

Rough Magic

Deviant Craft

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

The last line of *The Tempest* is never uttered in W. David Hancock's disturbing adaptation-appropriation of the play. But Prospero's plea in the epilogue—"As you from crimes would pardon'd be, / Let your indulgence set me free"—glimmers over *Deviant Craft* like a lodestar, steering the production toward its conflation 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—reconciling enemies, 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 complicit 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 Convention of Cartography* last year, in *Deviant Craft* Hancock has concocted 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 Phlogiston 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 Phlogiston Foundation is located and Prospero's magic isle.

We learn that Phlogiston'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 rare aptitude in science, technology, and art. In the lobby, some demonstrate their projects like students in a Westinghouse competition. This disjunctive prologue also reveals that the colony was torched in 1970 by an arsonist, Doty, the only survivor of the fire. It burned a building where rehearsals for the annual production of *The Tempest* were taking place. With Milkman's death, the colony lost its funding, until "an anonymous corporate donor" appeared in 1991 and revived it. Now, a male drama therapist 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 O), it is disrupted by the women's own conjurings, competing with Prospero (played by Snow) for the final course of the drama. Calling forth their own spirits—ghosts of women who died in the fire—they attempt to rebuild the wracked ship as their own "deviant craft" that will carry them to some



Aboard the wracked ship: Dor Green as Ferdinand in *Deviant Craft*

mysterious realm of freedom. One inmate intervenes in the role of Sycorax, mother of Caliban, the issue, she insists, of Prospero raping her. After

the rape, she says, "all my words disappeared. I had to learn to tell my stories by opening fissures between other people's words."

That's essentially what she does by butting into the Phlogistons' *Tempest*—and it's what Hancock does by butting into Shakespeare's, joining a

centuries-old tradition of deconstructing that play into anticolonial adaptations. Hancock raises gender oppression 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 that drives many of these other adaptations: a relationship to some movement or reality on the ground.

For all the detail of Hancock's Phlogiston Foundation—right down to perfectly smarmy appeals that the audience invest money in the colony—and for all the commitment of a strong acting ensemble, it's never clear how the production means to enlighten or challenge us on attitudes toward violent felons—a missed opportunity in these days of lock-'em-up frenzy. Instead, Hancock uses his crime conceit to compound the paradoxes of theatrical art. He does that with dexterity. But in the end, his prison colony serves an elaborate

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metaphor and its literal significance is lost.

The play-within-the-play's program for the Phlogiston's *Tempest* quotes Dr. Milkman on the uses of drama as disciplining device: "Theater underscores the futility of rebellion; the client may be troubled, rebellious, devious, but if she is performing in a play, she will be uttering predetermined lines at a predetermined place and time. When a client comes face to face with this lack of possible futures for her character, her own life becomes as directed and focused as we need it to be." It's a chilling inversion of *The Tempest*'s celebration of art as liberatory. The trouble is, Hancock twists *The Tempest* in only one direction, creating a Möbius strip of a performance that keeps turning back only into itself.

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