

Shakespeare play debuts downtown 'All's Well' ends well

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Ginna Hoben stars as Helena in Shakespeare's play "All's Well That Ends Well." / Submitted

Written by
Charles Culbertson
footlights and spotlights

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It might not be Shakespeare's happiest work — although it's lumped into his comedies category — but "All's Well That Ends Well" as performed by the American Shakespeare Center is bright, engaging and entertaining from start to finish.

Never let it be said, however, that a great performance is necessarily the natural extension of a great play. "All's Well," while certainly a classic written by the Western world's acknowledged master playwright, is still a puzzle to me, primarily because of the incomprehensible actions of two of its major players. Here's the skinny:

Helena, the beautiful daughter of a recently deceased physician, loves Bertram, a young nobleman who, if he has any redeeming personal virtues, hides them well. When Helena uses one of her father's medicines to cure the ill king of France, she is granted the

privilege of marrying whomever she wants.

Faced with several extremely suitable young men from which to choose, she inexplicably picks the reluctant Bertram — a man who wants nothing to do with her. Bertram marries her as the king orders, but refuses to consummate the marriage (huh?). Instead, he ducks off to a war in Tuscany (double huh?) and sends Helena a letter saying he will not recognize their union until she becomes pregnant with his child and takes the heirloom ring from his finger.

A tricky deal, considering he won't sleep with her. And, considering the charm and beauty of Helena, you just have to think that here's a guy who's a few tacos shy of a full combination plate.

If You Go!

what: "All's Well That Ends Well"

when: Now playing through June 19

where: Blackfriars Playhouse, Staunton

Helena trails Bertram to the war and, just as he is about to seduce a young virgin, takes her place. Through this trickery she obtains his ring and her first trimester, and all ends

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tickets: \$10 to \$40
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well when Bertram seemingly accepts his fate as husband and father.

The relationship between Helena and Bertram is exceedingly difficult to fathom. He's shallow and self-centered, doesn't give a damn about her and tries to segue from groom to adulterer with jack-rabbit swiftness. Even when he repents at the end of the play, we're not really sure he means it or if he's just doing what's expected of him for the time being.

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E-mail Go! columnist Charles Culbertson at mail@stauntonhistory.com.

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