

Miraculous 'Pericles' In The Park - Review

Elm Shakespeare Brings A Little Elizabethan/Victorian Bustle-Twerking To 'Pericles'

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A couple of years ago, it suddenly became easy to find productions of "Cymbeline," one of the least-produced plays in the Shakespeare canon. This year, apparently, it's "Pericles'" turn. The rollicking, sordid adventure yarn, involving shipwrecks, piracy, prostitution, fairy tale-style skullduggery and royal derring-do, is getting two separate stagings in Connecticut this month. Both are outdoors and both are free (donations gratefully accepted). On Saturday, Aug. 23, the New Jersey-based Hudson Shakespeare Company troupe is bringing its new touring production of "Pericles" to the lawn outside the Stratford Public Library for a single performance at 2 p.m.

By far the grander of the two productions of "Pericles" — three weekends of performances, played out on a multi-level 75-foot-wide stage area — comes courtesy of the well-established Elm Shakespeare Company, which has been presenting summer shows in the gorgeous Edgerton Park (on the New Haven/ Hamden border) since 1995.

The play, which Shakespeare likely only wrote some parts of, has many problems. It's hopelessly contrived, with absurd coincidences that not only challenge common sense but bend the accepted principles of life and death. Some of the plot's twists and turns are so incredible, or incredibly obvious, that waiting for them to be resolved (with long reunion speeches or drawn-out contests) can be tedious. The many scenes of sex and violence, and the in-fighting among kings, don't speak to some greater universal human conditions, as they do in "Othello" or "Hamlet" — they're gratuitous, and veer into such icky dramatic territory as incest and sexual abuse.

Which makes Elm Shakespeare's thoughtfully entertaining production of this awkward script as miraculous as, say, the scene in which Pericles' waterlogged spouse, Thaisa, is brought back from the dead.

Elm Shakespeare is a professional company that draws from professional New York actors, regional theater stalwarts and a lot of strong community talent. Nearly half of the cast of "Pericles" have done shows with the company before, and a hardy ensemble feel is what makes this one work so well. Moreover, the actors playing Pericles (Paul Pryce, who shifts nearly from stoic and heroic to playful and romantic and back again) and his long-lost daughter Marina (Prema Cruz, who brings alertness and intelligence to what could be a thankless ingénue role) are both recent graduates of the Yale School of Drama, and know how to maneuver tricky verse dialogues.

Director (and Elm Shakespeare founder) James Andreassi has chosen to place the play in a late-18th century West Indies setting, changing the gender of the narrator Gower, who is now a colorfully dressed Haitian woman (Gracy Brown, who steers us clearly through the convoluted storyline) and adding a sense of revolution, radicalism and multi-culturalism to Shakespeare's mix of seafaring terrors and rarified regal marital rituals. Andreassi likes to keep the audience engaged, so there's a touch of Elizabethan/Victorian bustle-twerking in a royal-court dance routine. But it doesn't go so far as the hip-hop dance that Andreassi once inserted into "Taming of the Shrew." He also errs in letting some favored Elm Shakespeare colleagues appear in multiple roles; with a play that so few people are expected to know, and when there are so many other Shakespeare plays that deal with disguises and mistaken identities, reusing such recognizable faces as Raphael Massie (who doubles as the jolly King Simonides and the priest Cerimon) and Jeremy Funke (the assassin Thaliard, the brothel-keeping Pandar, plus a jousting knave at a Pentapolitan feast) only brings confusion.

What's important is that while Elm Shakespeare wants to make the bard's works accessible to everyone (their audiences can include Yale scholars and picnicking kindergartners), the company doesn't dumb down the language and the storytelling. Everything from celebrated artist Vladimir Shpitalnik's expansive set (intertwined with trees from the park, and studded with miniature models of the castles Pericles visits on his odyssey) to Nathan Roberts' intense ambient sound design, to several performances in minor roles (like Iris McQuillan-Grace, winning laughs and smirks as the snippy nurse Lychorida), gives "Pericles" an importance that this sorry script does not deserve.

PERICLES is presented through Aug. 31 by Elm Shakespeare in Edgerton Park, 75 Cliff St., New Haven. Performances are Tuesday through Sunday at 8 p.m. Free; suggested donation \$20 for adults. elmshakespeare.org