

HOUR - AUGUST 2001

Tempest: Forecast Disorder

BRAVE NEW WORLD

UPSTART COMPANY GRAVY BATH TAKES ON THE BARD

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stage

(arts)

A lot of people know a lot about Shakespeare's *The Tempest*; it's been done and done and done, so much so that many of us can quote from it. "O brave new world..." comes to mind when confronting the Gravy Bath production of the play because it approaches theatre as though it were full of possibilities and ripe for exploration. Everything about GB is marvelously tongue in cheek, even when they are dead serious (the recording you hear when you book tickets is a masterpiece of tomfoolery).

Going after the local theatre scene - critics and all - with their last outing *Critic* was pretty brave. But taking a well-known, well-loved play and giving it a subtitle - *Forecast Disorder* - may be braver still. You can screw with critics - we have to smile, prove we're good sports - but there are none so rabid as the fans of Shakespeare. Just ask Repercussion Theatre, which gets roasted each summer for the liberties they take with the Bard. The thing with Shakespeare is this: you will never please everybody no matter what you do.

So fuck it, I say! The greatness of Shakespeare can shine through damn near anything and often is even illuminated by just such fun and games. So I was in the mood when I went to the show because I expected, even anticipated, anything.

I had been warned: the play was being set in an all-male asylum where, said the PR bumf, "Egos clash, and chaos reigns, where vengeance, hatred, enslavement, love, memory, marriage, bitterness



GRAVY BATH PRESENTS A TEMPEST WHERE
"BUGGERY GRAPPLES WITH MAN'S SENSES"

and buggery grapple with man's senses."

And that's the place where the production both succeeds and falters: its setting. Though the play does support director Madd Harold's concept, the concept also makes the play forbidding and, ultimately, extremely bleak. What begins as fun - the lunatics taking charge - ends in anomie. Though the production remains relatively truthful to the text, it actually breaks the back of its plot and tone. By making the young lovers male, for example, the director doesn't just challenge our concepts of love, but actually within the framework of the madhouse turns the figures into deviants.

The acting is insanely uneven and I will not discuss it because this is first and foremost a director's exercise and it is enough that the cast provides the enthusiasm and energy necessary to get to the end of the evening. Although much of that evening explodes with imagination and originality, one can also see the great debt the director owes to Peter Brook, particularly Brook's productions of *Marat/Sade* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the former for showing how madness does not mean theatrical chaos, the latter for proving that an empty box can be just the right space for Shakespeare.

And at the end? What can I say? I

was challenged. Delightfully so. I also wish to celebrate the titanic ambition of this company, particularly for their spirit of transgression in taking on a cherished work. This, my friends, is true theatre: a framework for surprise.

Another quote from the original *Tempest* comes to mind as you walk out of this production: "Your tale, sir, would cure deafness." After this and its previous outing, Gravy Bath is making good noise and getting through to all of us.

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Meanwhile The Théâtre du Nouveau Monde is getting its 50th anniversary season going like gangbusters. During Just For Laughs this year they mounted Molière in the little park beside the venue and now, before they launch their own series with Molière's *L'Avare* (the first play the company ever performed), they are bringing in France's Odéon - Théâtre de l'Europe with their production of

Aeschylus's *Orestie*. The company, created in 1782 (not a typo) is one of France's five national companies and has been responsible for the creation of some of the great works of the 20th century, including those of Genet, Beckett and Ionesco. In the original Greek play, blood and guts spill, rage reigns, vengeance is theirs. But you can't do the piece now without the stage being haunted by the ghosts of wars more recent like Rwanda and Kosovo. Odéon has found just those resonances in its production hailed by the European critical community. It won't be a fun night of theatre but it might just be one of those unforgettable ones. Théâtre du Nouveau Monde, September 4 to 16, 84 Ste-Catherine W, 866-8668, \$20-45. (.)

TEMPEST - FORECAST DISORDER

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