



A Shakespearean Storm

By Emily Alp
Photography by Jessie Palanca

The Doha Players are bringing to life William Shakespeare's iconic comedy — *The Tempest*, at QNCC. Thought to be the last play the storied playwright ever wrote, it's also one of his most allegorical. **QH** spends an afternoon at rehearsals alongside the cast and crew.

"We are such stuff as dreams are made on, and our little life is rounded with a sleep."
— William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*

In early November, Doha will see the performance of a play that invites people into Shakespeare's last dreamscape, *The Tempest*. Named for its catalyst—a violent, shipwrecking storm—the play features Shakespeare's genius insight into human nature through the lens of dramatic circumstances. Select members of The Doha Players are now rehearsing to bring the play's characters to life and draw anyone who's game deeper into meaningful scenarios that entertain.

"The moment you start watching *The Tempest*, you know what's happening ... it's quick, but in a good

way because you're just immediately in there; you know what's going on," says Hussam Aitelqadi, who plays Caliban, a disgruntled slave.

The action begins with a supernatural storm planned by a man, Prospero—played by Mione van der Merwe—yes, a woman, playing a man, since many female characters were played by men in Shakespeare's day (so why not turn the modern tables?). Prospero plans the storm to overturn a ship full of his family members traveling near the island where he and his daughter are stranded. Seems a bit extreme, but the man has his reasons—it was only a decade or so earlier that he was cast away with his infant (now teenage), daughter Miranda, played by Katie McIlroy, and left for dead by a power-hungry character, Antonio, the brother of king Alonso of Naples, played by David Pearson.

The survivors of the wreck find themselves strewn across the island, believing that only they have survived, until, that is, they start running into one another. Three weaving plots ensue. Each character emerges through a love story, a comedy and more than one death-defying struggle for power.

"It's a comedy, but it's based on these really horrible acts. Prospero's brother had a coup, threw his brother out and put his brother on a little boat with a little baby. ... and just wanted them to die," said Pearson. "Later on in the play, my character tries to figure out how to kill his brother. And he's

very serious about it. So the comedy is built around these horrible things; it doesn't come out of frivolity."

April 2016 will mark 400 years since his death, yet Shakespeare, to this day, remains ubiquitous across the world as a mainstay in literature classes, and his work never enters the realm of triteness.

"There is a fundamental aspect that Shakespeare managed to capture and that's what it's to be human," said Kim C. Sturgess, one of *The Tempest*'s directors. "It doesn't matter what colour you are, what religion you follow, you are human and that is what he captured, and that's why we are still watching the plays. So much in the so-called West, these modern things we've strapped on top to try to understand, but Shakespeare sticks with the basics — family, rivalry, power."

Sturgess explained further that Shakespearean plays are a chance for a wider audience to take in the genius of his work without the struggle of reading it for themselves. In fact, more people get the chance through these performances to discover how the characters reflect their own lives. One of the constant studies in Shakespeare is of the roles that we play in our families and society, how we are bound to them. *The Tempest* will introduce these in a way that promises to resonate with the lover, comedian, the ruler, the envious sibling, the underdog, the wise forgiver and a range of human sentiments within anyone.



Actor Sebastian Delascasas
as Young Ferdinand

"You've got the different hierarchy within the play, you've got the leadership and you've got the slaves, and then they find other people that they think are even below them," said Gary Mond, who has been with The Doha Players since 1999 and will play the part of Trinculo, the king's jester. "There are some fun parts designed to get the audience engaged; there are some more powerful points in there as well, and there's some sinister overlay in it. It's clever."

Shakespeare's plays are always amended to keep them a reasonable length. The choices about what to cut and how to edit usually reflect the time and place where they're performed, Sturgess explained.

"We are going to highlight what's in the text," he said. "It mentions North Africa and Tunis... a group of people who have just come back from Tunis, and they're on their way to Naples. We are making it relevant to the world we're in, and the play will say everything that Shakespeare expected his audience to understand. The play will communicate the text. The audience will get *The Tempest*—it's just some of the things that wouldn't necessarily help our audience understand or engage, we will probably do without."

The Doha Players is a non-profit, community theatre group that ran its first play in 1954—last year marking its 60th anniversary. Its members hail from more than 20 countries, attracted over the years to entertain the community-come-cosmopolitan city. In May of 2014, the organization became one of the first adult community theatre groups worldwide to be granted a license to perform the longest-running musical in history—*Les Misérables*.



The Tempest's Shipmaster
portrayed by Steve Rich

"Doha Players has very high standards," said Mond. "And I think when you get involved you realize the high standards and the commitment that you have to make. It's not an easy commitment."

The actors dedicate their weekends and one weekday a week, for seven weeks, and continue to practice their characters on their own free time until the production hits the stage. "It's quite intense," Mond continued. "And generally you find that you bond and it's quite good fun. That's why you do it. You do it because of the buzz and the friendships and the fun that you have."

"This is amateur theatrics," Pearson said. "But it's not amateur in that it's not good."

The actors agree that they aim to surpass the standards of established, renowned live theatre companies that seasoned connoisseurs have come to expect. And yet their humility is palpable and apparent when they eagerly jump on the subject of what makes their pursuits possible; specifically, when they talk about the players you never see—set and costume designers, and technicians who secretly drive the performance nights to success.

"I think the unsung heroes are the people who don't go on the stage and get the buzz," Mond said. "The ones who create wonderful sets—they put in time to paint them and make them good... I don't know what [the costume designer] gets from it, but she makes fantastic costumes for us... so there's a whole group of people who never appear on-stage, they may get a little mention in the brochure, but they do it because they love to see Doha Players put on shows."

While in the past, The Doha Players have had a rather nomadic presence throughout the city—performing wherever they could find the space—they're excited now to have found a home at the Qatar National Convention Center, which offers world-class equipment and an excellent performance space for the players and audience alike.

Over the years, audience members represent a full range of backgrounds and cultures; in fact, many are



Actress Mione van der Merwe
takes on the role of Prospero

locals and students. In the case of Shakespeare, the experience enhances their learning of the playwright and his motivations.

"He made no attempt at all to collect his plays. I think for him these were things in a moment... that life is just the things that dreams are made of," Pearson said.

"He struggles with that in all of his plays," van der Merwe added, "the fact that life is short and then you die."

"So you come back to those basics of mortality," Sturgess continued. "None of us, I don't think, want to die. We all accept that we're all going to die. And it's a question of how we live our lives managing those two contradictory things. You don't want to die but we know we are going to. And in Shakespeare, in all the plays, there is this struggle with dealing with our mortality."

Already taking on his role as the jester, Mond concluded: "It's a good play. People who come to it will enjoy it. It's got enough variety and air. It's not too heavy—they'll walk away saying they had a great evening." ■

The Tempest will be showing at
the Qatar National Convention Center
from November 7-10 at 7:30 p.m.

Tickets are QR 100 and are available from
www.q-tickets.com. Discounts will be available
for youth under the age of 18 with valid I.D.

The Doha Players are always looking for
new actors, musicians, directors, costumers,
props managers, painters, set-builders, sound
and lighting experts and much more. For
more information about volunteering, trying
out for a play, tickets or just keeping up with
the live performance scene in Doha, visit
www.thedohaplayers.com or follow
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