

This was my first visit to the St. Lawrence Shakespeare Festival and my first ever production of MEASURE FOR MEASURE. I was impressed by the quality of the production and also the venue itself. Located in a natural amphitheatre on the banks of the St. Lawrence, it's a beautiful setting with a view of the river and lots of song birds – not noisy seagulls. It's also fascinating to Shakespeare as originally done – in the daylight. Director Craig Walker proved to me something I'd always questioned ever since reading the play years ago. Although MEASURE FOR MEASURE has a dark streak, yes, folks, it IS a comedy.

Andrea Robertson's set is minimal, with three decorative flats upstage on the three-quarter thrust stage. There are matching curtains stage right and left that partially conceal entrances and the musicians. Set in Vienna, her costumes create the world of Austria at the turn of the 19th century. I particularly liked those for the masked and underwear-clad ladies of the evening.

This is one review where I won't mention either lighting or sound, as both are natural. However Musical Director Doreen Taylor-Claxton has done a lovely job with both the singers and the small instrumental ensemble, consisting of cello, violin, guitar and recorder. The opening music sets the stage beautifully.

Now to the cast. It's a large one and with a couple of minor exceptions, strong. Michael MacDonald is hilarious as Elbow with his Inspector Clouseau accent, as is Perry Mucci as Froth with his vacant expression and curly blond wig. Unfortunately Brent Buchanan seems to be working too hard as Pompey and not really enjoying the role. The trio's Act I scene with John Koensgen, as an upright and believable Escalus, is a riot.

Alix Sideris gives an over the top performance as Mistress Overdone that never quite slips into caricature and is thoroughly believable. Greg Kramer is outstanding as Lucio. He's one of those actors that speak Shakespeare's language with such clarity of intent that it seems contemporary. He's also endowed with impeccable comic timing.

As Duke Vincentio, Craig Walker gives a solid performance and is especially good in his scenes in disguise, although his Irish accent took me by surprise. His scenes with Lucio are great fun. Emma Hunter gives a touching and spirited performance as Isabella. Her infectious delight in the plotting with the Friar shows an unexpected aspect of the character.

Kris Joseph gives a remarkably convincing performance in the dual roles of Angelo, representing the dark side of human nature, and the sensitive Claudio, Isabella's brother. He's especially effective in Claudio's act II passage which is perhaps the best-known in the play that begins, "To die and go we know not where. . ." His Angelo is a powerful portrait of disintegration.

Director Craig Walker has done a terrific job of staging, using every available entrance, exit and path. His opening magician scene is as relevant as it is startling. He and his excellent cast have managed to clarify this complex play, bringing out all the humor without undercutting its ideas about hypocrisy.

This is a good opportunity to see a fine production of one of Shakespeare's least-produced but also one of his most interesting comedies. Not only that, you can rent a chair and get ice cream at the Lighthouse at the intermission.

On a scale of one to five the St. Lawrence Shakespeare Festival production of MEASURE FOR MEASURE gets four and a third buoys. For North Country Public Radio I'm Connie Meng.