Bitterroot

By James Venhaus

Based on "The Tempest"
by William Shakespeare

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STORY OF THE PLAY

Magic, mayhem, and madness unfold in this classic story of love, revenge, and forgiveness. Based on *The Tempest* by William Shakespeare, *Bitterroot* is a modern adaptation set in the American West. Prospero and his daughter Miranda have been stranded in the Montana wilderness for twelve years. When fate brings Prospero's evil brother to Montana, Prospero must decide whether to exact his revenge or forgive his enemies. But can Prospero accept that his daughter wants to marry the son of an enemy? And can he forgive himself for the way he treated his servants Caliban and Ariel? Ultimately, it's up to the audience to decide Prospero's fate in this highly theatrical adaptation of Shakespeare's classic. The play has a flexible cast with larger roles written for adults or teenage actors, medium-sized roles for younger actors, and a chorus of small roles meant to be played by the very young. It is ideal for theatre camps, or youth theatres that have an ensemble of actors of a variety of ages. Run time: 90 minutes.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Bitterroot was commissioned by Orphan Girl Children's Theatre in Butte, Montana, Jackie Vetter, Artistic Director. *Bitterroot* was first presented as a filmed theatrical experience and streamed to audiences on September 23-28, 2020. The production was directed by Jackie Vetter. Original music was composed by Frankee Angel. The Production Manager was Elizabeth Crase. The Stage Manager was Kershaw Mellott. The cast in order of appearance was:

Michael Prospero: David Coleman II; Miranda: Danielle Clark; Ariel: Avery Santifer; Caliban: Nimalka de Alwis; Ferdinand: Tytan Rosencrans; Alexander: Keri J. Gukeisen; Anthony Prospero: Sullivan Panisko; Sebastian: Frankie Cox; Gregory: Michael Peck; Trey: Peytan Campbell; Stephen: Marley Hamblin; Captain: Sullivan Malouf; Ship's Crew: Rylee Forbes, Molly Peck, Presli Smith-Anderson and Abbi Wright; Spirits: Rylee Forbes, Molly Peck, Presli Smith-Anderson, Grace Speece and Abbi Wright.

Orphan Girl Children's Theatre produced a fully staged version from September 23-26, 2021 with the same cast and creative team.

The author would like to thank the following people who provided invaluable support and encouragement throughout the development of this play: Jackie Vetter, Elizabeth Crase, Frankee Angel, Laura Venhaus, Charlotte Venhaus, and Penelope Venhaus.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

2 m, 2 w, 10 either (expandable to 20)

All of the characters in this play can be played by performers of any gender. Feel free to change the first names and pronouns to suit the performer playing the role. The only expectations are Miranda and Ferdinand, who should be played as written.

MICHAEL PROSPERO: The protagonist, father of Miranda and brother to Anthony. He and Alexander are the oldest characters in the play. He is gruff, sometimes cruel to his servants, but he is a kind and loving father. By the end of the play, he learns to forgive his enemies and let go of his bitterness.

MIRANDA: The daughter of Michael Prospero, Miranda was brought to the wilderness at an early age. Because she was raised by her father and has been sealed off from the world for so long, Miranda has no idea of the social conventions of the civilized world. She is strong, independent, and sometimes very stubborn. Yet, she is compassionate, generous, and loyal to her father.

ARIEL: Prospero's spirit helper. She is mischievous and fun-loving, but also very loyal to Prospero. She leads a group of small spirits that are an extension of her magic.

CALIBAN: Another of Prospero's servants. Caliban has lived in this land his entire life. Caliban believes that the land rightfully belongs to him and has been stolen by Prospero. He is angry and resentful of his circumstances.

FERDINAND: Son of Alexander. Ferdinand has lived a life of privilege and is naïve and innocent. He falls in love with Miranda at first sight. His views of the roles of men and women in society are very old fashioned, but he quickly learns that men and women can be equal.

ALEXANDER: Governor and father of Ferdinand. Alexander helped Anthony to take Prospero's life away twelve years before. After the magical banquet, he regrets his part in unseating Prospero.

CAST OF CHARACTERS
(Continued)

ANTHONY PROSPERO: Prospero's brother. Anthony is power-hungry and rash. He is quick to take advantage of people and situations if he feels it will help him gain power.

SEBASTIAN: Alexander's brother. Like Anthony, he is hungry for power, but he is sometimes afraid to act.

GREGORY: Servant to Alexander, Anthony, and Sebastian, and former servant to Prospero. He is honest, kind, and brave.

