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Festival Review: Bard at the beach

This summer's Lake Tahoe Shakespeare Festival may be the strongest yet.

By Marcus Crowder - Bee Theater Critic

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Lenne Klingaman as Juliet proclaims her love for Romeo (Brandon Petty) in "Romeo and Juliet."

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Randy Pench / Sacramento Bee

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The star of the Lake Tahoe Shakespeare Festival will always be -- Lake Tahoe. The dramatic waterfront setting never disappoints. Still, the growing summer theater festival, which takes up residence in an amphitheater on the northeast shore of the lake, continues making its own aesthetic high marks.

With close to 800 patrons in attendance on each of the first two opening nights to watch plays produced by Nevada City's Foothill Theatre Company, this year's festival certainly seems poised to be the strongest yet.

LTSF Executive Director Catherine Attack has cautiously grown both the theater and its offerings at the spectacular venue. Dramas now play in tandem with comedies, and last year the festival added Monday performances of a non-Shakespearean production. This year, they do the same with "Greater Tuna," a two-man comedic vehicle for actors Ted Barton and Greg Bryan under Carolyn Howarth's direction.

After the Shakespeare season closes, the festival will be presenting more events than ever, including performances by the Sierra Nevada Ballet and a Cirque du Soleil-related show called "A Midsummer NightMARE," complete with live music and aerial performers.

Attack hopes LTSF can be a viable alternative to the stellar Oregon Shakespeare Festival. To do that, the organization will have to continue investing in talent, both on and off stage.

The lake will do the rest.

The Taming of the Shrew

4 stars

Oh, what a little fresh air will do! The stunning Lake Tahoe vistas, with blue waters beyond and blue skies above fading into purple-pink sunsets, seem to have loosened up the Foothill Theatre Company.

Not that the Nevada City-based group is exactly a stuffy bunch -- more the opposite. Liberated, however, on the outdoor stage at Sand Harbor for the Lake Tahoe Shakespeare Festival, there's no telling what FTC will do. And

lately, as in the case of the just-opened "Taming of the Shrew," it's as much as they can get away with. Director Scott Gilbert's raucous, riotous production goes for broke, with its outrageously talented, well-balanced cast mining tear-inducing laughs. Following in the footsteps of its highly successful and entertaining "Comedy of Errors" two seasons ago, Gilbert's "Shrew" throws down contemporary mannerisms and references whenever and wherever possible. This isn't Shakespeare for purists, but there probably hasn't been pure Shakespeare in 400 years anyway, so what's the difference?

Paulette Gilbert's clever multi-functional 18th century costumes and composer Michael Rasbury's witty score set an appropriately genre-blending mood. Call it funky traditionalism, with the emphasis on funky.

The play certainly walks a tricky tightrope with its traditional gender politics, which many find funky in its ultimate outlook. Ironically, the central relationship between Scott Coopwood's confident Petruchio and Carolyn Howarth's belligerent Kate is the most straightforward aspect of this wildly irreverent production.

Petruchio, of course, has come to Kate's hometown of Padua "to wive it wealthily. If wealthily, then happily."

While he and sharp-tongued Kate battle through their unorthodox, abbreviated courtship -- followed by the most uncomfortable honeymoon ever -- another more romantic interlude takes place. Bianca, Kate's favored younger sister, has three suitors in waiting, scheming against one another for her rather "Legally Blonde"-like affections. Jason Heil's crafty Lucentio, disguised as a Latin teacher, has the inside track, but don't count out Greg Bryan's Hortensio, a preposterously rapping, hip-hop music teacher. Barzin Akhavan's rather mature Gremio, who comically ages throughout the production, truly has no chance.

The most innovative creation in this production is Ted Barton's shape-shifting Biondello, servant of Petruchio.

Biondello cascades hilariously physical and verbal depictions onto Petruchio's many allusions in a comic tour de force. The partnership and timing between Barton and Coopwood are key to these outrageously entertaining set pieces.

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Carolyn Howarth as Kate engages Scott Coopwood as Petruchio in a battle of strength and wills in "The Taming of the Shrew." Randy Pench / Sacramento Bee

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Brandon Petty as Romeo delivers a speech under the gaze of the outdoor audience at the Lake Tahoe Shakespeare Festival's amphitheater. Randy Pench / Sacramento Bee

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