

This 'Merchant' will appeal to Shakespeare experts

Kyle Ridley

Special to the Potomac News and Manassas Journal Messenger

Thursday, October 11, 2007

Cracking the classic linguistic code tends to be a test of concentration whenever taking part in a revived Shakespearean production. If not familiar with the storyline, it is easy to get puzzled by the dialogue or lose focus of plot and direction. Playing at the Cramer Center in Manassas, Vpstart Crow's current production of "The Merchant of Venice" requires full attention of the class in order to make the grade.

The complex tale involves Bassanio (Christopher C. Holbert) asking his merchant friend Antonio (George Kitchen) for 3,000 ducats in his quest to win the hand of wealthy heiress Portia (Rachel Lee Poole). Having to borrow and failing to pay back the funds from Jewish money-lender Shylock (Jay Tilley), Antonio's future is left up to the court when Shylock demands a "pound of flesh" for his inability to pay.

At the core of this complicated and often exhausting production of religion, love, loss, politics and greed are the 14 devoted players that carry each intricate piece of dialogue with passion and poise.

Poole is the shining centerpiece of the play. Bold and biting, she dances through each scene with an unshaken confidence that keeps an audience glued. Her ability to twist a not so admirable character into a crowd favorite without losing any edge is key. Whether scheming in a little black dress or standing firm disguised as a man, Poole carries out the role of the sly and sharp-tongued Portia with a natural flare that in turn showcases her own crafty intellect.

Also serving strong doses of skill are Jay Tilley and Carl Brandt Long. Straight-faced and in tune, Tilley is pro at becoming one with his character in every spoken sentence or silent stare. From vicious to vulnerable, his direction is solid through each step.

Offering up some comic relief is Long, who literally throws himself into each swinging second of stage time. Playing the drunken Launcelot, his animated performance provides a much needed jolt of enthusiasm and simple silliness.

Never too extravagant, Vpstart Crow sticks to its trend of impressive costumes and mediocre stage designs. Set in 1920s Venice, flapper dresses and fancy business suits are front and center along with a makeshift ancient fountain and mostly bare set.

With a blink you've missed vital information script, the tiresome production was further brought down by what seems to be the over-heated Cramer Center. Patrons making their programs into fanning devices throughout the two and a half hour production contributed to the restless acts.

Although there is no denying the accelerated drive of the cast, the successful speed of Shakespeare, or the lasting impact of the script, Vpstart Crow's current production

of "The Merchant of Venice" fulfills only the appetites of Shakespeare experts while leaving a hungry growl in the novices that may need a classic literature tune up.

WHEN YOU GO

- "The Merchant of Venice"
- Vpstart Crow, The Cramer Center, 9008 Center St., Manassas
- Fridays and Saturdays through Oct. 21 at 8 p.m.; 3 p.m. Sundays
- Tickets: \$15 to \$20
- To purchase, boxof

ficetickets.com/vpstartcrow or BoxOfficeTickets.com; 800-494-TIXS