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REVIEW: As You Like It

Interlochen Shakespeare Festival

Interlochen's "As You Like It" a summer delight

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Article: 9924

Though the temperatures drop as the sun goes down and mosquitoes nip at the heels, there can be no more enchanting setting for a pastoral comedy such as “As You Like It” than an auditorium en plein air. In fact, for Interlochen’s production, the surrounding woods create the setting as much as the scenic design, and the effect is profound. The audience not only witnesses the transformative power of nature on the characters, they experience it for themselves. In traveling from cities and towns into the placid setting of Interlochen Centre for the Arts, they are players in their own pastoral comedies and feel in their bones that, indeed, “all the world’s a stage.”

The maples and white pines towering above the combination thrust and proscenium stage of Upton-Morley Pavilion and the flicker of fireflies would be mere distractions in a lesser production. But this “As You Like It” spares no attention to detail and harmoniously uses every element imaginable to create superb theatre.

Shakespeare’s fun and light-hearted romantic comedy, full of sass and inventive language, transcends time. Part gender-bending love story, part satire and social commentary, it tracks Orlando and Rosalind who fall in love at first sight but are

separately banished to the Forest of Arden. Each of them with troublesome sidekicks, they encounter malcontents and fellow outsiders in the woods. When they meet each other again, she is disguised as a man and with great mischief, tests the verity of his love. As a quest story of sorts, the action emerges from obstacle. And it’s all quite amusing.

Shelby Lewis plays a sharp and delightful Rosalind. She is wonderfully matched by Harry Thornton’s earnest “love shaked” Orlando, and together they embody the exuberance of youth and play with good humor.

Kendra Williams also plays beautifully with Lewis as Rosalind’s cousin Celia. As a bodacious blonde with hilarious vocal range, she presents a nice counterpoint to Lewis’s lithe and grounded boyishness. Together they chirp, scheme, and create an adorably silly friendship.

The greatest roles and standout performances come from David Montee as a fabulously funny Jaques, the cranky melancholic who argues “the worst fault you have is to be in love.” In his mouth, Shakespeare’s words are natural and convincing and he breathes new meaning into the famed “All the world’s a stage” speech.

Likewise, Jeffrey Nauman’s Touchstone is a revelation. He is sassy, raucous and his physical comedy is brilliant. Both Jaques and Touchstone provide the cultural criticism and depth to this comedy, while Montee and Nauman’s charismatic performances are crucial to the success of the show.

Every actor on stage is marvelous. Director William Church not only put together an outstanding cast, but he has them utilize endless various spaces both on and off the traditional stage and gives them remarkably dynamic blocking. From wood chopping to silly dances to a cartoonish wrestling match, the show is alive with meaningful movement as essential to creating characters as the Bard’s language.

Every technical choice creates this engaging world on stage. Risa Alecci’s fun and provocative costumes vaguely span the 20th Century--from ‘80s sparkly ball gowns to a ‘20s fringy flapper frock to ‘40s suits and hats--and the effect supports the overall feeling that the events are happening out of time. Courtney Kaiser-Sandler’s original folksy music provides charming interludes and sets the mood as only music can do, and her singing and guitar playing are gorgeous.

Of course, the set and setting here are inextricable. Not just the actors, but the audience, too, inhabits the Forest of Arden, and this happens only in part because of the natural beauty of Interlochen. Christopher S. Dills’ set, though full of practical ladders and stairs, also signifies forest with its artful metalwork and colorful ropes and netting. Rachel Diebel’s lights work in tandem with the set and the outdoor setting, sparking to life both the forest and its mystery.

To attend Interlochen’s magnificent “As You Like It” is to enter the forest, its mystery, Rosalind and Orlando’s twisted romance, as well as to embrace the unfolding of one’s own pastoral comedy. And isn’t that what summer in Michigan is for?

SHOW DETAILS:

As You Like It

Interlochen Shakespeare Festival
Upton-Morley Pavilion, Interlochen Center for the Arts, 4000 Highway M-137, Interlochen
July 2, 3, 9 and 11 at 8:00 p.m.
\$30.00
231/276.7409
www.interlochen.org