



Danai Gurira glows as Isabella in Shakespeare's dark saga of a dirty world at the Delacorte

**BY MICHAEL SOMMERS
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OFF BROADWAY REVIEW**

What with its nasty doings in a corrupt society, "Measure for Measure" is a tricky play to stage. If the degenerate characters are made to appear too entertaining, the story's few good people look terribly prudish.

Director David Esbjornson's revival of Shakespeare's 1604 problem play, which opened Thursday at the Delacorte Theater in Central Park, is performed capably enough but somehow registers as a patchy mix of comedy and drama.

Perhaps the uneven production will solidify with additional performances as it runs in rep with "All's Well That Ends Well."

"Measure for Measure" is the one about Isabella, on the verge of becoming a nun, who pleads for the life of her brother Claudio, condemned to die for fornication by Angelo, who is seemingly a figure of moral rectitude. But Angelo is overcome by lust for Isabella and says he will reprieve Claudio only if she submits to his passion. Virtuous Isabella's plight is aided by the Duke – Angelo's absent superior now in disguise as a friar – whose intervention eventually leads to a happy ending of sorts.

There's plenty more plot than that, but let's skip it. Instead, let's praise Danai Gurira's shining portrayal of Isabella. Dressed in white, Gurira positively glows against the darkness of the story and designer Scott Pask's gloomy setting. Blessed with a melodic voice, Gurira's soulful Isabella is anguished, urgent and altogether an appealing figure.



Clean-cut Michael Hayden is somewhat stolid as Angelo, although his ambivalent character's heated encounters with Isabella create the production's most compelling moments as he slowly circles her like a predator tracking his prey.

The crucial role of the Duke is limpidly spoken by Lorenzo Pisoni, but his characterization does not pack sufficient forcefulness of personality to hold together the play's meandering storyline.

Costumed by designer Elizabeth Hope Clancy in a sort of Alexander McQueen version of 1600s fashion, the ensemble members generally do nicely by the smaller roles. Annie Parisse as Angelo's jilted sweetheart, John Cullum as a venerable lord, Reg Rogers as a dissolute blabbermouth and a red-wigged Tonya Pinkins as a bordello madam offer solid performances. Carson Elrod invests a pimp with surly vitality. Lucas Caleb Rooney delivers a crowd-pleasing cameo as a prisoner who declares himself too drunk to be executed.

Devils in black body suits, metallic music composed by John Gromada and sooty lighting from Peter Kaczorowski lend the production an appropriately pernicious atmosphere.

"Measure for Measure" runs in repertory with "All's Well That Ends Well" through July 30 at the Delacorte Theater in Central Park, New York. Call (212) 539-8750 or visit www.shakespeareinthepark.org

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