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Taking the 'Measure' of Brooklyn Bridge Park

It's a spectacular setting for New York Classical Theatre's "Measure for Measure"

By Lore Croghan • August 13, 2015



Meet the cast of "Measure for Measure" — (left to right) Clay Storseth as Duke Vincentio, Mairin Lee as Isabella, John Michalski as Escalus and M. Scott McLean as Angelo. Photos by Miranda Arden.

The Bard belongs in Brooklyn Bridge Park.

A Shakespeare troupe that's a whiz at staging plays in open-air venues proves this point a thousand times over with a stellar production of "Measure for Measure."

New York Classical Theatre's actors lead audiences on a wonderful waterfront ramble around Pier 1. As an added bonus, the roving production is free, in the tradition of al fresco summer Shakespeare that flourishes in Manhattan and Brooklyn.

Luckily for playgoers, these are masterful actors who can command the audience's attention without microphones or a stage in the middle of the great outdoors—even when helicopters hover overhead, as one did in the middle of Wednesday night's performance. They bring Shakespeare's work to life with verve and skill—and a handful of flashlights, held by theatre staffers, which serve as spotlights when darkness falls.

The theatre troupe's artistic director, Stephen Burdman, who serves as the director of "Measure for Measure," told the audience before it began Wednesday, "You gotta stay on your toes." That's because every 15 minutes or so, the actors strolled off to a new location on Pier 1's lush, tree-lined lawns to start another scene. Playgoers followed in their wake.

“Measure for Measure” is a gripping drama, a dark meditation on absolute power and how it corrupts absolutely when the man who is suddenly handed it gets carried away. It's about justice versus mercy, a big Shakespearean theme—and the perverse fact that the hottest girl in town is invariably the one who's completely, totally off limits to guys.

In “Measure for Measure,” that would be Isabella, played by Mairin Lee as a fine, fierce creature, radiant in her piety. She is about to enter a convent and become a nun. Demanding sex from saintly Isabella is a hundred times more sinful than trying to get her to two-time an ordinary boyfriend.

The man who wants her so bad (like in the Beatles song) is Angelo, who's a devil despite his angelic name. M. Scott McLean does a fabulous job of portraying him as a self-righteous autocrat with blood so cold another character calls it “snow-broth.” Angelo is stunned when passion strikes him. In an electrifying encounter, Isabella innocently lays her hands on his heart to plead with him. Angelo recoils like he's being burned alive.



Pompey (Andy Paterson, at right) takes a peek at Barnardine (played by Kevin Orton), who has been in prison for years.

Duke Vincentio of Vienna (played with gravitas and charm by Clay Storseth), having decided to go incognito as a friar for a while, has put Angelo in charge of the city for the duration.

Angelo and Isabella have their heated encounter after he sentences her brother, Claudio (played by David Friedlander, who is excellent) to death for fathering a child out of wedlock with his fiancée Juliet. Tom Morin brings big comic energy as Lucio, a young man with an unfortunate habit of unknowingly speaking ill of the Duke right to his face.

Part of the fun of seeing a play in the park starting at 7 p.m. is that sunset is a magnificent substitute for stage lighting. On Wednesday, a rainbow appeared overhead shortly before “Measure for Measure” began. Later, the clouds lit up, like in a Tintoretto painting.

After dark, the action moved down to the East River's edge. The skyline of Lower Manhattan, with the new World Trade Center standing tall, served as a jaw-dropping backdrop.