

ETCETERA



Pericles shone the spotlight on 200 non-professionals as part of the Public Acts programme. IMAGE: JAMES BELLORINI

Review: Pericles at the National Theatre

★★★★

It's a people's revolution. For the very first time, a community cast takes the Olivier stage: around 200 non-professionals, led by a few actors, representing national diversity.

And that's no anaemic buzzword here, but real inclusion – assorted ages, sizes, ethnicities, experiences, performers in wheelchairs, in drag, all combining in the art of storytelling. It's end-of-term play meets Danny Boyle's London Olympics Opening Ceremony.

Pericles is the debut production of the National's new Public Acts initiative, partnering with local community organisations.

Chris Bush has skilfully filleted this (disputed) Shakespeare play, elevating the concept of 'home' as *Pericles* journeys around various islands, losing and regaining family.

Director Emily Lim is canny in marshalling her giant cast, which also includes cameo performance groups. Different ensembles represent the island communities – retaining their distinct voices within a coherent, disciplined whole.

Thus the London Bulgarian Choir powerfully voices *Pericles'* grief, while the Ascension Eagles cheerleaders join a kazoo orchestra and adorable shellfish-costumed little ones in welcoming him to Tarsus.

Princess Thaisa is wooed via a dance-off, featuring samba and a pint-sized breakdancer, amidst music from the Bhavan Centre Drummers and an exuberant jig round a maypole.

Marianka Swain writes about a genuine triumph of diversity on the Olivier stage



Action from *Pericles* at the National Theatre. IMAGE: JAMES BELLORINI

Mytilene's brothel becomes a more family-friendly cabaret, presided over by Kevin Harvey's RuPaul-esque Boul.

Fly Davis's design – rainbow-hued and inventive throughout – reaches its apotheosis here, with fabulous octopus chandeliers.

Ashley Zhangazha takes *Pericles* from swagger and bling to hard-won wisdom, and there's fantastic support from Naana Agyei-Ampadu's independent Thaisa, Ayesha Dharker's cheerfully sex-positive Simonida, Garry Robson's wily Cleon and Audrey Brisson's steadfast

Marina.

Jim Fortune's hummable songs have a Disney-esque emotional universality, and resonant messages about border-transcending family and a "nation's worth" shown by how it treats newcomers are communicated (in several languages) – without preaching.

Best of British: making theatre home to all.

Pericles was the first production from the National Theatre's Public Acts initiative. For more details, visit: nationaltheatre.org.uk

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