

'As You Like It' is theatrical magic



Francesca Choy-Kee is Celia, Sarah Dandridge is Rosalind and Alvin Keith is Orlando in the Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park's production of As You Like It. / Provided/Sandy Underwood

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"All the world's a stage" we're told in "As You Like It," and at Playhouse in the Park, co-directors Ed Stern and Michael Haney take Shakespeare to heart to deliver a Shelterhouse season-opener that is theatrical magic.

What an inspired choice, to blend the world of the theater with our own - the stage floor matches the stone floor of the theater, the curtain (a lovely forest green) is thrown open to reveal a 'backstage' - not the real one, but what we all think a backstage should look like. A false back wall is a facsimile of the interior stone wall of the original Eden Park shelterhouse, now the Playhouse main lobby.

The message is clear - if the actors are players in the comedy of life, so are we. We embrace the artifice, and the reality, as an exuberant cast of 17 in this modern-dress interpretation fills the small stage with love, foolishness, melancholy, reconciliation - everything that is life.

Sarah Dandridge is a delightful Rosalind, the romantic comedy's feisty and full-of-graces heroine. Her uncle long ago usurped her father's rightful dukedom. Now she, too, is banished, but not before she falls head-over-heels for Orlando (Alvin Keith), who has been treated shamefully by his jealous eldest brother.

Rosalind goes to the Forest of Arden, accompanied by her loving and clear-sighted cousin Celia (Francesca Choy-Kee) and dapper if motley fool Touchstone (David Graham Jones), who sports crazy hair and quite the wardrobe. They provide terrific support. The girls are in disguise, so as not to be set upon, with Rosalind geared out as a rustic boy.

They meet all manner of folk in the forest, from shepherds and goatherds to courtiers, who come together as a wonderful acting ensemble.

What could be more fun than to have Stern and Haney, both wonderful directors, collaborating on Shakespeare? They clearly work well together, and "As You Like it" overflows with great assets that they share: intelligence, heart and humor.

They create a sort of contemporary "Neverland" (artifice anchored to reality), with a stark difference between the first and second acts.

In act one, the Forest of Arden is clearly a place of banishment, not somewhere to while away pastoral weeks, months, years. It is cold, and hard and unforgiving.

In act two, the sun comes out, and half the cast is falling in giddy, fearlessly funny, occasionally misplaced love. Somehow Orlando has found reams of paper and is filling the forest with bad verse to Rosalind, and somehow she, still in disguise, has persuaded him to practice his wooing on her.

There's nothing not to love in this "As You Like It."

The design work is impeccable, with thoughtful set by Joseph Tilford and lighting that beautifully reflects and illuminates mood by Thomas Hase. Susan Tsu's range of costuming defines the wide demographic that populates the play, which at Playhouse speaks of some isolated patch of shire where you're wise to wear your Wellies. She also captures the production's rich humor.

Among the standouts in a strong cast are the rustics: goatherd Audrey (Katherine Leigh); shepherdess Phoebe (Rebeca Miller); shepherd Silvius (Bob Braswell); and slowpoke swain

William (Aram Monisoff). Brendan Averett and Joneal Joplin are standouts in their diverse roles.

"As You Like It" is Ed Stern's final stage bow at Playhouse. He retires at the end of the season. "As You Like It" is quite the farewell.

"As You Like It," through Nov. 6. Thompson Shelterhouse, Playhouse in the Park, Eden park. Tickets: \$25-\$71. (There's a \$12 student special, call for information.) 513-421-3888 and www.cincyplay.com.