



# *As You Like It* at Shakespeare Festival/LA

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By David Ng

Of all of Shakespeare's comedies, *As You Like It* might just be the most difficult to follow. The comedy of romance and mistaken identity contains cross-dressing, character doubling and a fly-by gallery of supporting clowns whose paths intersect with a velocity that can make your head spin.

The New York-based Aquila Theatre, in residence at the Shakespeare Festival/LA, mischievously seeks to compound rather than simplify the confusion by having actors take on multiple roles in Russian-doll fashion. But instead of frustrating the viewer, this finely acted production succeeds at creating a pleasantly tipsy experience as it merrily toys with the fluidity of identity.

Set on a mostly bare stage, the Aquila's modern-dress interpretation takes a few liberties with Shakespeare's text, most noticeably in the beginning when the actors (playing themselves) perform a prologue set to music. Rosalind (Leandra Ashton) is a French nobleman's daughter who falls for Orlando (Richard Kidd), a moody young man from a rival clan. A series of arguments and misunderstandings leads to the exile of most of the main characters to the Forest of Arden, where they become unmoored from their former identities and engage in covert games of romantic hide-and-seek.

"One man plays many parts," says a character midway through the play, and indeed this production holds true to that edict by having most of the cast play multiple roles or play characters who assume multiple identities. Rosalind disguises herself as a man named Ganymede with the help of her saucy cousin Celia (Vaishnavi Sharma), who assumes the identity of a servant. The rest of the cast fills out the supporting ranks, with some actors taking on as many as eight parts.

The discombobulation is deliberate and largely successful thanks to laser-sharp acting from a seven-member cast called on to bring to life 20 characters. The best performances come from the actresses, who deliver their lines with clarity and unforced charm. As Rosalind, Ashton is superb in a famously difficult role, rendering her character's long-winded repartee with a seeming ease that is coupled with spot-on physical comedy. And Lucy Black, who plays a gallery of supporting roles of both genders, deserves special recognition for her versatility that never feels ostentatious or self-congratulatory.

Kenn Saberton's direction doesn't always manage to untangle the play's knotty twists and turns, but it succeeds in finding the right balance between comedy and melancholy while implicitly acknowledging that the two are joined at the hip. Those ambiguous moments are best encapsulated in a series of songs performed on guitar by Damian Davis, who casts the theatrical equivalent of an autumnal sigh over the play.

*As You Like It* isn't an easy comedy to embrace for either the audience or the cast. Aquila's superb production makes the challenge feel worthwhile and exceptionally rewarding.

