

The Late, Great Pinter

Tony Adler

The Tempest Steppenwolf Theatre Company OLD TIMES City Lit Theater 4 PINTER Aston Rep Theatre Company at Peter Jones Gallery

Let me live here ever. So rare a wonder'd father and a wife makes this place a Paradise." —The Tempest

It's been said—most recently by David Mamet, I think—that if you want immortality as a playwright, you've got to write at least 30 scripts. Shakespeare wrote 37, and cleverly fixed it so that a lot of them were either great or charming. But he also assured his endurance through the centuries by writing juicy lead roles for actors at every stage of life. Men in particular can make their first big splash as Romeo, mature into Macbeth, and then demonstrate their undiminished chops in the autumn of their years with Lear.

The Bard even wrote a role for the winter: Prospero, from *The Tempest*. Running now at Steppenwolf Theatre in a slow-building but ultimately fascinating and delightful production directed by Tina Landau, the play is thought to have been Shakespeare's last—and Prospero, an old nobleman who's spent his years learning and working magic, a poeticized version of the playwright. Prospero's climactic renunciation of sorcery is seen as a 56-year-old Shakespeare's farewell to the theater. And the actor who plays Prospero may be giving a valedictory of his own.

At 65, Frank Galati needn't be saying farewell to anything. But his career—especially as an adapter and director—has been all about magic. He's the guy who made it rain on Tom Joad in *The Grapes of Wrath* and so beautifully realized the lives and minds of Picasso and Gertrude Stein in *She Always Said, Pablo*. There's definitely something evocative about seeing him in the role of a man who creates masques with the help of sprites.

But this production doesn't trade in nostalgia. When we first see Galati's white-bearded, long-haired Prospero, he's wearing a hodgepodge outfit that includes huaraches sans socks, ratty pants under an India-cloth skirt hung with little trinkets, a washed-out antique European coat, and a top hat garnished with feathers and made of what appears to be buckskin. All ochres and browns except for the bits of flair, he looks like some New England eccentric who came out west and went native. Or a maybe a Merry Prankster who never got off Ken Kesey's bus. There's something incontrovertibly American in his style, and in the easy cadence of his speech too.

Prospero's backstory is this: once Duke of Milan, he ignored statecraft in favor of arcane studies and has been duly overthrown by the brother, Antonio, on whom he'd fobbed off his responsibilities. Set adrift in a leaky boat with his three-year-old daughter, Miranda, he's made landfall on an island previously inhabited by a witch, finding there both her son, a gullible, malformed, fish-scented creature called Caliban, and Ariel, an "airy spirit" the witch had shut up in a tree. Using his formidable necromantic skills, he's subjugated the former and liberated the latter—but has made servants of them both. Now 12 years have passed. Miranda's coming into womanhood, and Prospero's decided it's time to settle scores, reestablish the equilibrium that was wrecked by his overthrow, and leave the island.

Which island is it, though? Where is it supposed to be? Impossible to say for certain—Shakespeare had a habit of creating imaginary places and turning real places strange. Still, Galati's getup and manner had me believing that, without being explicit about it, Landau means us to see this bit of seagirt real estate as a kind of America.

The concept works frighteningly well, though it doesn't solve anything at all. On the contrary, its genius lies in

the incredible number of questions it generates. Especially on the subject of race. Caliban, Ariel, Antonio, and Miranda are all played here by black actors. The quartet includes Prospero's closest intimates and sworn enemies, those he's been harmed by and caused harm, those he's saved from torment and condemned to it. Crucially, tellingly, it includes his slaves as well as every bit of family this washed-up European duke has left. Talk about rich and strange. I don't think I've ever seen the epic complications of America's race relations more elegantly set out.

And the dramatic payoff is enormous. When James Vincent Meredith's smoldering Antonio can't bring himself to reconcile with his brother, the silence is electric. When Jon Michael Hill's buoyant Ariel helps his master master himself, the moment is expansive. Every time K. Todd Freeman's rueful Caliban drags himself out of his little pit with a shackle on his ankle, the ugly resonances multiply. And when Alana Arenas's sweet Miranda declares her love for Ferdinand, the shipwrecked young white kid, all you can do is hope.

The entire cast is perfect, and the look, partially created through aerial choreography by Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi (who is, in the interest of disclosure, my former partner at the Actors Gymnasium), is sumptuous fun.

reviews

Prospero in America