

UC SANTA BARBARA

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[Debra Herrick](#)

Naked Shakes marks 20th anniversary with Shakespeare's 'The Tempest'

Under the sunset at UC Santa Barbara, Naked Shakes will stage Shakespeare's mystical 'The Tempest' as both performance and milestone, marking the company's 20th anniversary. Artistic director Irwin Appel says the occasion reflects the spirit of constant renewal that has defined the program since its founding. "After 20 years, I feel as if we are just getting started," [Appel](#) said. "The strength and beauty of Naked Shakes is that we are always reinventing and reimagining."

Founded on the principle of "stripped-down Shakespeare," [Naked Shakes](#) is known for minimal sets, few technical elements and a focus on language and performance. That ethos is both amplified and challenged by the troupe's growing use of outdoor venues like Elings Park. "At UCSB we are essentially creating outdoor theater spaces where theater has not been done before," Appel said. "So there is no template for how to do it. Outdoors, the surroundings can overwhelm the action on stage. We are making great efforts to find the right interaction, or 'partnership,' with our environment that preserves and enhances the delicacy and energy of the text, poetic imagery and performances."

At the heart of this season's play are themes that resonate across centuries. "The Tempest" tells the story of storms, betrayal and ultimately forgiveness, embodied in protagonist Prospero's final renunciation of revenge. "Prospero's discovery as he

ends his quest for revenge is that ‘the rarer action is in virtue than in vengeance,’” Appel said. “Look at the state of our country and our world — couldn’t we use a little more virtue instead of vengeance right now?”

But the play’s philosophical reach extends even further. For Appel, it raises timeless questions: “What happens when we wrestle with our own spiritual crisis and come to a painful awakening? What is it to leave our world better for our children and the generations who come after us? Plus, what does it truly mean to forgive? Is that a superficial, quaint idea, or does it come with an enormous cost?”

One of the production’s central meditations is on the difference between what is ephemeral and what endures. Appel points to Prospero’s famous “cloud-capped towers” speech, which imagines even the most glorious structures dissolving into nothing. “I’m often fascinated by what Shakespeare doesn’t say,” he reflected. “He could have said ‘great world’ or ‘great earth,’ but instead he chose ‘great globe’ — the Globe, the name of his theater.

“The Globe Theatre actually did dissolve; it burned down during a performance,” Appel continued. “We don’t have a single manuscript in Shakespeare’s handwriting, no piece of scenery, no costumes — and still we have the plays. Perhaps artistic creation passed down through the centuries is far more substantial than the things we assume will last.” That haunting sense of impermanence will frame the production itself.

“We are actually using the line ‘We are such stuff as dreams are made on’ to begin and end our play,” Appel said. “I’ll be very interested to see if this theme resonates with our audiences.”

For Appel, staging “The Tempest” as the 20th anniversary production is deeply fitting. “It was Shakespeare’s final major play, the culmination of his work and career,” he said. “Although we have no plans to retire Naked Shakes — we hope we go another 20 years at least — this production reflects the 20 years of work that Naked Shakes has produced.”

The performance will even include a special nod to the troupe’s history. For the “pageant” Prospero stages for his daughter Miranda and her betrothed Ferdinand, Naked Shakes has woven in music and scenes from other Shakespeare plays the

company has produced over the past two decades.

“In addition to the exceptional work of our student cast, crew, assistant directors, designers, dramaturg and stage managers, ‘The Tempest’ would not have been possible without the extraordinary artistry of choreographer Christina McCarthy, composer and musician Jim Connolly, associate director Pesha Rudnick and creative consultant Daniel Stein,” Appel said. “All four of them have worked on multiple Naked Shakes productions over the past 20 years, along with many other amazing faculty, staff and guest artists, and they have all played a major role in shaping the artistic identity and aesthetic of the company.”

[The anniversary season begins with three performances](#) on Commencement Green, on the UCSB campus on Sept. 4, 5 and 6, each at 5 p.m. A UCSB Affiliates picnic will be held on Saturday, Sep. 6, at Commencement Green before the 5 p.m. performance. Additional shows will be held at Elings Park’s Godric Grove on Thursday and Friday, Sept. 11 and 12, at 5 p.m., and Sunday, Sept. 14, at 3 p.m. Performances will also be held on Oct. 3, 4 and 5 at 4 p.m. on Commencement Green to open the Department of Theater and Dance performance season. The Oct. 4 performance will include a special Naked Shakes 20th anniversary celebration and alumni reunion event.

Appel hopes that audiences will experience both the raw humanity of Shakespeare and the enduring power of artistic creation. “With Naked Shakes, all you need is a bare theatrical space, the power of language, and the collective imagination of the audience,” he said. “From that, we can create what Prospero calls ‘rough magic’ — revealing the true heart, meaning and original inspiration behind Shakespeare’s plays.”

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