

A warm welcome at the box office from Elena and Agnes:



The stage is set:



I sometimes worry that we see so many Shakespeare performances that we dilute the experience. I suspect I saw Macbeth more times in 2015, alone, than it was performed in Shakespeare's lifetime. Most plays, back in the day, were off the stage after a few performances as they very quickly

became 'last week's thing' in the eyes of a novelty hungry London theatre audience. Even 'smash hits' did not last that long on the 'Elizabethan charts'.

I was particularly worried re *The Tempest* as I have seen it so many times in the last decade and most recently with my wife this very spring at the Wanamaker, especially as then Roger Allam was really outstanding as Prospero and Ariel was excellent. I need not have worried, the ever inventive and reliable David Rowan was in the director's seat and even the wondrous Wanamaker Theatre does not outshine a college garden in the summer sun, and with their first appearances the main characters immediately allayed my concern.

Ian Recordon gave an impressive Prospero, full of dignity and control, notwithstanding an understandable rage at those who had deceitfully overthrown him in the past and were attempting to kill him in the present.

Ariel shimmered onto the grass with a grace befitting this admirable spirit's character and abilities. Jemima Watling was entrancing throughout and one ached for her to be given her long longed for freedom. The farewell scene with Prospero, one of the play's many illustrations of Shakespeare's supreme artistry, was played with just the right balance of understatement and emotional depth and significance. Yes, yes, I had to wipe my eyes. I always get a fleck of dust in my eye at that point. Some people – bless them – claim real men are allowed to be beset by such ocular irritations, honestly.

Meanwhile at the other extreme of light and dark, of air and earth, we were shown an unforgettable Caliban by Lawrence Watling. With his staring eyes and behaviour that was always on the edge of extremity, he was like a child with his tantrums and his whining self-pity when he didn't get his way. His sudden rages, alternating with transparent attempts at ingratiating himself to whomsoever he might be most protected or indulged by at any given moment, were transmitted with such energy and throat-ripping intensity that I cannot see how his body and vocal cords can survive the three weeks. I hope, for his sake, that he has a calmer part in the second round of plays.

Miranda and Ferdinand often come across as so unbelievably one dimensional that their characterless nature is tedious. What happens to them is, after all, beyond credulity:

ALONSO

*What is this maid with whom thou wast at play?
Your eld'st acquaintance cannot be three hours:
Is she the goddess that hath sever'd us,
And brought us thus together?*

FERDINAND

*Sir, she is mortal;
But by immortal Providence she's mine:
I chose her when I could not ask my father
For his advice, nor thought I had one.*

Here, however, these difficulties were avoided. I was fairly sure that Miranda (Kay Dent) was going to be a success because her opening scene with Prospero was as apt as his with Ariel. However, the

instant, and to be accepted by the audience as transparently life-long, love between her and Ferdinand can be a tricky thing to convey. Miranda was so young looking that you really felt, not just heard and saw, the wonder that she saw in Ferdinand a young man being the only male she had ever seen other than her father and the half-human Caliban, who had previously tried to rape her. Ferdinand was also believable as a youth whose being is totally taken over by the single-minded intent that lust and love combined (I'll leave you to decide which is the chicken and which the egg) create. The humour of his situation with Prospero playing the strict father re pre-nuptial intimacy was skilfully exploited.

The Tempest was written after the construction of the indoor Blackfriars Theatre and when the scenic effects such venues could host were becoming ever more popular, it demands more attention in these regards than earlier plays. So late in the canon, indeed, is *The Tempest* that it is often declared to be Shakespeare's final play. It may be his last sole authored play but it is far from certain. The desperate need to force art into a biographical straitjacket which is forever presumptive, if not downright imaginary, even in cases where external biographical details are well known, however, compels many to believe the play 'must be' Shakespeare talking directly to us. There is no definitive external evidence to assure us that it was completed before *The Winter's Tale* and even *Cymbeline* could be a contender (I particularly like the idea of its final act also being Shakespeare's) but all of this ignores the unknown authorship status of the lost *Cardenio* and those who claim majority or sole authorship by Shakespeare of the play that really comes last in the canon – *Henry VIII* or *All Is True*.

