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Longer and stronger  
This year's Lake Tahoe Shakespeare Festival offers quantity and quality

By Jeff Hudson  
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This summer, the Lake Tahoe Shakespeare Festival features a mix of new lead actors and established favorites, and expands its offerings to a third play and seven nights per week. *Twelfth Night* and *Othello* make up the bulk of the performances, with the Foothill Theatre Company's current production of *The Compleat Wrks of Wilm Shkspr (Abridged)* traveling to Tahoe from Nevada City on Monday nights.

Director Nancy Carlin delivers the mellowest, most beguiling version of the oft-produced comedy *Twelfth Night* we've seen in years. The setting is the psychedelic Pepperland, borrowed from the 1968 animated film *Yellow Submarine*, with colorful garb by Callie Floor and a Beatles-influenced score by Michael Rasbury—who really nails the concept.

Shakespeare's text adapts naturally to this slightly stoned, soft-focus interpretation: Love is constantly in the air, albeit not always focusing on the most appropriate partner. Hence the comedy, mostly surrounding Viola (spunky, charming newcomer Megan Smith), who spends most of the play impersonating a young man. Smith, a Davis High School graduate, also sings and plays the double bass. The bass first appears in the opening scene, emerging from a shipwreck in what looks like a body bag—a nice touch.

Smith also works up some good comic scenes opposite the versatile Karyn Casl, one of Foothill Theatre's regulars, who plays Olivia with a winning mix of gutsiness and arrogance, insecurity and swift infatuation.

On the male side of the cast, Warren David Keith does well as the conceited, Puritan steward Malvolio, equalling good performances we've seen by other actors in other productions in recent years. Ted Barton, as Olivia's jester Feste, looks like a "square" English businessman. Within the concept for this production, this idea works just fine. (We almost expected to hear Feste humming Paul McCartney's "Fool on the Hill.")

Carlin's "light" interpretation works well, avoiding the dark shadows other directors sometimes locate in this play. Even the shipwreck that sets the story in motion seems more like a bad trip than a deadly disaster.



Megan Smith and Scott Coopwood daydream in *Twelfth Night*'s Pepperland.

*Twelfth Night*: 7:30 p.m. August 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 16, 18 and 20. *Othello*: 7:30 p.m. August 3, 5, 9, 11, 13, 15, 17 and 19. \$22-\$67, or \$14 for those age 15 and under. Sand Harbor State Park, three miles south of Incline Village in Nevada; (800) 74-SHOWS;

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In contrast to Carlin's unconventional approach, director Scott Gilbert offers a fairly orthodox take on *Othello*, though he interprets

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the action in the deadly finale a little differently than it's often done. As Othello, actor Reginald Andre Jackson, who's new to the festival, skillfully articulates his character's rising suspicion, frustration and fury. He could display more noble bearing and assured, natural leadership early on, and he could deliver Othello's late speeches with more ringing authority. These qualities would make Othello's swift fall even more tragic.

Actor Scott Coopwood, also new to the festival, makes for a "hot" Iago. He emerges as this production's dominant character: sipping from a hidden flask, stewing and sweating as his scheme to undermine Othello evolves.

Coopwood plots Othello's destruction. Barzin Akhavan stands out in the small part of Rodrigo. Akhavan displays a piercing gaze and expresses a growing awareness that he's Iago's pawn—and eventually his victim, as well.

Carolyn Howarth plays Iago's wife, Emilia, and moves skillfully from early displays of earthy candor to moral outrage as she realizes the scope of her husband's scheme. We tend to remember Howarth, one of Foothill's regulars, primarily as a comic talent, but this performance is a strong reminder that she can do very well in serious parts.

Composer Rasbury contributes a score that emulates the minimalist style of Philip Glass. Imitation, in this case, is a form of flattery, rather than a mocking gesture.

The Lake Tahoe Shakespeare Festival continues through August 20 at Sand Harbor State Park. If you can't make the lake, you have the alternative option of seeing *Twelfth Night* and *Othello* in the Sierra foothills after their Nevada runs. In late August and early September, both shows will move to the Nevada County Fairgrounds and continue as the Sierra Shakespeare Festival under the aegis of Foothill Theatre Company.

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