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We Players get right down to sex in ‘Midsummer of Love’

By Jean Schiffman

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From left, Britt Lauer, Ava Roy, Nick Dickson, Nathaniel Justinano, Amy Nowak and John Steele are excellent in “Midsummer of...

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Whips and chains and handcuffs, oh boy!

We Players’ adaptation of Shakespeare’s “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” — retitled “Midsummer of Love” in honor of San Francisco’s citywide 50th anniversary celebration of the Summer of Love — is an entrancing, and delightfully sadomasochistic, take on the popular comedy.

Dog collars and unmentionable body parts and positions are juxtaposed with a sylvan setting: a clearing atop Strawberry Hill on Stow Lake in Golden Gate Park, with only natural light (the

show concludes before dark) and a mere log for a set piece.

Performers tumble down hillsides, gambol (and fight, viciously) amid the trees and cavort around the audience, which is seated on blankets and stools.

It's also the funniest "Midsummer" I've ever seen, a gender-bender with mirror-imaging: an actress in black leather and mohawk (Britt Lauer) is both the fairy king Oberon, the mortal queen Hippolyta and the wily Puck, and John Steele plays the fairy queen Titania, all slithery and sly, the duke Theseus and another incarnation of the fairy trickster Puck — and, really, why wouldn't Puck embody two human forms? (In program notes, director Ava Roy describes the Pucks as master manipulators, the kings and queens being roles they play.)

Roy (We Players' founder/artistic director, who also plays lovelorn Helena and a timid, bespectacled Quince of the Rude Mechanicals) seized upon the S&M cruelty running throughout the Bard's play: Helena stalks the viciously rejecting Demetrius (Nick Dickson, doubling as a nervous Flute), and Lysander (We Players treasure Nathaniel Justiniano, also a self-important Bottom), under a magical spell, suddenly turns murderously against the besotted Hermia (Amy Nowak, who's also Snug the Joiner).

This "Midsummer" begins at the foot of the hill as the Rude Mechs plan their performance of "Pyramus and Thisby," and continues as they lead the audience up to the playing area.

Trimmed to its essentials with some scenes rearranged, it's performed entirely by the excellent six-member ensemble, plus two wandering musicians (haunting score by Charlie Gurke).

As the characters vie for power in various, imaginative ways, moments of sheer inspiration abound.

Some personal favorites: Oberon and Titania crooning duets that are chilling moans; Bottom's outsize donkey appendage, the main attraction for the spellbound Titania; invisible fairy attendants represented by musical notes from among the trees; a physicality that is absolutely uncompromising; bereft Helena's snorting, snuffling sobs.

Sensual and sexual, this black-magical dream beautifully captures the dark and comic strains of love.

REVIEW

Midsummer of Love

Presented by We Players

Where: Strawberry Hill, Stow Lake, Golden Gate Park, S.F.

When: 6 p.m. July 6-9, 6:30 p.m. July 27-30

Tickets: \$30 to \$80

Contact: www.weplayers.org

Note: Performances also are at 6:30 p.m. July 15-16 and July 22-23 at Kennedy Grove Regional Recreation Area in El Sobrante.