Rough Magic

Deviant Craft
By W. David Hancock
Directed by Melanie Joseph
Brooklyn Bridge Anchorage

The last lines of The Tempest are never uttered in W. David Hancock's disturbing adaptation-appropriations of the play. But Prospero's plea in the epilogue—"As you from crimes would purged be—Let your indulgence set me free"—furnishes a through line for Deviant Craft: like a lodestar, steering the production toward its conclusion of art and violence.

Shakespeare's epilogue compares the magic of Prospero to the magic of theater, pointing out that in his role Prospero performed his task brilliantly—controlling elements, stirring up auspicious winds in which to set sail for home—and requesting that the audience provide him a parallel release from the island that is the stage by agreeing, with their applause, that the actor performed brilliantly, too.

Hancock and director Melanie Joseph certainly latch onto the idea that actors are imprisoned in the made-up universe of a play by the compact imaginations of the audience. But more than that, they seize hold of the first line of Shakespeare's closing couplet to suggest that there's something about theater that is downright criminal.

As in his ingenious The Conveniences of Carcass, last year, in Deviant Craft Hancock has cast a world more than he has written a play. Spectators arriving at the cavernous Brooklyn Bridge Anchorage are introduced to that world in the lobby before going into the theater to see a performance of The Tempest acted by inmates in a women's prison community called the Philagonia Foundation. Scenes played around the lobby, along with slick displays about "one half century of penal progress," set up the analogy between the island where the Philagonia Foundation is located and Prospero's magic island.

We learn that Philagonia's founder, Dr. Horace Milkman, believed that there's a link between criminal violence and creativity. The inmates—his own daughter among them—all showed raw aptitude in art, technology, and art. In the lobby, some demonstrate their projects like students in a Westinghouse competition.

This didactic prologue also reveals that the colony was started in 1970 by an arsonist, Dotty, the only survivor of the fire. It burned a building where inmates for the annual production of The Tempest were taking place. With Milkman's death, the colony loses its funding; until "an anonymous corporate donor" appears in 1993 and saves them.

Now, a male drag artist named Snow presides over the colony like a sadistic director who thrives on the dependence of actresses. He blows a whistle to keep them in line, ordering the women to enact exercises that recall their guilt and confirm their incorrigibility.

When their performance of The Tempest finally begins in a Elizabethan-style wooden G, it is disrupted by the women's own conjuring, competing with Prospero (played by Snow) for the final outcome of the drama. Calling forth their own spirits—ghosts of women who died in the fire—they attempt to rebuild the wrecked ship as their own "deviant craft" that will carry them to some centuries-old tradition of deconstructing that play into anticolonial adaptations. Hancock incites gender opposition as a struggle within The Tempest, one rarely addressed in the many African, Caribbean, and African American treatments that focus on the relationship between Prospero and Caliban as colonizer and colonized. Thus Hancock cracks an exciting opening into the play. But his appropriation lacks the force that11

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metaphor and its literal significance is lost.

The play-within-the-play's program for the Philagonia's Tempest quotes Dr. Milkman on the use of drama as a disciplining device: "Theater undertakes as a therapy, the possibility of rebellion; the client may be troubled, rebellious, devious, but if she is performing in a play, she will be amending predetermined lines at a predetermined place and time. When a client faces the decision to face with this lack of possible futures for her character, her own life becomes changed and focused, and it is in this way that we need it to be." It's a chilling inversion of The Tempest's celebration of art as liberatory. The result is, Hancock twists The Tempest in only one direction, creating a Morose strip of a performance that keeps turning back only into itself.

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