrant with new meaning.



### *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*

Presented by **Brave Spirits Theatre** at the **Lab at Convergence**, Alexandria, VA. March 30–April 23, 2017. Directed by Charlene V. Smith. Dramaturgy by Claire Kimball. Set by Leila Spolter. Costumes by Adalia Tonneyck. Makeup by Briana Manente. Lighting by Jason Aufdem-Brinke. Music by Zach Roberts. Fights by Casey Kaleba. Dances by Alison Talvacchio. With Jenna Berk (Annabella), Danny Cackley (Giovanni), Gary DuBreuil (Richardetto), Rebecca Ellis (Hippolita), Erik Harrison (Friar Bonaventura/Grimaldi), Brendan Edward Kennedy (Bergetto/Cardinal), Briana Manente (Vasques), Ian Blackwell Rogers (Soranzo), Kathryn Zoerb (Putana/Philotis), and others.