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Love Among the Redwoods

By TERRY TEACHOUT



Santa Cruz, Calif.

While some of Shakespeare's plays border on being performer-proof, others need tender loving care to flourish onstage. **"Love's Labour's Lost"** is one of the latter, a relentlessly artificial farce whose comedy is almost entirely verbal and whose hectically bawdy wordplay leaves little room for the richness of characterization that modern audiences expect from a Shakespeare production. Small wonder that "Love's Labour's Lost" is mounted so infrequently in America that I've reviewed it in this space only once before now. The good news—very, very good news—is that Shakespeare Santa Cruz's outdoor production of "Love's Labour's Lost," directed by Scott Wentworth, is a complete success, so much so that those who have never seen the play done badly may well go home wondering why it isn't as popular as "As You Like It" or "A Midsummer Night's Dream."



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Sashona Brooks and Victor Talmadge in 'Love's Labour's Lost.'

If you've never seen it at all, "Love's Labour's Lost" is based on a preposterous premise: The King of Navarre and three of his lords vow to withdraw from the world for three years of study, during which time they will hew to an ascetic regimen that includes celibacy. High jinks ensue, the vows get broken, and everybody lives happily ever after—maybe. In Mr. Wentworth's hands, the king (superbly played by V Craig Heidenreich) and his attendant lords are turned into something not unlike the band of unworldly scholars in Howard Hawks's "Ball of Fire," and all of the supporting roles are enacted with the utmost variety and individuality.

That may sound like standard operating procedure, but it isn't: Rarely do I get to see a production of a Shakespeare comedy in which each member of a large cast stands out in such high relief. Fold in a heaping helping of zany comic business and you get a show that is not just amusing but wildly, chokingly funny. Then, without warning, the last scene modulates into the shadowy key of doubt, and after the play's enigmatic closing line ("You that way: we this way") is spoken, you leave the theater marveling anew at Shakespeare's matchless ability to surprise.

SHAKESPEARE SANTA CRUZ

UCSC Theatre Arts Center, Santa Cruz, Calif.,
831-459-2159

LOVE'S LABOUR'S LOST

Festival Glen (\$30-\$49),
closes Aug. 29

THE LION IN WINTER

Mainstage Theatre (\$15-\$47),
closes Aug. 29

Part of the charm of this production is that it is being performed in the company's Festival Glen, a natural amphitheatre tucked into a redwood grove on the edge of the campus of the University of California, Santa Cruz. I have no doubt that the opportunity to work in so intrinsically festive a site has inspired Mr. Wentworth's actors to give of their best. To name one is to long to name all, but I'll unbend far enough to single out J. Todd Adams's gloriously brainless Costard, Emily Krakowsky's winsome Moth, Jeff Mills's lecherous

Holofernes, Adam O'Byrne's all-American Berowne and Victor Talmadge's Harvey-Korman-esque Don Adriano de Armado. Also noteworthy is the touching way in which Mr. Heidenreich and Marion Adler, the no-longer-young princess who pursues him, delicately suggest the absurdity and beauty of middle-aged love.

Special praise to Rodolfo Ortega for his incidental music, which ranges from a snappy assortment of oddly tilted fanfares to an unexpectedly haunting setting of "When daisies pied and violets blue," the lyric that winds the play to its tender close. Like everything else about this production, it's as right as you could possibly want it to be.

* * *

Indoors on the company's adjoining main stage, Richard E.T. White has directed a vigorous revival of James Goldman's "**The Lion in Winter**," a play that is now best known in its handsomely cast 1968 film version, which teamed Peter O'Toole and Katharine Hepburn, but is even more rewarding when seen in live performance.

Goldman's play, in which the strife-ridden marriage of England's Henry II (Marco Barricelli) and Eleanor of Aquitaine (Kandis Chappell) is portrayed as a drawing-room comedy steeped in wormwood and gall, is a piece of theatrical prestidigitation that juxtaposes a 12th-century setting with 20th-century dialogue ("Is this an audience, a goodnight kiss with cookies or an ambush?"). The trick is to deliver the clever lines not archly but with ram-you-damn-you boldness, and Mr. Barricelli, the company's artistic director, has it down pat. He gives a leonine, space-filling performance that put me in mind of the young Orson Welles—I'd love to see him as Welles in Austin Pendleton's "Orson's Shadow," a play that Shakespeare Santa Cruz ought to do—and Ms. Chappell parries his thrusts with a stinging wit that never quite conceals her bitter disappointment at having lost him to a younger woman (Mairin Lee). She is as human as he is larger than life, and the combination is most appealing.

—Mr. Teachout, the Journal's drama critic, blogs about theater and the other arts at www.terryteachout.com. Write to him at tteachout@wsj.com.

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