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**Derring-do and romance highlight ASC's 'Fair Maid'**

*Leave it to the American Shakespeare Center to plumb the depths of obscure Elizabethan drama and rise to the surface with a long-submerged treasure. It's happened yet again with "The Fair Maid of the West, or a Girl Worth Gold," which is on tap at the Blackfriars Playhouse.*

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**Document Text**

This funny and lively play was written by Thomas Heywood, who might be considered the Max Brand of his day. Like Brand (who published an estimated 500 novels and countless short stories under 20 pen names), Heywood was prolific and popular during his lifetime, and does not hold an exalted place among modern critics. Some have called the Elizabethan playwright a "hack."

Nevertheless, Heywood -- like his 20th century counterpart -- had a way with language and a story, and defies today's detractors who would pigeon-hole him as a mere word machine. "Fair Maid" is a perfect example of why popular writing and good literature are not mutually exclusive.

The play is a dizzying, delightful potpourri of swashbuckling, sea adventures, tavern hopping, cross-dressing and romance that director Jim Warren milks for all the laughs and thrills he can get. To boot, the play features several plum roles Warren fills with some of the best actors at his disposal.

One of those roles is that of the title-character, Bess Bridges, a chaste and beautiful barmaid whose love for a young man above her station is steadfast even when she thinks he is dead. She's fetching and tough and self-reliant in the best Shakespearean mold, but gets to do things that even the most adventurous of the Bard's women never dreamed of -- including commanding a pirate ship and physically intimidating big, burly men.

Ginna Hoben, thoroughly believable as Bess, incorporates sex appeal and derring-do with a delicious joie de vivre. She makes us accept as completely plausible a young woman who can smite men's hearts and, at the same time -- although she barely comes up to the middle buttonhole of some of her male adversaries -- smite them with fear.

In hands less capable than Hoben's, the character of Bess would be a much more pallid presence.

Enter the next indelible character in the form of Roughman, a Falstaffian figure portrayed by James Keegan. I like this character even better than Falstaff, because while Roughman is similarly a braggart and swaggerer, he ultimately proves himself trustworthy and formidable.

And you simply don't want to miss his transformation from cowardly laughingstock to contender for Douglas Fairbanks' swashbuckler-acrobat crown. Except I don't think I've ever seen Fairbanks or anyone else use both a sword and a frying pan in the same brawl. Keegan is immensely likable in the role and, although he gives us a bit of Falstaff, makes Roughman his own man.

Favorable impressions are also made by ASC veterans John Harrell as Captain Goodlack, Allison Glenzer as the clownish Clem and Rene Thornton Jr. as the lusty and colorful Mullisheg. Although young lover roles in plays such as this one are mostly thankless, that of Spencer -- Bess's paramour -- has some meat to it and is flawlessly performed by Patrick Midgley.

Benjamin Curns, Paul Jannise, Daniel Kennedy, Sarah Fallon, Chris Johnston and Jeremiah Davis round out the cast for a play that shouldn't be missed -- if, that is, you like your theatrical froth replete with nonstop action, engaging characterizations, snappy dialogue and happy endings.

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