

[theatre reviews]

THEATRE REVIEW by Alison Cotes: AS YOU LIKE IT BY William Shakespeare. Directed by Paul Adams for the Queensland Shakespeare Ensemble. With Andrea Carne, Ruby Drewery, Colin Smith and a cast of thousands at the Amphitheatre, Roma Street Parkland. 22 October – 1 November.

Gender-bending. It's not a modern phenomenon in live theatre, and in the days before women were allowed on stage it happened all the time, with spotty youths playing the parts of Cleopatra, Juliet and even Lady Macbeth. I once saw a brilliant production of *Henry V* at the Globe in London, where Princess Katharine was played by a twenty-something boy with designer stubble and very hairy legs, to the great delight of the groundlings, of whom I was one of the happiest.

Rob Pensalfini's **Queensland Shakespeare Ensemble**, probably because of the dire lack of male actors, has always been creative about gender roles, therefore *As You Like It* provides them with a fertile field indeed.

In Shakespeare's day, this was the ultimate gender-bending play. The young heroine, Rosalind, had of course to be played by a boy, so already we have boy playing girl. But as the plot develops, Rosalind disguises herself as a boy to escape her wicked uncle's (here, her wicked aunt's - bear with me) evil plan to deprive her of her life as he/she already has of her (Rosalind's) inheritance. So there's boy playing girl playing boy. Later, when she meets the love of her [life] Orlando, also banished to the Forest of Arden ("when I was at home I was in a better place," says Touchstone, "but travellers must be content"), she has somehow to woo him, but she's disguised as a boy, so pretends to be his love Rosalind and teaches him how to be a lover. Boy plays girl plays boy plays girl. Confused already?

Of course, as in all Shakespearean comedy, Troo Lerv prevails and all's well that ends well, and everyone sorts out their problems in the Forest of Arden and toddles back to court, except for the baddies, who repent of their wicked wicked ways and stay there as contemplatives, and the unlucky Touchstone, **played here by Rob Pensalfini as a silly old man, for which I can hardly forgive him**, except that he ends up with tawdry Audrey, and a merry dance I hope she leads him.

Like all QSE's productions, this was a bit rough and ready, but it has a whole stack of things going for it, which kept the youngish audience in stitches. They didn't care that the melancholy Jaques is here played by a woman (**Angel Kosch**, arching that perfect eyebrow just a little too often), or that wicked Duke [Frederick] is transmogrified into wicked Duchess [Frederika], or that the dippy priest Oliver Martext (get the pun?) becomes (as is perfectly reasonable in the 21st century, of course, in spite of pope Benedict's intransigence) the Rev Lady Olivia Martext, and tizzies her way through the marriage muck-ups until we all, including the cast, let out a sigh of relief at the group-wedding spectacular in the last scene where everyone eventually ends up married to the appropriate person. (sigh of relief here that the sentence finally came to a grammatical end.)

What I like best about QSE is **the way the young actors speak their lines as if they really understand them**, and extract the full meaning for them, instead of rushing through them as if they're almost an impediment to the physical action (and if I never see a visual dick joke again, it will be too soon). They don't dumb down the original text, but convey its meaning in a modern street-smart style - I could see my own teenagers in all of them - and they are strong and confident in what they are doing.

Paul Adams gets some lovely performances out of some of them - **Jane Cameron** as Charles the dumb wrestler is a real treat, as she stretches her calves and swaggers around like a bover-boy; **Belinda Small** doubles as a semi-effective Old Adam and the ditzzy Phebe, who has the hots for Rosalind who is playing a boy so that this is where it could all get very iffy, but of course, this being Shakespeare, we don't get this iffy of this kind; and **Liz Verbraak** who triples as Amiens, a minor lord attending on the exiled Duke (oops, Duchess here!) who gets all the best songs; as the foppish courtier le Beau (make that Madame le/la Belle?) and as the poor dopey peasant boy William who loses

his bawd Audrey to Touchstone.

The better you know the play, the more you'll be confused; but if you're new to it, go along for a great romp. Take a picnic and something to drink, get there a bit early, and enter into the whole atmosphere of the caper, because this is definitely Shakespeare as you (and I) like it.

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