

JUNE 2013
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& ENTERTAINMENT

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Shakespeare fest brings favorite plays to audiences

Season-long series starts with comedy, ends with tragedy



Ashley Weingardt plays Rosalind, and Tom Pentecost is Jaques in *As You Like It* at The Vortex. Photo by Alan Mitchell.

The annual Vortex Summer Shakespeare Festival, *Will Power 4*, hits the Albuquerque stage for nine weeks starting in June. This wildly popular fest promises to be one of a kind with outstanding local directors and actors presenting the Bard's best.

In his 38 plays, William Shakespeare portrayed the human experience deeply and eloquently, with 400-year-old themes that resonate into modern times. We'll see a romantic comedy, a dark comedy and a tragedy in this year's festival, filled with drama, history and adventure.

We recently spoke with directors David Richard Jones, Denise Schulz and Leslee Richards about their choice of plays, the casts, and their love of all things Shakespeare.

As You Like It, directed by David Richard Jones, June 6-23

ABQ A&E: Why did you choose to produce "As You Like It" in particular?

It is my favorite Shakespeare comedy, a perfect union of brilliant language, memorable characters, and unique construction, with four couples married at the end rather than the standard three in his other comedies.

The leading role, Rosalind, is arguably the greatest woman Shakespeare ever created and one of the great female characters in the history of literature, a young woman who puts on man's clothes and matures before our eyes. No wonder it's been played by Katharine Hepburn, Vanessa Redgrave, Helen Mirren, and a flock of other famous actresses. Jacques, the "melancholy" philosopher, tells us that "all the world's a stage" and that human life comes in seven stages, all brilliantly articulated. And the fool, Touchstone, is among Shakespeare's wittiest characters.

ABQ A&E: Can you talk about the relevance of "As You Like It" in modern times?

Students and audiences hunger for strong female characters, and Rosalind is the quintessential woman who begins as a sad sack banished daughter who learns to exert strength over herself, her lover, and all the folks in her neighborhood. A girl-goddess. The other three women who end at the altar are similarly stronger than their male lovers. The play is a feast of brilliant, energetic, witty women.

ABQ A&E: What are some challenges you and the cast face with this production?

Performing Shakespeare is always a challenge. First, to understand the language and make it understandable to modern ears and modern minds. Second, to make the characters emotionally real rather than stick figures spouting poetry. And third, to set the whole whirligig of the production into motion with music and song and dance. But the challenges are nothing compared to the rewards. Like "Hamlet," which followed it by a year or so, this is Shakespeare at his greatest.

ABQ A&E: What other plays have you recently produced and how does Shakespeare fit in to your repertoire?

In 41 years of directing theatre in Albuquerque and elsewhere, I have directed two Hamlets, two *As You Like Its*, and four other Shakespeares. In 43 years of teaching, I have taught Shakespeare almost every year. I'll be teaching English 353: Later Shakespeare at UNM in the Fall. Shakespeare is one of my main interests.

ABQ A&E: What can you share about the cast who'll perform "As You Like It" at Will Power 4?

Ashley Weingardt, who plays the leading role of Rosalind, just performed the title role of Rudolfo Anaya's "Rosalinda" at NHCC, a curious coincidence but a testimony to the strength of her acting work. Tom Pentecost, who plays Jacques ("All the world's a stage"), just appeared as Big Daddy in the ALT "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof." Scott Bryan, who plays the leading comic role of Touchstone (a Fool), just played the title role of "Tartuffe" at the Adobe. And Harrison Sim, who plays the romantic male lead role of Orlando, just played the leading role of Charles in "Blithe Spirit" at UNM's Rodey Theatre. All these shows just closed before we went into rehearsal. The cast is very strong and includes some of the major actors of today's Albuquerque theatre scene.

Measure for Measure, directed by Denise Schulz, June 27-July 14

ABQ A&E: Why did you choose to produce "Measure for Measure" in particular?

I was intrigued by directing one of Shakespeare's problem plays and by the dramatic structure and thematic aspects.

ABQ A&E: What is a "problem play"?

The label "problem play" was introduced in the 19th century. "Measure for Measure" and other Shakespeare plays deal with subjects that are highly contentious, and characters present conflicted views forcing the audience to form its own opinions on social or moral issues. A problem play may also shift between comic and tragic and ultimately fall between genres.

ABQ A&E: What is the relevance of "Measure for Measure" in modern times?

It is very relevant to our social and political environments, including the conflict over gay marriage, the conflict over censorship, the conflict over the definition of morals, the conflict on who is at fault in rape — the man or the woman — the conflict over extremist religions — nationally and internationally, etc. Who determines how we live our lives? This Shakespearean masterpiece could have been written today. "Measure for Measure" is a provocative mix of humor and intrigue in an old and yet new tale of scandal, abuse of power and what happens when repression and decadence get equally out of balance. Its contemporary relevance is distressingly obvious.

