Theatre Reviews

**AS YOU LIKE IT**: directed by Helen Flax. Mannville, Port Elizabeth. 2007.

LAURENCE WRIGHT

This was a stylish, well-conceived production, which made sense and meaning from what is probably Shakespeare’s most delicate, and ‘English’, of comedies. The piece calls for strong ensemble playing, a full stage of equals rather than a few strong parts dominating the story. The Port Elizabeth Shakespearean Festival pulled it off marvelously.

I liked the rock music counterpointing, or playing against, the language and feeling evoked by the script. It had the effect both of distancing us from events on stage, at some moments, so that we could withdraw to contemplate the action, and at other times linking us more firmly to the story through the pounding pulse of contemporary relevance. The saxophone sets worked, much to my surprise, for any instrument less calculated to fit the temper of *As You Like It* would be hard to find. The script was pared down, and though I missed a couple of favorite bits, the sprightly pacing worked well. There was one place where I felt the audience needed more time to ‘breathe’, and that was the moment of magic that followed Jaques’s ‘seven ages of man’ speech, where the need was to leave the audience in a state of lyrical contemplation. Instead, the dance interlude followed hard upon it and, while it might have been meant to represent the gentle motion of contemplative thought, tended to shatter the mood and move us on too brusquely. Perhaps the visual impact overwhelmed the intended meaning.

Rosalind (Lesley Barnard) and Celia (Melody Cutting) were a fine pairing, and carried the show. Celia had a touch of Regency comedy about her, while Lesley Barnard tore into her boyish impersonation with gusto. Ken Hodgkinson delivered a memorable cameo as Duke Senior, playing him as a benevolent and slightly dotty old chap, completely harmless, which worked well against John Keevey’s self-important Duke Frederick. Carli Grobler made a wonderfully slatternly Audrey and the unequal relationship with Touchstone (Colin Ward) was as amusing as ever. Phebe’s reluctant acceptance of the gormless William, after her all-too-blatant attempts to market herself elsewhere, was funny, even touching: good work from
Elizabeth Munro and David Emery. Reyn Ffoulkes portrayed an excellent mincing and posing Le Beau, while the two ‘de Boys’ brothers (Andile Magxaki and Jason Perry) carried off their parts with aplomb. The wrestling was brief and to the point, and Nardus Oelofse made an impressive popular wrestling hero.

Flax describes her production as ‘eclectic’: well, one noticed the gold watch, the ‘Spar’ carrier bag, a medieval jester’s outfit, Victorian togs here and there. But the pot pourri blended into a whole, a postmodern completeness which felt good and fitting. The delicate Englishness had been exchanged for an energizing form of universal pageantry. One of the great mistakes of misguided Shakespearean direction is to use his historical remoteness as a means of alienating the audience, trapping them in a foreign world; instead, we have to recognize that despite the cultural trappings of his age, the people and predicaments represent creatures just like us. More than that, biologically-speaking they are us, playing the same old games but in a different cultural environment. The contribution of the melancholy Jaques (an excellent, robust performance by Andrew Horne) is to point up the existential void, the nothingness, underlying our apparently intelligent relationships, posturings and intentions. The comic games are driven by forces of which we are hardly aware, something which makes our zeal in pursuing them all the more poignant and funny.

This was one of the best all-round performances from the Festival that I have seen; better, indeed, than last season’s award-winning A Midsummer Night’s Dream.

Hamlet: directed by Garth Anderson and Clare Mortimer, performed by the Actor’s Cooperative and The Playhouse Company Natal Playhouse. 9 February 2007.

Hamlet Deconstructed: directed by Debbie Lutge, performed by students of the Drama Studies Department. Durban University of Technology. 24 May 2007.

BRIAN PEARCE

It is always good to see Hamlet on the stage and to realise again that, even in a cut down version, the play is one of the finest pieces of theatre ever written and of great popular appeal. The present version ran for not much more than two hours and the directors had cut the text effectively. Inevitably, one misses the full text, whatever that might be, and I noticed some important lines of poetry which were missing. Another half an hour of playing time would have allowed some important speeches to have been included in their entireties, such as Hamlet’s “There’s a special providence in the fall of a sparrow...” which was shortened. In forcing the text into a shorter playing time, inevitably perhaps, it was the moments of reflection and repose which were lost. The result was a feeling of breathless action from start to finish, denying one a sense of the play being as much about thought as action.

In the opening scene of the play, the Ghost was presented as appearing entirely in Hamlet’s own mind. The words were said effectively through a recording, full of resonance, the lines suggesting anguish and despair from beyond the grave. This effective stylistic device was contradicted later in the play, during the closet scene, when the Ghost actually did appear on stage, played by the actor who had previously appeared as the Player King. The words were still said over the loud speakers, full of tremolo, but they were quite clearly not coming from the actor playing the Ghost on stage. This was not convincing and inconsistent with the convention established in the opening scene.

Hamlet and Horatio did not discover the single gravedigger, it seemed rather as if the gravedigger discovered them and brought his grave digging to Hamlet’s attention. Was he looking for them to find a suitable place at which to begin digging, where he could be “discovered”? The staging, with all the lines preceding Hamlet’s entrance cut, and Hamlet visibly watching the gravedigger settle down to his digging, seemed to suggest this possible