

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

# Santa Cruz Shakespeare's 'Pericles' navigates love, loss and redemption



BY JANA MARCUS August 5, 2025

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Pirates, princesses, brothels and shipwrecks — "Pericles" has all the drama of a soap opera with the poetry of Shakespeare, and Santa Cruz Shakespeare gives this wild ride heart and humor. Think "Shakespearean road trip" with emotional payoff and a superb cast.

Santa Cruz Shakespeare's third offering of the summer is one of the Bard's most rarely produced romantic plays, "Pericles." The compelling, multi-plot journey embraces geography and mythic spirit through shipwrecks, royal courts and reunions that span decades.

At nearly three hours, "Pericles" is one of Shakespeare's more episodic — and meandering — plays, and this production doesn't shy away from its full length. It's an ambitious undertaking that comes into focus with a superb ensemble stepping into multiple roles to bring Shakespeare's adventure to life with crisp and cohesive storytelling.

"Pericles" is part fairy tale and part odyssey. The story follows Prince Pericles of Tyre (played by Paige Lindsey White), who flees the corrupt king Antiochus (Corey Jones) after uncovering a deadly secret. From there, Pericles' life becomes a series of perilous voyages — surviving storms at sea, falling in love with the princess Thaisa (Lily Kops), fathering a daughter, Marina (Allie Pratt), and enduring profound personal loss. Along the way, he encounters a wide cast of characters: the scheming Dionyza (Desiree Rogers), the loyal Helicanus (Mike Ryan), and a host of fishermen, nobles and villains. The soap-opera nature of the narrative allows for moments of high drama, levity and, ultimately, a cathartic reunion.

Charles Pasternak's direction brings welcome clarity to a notoriously complex play, and many scenes are staged with real flair — particularly the moments of transformation, humor and high tension. His use of movement, ensemble interplay and visual storytelling often heightens the emotional stakes. That said, the pacing can be uneven. Some scenes burst with vigor and inventive staging, while others linger too long or feel static, causing the energy to dip. It's a production full of bold ideas, and while not all of them fully land, the overall vision remains cohesive and generous — committed to finding humanity in even the play's most improbable turns.

Corey Jones gives exceptional, multiple performances as the ominous King Antiochus, the conflicted Cleon and the lively Simonides. He brings each character fully to life with a rich, resonant voice and sparkling characterization. He's simply wonderful to behold—an actor who fills the stage with presence and exactness.

Lily Kops is a standout, delivering warmth and poise as Thaisa, then pivoting to sharp comic edge as the bawdy madam of Mytilene. She handles both roles with striking versatility, moving from regal grace to earthy humor with ease.



A scene from Santa Cruz Shakespeare's production of "Pericles," with Corey Jones (front), Shelby Denise Smith and Lily Kops. Credit: Santa Cruz Shakespeare

Paige Lindsey White, cast in the traditionally male title role, brings a quiet dignity and emotional restraint to Pericles. The choice to present the prince in a gender-neutral way — yet using male pronouns — keeps the performance firmly rooted in tradition. Still, it's difficult at first to get past a woman acting as a man. One wonders what might have emerged had the role been played explicitly as a woman. Santa Cruz Shakespeare took that bold approach with its 2016 "Hamlet," allowing a female Hamlet to remain fully herself inside the role — and the result was electric. Here, by contrast, White's performance feels more contained, and at times underpowered. The internal journey is there, but it unfolds with a kind of reserve that may leave some audience members seeking a more profound sense of transformation.

ML Roberts makes a lasting impression as Thaliard, Escanes, Bolt and the First Fisherman. There's a smooth, rhythmic quality to his delivery that gives even minor characters a kind of poetic clarity. He's always engaging — whether offering comic relief or grounding the world with a steady presence.

In Act II, Desiree Rogers is especially sharp as Dionyza, delivering polished malice with a calm, calculating edge. Her scenes land with a quiet chill as her mask of virtue begins to slip.

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Allie Pratt, as Marina, is luminous — full of clarity, resolve, and grace. Her scenes in the brothel become a showcase of character, not victimhood.

Mike Ryan is both the loyal advisor Helicanus and the scheming Pander, and makes each distinct. Jono Eiland's dual turn as the gentle healer Cerimon and the hired killer Leonine shows off the production's thoughtful casting. Shelby Denise Smith injects humor and humanity into Lychorida and the Third Fisherman, and Nick Rossi's Lysimachus charts a believable transformation from jaded politician to earnest suitor.

While the set itself is minimal, its rotating platform serves the storytelling well — visually marking Pericles' passage from port to port and gives the production a sense of movement. The design leans heavily on lighting and sound to define place and mood. What the set lacks in specific scenic decoration, the costumes by Erin Reed Carter more than make up for — becoming the primary visual cues for the many lands in Pericles' journey. From an Asian-inspired militaristic edge to the refined silks of Tarsus, Carter's simple, elegant designs not only distinguish characters but also give each world its own texture and cultural feel.

The production's visual and sonic landscape is richly supported by Marcella Barbeau's lighting, guiding us from storm to sanctuary with fluid ease. Mackenzie Adamick's sound design and original composition add depth — especially during transitions and moments of peril at sea. The result is a fluid, imaginative staging where movement, sound, light and wardrobe work in tandem to transport the audience across Shakespeare's vast map.

A notable highlight is choreography by Izzy Pedego, which runs the gamut from bold to ethereal. The soldiers' dance in Pentapolis channels a "Rhythm Nation" vibe — sharp, synchronized and fun — while a courtly dance later in the play is soft and dreamlike. Pedego's work injects kinetic energy into the storytelling, often elevating entire scenes.

Santa Cruz Shakespeare's "Pericles" is not just a rare opportunity to see one of Shakespeare's lesser-known works, but also a testament to the company's adventurous spirit. They have crafted a "Pericles" that is heartfelt and filled with surprises. It's a tale of storms — literal and emotional — and the rare beauty of finding calm on the other side.

Tickets are now [on sale](#) for Santa Cruz Shakespeare's production of "Pericles" by William Shakespeare and George Wilkins, at the Audrey Stanley Grove at DeLaveaga Park in Santa Cruz, through Aug. 30.