



## Synopsis: *The Tempest*

*Shipwreck, a not-so-deserted island, sorcery, spirits of the air, an islander of the earth, a king, two dukes, a drunk butler, a drunk jester, and an unlikely coupling are such stuff as dreams are made on.*

By William Shakespeare, written about 1611 and first printed in the 1623 First Folio

### Act I, Scene 1

A ship encounters a sudden tempest and wrecks. In addition to the Master of the ship, the Boatswain, and the crew of Mariners, the ship is bearing a royal party: Alonso, the King of Naples; his brother, Sebastian; Alonso's son, Ferdinand; Antonio, the current Duke of Milan; and Gonzalo, a counselor of Naples.

### Act I, Scene 2

A young girl named Miranda, who has watched the shipwreck from the shores of a nearby island, implores her father, Prospero, to cease the storm and save the ship. You read that right. Prospero assures her no harm has been done. Prospero is a sorcerer, and he now tells Miranda their life story. He was the Duke of Milan who ended up spending more time studying his magic books than ruling. His brother, Antonio, usurped him, in part by selling out Milan to Naples (Alonso was confederate in the scheme). Prospero and his then 3-year-old

daughter were escorted out to sea and put on a boat so dilapidated, even the rats had quit it. Set adrift, the two landed on this deserted island with its single inhabitant: Caliban, the son of a witch named Sycorax who had been banished from Algiers and died on the island. Prospero and Miranda have been marooned on the island for 12 years. Now, fortune has brought Prospero's enemies in proximity of the island, so he conjured up the storm and shipwreck in order to carry out his grand scheme.

He puts Miranda to sleep and calls forth a spirit named Ariel, who actually carried out the special effects of the storm and shipwreck. Ariel assures



Dan Istrate as Ariel in the Synetic Theater's 2013 production of *The Tempest*. Anastasia R. Simes designed the costumes that allowed actors to dance and perform acrobatics in water while spectacularly depicting the spirits, the Renaissance Italians, and the marooned inhabitants of the island. Photo by Johnny Shryock, Synetic Theater.

Prospero that the ship is safe in a harbor, its crew asleep under the hatches, Ferdinand washed ashore in one part of the island, and the other lords washed ashore in another area. Prospero instructs Ariel that they have two hours of work to do, prompting Ariel to complain that Prospero had promised him freedom. Prospero reminds Ariel of how he found the spirit when he landed on the island, imprisoned in

a tree by Sycorax. Ariel resumes his obedient ways and flies off to turn himself into a water nymph. Prospero awakes Miranda and calls forth Caliban, who enters cursing both father and daughter. He claims Prospero stole his island and imprisoned him; Prospero counters that he and Miranda taught Caliban language and culture, and instead of gratitude he tried to rape Miranda. Caliban owns up to the assault, expresses appreciation that they taught him how to curse, and goes off to fetch firewood lest he suffer cramps caused by Prospero's magic. Ariel, invisible and singing, leads Ferdinand in. The prince believes his father has drowned (Ariel's song says as much), but while mourning his father he wonders what supernatural being is making the music. Then he spots Miranda and figures she must be the goddess of the island. He's immediately smitten with her and she with him. This is what Prospero had hoped for, but he doesn't want to make the prize of his daughter too light by easy winning, so he intervenes, accuses Ferdinand of being a traitor and, using his magic powers, disarms the prince and orders him into servitude. Miranda pouts, but to no avail.

### Act II, Scene 1

The Italian lords are now wandering over the island, looking for Ferdinand, though Alonso and some of the others are convinced he's dead. We also learn that the king's fleet was returning from Tunis after the wedding of Alonso's daughter, Claribel, to the King of Tunis. Gonzalo tries to convince the king to have hope and, in an attempt to shore up Alonso's spirits (while bandying the insults lobbed at him from Sebastian and Antonio), Gonzalo describes a utopian ideal for this wondrous island. Ariel, who is invisible, enters playing music, and Gonzalo, Alonso, and the attendants fall asleep, leaving only Sebastian and Antonio to stand guard. Antonio, with much prodding, convinces Sebastian that with Claribel so far away from Naples and Ferdinand surely dead, Sebastian would be king if Alonso encountered some mischance (using his own usurpation of Prospero 12 years before as example). They decide to assassinate the sleeping king and Gonzalo and are finally getting

down to it when Ariel enters and awakens Gonzalo, who sees Sebastian and Antonio with swords drawn and yells to awake the rest. The two conspirators explain they heard a noise, Gonzalo confirms he heard a noise, too, and so they all troop off to search some more for Ferdinand, but on careful guard now.

### Act II, Scene 2

Caliban is carrying wood, complaining about Prospero and the spirits under his command. He sees Trinculo, a court jester washed ashore from the shipwreck, and figures he must be one of the spirits, so he hides under his gaberdine. Trinculo comes across



Prospero (René Thornton Jr.) uses his magic to disarm Ferdinand (Chad Bradford) in the American Shakespeare Center's Actors' Renaissance Season production of William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* at the Blackfriars Playhouse in 2016. Photo by Lindsey Walters, American Shakespeare Center.

what he thinks is a dead islander and takes him for either a fish or a monster, so strange is the islander's appearance. When he hears another storm coming, Trinculo looks for a place to take shelter and decides his best choice is under Caliban's gaberdine. Stefano, the king's butler, enters. He rode a butt of wine ashore from the shipwreck, and he's been drinking of it ever since, carrying a bottle now. He comes across what he thinks is a four-legged, two-headed monster, which is crying out in anguish. He determines to give the anguished head (Caliban) drink, and meantime Trinculo recognizes Stefano's voice. As butler and jester reunite and recount their adven-

tures after the shipwreck, Caliban, besotted with the drink, considers Stefano a god and begins worshipping him. Thinking this god mightier than Prospero, Caliban announces his freedom and leads the other two off to explore the riches of the island.

