

(Not Really) As I Like It

© Mark Mantho

The Huntington Theatre Company's production of Shakespeare's *As You Like It* suffers under the weight of some significant flaws, a less than inspired interpretation of the play's text chief among them. There are some bright spots, however, if you can wait that long.

As You Like It is not one of Shakespeare's more action-packed efforts. Concerned instead with the differing perceptions and attitudes people bring to life and how they do or do not mesh, a lot of talking goes on - *a lot*. And while it's certainly laudable that director Edward Gilbert chose to leave the bard's text more or less intact, his scrupulous attention to detail is less forgivable when the production as staged clocks in at a little over three hours. Much of the first half drags because of this, and though I'll admit I'm neither a Shakespearean scholar nor an accomplished stage director, I do think trimming some of the play's less crucial lines would improve the overall effect. The lines in which Celia, as Aliena, reads Orlando's tortured prose declaring his love for Rosalind come to mind; it's nothing we don't already know, so why keep it when it adds little to the texture of events?

A problem of greater consequence with the Huntington's rendition of the festive comedy is the sometimes forced, stagey acting. Often, it seems an unrelieved monotone of near shouting (as when we first meet Arthur Pearson's Oliver, or Craig Spidle's Duke Frederick) or buffoonish behavior (Gregory Simmons' Silvius, Spidle's Sir Oliver Martext) threaten to overpower any subtlety or pathos the characters might possess. Les Marsden's version of the clown Touchstone is perhaps the prime example of this. He's certainly funny enough, romping hither and dither about the stage with manic intensity, but he lacks the necessary shades of grey that might reveal the genuine wisdom behind the wit. There's no keen insight, for instance, when Marsden intones, "the more pity that fools may not speak wisely what wise men do foolishly," or hint of irony when he quips, "I shall

ne'er be ware of mine own wit till I break my shins against it." It's true *As You Like It* is a comedy, so maybe I'm asking for too much...

The other problem, as far as acting goes, is the somewhat ill-advised casting of Aloysius Gigl as Orlando, and more to the point, Monica Bell as Rosalind. It's not that they're not good actors, because they are; rather, it's that they don't suit their roles terribly well. Orlando, as written, is initially a brave but callow young man, unlearned in the ways of romance yet enthusiastically professing the "virtues" and conventions of courtly love, whether through love-sick poetry or in conversation with the disguised Rosalind. As Gigl depicts him, however, he is comparatively self-aware, even arch. This is particularly true when Rosalind, as Ganymede, details and enumerates all the ways a woman can confound a man in love. Reading the text of the play, the impression of Orlando is, as noted, one of a youth demonstrably lacking in sophistication concerning the habits and idiosyncrasies of the opposite sex. Here, he's like a modern man all too familiar with the vicissitudes of relationships, less eager to learn from Rosalind, apparently, than he is to engage in an antagonistic game of verbal badminton.

In general, Gigl's acting is regrettably bland, and though Monica Bell fares better, she too appears to be miscast. Again, *reading* the play - and never having seen another production of *As You Like It* - I imagined Rosalind to be a young woman very much in control; reaching for the stars, perhaps, but with feet planted firmly on the ground. A commanding presence, surely. I didn't sense that kind of presence in Monica Bell's Rosalind. Instead, she was tepid and somehow unconvincing. An example of this is the scene in which Rosalind upbraids Phoebe (Rengin Altay) for her mistreatment of Silvius. Shakespeare's words were all there, but the air of authority was missing. The kind of pithy, worldly wit imbued in lines like "love is merely a madness and deserves as well a dark house and a whip as madmen do; and the reason why they are not so punished and cured is that the lunacy is so ordinary that the whippers are in love too" don't bite nearly as much as they might. For that reason I'm inclined to believe it was Bell's delivery, and not the text itself, which left something to be desired.

My final criticism of the Huntington Theatre's production is broader. If, as is generally assumed, *As You Like It* is a play that hopes to explicate themes like court vs. country, the simple and the sophisticated, the cynical and the ideal, and the restorative powers of love, there is little evidence of such meanderings here, despite the lines recited. As mentioned earlier, Les Marsden's blithe reading of Touchstone effectively defangs the fool's occasional commentaries on life. Jaques, his ostensibly "melancholy" counterpart and the consummate outsider, is portrayed by Munson Hicks as a cynically effete ne'er do well. As such, Hicks' account is played strictly for laughs - and that's fine. But again, something is missing; the depth of characterization that would expose Jaques for what he is - an inverted idealist - is absent. Even the "from hour to hour we rot and rot, and thereby hangs a tale," and "all the world's a stage" neo-soliloquies are rendered for the most part superficial. These shortcomings, and likewise the sometimes ineffectual acting, can reasonably be laid at the feet of director Gilbert; it is, after all, his show.

Still, with all of that, there are some things worth liking about the Huntington Theatre Company's *As You Like It*. For starters, there's Marjorie Bradley Kellogg's set design. Incorporating a gazebo-like construct with staircases leading up to a platform on either side, and a giant man's face at it's center - an apt reference, it seems, to the theatrical masks of comedy and tragedy - the initial mood created is claustrophobic. There are no scene changes, and the set therefore doubles for both court and country locals. There's a meager patch of turf to suggest life in the forest. That's it. Yet, as you settle into the play, these apparent deficiencies disappear. In a play more devoted to what people are saying as opposed to what they are doing, the simplicity of this set becomes a virtue; the lack of distracting scene changes allows the audience to concentrate on what's being said.

Two other treats are the solid, engaging performances of Clarence Felder as Duke Senior and, especially, Emilie Talbot as Celia. Felder, an experienced character actor with an impressive resume, brings lusty vitality and obvious presence to a relatively minor role. It's a shame he's so underused (maybe he could take over some of the dual roles currently handled by others). Emilie

Talbot's Celia/Aliena is warm, clever and strong-willed. Everything, in short, that Rosalind should be. When she's on stage, you know it; there's nothing overmannered or inauthentic about her presentation, nothing wasted. In larger terms, the production actually gets stronger in the second half, really hitting it's stride - alas! - toward the end. The scene where Touchstone warns off a comically doltish William (Jim Loutzenhiser) and the one in which Rosalind extracts pledges of honor from Orlando, Silvius, and Phoebe are among the best in the show. The musical adaptations, too, are first-rate.

Finally, in giving this rendition of *As You Like It* a decidedly mixed review, I'll paraphrase Shakespeare's epilogue for it; make of this concoction what you like, in the end it's to you to judge whether you do, or do dislike.