

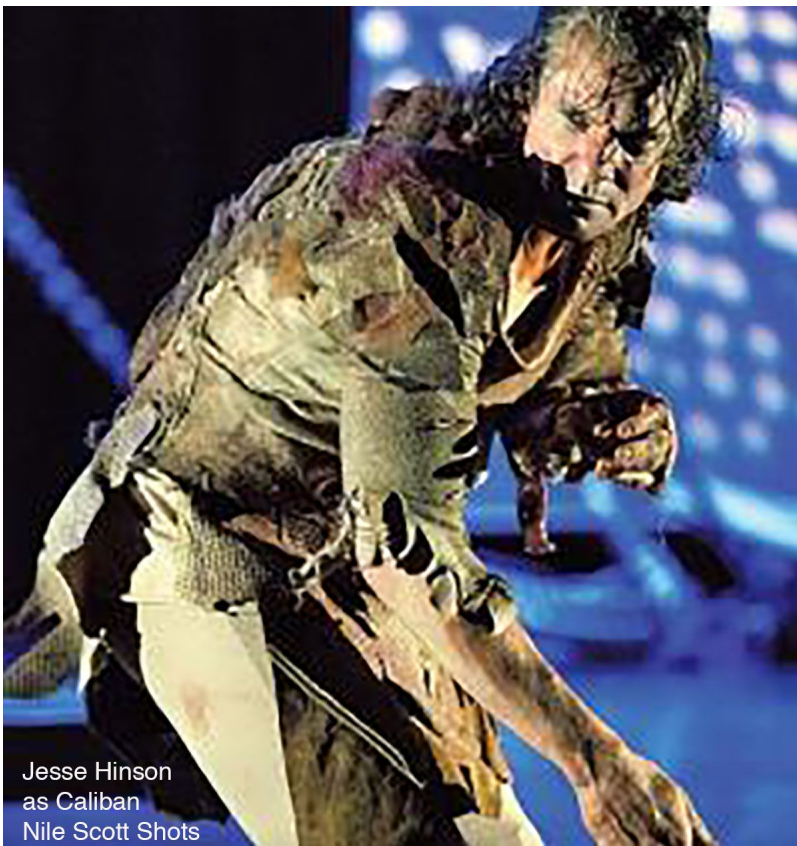
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Arts & Entertainment

## A magical 'The Tempest' from Actors' Shakespeare Project

THEATER

By Bob Stachel Advocate arts correspondent



Jesse Hinson  
as Caliban  
Nile Scott Shots

The text for “The Tempest,” William Shakespeare’s tale of sorcery and vengeance, contains more stage directions than most of his other plays. Several of them have to do with creating special effects using the stagecraft of the day. For example, a table loaded with food for a banquet is to be suddenly made bare by means of “quainte device.” Scholars are not exactly sure what device was used – a false tabletop manipulated by a boy hidden underneath is one educated guess. Whatever it was, the text gives us a strong clue that magical effects were important to the playwright.

Furthermore, although we typically associate Shakespeare’s work with the Globe Theatre, illuminated by daylight alone, evidence indicates “The Tempest” was written for and staged at Blackfriars Theatre. This venue brought such innovations to commercial theatre as artificial lighting and music between

the acts. We can well imagine audiences of 1610 were captivated by not only the mental images summoned by the power and majesty of the Bard’s language, but also by some new and surprising effects on the boards themselves.

All this is by way of saying that the Actors’ Shakespeare Project is heir to a long theatrical tradition as it employs light and music to transform the unassuming Willet Hall of Brookline’s United Parish into an enchanted island. It is not clear how to apportion credit here between lighting design (Chris Bocchairo), set design (Tyler Kinney) and props (Elizabeth Rocca), but the stage and even Prospero’s magic book literally glow.

Where ASP diverges from tradition, although not jarringly, is in director Allyn Burrows’ casting. Marya Lowry

takes on the role of Prospero with appropriate power and nobility, and Mara Sidmore converts Alonso from King to Queen of Naples. This production is not making any overt statements about gender. This is unlike last March, when Chicago's Hypocrites Theater sailed into Club Oberon aboard a completely gender-reversed H.M.S. Pinafore, to great comic effect but also providing some social commentary.



Lydia Barnett-Mulligan  
(Miranda) and Marya  
Lowry (Prospero)  
Photo: Nile Scott Shots

Mr. Burrows seems to be just making best use of the talents of his company and is primarily interested in making the text of the Elizabethan piece work its magic upon a modern audience. Still, the effect of making Prospero and Miranda (a lovely and wild Lydia Barnett-Mulligan) into mother and daughter does provide a new buzz from old words, although I will confess a tiny pang at losing the final alliterative F when changing the parent to "mother" in "Full fathom five thy father lies."

A couple of performances leave us spellbound. A silvery Samantha Richert enchants with curves and voice as Prospero's trickster sprite, Ariel. A

slithery Jesse Hinson comically menaces as Caliban, the monstrous embodiment of Prospero's dark side. At times, Mr. Hinson seems to be all arms, legs and serpentine tongue, and his NBA-sized frame does not prevent him from leaping on top of a barrel or entwining with Ms. Sidmore when she takes a second turn as the besotted jester Trinculo.

The weaknesses of this production lie in comedy and romance. Ms. Barnett-Mulligan has a wonderful naiveté, but she simply does not have a Ferdinand who can complement her in one of Shakespeare's sweetest love scenes. The first couple of clown scenes elicit a few titters but never really take off. The heart of clowning is the clown's passionate belief that the obviously unachievable can be attained, even if the unreachable goal is as simple as trying to stand up straight when completely inebriated. The more the clown fails or is beaten down, the harder she tries for success. These clowns seem to be defeated before they start. Only Mr. Hinson's Caliban seems to have the right comic energy.

While we are carping, it would have been nice to see a bit more of a change in Ms. Lowry's performance when Prospero abandons vengeance and finds forgiveness in her heart.

Although overall the technical aspects here are a strength, during the opening storm and shipwreck, the passengers were in danger both from drowning at sea and from having their dialogue drowned out by the overly loud background music.

Nevertheless, once on shore, the production is on firmer footing. Shakespeare's work is presented with clarity and power, and trimmed to a reasonable just over two hours. ASP's website says the running time is 2.5 hours, for some reason. I hope this minor error does not keep any potential audience members at home.

"The Tempest," by William Shakespeare, directed by Allyn Burrows, Actors' Shakespeare Project, Willet Hall at United Parish, Brookline, through Jan. 8, 2017; ActorsShakespeareProject.org, (866) 811-4111

