

## THEATER

# 'Pericles' is worth trip to Santa Cruz Shakespeare



**LILY JANIAK**

COMMENTARY

Among Santa Cruz Shakespeare's impressive summer ensemble, one collaborator with impeccable timing remains uncredited in the program: the wind.

Right as five soldiers were grunting, stamping their feet and pounding their pecs in a bid to impress a group of nearby ladies during the Sunday, Aug. 3, performance of "Pericles," a gust picked up through the eucalyptus trees that encircle the Audrey Stanley Grove at DeLaveaga Park. Scythe-shaped leaves rained down, as if bowing before the force of the dancers' masculinity.

In the next sequence, during a candlelit couples' dance, it howled, suggesting the way love at first sight makes the rest of the world go quiet.

Magical, you-couldn't-plan-this-if-you-tried encounters between the forces of nature and the force of Shakespeare's words are one reason why so many companies stage his plays outdoors. But in Charles Pasternak's magnificent production of "Pericles," which scholars believe was co-written by George Wilkins, they're only part of the enchantment. Forceful, musical line readings make clear from the play's first moments that you're in the presence of expert actors — titans with resonant vocal instruments that match the copse around them.

"Pericles" probably isn't considered a fan favorite Shakespeare play, but it has the makings of a great graphic novel or



Photos by Kevin Lohman/Santa Cruz Shakespeare

**Corey Jones, from left, as Simonides, Paige Lindsay White in the title role and Mike Ryan, Nick Rossi and ML Roberts as knights do the soldier's dance in Santa Cruz Shakespeare's "Pericles."**



**Allie Pratt as Marina in "Pericles."**

Netflix adventure series. (Between-the-acts summaries, addressed directly to the audience, even have a "Previously, on 'Pericles'" feel.) Each time Shakespeare and Wilkins introduce a new setting and important-seeming set of characters — incestuous royals, philosophical fishmongers, johnny-on-the-spot pirates — get ready for them to say, "Just kidding," and whisk you elsewhere.

Pasternak, in his summer directorial debut with the company, handles these and copious other bits of weirdness by having the cast embrace them. When Princess Marina (Allie Pratt) recounts how, as she was about to be assassinated, pirates kidnapped her, her intonation seems to say that yes, whoever concocted this tale has a screw loose.

Most of Shakespeare's royal

protagonists have some mighty flaw that makes them interesting and sets the plot in motion. The perceptive, generous, loyal Pericles (Paige Lindsay White), by contrast, comes off as the ideal ruler and mate. He simply has Book of Job-level bad luck: a bounty on his life, forced multiple shipwrecks, betrayal by friends, the reported deaths of his wife and daughter.

White, whose Polonius in the company's "Hamlet" last year was so funny you wished for a whole other play centered on the officious lieutenant, excels equally in the opposite register here. Where Polonius is unseeing and pompous, her Pericles has a thousand-yard stare, taking in the weight of the world and letting all its suffering infuse her every utterance, even as she shines with a confidence that doesn't have to brag.

Equally as glorious is Corey Jones as multiple kings, but especially as King Simonides, who decides he's going to mess with his daughter Thaisa (Lily

**"Pericles":** Written by William Shakespeare and George Wilkins. Directed by Charles Pasternak. Through Sept. 7. Two hours, 40 minutes. \$20-\$75. The Grove at DeLaveaga Park, 501 Upper Park Road, Santa Cruz. 831-460-6399. <http://santacruzshakespeare.org>

Kops) and Pericles before he lets them wed. His whole mien signals he knows he's being ridiculous but delights in it and forges ahead anyway.

In one master stroke — among the single most brilliant bits of staging I've ever seen in any Shakespeare production — Jones raises his hand as if to smack Pericles, then freezes. His posture softens, and with the other hand, he reaches for a single finger to remove his ring ... as a gift for Pericles to give to his own bride. Sike!

"Pericles" hopscotches among modes of existence: one court poisoned by incest, another withered by famine, a third sloshing with wine; the sick room of a wacky sorcerer; a squalid chamber in a whorehouse; a tempest-tossed boat deck. Circumstances aren't destiny, Wilkins and Shakespeare imply. Wherever you are, it's possible to make righteous choices.

As such, for all its whiplash-inducing adventures, the show continually offers chances to atone for the sins of the past. Just because one daughter is violated by her father doesn't mean another father will never be able to make it up to his own wronged child. Just because one marriage suit goes foul doesn't mean another can't end in joy.

If this is the kind of work we can expect from Pasternak, who became the company's artistic director in 2023, Santa Cruz Shakespeare is all the more worthy a destination for Bay Area theatergoers.