### Act III, Scene 1

Ferdinand is now bearing logs, part of his trial at the hands of Prospero. Miranda enters to try to help him out, though she has been commanded by her father not to interact with Ferdinand. But her father is not far behind her, watching as the two youngsters express their love for each other and determine to marry. As Miranda and Ferdinand go their separate ways, Prospero announces his pleasure at their intended nuptial, but he has other business to attend to in the meantime.

### Act III, Scene 2

Caliban, Stefano, and Trinculo enter, all reeling drunk. Caliban is still worshipping Stefano, but he doesn't like the mocking Trinculo. Caliban exhorts the mighty Stefano to kill Prospero, and as he goes into his tale, Ariel, invisible, enters and plays voice-throwing tricks on the three. After this knockabout humor, Stefano agrees to undertake the task of killing Prospero, leading Caliban to request Stefano and Trinculo sing a catch they had sung earlier. But they don't sing the tune correctly, whereupon Ariel begins playing the tune. This is to Caliban's delight, but music magically played by invisible beings frightens Stefano and Trinculo. Caliban assures them they need not be afraid, that the music and other such sounds are the island's greatest treasure.

### Act III, Scene 3

The other Italian lords are still wandering about the island. Antonio and Sebastian reassure each other that they will carry out their conspiracy first chance they get. Out of nowhere, strange islanders (actually spirits under Ariel's direction) lay out a banquet for the lords and invite them to eat. But as the king, his brother, and the Duke of Milan approach the table, Ariel appears like a harpy in a thunderclap and con-



Ferdinand (Avery Glymph) and Miranda (Rachel Mewbron) watch as Juno appears to bless the couple in the Shakespeare Theatre Company's 2014 production of William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Photo by Scott Suchman, Shakespeare Theatre Company.

demns the three for their abuse of Prospero. Gonzalo and the others don't see the vision; they only see the other three in amazement. The king runs off in a fit of madness followed by the equally frantic Sebastian and Antonio. Gonzalo and the other attendants chase after.

### Act IV

Prospero, now much friendlier to Ferdinand, bestows his daughter on the prince, but warns him not to have sex with her until they can be formally married. He then has Ariel create a magical pageant for the couple, and they sit and watch a show of spirits playing Iris, Ceres, and Juno. Other spirits and nymphs enter and perform a graceful dance, but Prospero suddenly remembers that Caliban and his confederates are planning to kill him, and he dissipates the magical pageant. He is in such a consternation that it worries both Miranda and Ferdinand, but Prospero assures them that his vexation is something they need not be concerned with, though he goes on to compare this pageant of spirits that has melted into thin air with the state of the world, which someday will vanish into air while humans "are such stuff as dreams are made on, and our little life is rounded with a sleep." Prospero sends the two lovers off to enjoy each other's company while he gets the latest intelligence from Ariel, who describes how he has led the drunk Caliban, Stefano,

and Trinculo through thorn bushes and into a swamp. Prospero and Ariel set up a line of some of Prospero's finest clothes, and when the three conspirators enter near Prospero's cave, the two Neapolitans become totally distracted by the rich clothes. Caliban's warnings go unheeded, at which point spirits enter as dogs who chase the three conspirators away.



Caliban (Ryan Mitchell) listens to the music of the isle as Stephano (Dan Van Why) and Ariel (Julie-Ann Elliott) watch in the Olney Theatre Center's 2014 production of William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Costume designs by Pei Lee. Photo by Stan Barouh, Olney Theatre Center.

treasonous plans, then requires his dukedom back from Antonio and forgives his brother. When Alonso tells Prospero that his son was lost in the storm and shipwreck, Prospero says his daughter, too, was lost in the recent tempest. Alonso, apparently unaware that Prospero had a daughter, now wishes they could have lived to marry, whereupon Prospero reveals the two playing chess in his cave.

## Act V

Prospero now gets intelligence from Ariel on the status of the king's company. As Ariel describes their various states of mind, including the despondent Gonzalo, the spirit admits a yearning to pity them, though Ariel has no such human quality. This strikes Prospero deeply. He has been planning some form of revenge for his brother and the rest, but Ariel has taught him that forgiveness is the greater virtue. After sending Ariel off to lead in Alonso and his company, Prospero conjures a spell that concludes with his promise that, once his goal is accomplished, he'll break his staff and bury it in the earth and drown his magic book in the sea. When Ariel leads in the Italian lords, they are in an hypnotic trance. Prospero has Ariel help him into his duke's robes and then they awake the lords. Prospero presents himself to them: greets Alonso, warmly embraces Gonzalo, warns Sebastian and Antonio that he knows of their

Ferdinand reunites with his father, and Miranda gazes in wonder at this brave new world that has such people in it. Ariel now leads in the Boatswain who reports that the ship is tight and yare and all the crew safe. Next up, Ariel herds in Caliban, Stefano, and Trinculo. The three conspirators are sent to their duties by their respective masters and Prospero invites the lords into his abode before they set sail again. After the rest leave the stage, Prospero stays behind to set Ariel free.

## Epilogue

Prospero remains on stage to deliver the epilogue, noting that his magical powers are now all gone and he relies on the audience's indulgence to set him free.

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