

Livermore's 'Shakespeare' spoof a memorable piece of comedy

By Pat Craig, Staff Writer

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Wild laughter launched Livermore Shakespeare Festival's opening night in its plush new digs at Concannon Vineyards.

The company demonstrated an eagerness to bite the Bard that feeds it by starting the new season with the American debut of an updated version of the Reduced Shakespeare Company's spoof, "The Complete Works of William Shakespere (abridged) (revised)."

"(Abridged)" was reworked by the show's original authors, Adam Long, Daniel Singer and Jess Winfield. It manages to keep the breathlessly funny pace of the original while adding a 21st century sensibility that includes big doses of Internet comedy and a wickedly irreverent attitude that stretches far beyond that of the original.

It also introduces a muscular physicality to the piece, which is where the Livermore company, James Hiser, Nikolai Lokteff and Ted D'Agostino, is able to make the show its own. Director Leslie Martinson takes full advantage of both her actors' strengths and the playing space - a stage backed by a stunning white Victorian house - to make the show a smart, frenetically paced and memorable piece of comedy.

The comedy, which debuted more than 20 years ago as a renaissance fair sketch and grew into the now-multi-national theatrical powerhouse, The Reduced Shakespeare

Company, is probably the most well-crafted and considered of the company's half-dozen or so plays. It promises to recreate all of Shakespeare's works in just over an hour and a half, and that's exactly what it does, more or less.

Only "Romeo and Juliet" and "Hamlet" get any sort of full consideration, but other shows in the canon are at least mentioned in passing, and often very clever passing. "Othello," for example, becomes a rap song and the all of the Bard's history plays are combined into a regal Super Bowl, where a crown is passed from king to king like a football.

The three actors perform at a breathless pace and, with director Martinson, have added some touches to bond the show to the winery grounds - there's audience participation here and there, local jokes, and even a hugely funny wine gag, that, like most of the show finds an intelligent way of deflating the sort of intellectual pomposity that often surrounds both wine and Shakespeare.

What makes it work best though, is the way the piece is able to burst the over-inflated balloon of intellectual self-aggrandizement and at the same time be brainy and intelligent in its own right.

Reach Pat Craig at pcraig@bayareanewsgroup.com.