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Hoboken's Shakespeare has the edge

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BY PETER FILICHA
Star-Ledger Staff

NEW JERSEY STAGE

Here's a rarity: This weekend Jersey audiences can see another abbreviated, outdoor production of "A Midsummer Night's Dream."

The Mile Square Theatre Company in Hoboken has joined the Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey in presenting a spirited, 90-minute abridgment of the Bard's comedy. Both versions amuse, but Mile Square has two significant advantages.

One: Because it performs at the Sinatra Park Amphitheatre on the Hoboken waterfront, it offers a better backdrop -- a generous chunk of Manhattan's riverfront.

Two: It's free. (Though Mile Square wouldn't mind if you dropped a bill or two into the hat.)

Hobokenites might argue that the production has a third asset because some of Sinatra's '50s hits are played over the sound system. That's because director Chris O'Connor has set his show in the Eisenhower era of pony-tailed, petticoated and poodle-skirted girls, saddle-shod boys, and -- yes -- "On the Waterfront."

O'Connor has demanded a working-class Jersey accent from his actors. If a Shakespearean purist hears Daniel Harray's Theseus start the show sounding more like a longshoreman than a duke, he might run for the exit (or into the Hudson).

Still, while they sound like goodfellas, there are good fellows and females on hand. What fun there is in hearing Blair Brooks' accomplished Hermia proclaim her love for "Ly-se-an-duh" (Lysander, to you scholars). He, played by an easygoing Clark Gookin, returns the compliment to "huh" (meaning "her"). Demetrius, Hermia's cast-off, who's stalked by Helena, amuses when Brian Corbett delivers, "Do I entisya?" (That's "entice you" in English.) Helena, meanwhile, offers some solid exasperation and slumped-over defeat, courtesy of Dana Jacks.

Enter the fairies, who'll play havoc with the foursome. Recalling Frank Gorshin as the Riddler, Jeffrey de Picciotto makes an excitable Puck who jumps up and down with wicked glee. How he enjoys putting the head of an ass on Bottom.

However, those who don't know the play won't understand that Bottom has had his head transformed. The headpiece that costumer Ellen Pittman Stockbridge gives him looks more like a modest hat.

That doesn't keep Raymond McAnally from delivering a superb performance as Bottom, the weaver who believes he's an actor, too, and ripe for every part in "Pyramus and Thisbe." His scene in which Pyramus dies is particularly delicious. Protracted death scenes can wear out their welcome on stage, but McAnally dies in so many resourceful ways that he should go on even longer.

McAnally's Pyramus is a murderously hard act to follow for any Thisbe, but Malachy Orozco makes the

task look easy. O'Connor has him play her as a Southern belle, and Orozco flutters his eyelashes and flounces along, leading to a most hilarious suicide.

Hollie Hunt does well in two of gender-bending roles. First, she astutely plays Egeus as Hermia's mother rather than her father. Then she turns Peter Quince into Petra Quince. O'Connor makes the latter decision pay off nicely by having her flirt with Bottom to get her way.

And so it goes, for a merry hour and a half. Only a downpour could drench the spirits of this "Midsummer."

Peter Filichia may be reached at pfilichia@starledger.com or (973) 392-5995.

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