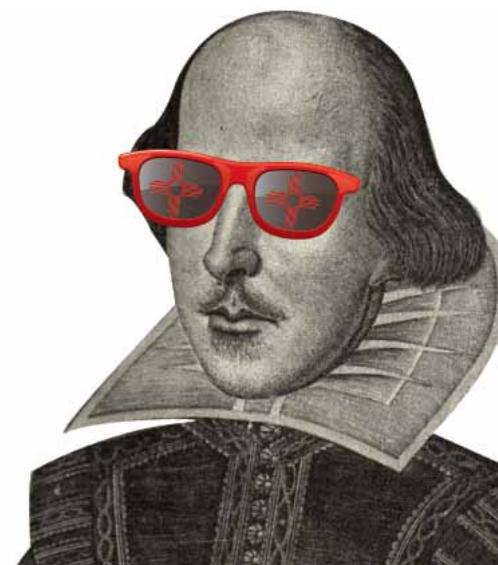
ABQ A&E: What are some challenges you and the cast face with this production?

The challenge of the production is to allow the audience to choose who is morally right or wrong rather than lecture one point of view. For example, the audience must decide what is more important: the immortal life beliefs of Isabella or the mortal life belief of Claudio? A sister who can save her brother's life by sleeping with a man? Should she or shouldn't she? For this cast of talented actors, creating three-dimensional characters in a environment and language established by Shakespeare is a challenge.

ABQ A&E: What other plays have you recently produced and how does Shakespeare fit in to your repertoire?

I direct a variety of styles. Just this year I directed an original script called "Little Red" for the Tricklock Company and "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" for Albuquerque Little Theatre — two very different styles of scripts. In the past I have directed mainly Shakespeare comedies. I do not see myself as a Shakespearean director, but as a theatrical director. I have ranged from Bertolt Brecht to Chekhov to Labute to Williams to documentary theatre to Shakespeare.

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Macbeth, directed by Leslee Richards, July 18-August 4

ABQ A&E: Why did you choose to produce “Macbeth”?

I have seen several productions of “Macbeth” and wondered if I could resolve some of the problems and enhance some of the values of those productions.

ABQ A&E: Can you talk about the relevance of “Macbeth” in modern times?

I think we can all think of someone in the world today who we’ve seen be willing to do anything to achieve their ambitions — Lance Armstrong, Kim Il Sung, Saddam Hussein come to mind, but there are everyday people who lie and cheat to get what they want. What’s interesting about Macbeth is how the repercussions play out and what his imagination allows him to want.

ABQ A&E: What are some challenges you and the cast face with this production?

“Macbeth” is very difficult to stage effectively. There are ghosts and witches, but also very real and human people who believe in those ghosts and witches. Are they mad? I think not and that’s what we have to resolve for our audience.

ABQ A&E: What other plays have you recently produced and how does Shakespeare fit in to your repertoire?

I directed “Pride and Prejudice” by Jane Austen, adapted by James Sullivan and Joseph Hanreddy at the Adobe last September, and just completed directing “The Motherf**ker with the Hat” by Stephen Adly Guirgis at the Vortex. If either of those have any relevancy to “Macbeth”, it would be “Motherf**ker” because the protagonist of that play must decide what to believe and what he can or cannot succeed at, much like Macbeth.

ABQ A&E: What can you share about the cast who’ll perform your production at Will Power 4?

Ryan Jason Cook will play Macbeth and Aleah Waldron Montaño will play Lady Macbeth. I worked with them previously when they played Oberon and Titania in “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” four years ago. Both are accomplished actors with vivid imaginations who are able to bring great energy and humanity to the characters. They will be joined by Laira Magnusson and Nic Ganjei as Lady Macduff and Macduff, and 12 other actors who are ready for the ride. This production will be set in Medieval times, which no previous Will Power production has done.

— Cristina Olds is a writer, graphic designer and teacher who loves writing about the fabulous people and fascinating places that abound in the Southwest.

As You Like It, directed by David Richard Jones, June 6-23

Measure for Measure, directed by Denise Schulz, June 27-July 14

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Vortex Theatre, 2004 Central Avenue SE

Thursdays through Saturdays, 7:30 pm and Sundays at 2 pm

vortexabq.org, 247.8600

As You Like It is a favorite of Shakespeare buffs. (l. to r.) Betty Moore is Celia, Harrison Sim is Orlando de Bois, and Ashley Weingardt is Rosalind.

Photo by Alan Mitchell.

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