

THEATER

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 and 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



From TOP to BOTTOM
1. Ben Cunis and Irina Tsikurishvili are "Antony and Cleopatra."
Photo by Graeme B. Shaw
2. Gary Carr and Emily Taaffe star in "Nation."
Photo by Johan Persson.

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 perform-

ing 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 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 is the theater columnist for The Hill Rag/DC North. He 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. He and his wife live on Capitol Hill. He can be reached by e-mail at Brad@PotomacStages.com. ★

**'Grease' Could Be the Word
Two Productions Give You
a Choice**

The rock and roll musical "Grease" will have two productions playing in Washington over the next month. The show has been something of a phenomenon ever since its first Broadway run, which started in 1972 and didn't close until 1980 – after 3,388 performances. The first revival added 1,500 performances to the total, and in 2007, under the direction of Kathleen Marshall, a new revival featured the victors of a television reality show "search" for stars. That inventive piece of "stunt casting" actually resulted in a satisfying production that was a lot of fun. Laura Osnes and Max Crumm, the victors of the TV search, have gone on to other activities, but the national tour of the production continues to rely on stunt casting from the store of "reality" television shows. It comes to the National Theatre with American Idol winner Taylor Hicks as "Teen Angel." There is a long tradition of such name personalities touring as "Teen Angel." In 2003 a different production of "Grease" came to the Warner Theatre with none other than Frankie Avalon in the role. By the way, the company includes Jesse JP Johnson, who was one of the stars of the original "Glory Days" at Signature Theatre and later on Broadway. The National Theatre stop is two weeks, Feb. 9-21. Tickets are going for \$36 to \$96.

If you can wait another month, however, you can see a local production that promises to be quite a kick. The Gay Men's Chorus of Washington's season always includes a wide range of programming from classics to romance music to show tunes. This year, on March 19-21, they will perform a fully staged production of "Grease" which they promise will be "the musical you know and love ... only gayer." The show will be on the stage of the Lisner Auditorium. Tickets are \$20-\$50 and can be purchased online at www.gmcw.org.

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