



Fair Maid of the West

Bess in a Mess

By Thomas Heywood

[American Shakespeare Center](#), Blackfriars Playhouse, Staunton, Va.

Saturday, October 30, 2010, L-6&7 (left box)

Directed by Jim Warren

As the actors themselves pointed out in private conversation, this is a good play, but it is not a great play. Ironically, it suffered something on the Blackfriars stage with a company so adept at gleaning action, gesture, and expression from references in Elizabethan and Jacobean scripts. Because Heywood didn't provide a script rich in such details, what I've seen play as a fun, slapstick romp in a theater using light effects and settings and a cast given to caricaturing acrobatics (Royal Shakespeare Company in 1986) only slogged along in the hands of the ASC players on the bare Blackfriars stage.

Granted, we've seen this company carry out fun romps in the past, so it may have been an off day. Other possible factors: As this was the fifth and last play to open in repertoire, it might not have gelled yet in performance; and the matinee audience we watch it with seemed unconnected, as many of the jokes landed like duds. No matter how hard Allison Glenzer playing the clown, Clem, ba-da-bing'd her way through bad puns, the audience barely smirked. This overall lack of energy from the stalls hampered a play that relies on energy in abundance for its entertainment value.

Before the plot got absurdly confusing as the action moved to sea, there is a fine character-driven plot device when Bess Bridges undoes the swaggering braggart Roughman, a scene that gave the two principals a character map for the rest of the play. James Keegan's Roughman ranged from braggart to coward to false braggart and undone swaggerer to true hero with well-placed gusto and an ugly pair of Ninja Turtle underwear. Ginna Hoben's Bess transitioned from honest innkeeper to swaggering cavalier brother to scheming actor, all in sequence in the play's first half, then combining all into one persona, the famous seafaring Bess, in the second half. Hoben capably carried the play on her shoulders. Unfortunately, the rest of the cast doesn't get nearly so much to work with (now that I think about the RSC production, the only two performances which stand out for me among a strong cast was Imelda Staunton's Bess and Pete Postlethwaite's Roughman).

Though the sets may have been typically Blackfriars barebones, this was yet a sumptuous production thanks to the costumes—including those Ninja Turtle boxers. Characters appeared as authentic English privateers, French and Italian merchants, Spanish captains, and a Moroccan prince lounging on Arabian cushions. Bess herself transitioned in dress from barmaid to innkeeper to cavalier to privateer and, finally, into stunning Elizabethan regality that could have slipped off a portrait of the eponymous queen herself. At that moment, René Thorton Jr.'s Mullishog, King of Fez, blabbered in real lust and true affection, and Heywood's allegorical rendering of Queen Elizabeth as English everywoman came to its final point: don't mess with Bess.

*Eric Minton
November 1, 2010*

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