TREY and STEPHEN: Servants to Alexander, Anthony, and Sebastian, but they are more buffoonish and incompetent. They are clowns and provide most of the comic relief in the play.

CAPTAIN: A brave riverboat captain. He appears only in the first and last scenes of the play and can double as one of Ariel's spirits.

CREW #1, #2, and #3: Sailors on the riverboat. Can double as Ariel's spirits.

SPIRITS: These spirits are an extension of Ariel and her magic powers. They silently carry out most of Ariel's magic. They move fluidly and provide the play with a sense that the entire land is magical, and nothing is what it seems.

SETTING

The wilderness of Montana in the early 1800s

SET

The first scene takes place on the deck of a keelship. The rest of the play takes place in a clearing in the wilderness in the wilds of Montana. Set pieces can be simple, such as a stump or a log or other items to indicate location, or if can be a bare stage. Having Ariel's sprits help with any set changes will allow transitions to be seamless and will help the pace. It will also add a sense of magic and wonder to the show.

Act I
Scene 1

(AT RISE: PROSPERO walks onto a bare stage. He is wearing once nice clothes that are tattered, faded, worn, and very old. Over these clothes, he wears a beautiful cloak. And he holds a large staff. He crosses C and strikes his staff on the ground. SFX: A loud clap of THUNDER is heard, and the LIGHTS flash off and on. During the brief blackout, ARIEL, a tree spirit, appears beside Prospero. Prospero whispers in Ariel's ear, and she nods then throws her arms in the air causing another clap of THUNDER and FLASH of lightning. This time, SPIRITS appear and begin moving about the stage. They bring on armloads of books and begin making a stack of books UC. Other Spirits begin pulling down ropes that are hanging from above or from offstage R and L. The sound of WIND and RAIN is getting louder. Prospero waves his staff, and the Spirits disperse. Ariel stays behind but Prospero gives her a disapproving look, and she exits. Prospero hides to watch the action unfold. Another clap of THUNDER and FLASH of lightning and the CAPTAIN of a keelboat appears standing on the top of the stack of books holding a ship's wheel.)

CAPTAIN: *(Blows a whistle that he has around his neck.)* All hands on deck. All hands on deck.

(The CREW of the ship rushes on stage and starts to grab the ropes. The CAPTAIN is trying to steer his boat through the storm, while the Crew pull the ropes and try to adjust the sails. ALL are shouting to be heard above the noise of the storm. Chaos ensues. ALEXANDER enters staggering about the deck as the ship tilts from left to right. He makes his way to the captain.)

ALEXANDER: Good captain. What is wrong with these men?
CAPTAIN: They've never seen a storm like this. They don't know what to do.
ALEXANDER: Do you want me to talk to them?

CAPTAIN: Do you know what you are doing?
ALEXANDER: No.
CAPTAIN: Here. *(Hands the wheel to ALEXANDER.)* Hold it steady. *(Rushes to each of his CREW and helps them with their tasks.)* Tie the lines down quickly. Here, like this. *(To another.)* Close that hatch. *(To another.)* Don't panic. Keep pulling that sail. Harder. *(To another.)* Come over here and help him. That sail has to come down, or it will be torn to shreds.
CREW #1: Are we going to die?
CAPTAIN: Don't be a fool. It's just a little storm.
CREW #2: Should we pray?
CAPTAIN: Yes. You should pray that I don't tell everyone back home how scared you are of a little thunder. Keep going.

(ANTHONY, SEBASTIAN, and FERDINAND enter, dressed in royal clothes.)

ANTHONY: Captain, can we help?
CAPTAIN: You can help by going below deck. You're only in the way here. *(To CREW #3.)* Take the wheel from the Governor and hold it steady.
CREW #3: Yes, Captain.

(CREW #3 takes the wheel from ALEXANDER and Alexander joins the ANTHONY, SEBASTIAN, and FERDINAND.)

FERDINAND: Father, what's going on?
ALEXANDER: Not to worry, my son. The good captain has everything under control.
CAPTAIN: Get below deck now if you want to live.
ALEXANDER: Never mind. Move. Move. Move.

(ALEXANDER, ANTHONY, SEBASTIAN, and FERDINAND scramble to get off stage as quickly as possible. Ferdinand is last and stops.)

FERDINAND: Wait. I see the shore.

CAPTAIN: Get below deck. NOW!
FERDINAND: I'm not going to stay here while this ship sinks. I can make it to shore.
CAPTAIN: No. Wait!

