

ASF meets the challenge provided by "As You Like It"

Theatre Talk

By FRED LIPPINCOTT

The challenge with Shakespeare's "As You Like It," which the Alabama Shakespeare Festival has given frequently before, is to make the comedy seem fresh and new. First, they brought in Chicago-bred James Bohnen to direct the production that opened over the weekend at the Festival Theatre, the second play in this season's repertory season. Then, Charles Caldwell designed a brilliant, abstract set with nary a forest leaf: pink columns become trees, a green floor is both fight ring and field, and stylized celestial orbits (technically called an armillary) hold up a moon that lights up at the end. Elizabeth Novak's stunning costumes, reassuringly Jacobean in feel, reinforce character (especially the difficult historical problem of what Touchstone should wear). The set painting (by the late Kimberly Franklin, to whom the show is dedicated) and Rachel Ruden's lights on a cyclorama contribute a dappled effect.

With the regular company involved with the Priestly play that runs concurrently in the Octagon, only four support roles were cast with ASF regulars: Rodney Clark (Duke Senior), Greg Thornton (Jacques), John Preston (Touchstone, played superbly in clown's white face), and briefly Ray Chambers (Hymen).

All the other Equity players came from outside, including an unusually large percentage of the major roles: Heather Robison (a strong Rosalind), returning Kathleen McCall (her sidekick Celia), and Sam Wellington (the hero Orlando). Others in supporting roles are Herman Petras (Adam — a role Shakespeare is said to have played), Carl Gofield (Orlando's evil brother Oliver), Conan McCarthy (Duke Frederick), Chris Moxon (Corin), Paul Whittmore (Silvius), and Stephanie Cozart (Phoebe). The remaining roles are taken by the Festival's capable graduate students.

With so many new and returning out-of-towners, the cast has a refreshing and believable youthful look appropriate for a play about young love. For me, though, the girlish roughhousing of the women early on comes from too realistic theatrical tradition to meld well with the more stylized speech and actions of the men in the forest. Sure, Orlando is a foolish young man in love, but his comportment is still decorous. But such girlish emphasis is often the problem of women acting in roles originally played by boys. Short of an all-male cast, which has been very successful in modern times, we can only sigh with

the sexist Henry Higgins, "Why can't a woman be more like a man!"

People at the opening complained of not hearing the lines, but I had no trouble from my good reviewer's seat. I watched the second half from the balcony where every word was also clear, and I enjoyed seeing the patterns in Colleen Kelly's round dancing at the close (I had previously enjoyed her innovative wrestling design). Obviously, the newcomers will take time to settle in to a new theater, but they've already very much made it their own.

If you've never seen "As You Like It," here's a chance to experience one of Shakespeare's happiest plays. Ideal for Schoolfest, it's also a good play to introduce Shakespeare to all young people. For those who know the play well, come to hear a fresh reading of the famous set speeches: "Books in Trees," "Seven Ages of Man," and the patterned doggerel on the name Rosalind. Go and enjoy this fine, fresh production.

* * *