

Free Shakespeare at the Bandshell Santa Monica Mirror review of "Midsummer" by Lynne Bronstein

The stage is a bandshell at the West Los Angeles Civic Center. The scenery is just some greenish draperies; the performers wield swords but wear Army surplus cut-offs and sweat pants as costumes. This is SIRFLA's (Shakespeare International Renaissance Festival Los Angeles) production of A Midsummer Night's Dream, acted by a cast of 15 that mixes pros and newcomers, including six service veterans.

It's not Shakespeare for purists. In a prologue set to the Monkees' "I'm a Believer," Zak Krebs, as loverboy Lysander, enters on a skateboard, while a group of workmen in uniforms labeled "Athens Parks and Rec" play brooms and buckets. Adeye Sahran and Rachel Emmers, as ancient Greek "Valley Girls" Helena and Hermia, engage in a girl-power swordfight. Kenneth De Abrew, as workman/amateur actor Nick Bottom, stabs himself with a plastic collapsible sword.

Director and co-producer Stephan Wolfert admits that A Midsummer Night's Dream isn't even a favorite of his. "I asked the cast: help me like this play," he says. Dressing the play in contemporary street style helped him and the cast breathe new life into an outdoor Shakespeare staple.

A former career military man, Wolfert left the service to work in theatre and organized SIRFLA through the collaboration of two organizations, United States Veterans' Artists Alliance (USVAA), and Veterans Center for Performing Arts (VSPA). The idea, Wolfert explains, is "to bring together veterans and the civilian community" and to help vets get a foot in the stage door.

This is SIRFLA's second year producing outdoor summer theatre. Last year saw productions of Coriolanus and Twelfth Night. This year, Dream is the sole outdoor show (although there have been some productions at indoor venues). Next year, Othello is scheduled, but the group may be able to schedule a second production if funding improves.

The vets who participate in SIRFLA's plays attend a two-week intensive training program run by Shakespeare Santa Monica and sponsored by USVAA and VSPA. When they complete their Shakespearean "boot camp," they are cast in plays along with professional actors who mentor them. Vets also comprise the behind-the-scenes crew. Participants trade off acting, crew work, handing out programs, and running the refreshment concessions.

Keith Jeffreys, artistic director of USVAA and co-producer with Wolfert, sees the program as one that helps veterans realize their creativity. He credits Wolfert's direction and energy: "He's a treasure," but also praises some of the veterans whose acting skills he has seen literally improve from week to week of the play's run.

After the shows, cast members mingle with the audience and chat about their experiences.

Ian Casselberry, a former U.S. Air Force firefighter, met fellow Air Force vet Joey Pate when they worked in an industrial film. Pate says he learned about SIRFLA from Casselberry. "I love doing this," says Pate, perched on the stage, still wearing the pointy ears of his Puck character. "Stephan is an amazing director." A Midsummer Night's Dream plays through August 9 at the West L.A. Civic Center Bandshell, 1645 Corinth Ave., LA. For more information, call 310.559.2116.

The concept of providing free Shakespeare for the community is part of our mission to build bridges between military veterans, artists and the communities in which we work and reside.

This is our second year and to date we have worked directly with 11 veterans along with the support of many other veterans to make this program a reality. All of this is made possible by the support of numerous artists and actors along with community members and leaders who understand the importance of this unique program.

The program this year is co-produced by the Veterans Center for the Performing Arts (VCPA), and sponsored by Los Angeles City Councilman Bill Rosendahl, The West Los Angeles Neighborhood Council and the Dax Foundation.