(FERDINAND jumps offstage and we hear SFX: a SPLASH as he jumps overboard and lands in the water.)

CREW #1: I thought you said we weren't going to die?
CAPTAIN: I had to say something to get them out of the way. Now, tie that line off.
CREW #1: Yes, captain.

(SFX: The sound of thunder and rain gets quieter, and the CREW stops swaying.)

CAPTAIN: The storm is passing. *(To CREW #3.)* Steer us toward the shore. Point us toward that cove on the starboard side.
CREW #3: Yes, captain.

(TREY and STEPHEN enter. They are servants dressed in simple clothes.)

TREY: Ahoy, mates! We are here!
STEPHEN: Trey and Stephen are here to save the day.
TREY: We serve the Governor, and now we are here to serve you! So, there is no need to worry.
STEPHEN: No need at all.
TREY: We have everything under control.

(TREY and STEPHEN start barking orders, but they clearly don't know what they are talking about.)

STEPHEN: Hoist that thing.
TREY: And move that other thing over to that place.
STEPHEN: Starboard the aft deck and swab the porthole.
TREY: That's disgusting.
STEPHEN: Sail the mainmast, and jib and tack the boom.

TREY: Flemish the anchor!

(The CAPTAIN approaches THEM and talks to them like they are children.)

CAPTAIN: Excuse me, good sirs. I can tell that you are fine sailors.
STEPHEN: That we are.
TREY: Shall we trim the winch?
CAPTAIN: No, sirs. My crew has taken care of all of that. But as we approach the shore, you might want to hold on to something. You might feel a little bump.

(The CAPTAIN and the CREW all move toward one of the ropes and wrap their arms around a rope to steady themselves, leaving TREY and STEPHEN CS.)

STEPHEN: A bump?
CAPTAIN: A little tap. A nudge.
TREY: A nudge? That's nothing to two old seafarers like ourselves.
CAPTAIN: Suit yourself. *(Shouting.)* Land ho!
TREY: What did you call me?

(Before anyone can respond, the ship touches the shore. The CAPTAIN and the CREW lurch forward a bit but don't fall because they are hanging on to ropes. TREY and STEPHEN fly forward landing face-first on the deck. BLACKOUT.)

End of Scene 1

Scene 2

(MIRANDA rushes on stage and grabs PROSPERO by the arm.)

MIRANDA: Father! What is that? What is happening?
PROSPERO: It's okay. Everything is going to be alright.
MIRANDA: Did you do this? Did you cause the storm?
PROSPERO: Calm down.
MIRANDA: Please make it stop. That ship... I could hear the people screaming.
PROSPERO: It's okay. The people on the ship are fine. I made sure of it.
MIRANDA: *(Starting to calm down.)* What an awful thing to see.
PROSPERO: There is no need to worry. No harm was done. I did all of this for you.
MIRANDA: What?
PROSPERO: Come. Sit down. It's time for me to tell you about who we are and where we came from.
MIRANDA: I didn't think there was anything else to know.
PROSPERO: *(Removing his cloak.)* Here. Sit down on my cloak. It's soft.

(PROSPERO waves his hand and some of SPIRITS take his cloak and lay it flat on the ground. MIRANDA sits on the cloak and other SPIRITS move a stack of books next to her and Prospero sits on the books. Other SPIRITS take a rope and make a circle on the ground around them, or perhaps they hold it up in the shape of a square to frame Prospero and Miranda as they talk.)

PROSPERO: Do you remember a time before we lived here? Anything? A house, or a person? Anything at all?
MIRANDA: Sort of. My memory is hazy. More like a dream than a memory. I remember… this can't be right… I remember four or five women used to take care of me. Is that right?

PROSPERO: Yes. We had many servants. Not magical creatures like we have now, but men and women like you and me.
MIRANDA: But why don't I remember my mother?
PROSPERO: I don't know. She didn't take care of you. Our servants did.
MIRANDA: Why?
PROSPERO: Your mother was very ill when you were little. She stayed away from you to keep you from getting sick. She stayed away because she loved you. If you remember all that, do you remember how we got here?
MIRANDA: No.
PROSPERO: We arrived on a ship. It was a keelboat, like the one in the storm. In fact, we traveled on the same river, from the same place.
MIRANDA: Really? Where?
PROSPERO: A big city in the East called Philadelphia. We lived in a big house, and I was a banker.
MIRANDA: What's a banker?
PROSPERO: I ran a company that kept people's money for them.
MIRANDA: That's a real job?
PROSPERO: Yes. Back East, people with lots of money are treated like royalty. I was like a king. Or, more accurately a Duke. And you were my little princess. My bank traded, bought, and sold things, and invested people's money for them to make more money.
MIRANDA: Why did people need more money?
PROSPERO: I wonder the same thing sometimes. But when your mother got sick, I couldn't focus on my job. All I wanted to do was read my books to learn about science, mathematics, literature, philosophy, and eventually, magic.

