

Audiences Are in Love with Shakespeare in Love



Shakespeare in Love has had an interesting journey to the stage. It's not uncommon for movies to get theatrical adaptations, and in this case, the film was written by Tom Stoppard and deals with the greatest playwright of all time — so in that sense, it's a natural fit.

What makes this story about Shakespeare, writer's block and the love that lifts all creative hindrances is that it was originally adapted with an eye on Broadway, only to have those plans scrapped in favor of a production in London and regional licensing that helped it become one of the most produced plays in the country.

So it's no wonder that eventually it was going to make its way to Rhode Island. The question was, which company would snatch it up first?

Well, rejoice theatergoers, because it's landed exactly where it belongs — in the hands of one of Rhode Island's best interpreters of the Bard and his multiverse. Jeff Church and Burbage Theatre Company have kicked off the theater season with a production so full of celebratory spirit and dramatic panache, you'll find yourself making friends with the person sitting next to you at intermission just so you can talk about how delightful it is.

The play itself is pretty faithfully adapted from the film by Lee Hall, based on the screenplay by Stoppard and Marc Norman. Shakespeare seems stuck in a rut. He can't seem to get moving on a new play he's writing titled *Romeo and Ethel, the Pirate's Daughter*. Then, enter Viola. A fan of Shakespeare's who wins him over first in disguise as an actor named Thomas Kent, then as herself at a ball where she is being betrothed to Lord Wessex, a sneering, down-on-his-luck aristocrat. Soon, Shakespeare's company finds that their play is improving immensely as the playwright finds himself, well, in love.

If all of this sounds downright Shakespearean, that's part of the fun. Remember, Shakespeare created a cinematic universe before there was cinema. One would think this company has been preparing to produce this play since their inception, considering they just came off a wildly successful run of *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (Abridged)* and just last season turned *Twelfth Night* on its head in the very best way.

For those of you who don't know a thing about Shakespeare, don't worry — there's still plenty for you to enjoy.

It should be noted that season openers are usually the hardest shows to program. How do you begin a year in a way that welcomes new audiences and pleases those who've been following you all along?

In this case, Burbage has chosen a show that exemplifies one of the things they excel at — creating an ensemble.

With a cast of nearly 20, every single actor in the show is working together like a finely oiled machine. If I didn't know better, I would think they'd been performing this play for years.

Leading the pack are Dillon Medina, one of the finest actors in the state, getting a chance to carry a play and making it look effortless. His Shakespeare travels from tortured to triumphant and hits all the right notes along the way. His relationship with Viola is enchanting and lovely to watch. Alison Russo makes Viola more than just an ingenue. She's a fiery leading lady with a point of view all her own. Her more vulnerable moments are heartbreaking and haunting. The final scene of R&J between her and Medina has a moment in it so gutsy I wish they would just stage the whole thing so I can see how Church would direct the rest of it as well.

Speaking of Church, he turns in a small but smashing performance as Marlowe. The Cyrano-inspired scene between him, Medina and Russo was a pleasure to watch. He and Medina have acted onstage together many times now, and it's evident. They have a familiarity with each other that helps solidify the relationship between these two friends and competitors.

With each production, Burbage seems to up its technical game, and this show is no different. The costumes — designed by Church, Jessica Winward and Morgan Clark, and coordinated by Clark — are worthy of their own ovation. Winward also does a spectacular job with the lighting. The challenge with a play like this is that it still harkens back to a film's way of presenting a story, which involves short scenes that travel around a room and back-and-forth between locations. Winward's lighting design helps direct your attention where it needs to go, and between the design and director, the show flows seamlessly from scene to scene. The set design by Trevor Elliot is straightforward and stunning, as always. Elliot's merging of function and form is what makes his work such a standout.

This would be the part of the review where I say that there are too many other actors in the show to mention and then list one or two, but to hell with that, I'm going to mention all of them, because they deserve it. In no particular order: Rae Mancini is a fierce and fabulous Queen Elizabeth. Andrew Stigler has a truly touching arc as the finance behind Shakespeare's play, only to fall in love with the magic of theater. James Lucey makes for a sinister Lord Wessex, but you can also sense the desperation he's experiencing as a man who has only one hope of having a future. His scenes with Russo are precise and on-point.

Patrick Keefe seems as though he was born to play Ned. He enters like a bolt of electricity and his fight

with Nicholas Menna as Richard Burbage is a highlight of the play. Menna makes Burbage both grumpy and lovable, which makes his pivot late in the play all the more enjoyable. Gabrielle McCauley, Brian Kozak, Helena Tafuri, Andrew Iacovelli, Nick Griffin, Brian McGuirk, Aaron Blanck and Cassidy McCarten are all working at the top of their game. Jack Clark as Wabash is truly touching, and as a Boatsman in one of the play's best scenes, he's a riot. Roger Lemelin has one of my favorite characters in the show — the crafty and catty Mr. Henslowe — and he makes it his own with perfect comic timing.

Now, if you're one of those people who asks why they keep making plays or musicals out of movies, you should know that *Shakespeare in Love* is one of my favorite films, and Medina and Russo are doing a far better job in this play than Fiennes and Paltrow did in the movie.

Actually, this might be one of the rare cases where the play improves upon the film, if only because it seems so much better-suited to being performed instead of screened. The intimate, in-the-round staging makes you glad we have companies like Burbage in the area where you can see every glance passed between actors — every moment up close.

Theater, at its best, can either entertain or enlighten us, but in some rare cases, shows can do both. With *Shakespeare in Love*, Burbage is proving that you don't need to present low-hanging fruit to attract big crowds. Their run is already selling out shows left and right, and I suspect it will continue to do so. They've added another smart, sophisticated and sexy show to their growing history of successful productions, and if you haven't checked them out yet, this would be a wonderful introduction to their work.

In other words, skip the movie, see the play and say hello to the person sitting next to you. I bet you two are going to have a lot to talk about.

Shakespeare in Love runs through Sep 16 at Burbage Theatre Company, 249 Roosevelt Ave, Pawtucket. For information, go to burbagetheatre.org