

Friday, November 19, 2010

Shakespeare — 'Like,' with a twist

MSU's 'As You Like It' forsakes the pastoral for the carnival

by *Paul Wozniak*



It seems strange to think that "As You Like It," William Shakespeare's pastoral comedy about banishment from home, sexual exploration and dressing androgynously could be set in the present-day teenage alternative music scene. However, director Christina Traister chose perhaps a more appropriate setting of strict social norms against romanticized freedom: the Victorian Era. Aided by Michigan State University's costume team, led by designer Jodi Ozimek, this current production is as colorful and funny in language as it is in dress.

The plot of "As You Like It" is too lengthy to concisely summarize in a sentence. Suffice to say that politics aside, concepts of romantic love are satirized, the art of wooing is taught, and cynics speak immortal words regarding the life cycle. Actors in some of the smaller roles are still learning how to make the language not sound monotonous, but most of the leading performers give honest, exciting performances with adept wordplay.

In the coveted role of Rosalind, the cross-dressing sharp-tongued feminist, is Mariette Strauss. Strauss imbues Rosalind with spunk, sass, and a strong will that blend perfectly with her curly dark hair and nicely defined features. More importantly, Strauss never loses her sense of authority as she chastises and directs other characters to live more virtuously, as she does.

Strauss is complemented by the chiseled Curran Jacobs as her love interest, Orlando. Jacobs' Orlando at times conjures up a confused Heathcliff, brooding because it pains him to love. While his performance is powerful and energetic, it also works in dissonance to Strauss's positive energy, muting instead of magnifying any potential sexual chemistry. Jacobs' strengths as a wrestler, however, are irrefutable: He executes his own complex fight choreography (with Delvon Roe as Charles) with polished flair.

Andrew Harvey plays the court fool, Touchstone, strutting like a pretentious goat around the stage. Harvey gives a creepy yet comic touch to all of his double-entendre-filled lines, stealing almost as many scenes as he is in. Leslie Hull plays the melancholic Jaques, the character with the poignant "All the world's a stage" monologue. Out of context, the quote has become a cliché, but Hull provides the cynical gravitas necessary to grip the audience and hold the stage with tender authenticity.

With the Victorian carnival substituting for the Forest of Arden, the lions, shepherds and huntresses of the original story have been replaced with lion tamers, fire swallows and an archer. Actors perform magic tricks in between scenes, ranging from simple yet well-executed scarf tricks to a box of fire revealing a small dog.

Kirk Domer's set design provides a beautiful frame for the spacious Pasant stage, with exotic posters of the requisite sideshow freaks alongside similarly themed set pieces that provoke nostalgic visions of a vintage circus utopia. Music director Andy Huber has picked equally appropriate songs to maintain a playful mood. Within this frame, Ozimek's exquisite costumes take center stage, flattering the figures of the entire cast, whether flowing or fitted.

What "As You Like It" may lack in name recognition compared to other Shakespeare comedies, it compensates for with memorable lines and sensual themes. MSU's production succeeds by capitalizing on these elements, delivering Shakespeare that is a feast for the senses in spirit, sight and sound.

"As You Like It"

Michigan State University Department of Theatre

8 p.m. Friday, Nov. 19 and Saturday, Nov. 20; 2 p.m. Sunday, Nov. 21

Pasant Theatre, Wharton Center

\$15; \$10 students

theatre.msu.edu

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