

STAGE REVIEW

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Dream in 'Donkey Show' is Shakespearean

By Don Aucoin, Globe Staff | September 14, 2009

CAMBRIDGE - Are you nostalgic for the disco era? Me neither.

Yet even this hardened survivor of the polyester nightmare of the '70s, that festival of bad taste and worse hairdos, managed to greatly enjoy "The Donkey Show," a production by the American Repertory Theater that reimagines "A Midsummer Night's Dream" as a disco phantasmagoria.

Let me say up front that "The Donkey Show" poses a challenge to a reviewer. It's not that the show completely defies description, but rather that the sensations it creates are so visceral that words seem almost beside the point. This is a show aimed straight at your adrenal glands, and at some of your other glands, too.

It doesn't bypass the brain, though. In less capable hands, it could have been a travesty or a mere stunt. But codirectors Diane Paulus and Randy Weiner, who created "Donkey Show" a decade ago in New York, have devised a visual language to express the essence of Shakespeare's play while not using a word of his text (unless the line "I am your boogie man. You turn me on" somehow got left out of my Pelican edition Shakespeare).

It was an audacious decision by Paulus to begin her tenure as ART artistic director with "Donkey Show," the initial entry in her "Shakespeare Exploded!" festival. This production will not be everyone's cup of tea. But if the performance I attended is any indication, Paulus's gamble may pay off by attracting a much younger audience than is the theatrical norm.

Not that audience is precisely the right word, if it implies passive watching rather than sustained booty-shaking on the dance floor, which is how much of the crowd spent "Donkey Show." The action unfolded in and around them as strobe lights swept the scene, a mirrored ball glittered on the ceiling above, and shirtless actors in spandex hot pants acrobatically bounded across tables and tumbled down stairs.

The mixed-up mortals whose romantic misadventures form the spine of "Dream" - renamed Helen, Dimitri, Mia, and Sander - are now patrons of a Studio 54-style nightclub presided over by Mr. Oberon. At the moment, he's on the outs with Tytania (Titania in "Dream"), a disco queen who wears butterfly pasties and not much else.

The part of Bottom is conflated into two guys named Vinnie, who look and act like characters out of "Saturday Night Fever" (a film Paulus has acknowledged as an influence on "Donkey Show"). Puck, a roller-skating rascal also known as Dr. Wheelgood, concocts a magic potion (amid winking hints that it's cocaine) that wreaks all kinds of havoc: among other things, it makes Tytania fall in love with the first thing she sees. As that first thing happens to be a donkey, into which the two Vinnies have been transformed by Puck, things get awkward.

This lunacy is punctuated with disco-era tunes that wittily underscore the mood of the moment, such as "I Love the Nightlife," "Ring My Bell," "No More Tears (Enough Is Enough)," "Don't Leave Me This Way," "Never Knew Love Like This Before," and "Pick Up the Pieces."

It may sound absurd in print, but it is riveting in performance, thanks to the interpretive imagination Paulus and Weiner bring to "Donkey Show," and to the unflagging commitment of the cast (women play some of the male roles). The characters are the most stylized caricatures imaginable, but the cast manages to communicate Shakespeare's themes (the wayward path of true love, the wobbly nature of identity) while conveying a message of their own about the power of a good time.

It should be noted, though, that there is plenty of darkness at the edges. Paulus and Weiner understand that predatory sexual behavior was a big part of the club scene during the disco era, and that is an unsettling display here.

If “Donkey Show” faltered for a moment, showed a trace of hesitation or self-doubt, the whole conceit might crumble. But it goes over the top, and then just keeps going, taking us with it.

So Paulus is off to a strong start at ART. And who knows, maybe she has a little karma in her corner. Three decades ago, another celebrated theater figure arrived in Cambridge amid sky-high expectations. His name was Robert Brustein, fresh from Yale Repertory Theatre. He launched ART and made it a cultural force to reckon with.

Brustein’s first production on March 20, 1980? “A Midsummer Night’s Dream.”

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