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Dr. David Z. Saltz
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Dear Dr. Saltz,

The following is my evaluation of Ms. Julie Ray's work as the Scenic Designer of *Much Ado About Nothing*, as performed in the Fine Arts Theater on Friday night, April 10, 2015. Let me start by saying that this is one of, if not THE, most enjoyable and delightful productions I have seen in my more than forty years of working in theatre. Having endured many performances of various Shakespearean works, especially in academic settings, I was somewhat apprehensive about what I might find – it's a large space, student-actors, etc. But I was delighted. I was moved. I was impressed with every aspect of the production.

Ms. Ray's set was stunning. Much of my career was spent as a scenic designer/technical director and one of my heroes was Joe Stell, who created some of the most beautiful places I've ever seen on stage. I am not comparing Ms. Ray's set to any of Joe's, but the visual impact and pleasure I felt when I walked into the theater reminded me of what I felt with some of Joe's best work. The lines, colors, textures, spaces – all were balanced and lovely. It filled the space so very well! I found myself discovering new elements and places as we waited for the play to begin. So yes, it was visually stunning.

One of my instructors long ago pounded into my head that there is no "best set" for any play – the "best set" is one that works best for a particular production of that play in a particular space. I was surprised to see that Ms. Ray had taken the set beyond the very wide proscenium opening and brought it down into the audience. Fine Arts is a huge space to fill and her set not only filled the space, but pushed beyond it. I was curious to see how this would work. As the performance unfolded I tried to focus on how the actors used the set and whether the set helped or hindered the action of the play. It was evident that there had been effective communication and collaboration between the director and designer because every inch of that complex and multilevel set was used. From the curtained cupola for the bedroom scene to the nooks and crannies for Beatrice and Benedict to hide in, to the wonderful statue that was not just decoration, the set worked very well and provided places for the action without causing the actors to seem strained or cautious. The actors inhabited their characters beautifully and the characters certainly inhabited their physical location with confidence and enthusiasm.

Ms. Ray's color palette, the sturdy browns and greys of the stonework, the deep greens of the foliage, and the cool sky backdrop, enhanced the style, period and moods of the production without being overt. I feel a little awkward writing this because I only realized this was true afterwards when we were leaving and I looked back at the stage and thought about what I had seen and experienced. It all fit together. Nothing leaped out at me during the performance – "Oh! That color represents the..." – the design elements (including the wonderful costumes) worked together without distracting.

Technically, it all seemed to work just fine. The set allowed every scene to have an appropriate place and enabled the director to create the most lovely stage pictures I have seen in a long time. We sat house right in row E, so we had a somewhat skewed view. I was a little concerned about our sightlines but they seemed fine, with the masking and angles of the set. Before the play started we discussed moving at intermission but ended up staying where we were because we could see everything well! We walked around at intermission and saw the set from different perspective, but we were pleased with our viewpoint. I questioned the reason for bringing the set down so far into the audience when there were sightline challenges, but I enjoyed the intimacy that this decision brought to the production.

Finally, I have to say that one of my favorite parts of the set was the door. Now I'm not sure how intentional it was, but the scraping sound it made as it opened was perfect! That sound resolved the dilemma of those damnable Shakespearean lines, "Hark, who comes now?" when actors are across that wide stage and facing the other way. I chuckled in admiration each time it happened.

I found myself looking for flaws, for problems, so this letter would not seem like one of Ms. Ray's student's critique of her work with my name on the top of the page. I watched for wall-wobbles. I tried to see actors waiting offstage. I especially paid attention when the actors were on the stairs and high areas to see if I could detect nervousness and insecurity. I checked each area to make sure it was used effectively. And I tried not to be delighted by the sheer loveliness of the world she had created for us. But it was all just too good. I look forward very much to seeing the next place Ms. Ray creates.

I am grateful for the opportunity to participate in your Department and I hope this response is helpful. I am happy to answer any questions you have about my response.

Best wishes,

Richard M. Rose II, Ed.D.
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