(PROSPERO waves his hand and some SPIRITS start to silently act out the story.)

PROSPERO: *(Cont'd.)* I have a brother, your uncle, his name is Anthony.

PROSPERO: *(Cont'd.)* My brother whom, aside from you and your mother, I loved more than anyone else in the world, took over my job. Slowly over time, he began to work with the customers more and more. He made more money for them than I ever did, and they became richer. So, they loved him. Eventually, I did less, and less work and he was doing all of my job. But he became jealous of me. And maybe he should have been. I had all of the rewards, but he was doing all of the work. So, he, I still can't believe it sometimes, he pushed me out and took over. Everything -- the house, the land, all of my possessions. He took all of it. But there were still some people who were loyal to me, so he knew that he couldn't take everything from me without some kind of explanation. So, in the middle of the night, our butler, Gregory, kidnapped us and took us to an old boat. And, although he was hired to make sure we disappeared from Philadelphia forever, instead of pointing the boat out to sea, he set the boat to go west. And on the boat, he hid a map, some food, clothes, and my books of magic.

MIRANDA: He sounds like a good man.

PROSPERO: He was. And that night. Oh, that night. You cried and cried.

MIRANDA: I don't remember that.

PROSPERO: I'm glad you don't. But something amazing happened. Once we got on the boat. You stopped crying and smiled. I was sad, but you were happy. It was like a game for you. Or an adventure. You ran up and down the deck of the boat. I hadn't seen you that happy since well, maybe ever. You inspired me. I studied the maps, set sail, and headed west, determined to make it as far away from my evil brother as I could and determined to make a new, better life for us. But the boat was old, and finally, we ran aground here, on the shore of the river. I thought we could stay here until the spring and fix the boat and sail again until we reached the Pacific Ocean. But you liked it here, and I started teaching you. You had an education better than any girl back East. And, my magic grew stronger, and you liked it here, so I decided to stay. That was twelve years ago.

MIRANDA: Do you miss it? The city. What was it called?

PROSPERO: Philadelphia. No. I don't miss it. The city is full of my enemies. My brother, his servants, who used to be mine. Even the Governor of Pennsylvania, a man named Alexander. All of them betrayed me.
MIRANDA: But what about the ship? Who are those people, and what do they have to do with us?
PROSPERO: This is the most amazing part of the story. The ship is filled with my enemies. All of them. Even the Governor. They are here.
MIRANDA: Why?
PROSPERO: I'm not sure. Maybe they found out that we didn't die and came to look for us. Maybe, my magic brought them here without me knowing. Maybe it's just the best luck I've had in twelve years. But I plan to find out.
MIRANDA: I'll go with you.
PROSPERO: No. You can't.
MIRANDA: Why not? My uncle is there. I want to meet him. And Gregory, the man that helped us. I want to thank him. I want to—
PROSPERO: But aren't you sleepy? It's been a long day.
MIRANDA: It's only noon. I'm not sleepy.
PROSPERO: Are you sure?

(MIRANDA lays down, and PROSPERO waves his hand, and SPIRITS begin to wrap her up in the cloak.)

MIRANDA: Well, maybe a little bit. I'll rest a little and then I'll come with you. I … *(Falls asleep.)*
PROSPERO: Ariel, come here.
ARIEL: Yes, sir. Your wish is my command. If you want me to fly, to swim, to jump into fire, to ride the clouds in the sky, Ariel will always be—
PROSPERO: Did you do as I told you?

(As ARIEL describes the action, some of SPIRITS start to silently act out the story.)

