

With and Without Words *Lansburgh Hosts Shows on Stage and on Screen*

BY BRAD HATHAWAY

Two shows come to the Shakespeare Theatre Company's Lansburgh Theatre on Seventh Street NW this month, and neither are the standard "live actors stand on stage and speak the words written by William Shakespeare" productions that are most often mounted in the lovely 450-seat hall.

One doesn't even have words at all, whether they were written by Shakespeare or not. The other doesn't have any live actors on stage. But both offer unique and interesting entertainment of note.

One which will be playing all month long is a production of the Synetic Theater. That is the company of Paata and Irina Tsikurishvili who came to the United States in 1997 from the former Soviet state of Georgia to take this town's theatrical community by storm with a new kind of theatrical experience blending movement, rhythm, visual spectacle and dramatic sound. They have rented the Lansburgh to present a very different kind of Shakespearean experience, a wordless version of his "Antony & Cleopatra."

That's right: A Shakespeare without the words of Shakespeare. This will be the fifth of their "Silent Shakespeare" productions where they take the story structure and the characters of one of his plays and stage it without use of a verbal language. These have never really been silent, however. They have been filled with sound effects and a fully satisfying score of music that blends classical traditions with new wave sensibility.

Even without words, the story in the "Silent Shakespeare" series has always been surprisingly clear. This has been due, in part, to the storytelling skills of their director, Paata Tsikurishvili, who also collaborated on the adaptation of many of their works, and of their choreographer, his wife Irina, who has also appeared in them when there is a role right for her.

This time out it is the tale of the Roman general, Mark Antony, and his historic love for the Queen of Egypt, Cleopatra. If they follow the pattern of their first four adaptations of Shakespeare, Paata and his longtime collaborator Nathan Weinberger will have followed much of the structure of the original but reduced each scene to its essence and found a way to communicate that essence in motion.

One reason for the success of it all has been

the choreography of Irina Tsikurishvili. The movements she devised have been so impressive year after year that they have earned her the Helen Hayes Award for Outstanding Choreography in seven of the past 11 years. She will also be performing in "Antony and Cleopatra." She will be Cleopatra to the Antony of Ben Cunis who also provides the fight choreography for the piece. He was the adaptor for their last "Silent Shakespeare," a lovely rendition of "A Midsummer Night's Dream" which played the Kennedy Center last year.

'Nation'

On Feb. 8, on one night that Synetic isn't using the Lansburgh, the Shakespeare Theatre Company will set up a high-tech big screen television projection system to show the latest in the National Theatre of London's series of productions televised around the world either live or with minimal delay. It will be the world premiere of a family-friendly spectacle based on a novel by Terry Pratchett, the author of the successful "Discworld" series.

"Nation" is set in 1860 on a remote island in the South Pacific where a tsunami wipes out the entire population save for one 13-year-old boy. As luck would have it – or there wouldn't be any story to dramatize – there is also a 13-year-old girl on a ship going by which is dashed by the storm. She, too, survives. They begin to rebuild the world of the island when people from other islands begin to arrive.

The stage adaptation is being directed by Melly Still, who directed the National Theatre's visually stunning production of "Coram Boy," which transferred to Broadway and earned her three Tony nominations – one for directing, one for scenic design and one for costume design. This time out, she's going to have to handle storms at sea, underwater swimming effects and a host of jungle animal encounters.

A matinee performance in London will be telecast to theaters around the world in 1080p high definition and 5.1 surround sound stereo. For the presentation at the Lansburgh, a pair of satellite dishes on the roof will capture the



FROM TOP TO BOTTOM: Ben Cunis and Irina Tsikurishvili are "Antony and Cleopatra." Photo by Graeme B. Shaw

Gary Carr and Emily Taaffe star in "Nation." Photo by Johan Persson.

signal, and their computer will store it for display on Monday evening, the eighth. They will use a 7,000 lumen projector to show the video onto a 24-foot-wide screen that all but fills the Lansburgh's proscenium. To compare that technology to a high definition major home theater projector, a top-of-the-line unit for the home might offer 900 to 1,800 lumens, so the contrast at the Lansburgh should be marked.

Tickets for "Antony and Cleopatra" range from \$40 to \$55, and the performances are Wednesday through Saturday evenings with Saturday and Sunday matinees. Tickets for the Feb. 8 screening of "Nation" are \$20. Both can be purchased in person, online at www.shakespearetheatre.org or by phone at 202-547-1122.

Brad Hathaway operated Potomac Stages, a website and email service covering theater in Washington, Maryland and Virginia and has written about theater for *Theatre.Com*, *Musical Stages Online*, *The Connection Newspapers* and such magazines as *American Theatre*, *Show Music*, *the Sondheim Review* and *Live Design*. E-mail at Brad@PotomacStages.com. ★