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THEATER

BY WILL KENNEDY



## ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE

Hipsters meets hippies in VLT's *As You Like It*

The trend in Shakespeare performance is to toss off all the “adius” and “but softs” with the casual tone of a texting teenager. I, for one, love this style. Breaking down the artifice deepens Will’s poetry and warms up his philosophy. And Very Little Theatre’s charming production of Shakespearean rom-com *As You Like It* is very much in this fashion.

Director Darlene Rhoden reimagines the play in a fanciful place somewhere between now and the 1920s, with a mix of hipster and hippie style (representing the high court versus the forest of Arden) similar to an average Saturday night at Sam Bond’s Garage. There’s Ninkasi beer bottles and funny bits with a selfie stick, and the music of Northwest indie-rock band Modest Mouse plays while the audience finds their seats.

The story is mostly a bunch of Shakespeare stuff, so here’s the gist: Banishment separates Rosalind (Jennifer Appleby) and Orlando (Joel Ibanez) just as they fall in love — bummer! So, Rosalind decides to dress up like a boy, because why not, and escapes to the forest of Arden with her faithful cousin Celia. Conveniently, Orlando, in conflict with his brother, also heads to Arden, where he and Rosalind (dressed as a boy) run into each other and, well, it all works out in the end.

But Shakespeare, for me, is very rarely about the plot. I love Shakespeare for his ideas and insight into human nature, and *As You Like It* examines desire, free will, gender roles (even alluding to non-binary gender identity), the therapeutic effect of nature and the peculiarly delicious insanity of falling in love.

Orlando has been advertising his love for Rosalind with clumsy verse tacked to trees all over Arden, a little like Facebook updates from a lovesick teenager. Feisty and complex Rosalind is one of Shakespeare’s most beloved female characters, and Appleby is magnetic, if occasionally hurried. As Orlando, Ibanez’ voice is a beautiful instrument for Shakespeare. And I wanted more of Blake Beardsley in the relatively small role of Le Beau.

I’m not sure replacing the show’s traditional music with several contemporary music interludes (ranging from Tears for Fears to The Mamas & The Papas) added much to the show. I’ve seen several professional Shakespeare productions in which this idea works quite well, but I couldn’t quite suss out how Rhoden felt these particular pop tunes deepened Shakespeare’s content. While fun diversions, in the end the songs broke the rhythm.

Another moment that broke the rhythm of the show also came at one of its best: a physical gag plunked in the middle of “Melancholy” Jaques’ famous “All the world’s a stage” monologue.

Nevertheless, Jaques (*EW* cartoonist Dan Pegoda) delivers the rest of the speech with such a gripping naturalism that you can imagine Shakespeare himself, who wrote *As You Like It* relatively late in his life, delivering the lines of a melancholy old romantic lamenting that, in the end — after all the love, laughter and loss in life — we all wind up “sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.”

It’s in these moments that Rhoden, and her entire cast, are most successful and deeply moving. ■

*As You Like It* runs through Aug. 19 at Very Little Theatre, \$15-\$18, tickets at [TheVLT.com](http://TheVLT.com).

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