

Spunky Rosalind Leads Spirited *As You Like It* Cast

Theater at Monmouth

The Theater at Monmouth has mounted a spirited reading of Shakespeare's comedy *As You Like It*, headed by a spunky, cheeky, exuberant Erica Murphy as Rosalind. Directed by Catherine Weidner, the production, set in the 1940s, features a largely youthful cast, simple but elegant décor, and the obvious engagement of the ensemble.



Erica Murphy and Michael Dix Thomas

Weidner's direction calls for a great deal of physical energy; the initial wrestling scene is excitingly staged (with Paul Dennhardt, fight choreographer); the principals scurry to and fro in the forest of Arden, pursuing their elusive loves; the fools are especially limber and lithe; and the staging makes clever use of the boxes and aisles. Her pace is, for the most part, breathless, making one year for some moments of respite, both in the stage action and in the vocal delivery, which is also fast-paced and high energy, again so much so as to sometimes convey the feeling but not the text. Weidner makes the decision to have some of the actors double in roles—the two Dukes, for example, and some of the courtiers—and, while this contributes to the metaphorical parallelism of the play and to the notion that in the forest everyone has another identity, it has its slightly confusing moments.

The cast is dominated by the indomitable performance of Erica Murphy as Rosalind. Murphy is equally at home in the lady-like swooning of the first act and in the boyish hi-jinx of the Arden scenes, and she grows with the part, as Rosalind not only learns about the follies of love, but is able to share her wisdom with all the other lovers. Lindsay Tornquist is a vivacious, feminine Celia, and Janis Stevens makes the most of Madam LeBeau, without ever becoming camp.

Michael Dix Thomas's Orlando is appropriately lovesick and youthful, though he appears pale beside this Rosalind. Leighton Samuels skillfully presents the two sides of his brother Oliver—at first jealous and scheming, later penitent and romantic. Will Harrell sculpts an original portrait of Jacques—more manic-depressive than completely melancholy, nerdy and alienated. Graham Emmons makes a delightful Touchstone, combining a commedia dell'arte kind of physicality with good comic timing. Denise Cormier as a giddy Audrey, Bill Van Horn as a plainspoken Corin (and later Hymen), and Ryan Simpson as a hayseed kind of Silvius give the rustics amusing moments. Rounding out the cast, Max Waszak makes a menacing Charles in the first act and a bumbling preacher in the forest; Mark S. Cartier contrasts the two Dukes—one angry and covetous, the other a benevolent presence; and Turner Frankosky provides the guitar accompaniment for the songs.

Dan Bilodeau's set is spare, but works remarkably well. It consists of panels depicting the forest with portals that open and fold over each other to suggest different interior locales, and he makes use of the balconies and covered orchestra pit as a thrust stage to add intimacy to the production. Jonna Klaiber's 1940s costumes are beautifully executed, using combinations of color and pattern—such as Touchstone's multi-striped suit and shirt in shades of cream and wine—to evoke character. Cecilia Durbin lights the set atmospherically with a touch of whimsy in the special effects which denote the "magic" which takes place in the forest, and Rew Tippin's sound design—both music and sound effects such as thunder—is remarkably well balanced and credible.

As You Like It is a charming romp, which reminds the audience not only of the timelessness of Shakespeare's wit and his incredible ability to draw human character, but his surprisingly modern "take" on the eternal courting dance.

As You Like It runs in repertory through August 23, 2014, at The Theater at Monmouth, 796 Main Street, Monmouth, ME 04259 Tickets: 207-933-9999 or visit www.theateratmonmouth.org.

Photo: Courtesy Theater at Monmouth

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