



The Restless Ecstasy of As You Like It HOT

 Michael Meigs March 26, 2011

 0  5  0  0  0

 Add to favorites

As You Like It

by William Shakespeare

American Shakespeare Center

October 2010 - April 2011

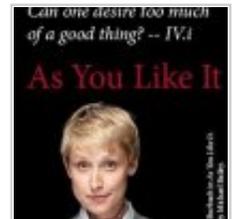
- Acting 
- Costumes 
- Sets 
- Directing 
- Overall 

"Restless Ecstasy," the title of the 2010-2011 tour by the American Shakespeare Center players, comes from the Scottish play (3.2) the scene in which the grim thane uses the phrase to describe his tormented sleeplessness after killing King Duncan. The ASC troupe didn't do their *Macbeth* at the University of Texas in Austin this week, but their staging of *As You Like It* corresponded fully to both promises of the tour title.

Noise, music, performance and joviality greeted the audience as soon as the house opened. Big, round Rick Blunt beckoned everyone forward with the huge friendliness of a carnival barker as cast members moved freely around the shallow stage of the UT Union. Blunt kept up a cheerful patter



Photos: Michael Bailey, Tommy Thompson, American Shakespeare Center



shallow stage at the UT Union. Blunt kept up a cheerful patter about the troupe, about their dedication to staging in the style of Shakespeare's touring companies, about maintaining available light and engaging the audience. He quickly recruited eight audience members for the seats placed at either side of the stage, and one suspects that if there had been room for groundlings he would have enticed students into those roles.

Austin theatre folk might have been amused to see Shannon Grounds seated up there, stage right, for she had played the heroine's faithful companion Celia in Beth Burns' graceful staging here of *As You Like It* at the Scottish Rite Theatre in 2009. Robert Matney, the doleful Jacques of that production, was also in the audience.

For the half hour before starting the play, cast members strummed guitars, tapped rhythms on wooden boxes and a *djembe*, fingered a weathered accordion, sang pop songs and carried on like buskers. It was as if only by chance they had arrived one week late for the restlessness of Austin's epic *South by Southwest* music festival. At the interval the cast stayed on stage to play and sing for the full fifteen minutes, maintaining an easy companionship with the audience.

The ecstasy of their staging of *As You Like It* was that of infatuation, the hypnotic attraction of love.

The cast's one-page leaflet explains the set-up and the early plotting with bullet points entitled *Stuff that Happens before the Play* and *Stuff that Happens in the Play*, escorting the audience in simple sentences as far as the arrival in the forest of Arden of Rosalind and Celia, disguised as men and accompanied by Blunt as Touchstone the clown. Final bullet: "Teaching, loving and learning ensue."

The company of eleven players works before a set of simple archways hung with curtains. They promise two hours of traffic on this stage, and there's not a split second of delay in transitions. Exits and entrances occur with simultaneous swishes through different curtains, a precision born of the six months that they have worked together on these stagings. The rhythm is quick, the diction is exact and the stage business is calculated, but there's not a hint of staleness. The audience sees and shares a joy in the disguises, the word play and the silly situations. Costuming is indeterminate folksy twentieth century.

The central thread of *As You Like It* is the education of the rude although not entirely unlettered Orlando, youngest son of the banished Duke. Chad Bradford plays him as guileless and not terribly bright. Orlando's victory over Charles the wrestler in a well-staged bout appears fortuitous; the verses with which he decorates the trees in Arden are scrawled upon pink Post-it™ notes, and in the cheerful interplay with the audience some of them wind up affixed to foreheads. Denise Burbach as the spunky Rosalind is animated and inexplicably enchanted by Orlando and his naive attentions. One has the impression that she's one smart young woman carried away by her emotions. Disguised as the male page "Ganymede," Rosalind entices Orlando to play-act to her his infatuation

for Rosalind. There's no real contest between the two. In this production Orlando doesn't get it until the transformation staged by Rosalind and a complicit musician (Jake Mahler) representing the god Hymen.

Doubling and tripling of roles is necessary with a traveling troupe of only eleven players. Particularly noteworthy in differentiating his roles is Jonathan Holtzman, who applies a lazily arrogant Robert Deniro accent to Charles the wrestler, credible backwoods phrasing as Corin the shepherd and an assured tone of nobility as the banished Duke Senior. Assistant Director Dennis Henry, in contrast, plays a single role, that of Silvius, the shepherd in love with Phoebe (Kelly McKinnon), but he does so with such enormous, placid incomprehension that he owns some of the funniest moments of the play.

And then, the fools. Blunt plays the licensed and self-certain Touchstone with red plastic nose and puppet mace, big and bawdy and followed avidly by the audience. He aptly illustrates his set-piece disquisition on the seven degrees of a quarrel with clever gesture and directs it toward a male student seated at stage left as his imaginary adversary. Aidan O'Reilly is the melancholy Jacques (pronounced "Jakes," preserving Shakespeare's joke reference to the privy or outhouse, unperceived by contemporary American audiences). O'Reilly has a bit of a rant to his Jacques, the hauteur of an aristocrat in a white suit, flavored with a touch of Southern coastal planter drawl. On the evidence of the following night's performance, that subtle accent was authentic and not an affectation, even though his bio is all California and Europe.

Jacques' short-spoken, unapologetic and restless departure from the celebrants around the newly restored Duke leaves us in the company of the four couples newly betrothed and dedicated to ecstasy. Rosalind's epilogue sparks the closing applause and the cast plunges into a rousing version of "Higher and Higher."

Approving word must have gotten around quickly that evening among students at the University of Texas campus in Austin, for the house was packed the following evening for *Measure for Measure*.



[Discuss this review or play in our forums](#)

[Read this play online now](#)