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Measure for Measure



According to one impartial observer, Angelo from "Measure for Measure" "was not made by man and woman after this downright way of creation." Allowed to take over Vienna and strictly apply the no-fornication laws after the departure of his boss, the duke, Angelo is described by the rogue Lucio as spawned by a sea-maid or "begot between two stock-fishes." One thing is for sure, "when he makes water his urine is congeal'd ice."

There's Angelo, and then there's Angelo. Geoff Elliott's portrayal of Angelo takes him to almost mythical proportions, but his revelation of Angelo's deepest desires and internal conflicts is what sets Michael Murray's production of "Measure for Measure" for A Noise Within apart.

In an attempt to clean up the immorality and licentiousness of Vienna, Duke Vincentio (Robertson Dean) has left, appointing the righteous Angelo (Geoff Elliott) to oversee the prosecution of the laws to the strictest sense with the help of advisor Escalus (Mitchell Edmonds). Secretly, however, the Duke has returned to observe the effect of the reforms under Angelo. One of those reforms is the application of the law that punishes fornication with death. Claudio (William Patrick Riley) is sentenced for impregnating his fiancé Julietta (Courtney Kocak), who is carrying his child. Claudio's friend Lucio (Stephen Rockwell) visits the nun Isabella (Karron Graves), Claudio's sister, in the hope that she can plea successfully with Angelo for her brother's mercy. The supposedly righteous Angelo falls into desire for Isabella on sight, and offers to pardon Claudio if she gives up her chastity to him. Claudio, in jail, also begs his sister to save his life, even given this corrupt bargain, but she refuses.

The Duke has been observing these machinations while disguised as a friar. Now he offers a solution: to offer up Mariana (Jill Hill), who was once betrothed to Angelo, but was neglected by him. The Duke tells Isabella to accept Angelo's proposition, but arranges to have Mariana go in her stead in bed. However, Angelo does not fulfill his part of the bargain, and orders Claudio executed in any case. The Duke gathers all the participants involved, and reveals Angelo to be a hypocrite. However, both Mariana (for obvious reasons) and Isabella (because she is charitable) asks for his pardon. Claudio marries Julietta and his friend Lucio is locked down to Mistress Keepdown, whom he earlier abandoned. After all that, the Duke makes a surprising gesture, and the conclusion is anyone's guess.

The comic role of Pompey (Mark Bramhall) is perfected in this production. In such a modern retelling, Bramhall wears cool sunglasses and styles his hair like a Las Vegas pimp. In one scene, Pompey is relegated to the duties of executioner for the prisoner Ragozine, whose head was to replace Claudio's. In one speech, he claims he can't cut off a woman's head, and "if he be a married man, he's his wife's head." Bramhall's rendition is done with often wild gestures and exaggerated expressions, but behind his sunglasses, he's still as cool as ever, especially in a speech about how painting is a mystery but hanging is not, for "if I should be hang'd, I cannot imagine." Another comic scene emerges when Abhorson (Peter Larney) tries to get Barnadine (Thomas Moses) executed. Pompey is put in charge of getting the prisoner out, but the perpetual prisoner Barnadine has been drinking all night, and not fit for execution. He humorously claims that "I swear I will not die today for any man's persuasion."

Graves's performance is encapsulated in Isabella's first plea with Angelo. When Angelo claims that he shows pity by dispensing justice (upon her brother), Isabella counters by referring to Angelo as "proud man, dress'd in a little brief authority, most ignorant of what he's most assur'd, his glassy essence, like an angry ape, plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven as makes the angels weep." Graves thus spends most of the play on her knees begging, but her strongest moments may be the end, when Mariana begs for her husband Angelo's life by invoking the adage "best men moulded out of faults," that is, that men "become much more the better for being a little bad." The final time that Graves kneels in this play is the real climax in the play, not the intricate revelations. It is also the most effective, eschewing the rhetorical earlier pleas by a simple thesis that morphs into an intriguing and provoking thought. In short, she claims that Angelo's actions did not overtake his intents, that "thoughts are no subjects, intents but merely thoughts." It is here that Graves wins our favor and the Duke's.

Geoff Elliott's performance as Angelo is understated and stereotyped, but quite effective for this production. After the introduction, it begins with a comic scene where Angelo is forced to listen to Froth and Pompey argue with the policeman Elbow (Michael Faulkner) about who committed a crime with whom, a scene he calls "a night in Russia, when nights are longest there." Elliott portrays real conflict in resolving his desire for Isabella and his intent on fixing Vienna's problems. For such an important role, Angelo gets relatively few words in the play. Elliott's expressions of conflict and contriteness took over. The most important of these scenes involves Angelo talking to himself after the departure of Isabella. "The tempter or the tempted, who sins most?" he asks, simultaneously looking around with his eyes framed by thick, square glasses like those of a preacher. Being "corrupt with virtuous season," Angelo blames Isabella as a cunning enemy, calling "most dangerous" "that temptation that doth goad us on to sin in loving virtue," to catch a saint.

Perhaps most evocative is Elliott's final statement in that speech, a line delivered with contempt and jealousy, but also with that slight touch of humanness that makes Isabella's plea at the end all the more inevitable, and the play all the more bitter-sweet. "Ever till now when men were fond," said Elliott in a curious voice, "I smil'd and wond'ered how."

"Measure for Measure" is performed by A Noise Within (<http://anoisewithin.org>) in Glendale, California, until of 5th of December, 2010.