ARIEL: Down to the last detail. I boarded the governor's ship and every corner of it, from the deck to the cabins, I made everyone surprised and scared. Sometimes I appeared in many places at once. Then I dove into the water and made myself into a giant wave and crashed myself against the ship again and again and again. I was faster than lightning.
PROSPERO: They must have been scared to death.
ARIEL: They ran around screaming in a panic. But I made sure the captain stayed calm so he could steer the ship to safety.
PROSPERO: Well done. Was this close to shore?
ARIEL: Oh yes, I made sure of it. The Governor's son, Ferdinand saw the shore and was the first to jump overboard.
PROSPERO: And where is the ship now?
ARIEL: I caused a mighty wind to guide the ship safely to the cove, near where you first found me. The ship is safe, and the sailors are asleep below the deck.
PROSPERO: Good. And the others?
ARIEL: I split them up into groups, just as you asked. Now they wander the land, looking for each other.
PROSPERO: Excellent. You have done very well.
ARIEL: Thank you, sir.
PROSPERO: Now, there is more work to do. First, I need you to—
ARIEL: Excuse me, if there is more work to do, may I ask you for something?
PROSPERO: What could you possibly want?
ARIEL: My freedom.
PROSPERO: Before you have finished your duties? Don't be ridiculous.
ARIEL: Sir, I've been a perfect servant. I've done all of the work you've asked of me. I've never made a mistake and never complained.
PROSPERO: Except for now.
ARIEL: You promised me a full year off my sentence if I –
PROSPERO: Have you forgotten the torture that I freed you from?
ARIEL: No, sir.

PROSPERO: When I landed on the shore, I heard you screaming and crying. I walked for days to find you. And there you were, trapped inside of a tree by that evil witch and her son, Caliban. And, he has been nothing but trouble for us. And I used my magic to free you. If not for me, you would still be inside that tree, crying.
ARIEL: I know.
PROSPERO: And this is the thanks I get?
ARIEL: I mean no disrespect.
PROSPERO: You are so ungrateful. I should cast a spell and put you back inside the tree.
ARIEL: No, please. I'll do anything.
PROSPERO: Good. I have one more job for you to do today. Do it, and I'll take two days off your sentence.
ARIEL: Yes. Thank you. Thank you. I'll do it. Whatever you want.
PROSPERO: Make yourself invisible to everyone except you and me and bring Ferdinand here.
ARIEL: Yes, sir. Right away.

(ARIEL leaves, followed by her SPIRITS. As the last, and SMALLEST SPIRIT leaves, she turns to PROSPERO and sticks her tongue out at him. Prospero takes one step toward the spirit, and the spirit runs away. MIRANDA begins to waken.)

MIRANDA: How long was I asleep?
PROSPERO: Not long. Just enough to rest your eyes. Come along. We need to talk to our servant Caliban.
MIRANDA: I do not like that man.
PROSPERO: I know, but we can't do without him. He builds our fires, gets our firewood, and does all kinds of chores. *(Calling out.)* Hey! Caliban, you ugly pile of dirt. Where are you?
CALIBAN: *(Offstage.)* You already have all the firewood you need.
PROSPERO: Come now, I say! I have something I need from you, you filthy animal.

CALIBAN: *(Entering.)* What do you want, you evil, evil man? I hope you get sick and get covered in bee stings! Both of you!
MIRANDA: What did I do?
CALIBAN: You came from him. Horrible people can only create more horrible people.
MIRANDA: That's not true!
CALIBAN: You carry the sins of your father with you with every step!
MIRANDA: I didn't do anything.
CALIBAN: You are here and that is enough! This is my land. Given to me by my mother. And you took it from me.
MIRANDA: We share it.
PROSPERO: Another ungrateful servant. Can't you remember all that we have done for you? I swear, your brain is as small as a goat's.
CALIBAN: I remember. I remember everything. When you first got here, I showed you the wonders of this land. Where to find freshwater springs, how to grow the food you needed. I loved you then. And you were so nice to me. Gave me medicine, took care of me, taught me the names of the sun and the moon. I wish I never learned your language because all I use it for is to put curses on you! Then, you took everything and locked me up in a dark cave.
PROSPERO: I locked you up because you tried to hurt my daughter. You are a brute.
CALIBAN: I wish I had hurt her! Then maybe you would respect me and my power!
PROSPERO: Be quiet! You are my servant.
CALIBAN: Yes, and you are my king. A king with only one subject! Do you know what my people call a leader with no followers? He is just a foolish man taking a lonely walk.
PROSPERO: I've heard enough from you. Go now to fetch more wood to make a fire. Do as I say, or I will use my magic to—
CALIBAN: No. No. Don't use your magic. I'm sorry. I'm sorry for what I said.
PROSPERO: Now, Go! Before I get angry!
CALIBAN: Yes, yes. I will do as you say. *(Exits.)*

End of Freeview

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