



Bawd on the Beach: Brothels Outlawed in New Orleans Production of Measure for Measure

by Cameron Butt. Written on 2013-07-12. First published in the *ISE Chronicle*.

For the production: Measure for Measure (2013, Bard on the Beach, Canada). See production details at the end of the review.

OF THE THREE SHAKESPEARE PRODUCTIONS THAT BARD ON THE BEACH BRINGS TO ITS SEA-SIDE stages this summer, *Measure for Measure* delivers the most energy. Director John Murphy and musical director Benjamin Elliott transform the play into a ragtime jazz musical set in 1900s New Orleans, showing us the lighter side of the law without losing sight of the story's weightier implications.

The Cajun setting works rather well for this play's sexual and legal themes, with the players' accents skillfully deployed in an auditory rendering of class and racial divisions. Mara Gottler's costume design, too, shows the discrepancy between wealth and poverty, with the duke and his lords dressed in black banking attire against the browns and blues of Claudio and the others. Outliers include Isabella, who wears pure white; Mistress Overdone, who wears suggestive reds; and Lucio, who sports a straw boater and sycophantically swings a cane throughout.

Murphy does New Orleans justice by substituting every occurrence of "Vienna" with "N'Orle'ns," not to mention colouring the dialogue a few other local toponyms. He thereby unabashedly tweaks the Bard's sacred language in favour of a more cohesive setting. To his credit, the play's language seems curiously well-suited to the Yat dialect as well as this period of New Orleans history.

No production set in New Orleans would be complete without music, and Elliot delivers a collection of cleverly written original songs based on language from the play text. I hoped to pick up a sound track at the Bard Boutique after the show, but I guess the festival organizers did not foresee Elliot's success. I've put in a request that a recording be available next year. It's that good. If Internet Shakespeare Editions can get their hands on the music, it will be a fantastic addition to the Shakespeare in Performance Database.

The production's greatest strength, however, is undoubtedly its lively cast, a talented group of performers capable of singing, dancing, and getting the crowd to shout along with the rabble. As Isabella (Sereana Malani) presents her unlikely case before the court, audience members find themselves following the lead of David Marr's Pompey, chanting "Hear her! Hear her!" one minute and jeering at Isabella the next. David Mackay renders a slimy Angelo and Andrew Wheeler delivers a Kelsey Grammer-like Duke Vincentio: kind and personable, yet severe enough to rule a dukedom. Though much of the play is dedicated to light-hearted comic mischief—led by a delightfully smarmy Lucio (Anton Lipovetsky) and a repulsively alluring Mistress Overdone (Lois Anderson)—Isabella and Claudio (Luc Roderique) manage to silence and captivate the audience with an emotional delivery of the dialogue in act 3 scene 1 ("Ay, but to die...").

If the lead performers are effective, the supporting cast members push the play's execution to near perfection. It's one of those rare productions where your eyes remain free to wander away from speaking characters to fall upon an absurdly funny facial expression from Froth (Benjamin Elliott) or a subtle glance between Escalus (Bernard Cuffling) and Angelo. Every single supporting actor buys into the action, a chemistry that is especially rare so early in the run (I attended the opening preview performance).

Several performers doubled up on roles, especially during musical numbers. During the final scene, band member Chris Cochrane suddenly dropped his instrument to transform himself into Elbow one last time, frantically donning his constable hat in a sequence that toed the line between bad staging and comic metadrama. Most notable, however, was Lois Anderson doubling as Mistress Overdone and Juliet, subtly drawing a parallel between prostitute and nearly-wed.

If the production falls short in any area, it is in the regrettable overuse of physical innuendo. Don't get me wrong: I can't argue with an occasional pelvic thrust to punctuate an antiquated sex joke, and I have no objection to Mistress Overdone wielding a dildo during one of Constable Elbow's brothel raids, but when every single allusion to a male or female sex organ becomes a gesture—especially in a saucy play like *Measure for Measure*—the sharpness of Shakespeare's wit grows dull. That said, these raunchy moments were certainly highlights for the teenage boys sitting behind me. And I suppose that's worth something.

Production Details

General

<i>Title</i>	Measure for Measure
<i>Year</i>	2013
<i>Theater Company</i>	Bard on the Beach
<i>Theaters</i>	Bard on the Beach Shakespeare Festival (Canada)
<i>Start Date</i>	2013-07-11
<i>End Date</i>	2013-09-13

Cast

DUKE VINCENTIO	MR. ANDREW WHEELER
ANGELO	MR. DAVID MACKAY
LORD ESCALUS	BERNARD CUFFLING
CLAUDIO	LUC RODERIQUE
ISABELLA	SEREANA MALANI
JULIET	LOIS ANDERSON
MARIANA	MS. COLLEEN WHEELER
LUCIO	ANTON LIPOVETSKY
ELBOW	CHRIS COCHRANE
FROTH	BENJAMIN ELLIOTT
MISTRESS OVERDONE	LOIS ANDERSON
POMPEY	MR. DAVID MARR

Creatives

DIRECTOR	JOHN MURPHY
COSTUME DESIGNER	MS. MARA GOTTLER
SET DESIGNER	DREW FACEY
CHOREOGRAPHY	TARA CHEYENNE FRIEDENBERG
LIGHTING	ADRIAN MUIR
MUSICAL DIRECTOR	BENJAMIN ELLIOTT
MUSIC	JOHN MURPHY
MUSIC	ANTHONY PAVLIC