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A measured approach to Shakespeare

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One might call it a "measured" risk.

The St. Lawrence Shakespeare Festival's Measure for Measure, which runs until mid-August, offers us mirror-image symbolism in its portrayal of iron-fisted authority and its victim.

It's a directorial risk that works well, but, like all such risks, comes at a price.

Measure for Measure is a play about the law, those who enforce it overzealously and those who fall victim to it, a group that often includes the dictators.

The Duke of Vienna, Vincentio, concerned that the law in his city has been "let slip," concocts a scheme to clean things up by staging his departure and placing the city under the rule of his deputy, Angelo.

The crackdown is immediate and brutal. Angelo sentences a young man named Claudio, who has impregnated his fiancée, to die for the crime of fornication.

Claudio's sister, Isabella, who is about to become a nun, pleads for her brother's life, prompting Angelo to descend into vice himself: he will only spare Claudio's life if Isabella sleeps with him.

The duke, meanwhile, has slipped back into Vienna, disguised as a friar, to see how his deputy is doing, and in that guise devises a benevolent scheme to prevent the execution.

There is further substitution of identity in the friar's plan, and after he is unmasked as the real duke, the sentence of choice turns out to be marriage rather than death. This is, after all, a comedy.

("Marrying a punk, my lord, is pressing to death, whipping, and hanging," the slimy Lucio complains.)

The risk comes with director Craig Walker's decision to cast the same actor as Angelo and Claudio - a decision, notes artistic director Ian Farthing, that some suggest the Bard himself made in his own stagings.

Kris Joseph, one of the festival's many welcome returning actors, does a remarkable job in both roles, most notably conveying Angelo's tortured character as the moralist authoritarian realizes he is not up to his own standards.

Putting the same face on the terrified prisoner awaiting beheading, who in desperation urges his sister to accept the indecent proposal, is such effective symbolism that one wonders why it isn't always done that way.

The answer comes at the end, when both the tyrant and his victim must share the stage.

Isabella, who at that point believes her brother to have already been executed, reacts with understandably intense emotion when she discovers Claudio is alive.

But rather than looking into Claudio's eyes, she must embrace a hooded man whose back is to the audience while Angelo looks on.

Clearly, this configuration robs the scene of much of its dramatic power - the price to pay for the symbolic power of the Angelo/Claudio match.

It is, however, the only drawback in an otherwise stellar production.

Joseph is not alone in delivering a splendid performance. Seasoned audience members will be glad to see the many returning actors, including Emma Hunter (Isabella), Michael MacDonald (whose portrayal of the comic constable Elbow has more Clouseau in it), and director Walker as the duke.

Welcome additions to this year's festival lineup include Greg Kramer, who injects some acid worldly wit as the rogue Lucio, Charlotte Gowdy as Angelo's snubbed fiancée Mariana, John Koensgen as Escalus and Brent

Buchanan as the incorrigible bawd Pompey.

The play is also a feast for the senses, from the understated fin-de-siecle Viennese costumes to the haunting religious music and violin melodies.

Measure for Measure runs at the Kinsmen Amphitheatre until August 15, alternating with the festival's other production, The Taming of the Shrew.

Performances run Tuesday through Saturday at 7 p.m., with 2 p.m. matinees on Saturday. The festival is also putting on its annual Sunday Series.

Tickets are \$22 for adults, \$18 for seniors. \$16 for students and children 12 and under are admitted free when accompanied by an adult. Season passes cost \$80.

More information is available online at www.stlawrenceshakespeare.ca.

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