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Theater Review up a magical Shakespearean feast

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Trinculo (Jonathan Kim) and Stephano (Eric Hissom) meet Caliban (Manelich Minniefee and Zach Eisenstat) in the American Repertory Theatre's "The Tempest." Courtesy Photo/Geri Kodey, The Smith Center



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Trinculo (Jonathan Kim) and Stephano (Eric Hissom) meet Caliban (Manelich Minniefee and Zach Eisenstat) in the American Repertory Theatre's "The Tempest." Courtesy Photo/Geri Kodey, The Smith Center



By Keith Powers
Wicked Local Arts correspondent
 Posted May. 18, 2014 @ 8:00 am
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The American Repertory Theater's "The Tempest" has an unexpected star.

Fresh from its dry-heat run in Las Vegas, and obviously bound for Broadway, the A.R.T.'s glittering production opened this week at the Loeb Drama Center in Cambridge, under the direction of Teller (Penn &) and Aaron Posner, with music by Tom Waits and Kathleen Brennan, choreography from Pilobolus, and acting and stagecraft expertise from a dozen or so theater luminaries.

But the real star? William Shakespeare.

That's what makes this "Tempest" so great.

Sure, characters vanish into thin air. And levitate. Monsters abound. Card tricks? A given. A banquet feast appears from nowhere.

But if these actors, and this production, had not made the riveting personalities that Shakespeare created, with their intense language and in-the-moment transformations, the focus of what happens onstage, this "Tempest" would just be another freak show.

Instead we get a conjuring Prospero (played with imposing thoughtfulness by Tom Nelis), superb acting from the stunned lovers Miranda (Charlotte Graham) and Ferdinand (Christopher Donahue),

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puckish excellence from Prospero's aide-de-camp spirit Ariel (Nate Dendy), and comic genius bordering on the grotesque from the Calibans (Zachary Eisenstat and Manelich Minniefee, in a joint appearance - literally, they play the character as a kind of Siamese twins).

With a half dozen supporting roles each nailed to perfection, the work onstage never falters from the highest professionalism.

The script has been liberally foreshortened and modernized, but this is how to play Shakespeare: Make it live. Every syllable uttered by this talented cast has meaning, and furthers the growth of these remarkable characters who seem to have become more genuine in each of the 400 years since the play first took the boards.

The single set is remarkably simple for such a lavish enterprise. Mysterious dark, with a handy curtain that aids in the sleight-of-hand, and a quartet of clever musicians placed visibly above on a second level, Prospero can govern the action on his island home with ease.

If you come for the magic, you won't be disappointed. The pallid Ariel with his card tricks would be enough. The dumbshow silhouettes to begin the second act are a riot. Along with the levitations, deceptions and appearances/disappearances, it's a magical feast.

If you come for the music, you won't be disappointed, either. The score by Brennan/Waits is mostly incidental accompaniment, with a handful of songs interspersed, all sensually delivered by the multitalented Rough Magic quartet - Miche Braden, Shaina Taub, Michael Brun and Nate Tucker. But they play a visual role as well: an ungainly performance on a rope percussion, while the Calibans attempt a rude dance below, makes everyone seem an actor in

this performance.

But if you come for the language - now there's the real beauty. Poignant pauses for emphasis, direct interaction with the audience, the occasional modernism for comic relief - by the time we hear Prospero's "but this rough magic, I hereby abjure" soliloquy at the play's conclusion, we feel like we live in Shakespeare's world.

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