

THEATER REVIEW

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By Robert P. Arthur

Christopher Newport University's production of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* last weekend pretty much made a farce of local amateur theater standards. The following elements were on the level of regional (professional) theater: set and lighting (George Hillow); costumes (Laurel Tsirimokos Goncalves); direction (Steven Breese); and some of the actors – Frederick Arsenault and Gregg Lloyd. Other performers were “oh-so-close” including Angela Hamilton, April Paynter, Antonia Perakos, Emily Glass, Bryan Wakefield, Jonathon Janis, Justin Hand, John de Triquet, and Bottom's fellow players, who were beautifully defined – Michael Gamache, Michael Raymond, Allen Brooks, Jason Linett, and Adam Downs.

Theater folk of the Southside who haven't seen a CNU production of late should take abrupt and serious notice. Christopher Newport University is far from doing business as usual. It is quite deliberately in the process of establishing a national presence in the arts, and, to that end, is stock piling faculty talent and projecting spending about \$50 million on its new arts center, which will include three new state-of-the-art theaters (125 seats, 440 seats, and 1750 seats), conference rooms, practice rooms, dance spaces, rehearsal halls, and a scenic/costume shop.

It's also one heck of a job finding special students for its drama scholarship program (four scholarships currently) and will certainly do much more.

Lighting and set designer George Hillow, who also directs, was former standout designer for Virginia Musical Theater and The Virginia Stage Company, and is quite simply one of the finest at what he does in the state. For *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, he built a post, two-story 1920's hotel peopled by members of the audience who watched the lively and wet

action in the on-stage swimming pool from their balconies.

For sheer audacious grandeur, however, nothing surpassed the incredibly iridescent and bespangled costumes, the utterly perfect gowns and lavish styling so familiar to us from the old Hollywood musical spectacles, but more gorgeous here, being in color.

And, on the supernatural side, best-darned and wildest fairy make-up I've ever seen, especially on Oberon, turning him into a post-modern pict, like Puck.

Breese's direction was so good – so inventive and expressive – that the play might have been intelligible in Arabic had there been only the most perfunctory of subtitles. Breese's presence on campus, by the way, is the product of a nationwide talent search that is continuing; another quality director (bringing the number to three) will probably be added even before the ground breaking for the new arts center in 2002, and professor emeritus Bruno Koch will likely continue in an advisory capacity.