

Rejuvenating Shakespeare

BY LIZA HOLTMEIER
Senior Reporter

Don't be surprised if Shakespeare's fairies and sworn-off lovers dance the Macarena today.

The Sweet Smoke of Rhetoric Tour, a touring company from Harrisonburg, Va., will present contemporary takes on Shakespeare's "Love's Labor's Lost" and "A Midsummer Night's Dream." The shows respectively begin at 3:30 p.m. and 8 p.m. today in Kimball Recital Hall.

The troupe performs with conditions similar to those of Shakespeare's day: Sets are minimal, actors play more than one character, and the players use the same lighting as the audience.

However, contemporary costumes and music—like the Macarena—give the plays an updated feel.

Three lords a-weeping

"Love's Labor's Lost" begins with King Ferdinand and three of his lords vowing to swear off the company of women for three years. Soon, the men all forsake their oath and find themselves lost in love. The show concentrates on the foibles of young and old, court and country.

"A Midsummer Night's Dream" tells the misfortunes of lovers Hermia and Lysander, who flee to the forest to escape a death sentence imposed by Hermia's father. They soon find them-

selves in the middle of a quarrel between the fairy queen and king.

Stephen Buhler, a University of Nebraska-Lincoln associate professor of English, first invited the troupe to Lincoln four years ago. He saw the players perform at Folger's Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C., and then was enamored by their approach to Shakespeare.

"They trust Shakespeare's language, and they trust Shakespeare's theatrical knowledge," Buhler explained. "Shakespeare knew how to work and create a theatrical experience."

Third time's a charm

Today will mark the troupe's third appearance at UNL. Four years ago, it performed "Much Ado About Nothing" at the Wick Alumni Center. The group's second appearance, two years ago, included "Hamlet" and "The Tempest" in the Temple Building's Studio Theatre.

Buhler said Lincoln audiences readily accepted the troupe because of its contemporary acting style and references to 20th-century popular culture.

"(The group's style) breaks through a lot of the encrusted traditions," Buhler said. "I've never seen an audience respond so genuinely to verbal humor."

Shenandoah Shakespeare Express, the touring group's parent organization, was founded in 1988 by Ralph Cohen, a James Madison University English professor, and Jim Warren, a

JMU alumnus. Both felt Shakespeare wasn't being performed properly and decided to stage their rendition of "Richard III" at an area Presbyterian church.

Around the world

Since then, the Shenandoah Shakespeare Express has grown into a national touring company of 12 members and a regional company of 11. Past productions include "The Comedy of Errors" and Tom Stoppard's "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead."

The company has performed around the United States, at Shakespeare's Globe Theatre in London, in Scotland, Paris, Germany and Canada. The group holds auditions in three different cities each year, auditioning 250 professional actors and theater graduates and patrons for the 23 member slots.

"We still believe Shakespeare is relevant today," said Adam Schrecengost, marketing director for the company. "We try to do it in his spirit. We rely on the talent and kinetic energy of the performers and the imagination of the audience."

Schrecengost said the performance of "Love's Labor's Lost" combined all of these elements.

"People overlook this play," he said. "It has drama and love. Plus, the language has a lot of strong wordplay."

Admission to the performances, followed by a discussion with Warren and the actors, is free.

JOSHUA GILLIN AND AARON STECKELBERG/DN

'Les Misérables' lives up to its world-renowned name

BY LANE HICKENBOTTOM
Theater Critic

Simply brilliant!

During Cameron Mackintosh's presentation of "Les Misérables" Tuesday night at the Lied Center for Performing Arts, the acting company justified its self-proclamation of "the world's most popular musical."

The Lied Center certainly went out of its way to give Lincoln "Les Misérables" for a week. I doubt even Garth Brooks could fill the Lied Center for eight performances. But the week is sold out and for good reason.

"Les Misérables" is a story of

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love, honor and a dream that the blue sky will be a brighter tomorrow.

The musical is full of compassion and full of tears. And those tears were let loose Tuesday when the audience was drawn into Jean Valjean's life. Valjean, the main character played by Gregory Calvin Stone, is an ex-convict who served 19 years on a French chain gang for the petty crime of stealing "only a mouthful" of bread.

After getting out, he is inspired by a bishop from whom he stole silver to change his life for the better. After

breaking parole, changing his name, buying a factory and becoming mayor, Valjean comes across one of his employees. Fantine, played by Lisa Capps, has sold not only her hair, but other parts and functions of her body to pay for medicine for her illegitimate daughter, Cosette.

Fantine is about to be arrested, and Valjean, finding compassion for her cause, demands that she be taken to a hospital, not to court. Valjean later vows to Fantine that he will look after her beloved Cosette.

Valjean finds the young Cosette, with the Thénardiens, who took care of her with less than honest concern. "Les Misérables" really takes off here

(as if it were ever grounded) as Stone and Danielle Raniere, who plays the young girl, meet for the first time and fall into a special familial love. The audience had no choice at this point but to fall in love with the sweet, abused Cosette.

There is no room and no point in trying to spew out the whole plot, but the musical rolls on with power as Valjean is forced to hide in the shadows from the police, all the while raising Cosette as he had vowed.

Victor Hugo's amazing story explores not only this love but also the story of revolutionaries, life-long promises and romance. This introduces the instant love between

Cosette and Marius, a young man played by Rich Affannato, who ends up nearly dying for a better tomorrow. Valjean saves his life almost as a gift to Cosette so she can experience love.

Great acting made the characters believable. An amazing rotating stage full of elaborate sets and great light-effects added to the mystique of "Les Misérables." And the often-forgotten orchestra provided a beautiful yet powerful platform.

Unfortunately for anybody without tickets, all remaining shows are sold out. If you get the chance, "Les Misérables" is worth the money. There is no better way to get a taste of Broadway without leaving campus.