Whatever, *The Tempest* is undoubtedly, by Shakespeare standards, a 'grand spectacle' and so, by CSF standards, this was an elaborately propped and costumed production. This is still by far nearer to a 'propless, bare stage' than one customarily encounters elsewhere. Perhaps, in this case, the phrase, 'a generally bare stage with a minimum of props' would be most accurate. A long standing example of a minimal yet effective CSF prop would be a blue cloth held up to signify the ocean/sea in a tempestuous state. It is striking, easy to replace and highly portable. And this is what we got here:



If it sounds as though the lack of elaborate scenery, stage machinery and CGI effects meant that the productions, both back in Shakespeare's day and now at the CSF, suffer from terrible constraints then I have to stress that the opposite is true. The release from any obligation to provide naturalistic

stage productions is liberating, and the absence of such cluttering distraction affords a total concentration on the action and words as brought to life by actors' bodies and tongues.

The next benefit of our intimate settings is that these very actors spend much of the evening interacting with us, the audience, and thus draw us into the performance as willing participants. To paraphrase a section of a book someone wrote last year ;)

“ As in Shakespeare's own days, having actors within touching distance of audience members on an open stage mostly in daylight brings out the significance of facial and other gestures, eye contact, audience interaction, the two-way communication between cast and audience, and the intimacy that grow from these. This two way communication on a physical level is deeply embedded in what makes the CSF performances such visceral, communal and deeply felt experiences. It is a shared experience in all senses of that expression.”

This special CSF audience interaction was evident throughout this production. Caliban's entrance set the tone. He crawled forward towards the audience with madly staring eyes and his tongue protruding. On he came, and on, and right up to the woman in the front of the picnicking area as though he were a dog about to lick her face. She bravely kept her composure as he pushed his visage so very close to touching hers with his tongue. Having shown her mettle that particular woman was to be middle of the so much interaction that she must have felt she was one of the cast by the evening's end.

Caliban many times approached the audience, indeed he once shook his bum in my face to general hilarity. The star 'interacter' though was Trinculo (Ella Sawyers) whose part is ready made for such improvised fun and she made the most of it and certainly ate and drank very well from her pilfering. Such behaviour is very much in character and, as an aside, I found her a more fun Trinculo than the one at the Wanamaker who, to be fair did not have the same scope for interplay.

Trinculo's performance reminded me of something David Salter, CSF director of many plays (currently [Coriolanus at Robinson](#)) told me when I interviewed him for my book:

'That's what I love about it, complete interaction between the audience and the actor. You wonder too how much of the work, the comic monologues particularly, were improvised in Shakespeare's day. I like it when that improvisation works and stays within the world of the play.'

This improvised interaction gives rise to feelings of camaraderie and shared laughter and it helps demystify Shakespeare and return him to his proper setting, that of a crowd pleasing producer of entertainment.

The closeness allows for more than clowning like that described above. Soliloquies and asides seem to be personally addressed to us in the audience because - well, because they are. Eye contact is thrilling. Jerome Dowling's Ferdinand was particularly impressive in this regard, as his eye contact was very well maintained with those in the front row as individuals and the crowd as a whole.

Acting in an outdoor environment, with this proximity, demands that the cast be alert to the need for constant improvisation. Lawrence Watling very adroitly turned a slip of the tongue into a knowing interchange with the audibly appreciative audience.

I am sure actors of the more minor roles hate reviews that leave any comment on them until the end and so I normally forbear from following this sorry tradition but, erm, well.....sorry I have done so here. It was a surprise to see stalwarts Rob Goll and Alexander Gordon-Wood in relatively brief parts as Alonso and Antonio respectively though a delight to have them together on stage, of course. Goll was suitably nasty as the irredeemable Antonio. Karen Whyte deserves double accolades rather than this brief mention as she so completely inhabited Stephano and Gonzalo that I had forgotten she was doubling until I came to write this. Having to deal with the near-mad/mad Caliban and the irrepressible Trinculo must have been almost as exasperating for her as her loquacious Gonzalo was for everyone else.

I have now seen three of the four current plays and if reports from fellow audience members on the other – *A Midsummer Night's Dream* – are accurate then these could well constitute the best foursome I can recall. I am not saying that they are the best individual plays I have ever seen at the CSF but the consistent high standard across the board has been laudable in the extreme. Two people who were seeing three over last weekend asked me which one to 'miss out' before leaving (they were already set on the *Dream* on Friday night) and I just could not decide. They really pushed for an answer but I could not as none of them are to be missed.

