

CAST takes on Shakespeare's villains

By / By Keith Powers / Correspondent

Posted Apr 10, 2018 at 6:05 PM

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Onstage through April 15 at the Gorton Theatre, “Villains, Bullies, Tyrants” is a pastiche of various louts found in Shakespeare’s plays. Artistic director Joseph Stiliano conceived the production, and narrated the segues between acts from “Richard III,” “Cymbeline,” “Macbeth,” and other works.

If you go...

WHAT: Cape Ann Shakespeare Troupe: “Villains, Bullies, Tyrants”

WHERE: Gorton Theatre, 267 East Main St., Gloucester

WHEN: through Sunday, April 15; Thursday-Saturday at 8 p.m.; Sunday at 3 p.m.

TICKETS: \$15, \$10 Student, \$5 under 19. Thursday pay what you will. Visit cast2008@prodigy.net.

Everyone wants a piece of the guy. Even William Shakespeare.

Who? The title of the Cape Ann Shakespeare Troupe’s latest production — “Villains, Bullies, Tyrants” — should give it away.

Artistic director Joseph Stiliano couldn’t keep a straight face when he said in his introductory remarks that any resemblance between this collection of theatrical bad apples, and current political figures, was coincidental.

But there is a big difference between Shakespeare’s scoundrels, and you-know-who. Shakespeare’s villains were smart, and they knew what they were doing.

Onstage through April 15 at the Gorton Theatre, “Villains, Bullies, Tyrants” is a pastiche of various louts found in Shakespeare’s plays. Stiliano conceived the production, and narrated the segues between acts from “Richard III,” “Cymbeline,” “Macbeth,” and other works.

The parade of nasties included the pernicious Queen from “Cymbeline,” the dishonorable Richard III, Iago (of course) from “Othello,” the devious Macbeths from the Scottish play, and the bastard Edmund from “King Lear.” Some of these realizations worked better than others; the success depended on the context created, and the strength of the acting.

Jonathan Arnold’s Richard III, which opened the production, was one of the successes. Arnold had his character — the lame, shameless king — firmly in hand. He kills his rivals, and then seduces one of their wives (Lady Anne — played by Ashlee Holm). Confident, boastful and obscene, Arnold fully portrayed the villainous hunchback.

A sequence from “Cymbeline” proved less successful. The Queen (nicely played by Annegret Reimer) weaves through various plottings (a poisoning, ruining a relationship). She thinks everything she says is a cunning trick; in reality, nobody believes a word of it. Reimer brought the deviousness to life, but too many diverse scenes were woven together (four or five, depending on how they were counted) for a contiguous narrative to emerge.

Three scenes from “Macbeth” — played by Jessie Sorrells and David Cluett — worked terrifically, with the players in character, and Stiliano’s notion of what excerpts would bring the plotting and ambivalent evil to life stoutly conceived. But a snippet from “Othello” — Ray Jenness portraying Iago, Henry Cooper the jealous Roderigo — needed better focus to get at the heart of Iago’s endless malevolence.

A meandering scene from “Titus Andronicus,” with Beth Bevins as Tamora and Patrick Cheney as Aaron, was extracted too obtusely from the drama to be understood. Likewise Don John’s “food for my displeasure” — his desire to upset a potential marriage in “Much Ado About Nothing,” just because — which fell apart in the telling from dropped and inaudible lines. Scenes from “Lear,” including the ugly disfigurement of Gloucester, closed out the set. There is plenty of evil in “Lear,” and this choice ended the evening on too graphic a note.

The concept is not new — extracting thematic sets from Shakespeare — and is a solid one. Let’s hope CAST continues to create occasional productions like this — it allows its actors to focus sharply, and limits extraneous characters who may not be up to the complexities.

Lots of this production showed that it can work; some of it needed additional rehearsal. But if you said “All of it was bad” — you’d be right, in part, thanks to the playwright.

The Cape Ann Shakespeare Troupe presents “Villains, Bullies, Tyrants” through April 15 at the Gorton Theatre. For tickets and information visit cast2008@prodigy.net.

Keith Powers covers music and the arts for GateHouse Media and WBUR’s ARTery. Follow [@PowersKeith](https://twitter.com/PowersKeith); email to keithmichaelpowers@gmail.com

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