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An enjoyable dose of wit makes all well

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PRESCOTT -- A crafty heroine and a pompous fool undone are the driving forces behind All's Well That Ends Well.

And while these are not uncommon elements in Shakespeare's comedies, they come together in a compellingly sober way in All's Well, something the St. Lawrence Shakespeare Festival conveys with great agility in the second of its two plays this season.

All's Well, which opened last night (Wednesday) at the Kinsmen Amphitheatre, is the story of Helena, a poor physician's daughter in love with Bertram, a count who is far above her social station.

When the king of France falls deathly ill, Helena uses secret arts inherited from her late father to cure him, asking in return for the right to choose whatever husband she wants.

Bertram, who is young and proud and arrogant, will have nothing of a woman below his station, and so, after being compelled by the king to wed Helena, steals away to a war in Tuscany with his sidekick Parolles -- whom everyone but Bertram knows to be a pompous, cowardly fool.

While Bertram is confident his wife cannot get him, Helena and a few female co-conspirators set in motion a crafty scheme to make him eat his words, while Bertram's fellow soldiers devise a stratagem of their own to expose Parolles for the underhanded fool he is.

While All's Well has many echoes of the festival's other play, Twelfth Night, it is less boisterous, with less carousing and more appeal to sympathy. Unlike Twelfth Night, the intent is not primarily a night of great fun, but a lesson in character - albeit delivered with superb wit and some great physical comedy.

Hence, Elena Juatco, who as Viola/Cesario yearns for the affection of the duke while disguised as a man, is given wider emotional latitude here with the role of Helena and proves herself even more as a female lead.

She goes from heights of exuberance in her self-confident schemes to depths of despair she cannot reach in the other play, and succeeds in radiating Helena's innate good qualities that lie at the centre of this play's message: that virtue exists in the individual, not in her name or title.

All's Well also allows actors who play minor roles in Twelfth Night to shine in more prominent positions.

Warren Bain, who is necessarily two-dimensional as the fop Sir Andrew Aguecheek, also covers a much wider range here as Bertram, showing the impetuosity of youth and the arrogance of his title.

The play's happy ending, in fact, depends on whether Bertram has really learned the lesson he claims to have learned, and Bain's performance is suitably ambiguous on that front.

Meanwhile, Marc Bondy brilliantly provides the other pole in this story, that of vice. His Parolles is a likeable character despite all his flaws, and, unlike other Shakespearean foils, is ultimately redeemed by his humility.

The play's music director, Melissa Morris, brings her musical skills to bear on this play as she does in Twelfth Night, providing welcome background music on the flute and harp for much of the play, then demonstrating her acting skills in the second half of the play as Diana.

And Daniel Giverin gives the minor character of LaFew precisely the kind of effete snobbery one expects from this portrayal of the French court.

Brent Buchanan perhaps best illustrates the difference between this season's two plays. As Feste in Twelfth Night he is a rowdy, raunchy fool, while in All's Well he portrays Lavache, just as much a fool, but one whose foolery is expressed almost entirely in language and wit.

This is a more sober play, but this company knows how to engage the audience nonetheless.

In *All's Well*, the actors make clever use of the audience, both as spectators and as a space in which to act, and there is a wink-wink reference to the local Red George Pub in each play.

All these elements combine to provide an enjoyable and satisfying comedy, in which sympathy for the underdog is rewarded and even knavery can be redeemed.

It is also a feast for the eyes. One can't go without mentioning the costumes in *All's Well*, which are dazzling in their colours and perfectly convey the period.

The season runs until August 13, alternating between the two plays.

Tickets are \$25 for adults, \$20 for students and \$80 for a season pass. Children 12 and under get in free. Performances run Tuesday through Saturday, with matinees on Wednesday and Saturday.

More information is available by calling 613-925-5788 or at www.stlawrenceshakespeare.ca.

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