

Shakespeare meets the Beatles works just fine in Prescott

Posted By Ronald Zajac, Staff Writer

Posted 16 hours ago

Can Shakespeare thrive at Woodstock?

You wouldn't think so, but the St. Lawrence Shakespeare Festival will prove you wrong.

The festival company's production of *As You Like It*, which opened Saturday evening at the Kinsmen Amphitheatre, is one of those efforts that, on paper, seem bound to failure.

Can the delightful interplay of Rosalind and Orlando really be enhanced by nostalgia for the 1960s? Can melancholy Jaques really work in Allen Ginsberg attire? Sir Oliver Martext as an Indian guru? Duke Senior as an aging hippie?

On paper, it sounds quaint, but little more.

Then you sit down at the amphitheatre, chuckle a bit as Amiens sings his first Beatles tune, and before you know it, you're realizing that Bob Dylan's "Like a Rolling Stone" may have something to say about the cast-out lovers in the forest of Arden - even if they've been deposited into a much gentler environment than Dylan's character.

By the end, all doubts are cast aside. The 1960s hit parade merely adds to the fun. Groovy, Bard...

In fact, *As You Like It* is splendidly rendered and true to the text, with the 1960s stuff more often an inside joke to the audience than an intrusion.

On that level, it succeeds in the festival's mandate to ensure Shakespeare is not spoken from a mountain-top, but presented in ways that engage the viewers. (One of the adapted Beatles' tunes even has a reference to Prescott geography.)

As director Craig Walker notes, *As You Like It* is one of Shakespeare's "green world" plays.

Like *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, it offers the forest as a parallel universe in which the rigid rules of the characters' city existence no longer apply and everyone is free to return to his or her authentic self.

Advertisement

That can, in a way, relate to the hippie movement of the 60s, albeit, as Walker himself acknowledges, in its idealized version rather than the messy reality.

Meanwhile, the play - as we usually like it - survives with all its joy and classic wit.

Alix Sideris and Quincy Armorer may seem more suited for roles a little older than the young lovers Rosalind and Orlando, but their experience is the more important asset here, yielding a rich and engaging performance.

Sideris, in particular, rises to the occasion of portraying a young courtly woman who must disguise herself as a man while fleeing in the forest. Her exaggerated false masculinity is yet another delightful inside joke.

Armorer, meanwhile, conveys an infectiously joyful energy even when he is playing the aggrieved younger brother.

David Adams, who plays Shylock in Merchant of Venice starting tomorrow night, is definitely age-appropriate as the play's polar opposite dukes, the oppressive usurper Frederick and the deposed Duke Senior, who takes his banishment to the Forest of Arden in stride.

Kris Joseph, in keeping with the 60s theme, gives the clown Touchstone a Bob Dylan inflection, much to the audience's delight, while festival regular Michael MacDonald is perfectly cast as this hippie heaven's unrepentant cynic, Jaques.

Perhaps the biggest quibble with the play's direction is with Jaques' iconic "seven stages" speech ("All the world's a stage").

It is meant as a soliloquy, but this production, bent on treating it more as dialogue and context-bound than as an anthology piece, offers it up almost incidentally.

Yet this is a passage that lends this otherwise ebullient play a rare moment of solemnity, because the final stage of human existence "Is second childishness and mere oblivion/Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything."

It is a moment that deserves a slowing down of the dialogue, just to experience that solemnity.

Without it, one misses the opportunity to hear this deep meditation as not only an eloquent description of time's inevitable march, but also a painful cry from Jaques's own soul, which Rosalind aptly describes as that of a time-ravaged traveller.

Otherwise, though, *As You Like It* is a welcome addition to the Prescott Shakespeare company's so far brief but stellar repertoire and should not be missed.

FAST FACTS

What: *As You Like It*, at the St. Lawrence Shakespeare Festival

When: Various days, until August 16, Tuesdays to Saturdays at 7 p.m., with 2 p.m. matinees on Saturday. (Performances alternate with the festival's production of *Merchant of Venice*.)

Where: Kinsmen Amphitheatre, Prescott.

Tickets: \$22, \$16 (seniors, students), children 12 and under free. Call 925-5788.

Article ID# 1115122