It was going to be a long full weekend of Chicago Shakespeare immersion. I knew there was some theater available and that both new Shakespeare movies were playing. I had even mentally drafted the opening line of my subsequent Chips article:

“Although I’m no deep lover of Shakespeare films, or even of films generally, my Chicago Shakespeare immersion weekend gave me some ho-hum live theater experiences and a transcendent film experience of one of the greatest, lesser-known Shakespeare plays...”

It turned out not to be: “Anonymous,” the comic espionage thriller focused on the Shakespeare authorship question, is showing at only one theater in North America—in Calgary, Alberta, Canada—and “Coriolanus,” a highly regarded film about a great play, is now playing in only thirteen U.S. cities, including Minneapolis. If only I had driven north instead of east!

So I was stuck using my three-day-weekend to attend live performances of four Shakespeare plays that are among my least favorite (probably mostly because of over-exposure). Irony: It turned out to be a marvelous weekend that demonstrated once again Shakespeare’s nearly infinite power to stimulate creativity in other artists (that’s my thesis, in case you’re looking).

Here, in order of preference:

**“The Taming of the Shrew”**

It’s not quite clear why the producers thought that this play about the gender wars would be a good choice for a “Shakespeare For the Schools” series. Even with considerable cutting and good-fee-ting pitches for maturity in marriage, the play still felt mostly like the subjugation of a woman of spirit. But the audience was engaged and it was worth being there just to hear this short conversation between an awkward-looking teenage boy and a sophisticated-looking older woman who looked like she might be his aunt.

Warning: So what did you think of it? I promise I won’t tell anyone.

Boy: I was really surprised. I had no idea Shakespeare could be funny.

**“The Tempest”**

The number of lines and the small number of characters—twenty or so—I thought “The Tempest” one of Shakespeare’s smallest plays. Reducing it to three characters and an hour might therefore seem a redundancy. But this portrayal of Prospero’s obsessions was surprisingly effective. The play’s iconic figures Ariel and Caliban were Prospero’s slaves who he forced to repeatedly act out, sometimes with puppets, sometimes with masks and sometimes with elaborate props used on a stage-sized T-shaped table, the original play’s—and life’s—most basic relationships: siblings, lovers, and friends. For love, brother betraying brother for power, servant fleeing master for liberty. This was a Tempest all about loss and power, and Prospero carried a huge battle axe to prove it. A reductive version of the play, then, but magically inventive set, props and acting.

**“Midsummer Night’s Dream”**

This was an extravagant production that took that title word “Dream” seriously. A cigar-smoking Freud look-alike introduced the play, transformed himself into a spritish, bald Puck with large phantasmagoric netherworld where our desires and anxieties played themselves out with full abandon. The play ended in an unahshed love fest. But the story itself was more complex: it’s been a long time since “A MND” has brought me near laughing. The original “Romeo and Juliet” requires nearly twenty small plays. Reducing it to three characters and an hour might therefore seem a redundancy. But this portrayal of Prospero’s obsessions was surprisingly effective. The play’s iconic figures Ariel and Caliban were Prospero’s slaves who he forced to repeatedly act out, sometimes with puppets, sometimes with masks and sometimes with elaborate props used on a stage-sized T-shaped table, the original play’s—and life’s—most basic relationships: siblings, lovers, and friends. For love, brother betraying brother for power, servant fleeing master for liberty. This was a Tempest all about loss and power, and Prospero carried a huge battle axe to prove it. A reductive version of the play, then, but magically inventive set, props and acting.

For the Schools series. Even with considerable cutting and other elective courses, but I missed including Minneapolis. If only I had driven north instead of east!

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