‘TWELFTH NIGHT’ A TREAT

African-American Shakespeare Co. sets mistaken-identity comedy in The City

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Jazzy ‘Twelfth Night’ set in The City

By Georgia Rowe
Special to The Examiner

There was a celebratory mood at opening night of the African-American Shakespeare Co.'s new production of "Twelfth Night." Last weekend.

It wasn't just the high spirits radiating from the stage as the company performed Shakespeare's rollicking comedy; there was a lot to celebrate in addition as well.

The company has weathered three years of ups and downs, but now boasts a new artistic director, a handsome new home in the Buriel Clay Theatre at the African-American Art and Culture Complex, a revitalized acting company and a rising profile throughout the Bay Area and beyond.

The combination of these elements is clearly working its magic — and fostering the company's continuing mission of reimagining the classics for contemporary audiences. As artistic director, L. Peter Callender said in his pre-show remarks, "African-American Shakespeare Co. is always in the black."

Callender's production, which brings the company's 2010-11 season to an upbeat conclusion, serves that mission in nearly every particular. The director sets Shakespeare's comedy of shipwrecks, mistaken identities and blossoming love in 1940s San Francisco.

When the heroine, Viola (the lovely Renée Wilson), and her brother, Sebastian (an agile Romulo Torres), wash ashore, it's to a jazz- and blues-flavored score written and performed by acclaimed composer Marcus Shelby.

Sets by Kennett Amoros and costumes by Kristen Lowe recall the vibrant heyday of The City's own Fillmore jazz district.

Callender directs at a snappy pace, and the cast is fully committed. Wilson's Viola, who spends most of the play disguised as the page Cesario, weather the pangs of first love with grace and wit.

Rebecca Prun’s Olivia registers her attraction to Cesario with a winning mix of elegance and sensuality. Matt Jones’ Orsino is aptly impetuous as he delivers his opening speech, “If music be the food of love, / Play on.”

The comedic scenes are broadly played by J. Danny Williams’ expansive Toby Belch, Martin Grunow’s foibles Andrew Aguecheek, Charles Brandly’s jive-talking Feste and Chris Dewey’s grumpy attendant Fabian.

Lauren Spencer adds a touch of the mastermind Maria, and Armando McClain brings urgency to the role of Antonio, Erik Beisel, Percival Archibald and Unique-Jade contribute in supporting roles, and Leslie boy John Shelby in a couple of lovely songs.

If the pivotal scene in which the others entrap the servant Malvolio (Michael Uy Kelly) doesn’t quite deliver its customary sting, the play’s final moment of reconciliation is cause for jubilation.

And so it is African-American Shakespeare Co.'s continued success.

Mistaken Identity: Renée Wilson is excellent as Viola — who masquerades as a man — in the African-American Shakespeare Co.'s musical production of "Twelfth Night."

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THE LIST

Top Pick

Fuddy Meers

Through April 24, 5:30-555. Marin Theatre Co. presents Pulitzer Prize-winner David Lindsay-Abaire’s acclaimed absurdist comedy about an amnesiac whose life becomes even more complicated when she is kidnapped by a limping, lingo-savvy, half-blind, half-dead man in a ski mask. [537 Miller Ave., Mill Valley, (415) 388-5800, www.marintheatre.org]

Curricular Activity by Jay D. Hanagan, "Three Questions" by Maurice Martin, "The Universal Language" by David Ives and "Graceland" by Elia Byros. [10195 Alvarado St., S.F., (415) 569-1550.]

Killing My Lobster Reboots

April 20-28, 5:30-5:30. Directed by Lisa Metz, the sketch-comedy troupe investigates technology and how it affects and changes our lives in pieces involving frequent Facebook posts, smartphones and outdated electronics. [The Jewish Theatre, 470 Florida St., S.F., (415) 331-3005, www.killingmylobsters.com]

Secret Identity Crisis

Through May 16, 5:30-8:30. Directors Clay Roberson and Melissa Holman examine what lies behind the mask of a hero in this two-hour play presented by Un-Scripted Theatre Co. [SF Playhouse, 533 Sutter St., S.F., (415) 869-5384, www.un-scripted.com]

A Streetcar Named Desire


Olmec Colossal Masterworks of Ancient Mexico

Through May 8, 2011

America’s oldest civilization and Mesoamerica’s “mother culture” (1200-400 B.C.), the Olmec are famous for their colossal heads carved from giant boulders. This exhibition of over 100 objects includes massive sculptures in addition to small-scale vessels, figures and masks, many of which have not traveled before.

Olmec Community Friday Nights: May 25-May 6, 2011

Every Friday from 5-8:45 pm view this exhibition for free. Permanent collection & other special exhibitions not included.

Funding for the San Francisco production of this exhibition is provided by

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