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Theater Reviews / Sunday, January 3, 2010

A Midsummer Night's Dream

By Gila Babich



Bare-Chested in the Park: Jake Paque and Rebekah Levin in A Midsummer Night's Dream.

Written by William Shakespeare
Directed by Kristin Skye Hoffmann
Queens Garden Stage
33-16 79th Street
Jackson Heights, Queens
718-874-9431

I once went to see a Julliard production of Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, which was set in the future; it didn't deviate from the original language but the setting was ultramodern, complete with spaceships and tinfoil suits. The acting was not bad but the science fiction variation on the set and costumes seemed so ill-fitting and distracting that I almost fell asleep. I decided then that Shakespeare's plays are not to be meddled with or altered.

When I heard the Queens Garden Stage was putting up a present-day, set in Central Park no less, I shook my head in disapproval. Imagine my surprise, then, when I stepped into the theater and was swallowed wholly by the world of the play, and was shaken only by violent fits of laughter.

Most notable in this small, well-cast production were Melissa Johnson as a whiny but charming Helena, and Bennett Harrell, who pulled off the role of Bottom in an exceptionally natural and hilarious manner. But Jake Paque stole the show in the role of Puck. His was a particularly hyperactive and flighty Puck who couldn't resist flirting with anything that moves, including unsuspecting audience members. Paque's high-energy performance charged the unfolding of events, and seamlessly tied together the different elements of the show.

Even the actors with smaller roles owned their parts. Look out for the lion, played by Joshua David Bishop, whose upstart roars will make you convolute.

The production's modern take proves once and for all that Shakespeare's words are compelling even when his characters are rapping. With hip hop dancing fairies, timely screen projections and cell phones as props, this production pulls Shakespeare's timeless themes into real life, but does it without losing the surrealism of *A Midsummer Night*. The light design accentuates the magical quality of a play in which most characters think they are merely dreaming.

Minor stumbling over text on opening night could stand to be polished, and the play does lose some of its initial momentum as it nears the end, before picking up again for the finale. Overall, the combination of one of Shakespeare's funniest works, a fresh cast and Kristin Skye Hoffman's direction makes this *A Midsummer Night* well worth a trip to Queens.

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