



Lively and Jovial, “All’s Well That Ends Well” at the Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival

by Abby Luby

All’s Well That Ends Well, is one of Shakespeare’s rarely performed plays. But after seeing the Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival’s new production, we wonder why the work is so overlooked. By resurrecting *All’s Well* as part of the Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival 2013 Season, the very talented HVSF troupe gives us a fun, energized and engaging performance.

A little background on this play: Shakespeare had already written *Hamlet* and *Twelfth Night* and although *All’s Well That Ends Well* is considered a romantic comedy, it seems the bard took a stylistic detour and gave us a play less amorous and more prosaic. Although

a romantic pursuit drives the play, looming bigger are the ironies and inconsistencies of the world seen more clearly by the wiser and more visionary characters, but ignored by those who are small minded and self serving.

Director Russell Treyz, who superbly directed last season's *The 39 Steps*, tells us that he purposely cast *All's Well* in Elizabethan tradition of men playing women's roles. The one exception is Helena, played by the only woman in the cast, Jessica Frey. All the actors play multiple roles except for three characters: Helena, her love interest Bertram, played by Dan Tracy and Parolles, played by Jason O'Connell. Helena, Bertram and Parolles are on a mission to better their lives. Helena pursues Bertram to be her husband, Bertram seeks his fortune and Parolles wants worldly recognition at any cost. O'Connell adroitly portrays Parolles as shallow and unscrupulous. Frey deftly serves up a woman who clearly sees the trajectory of her plan to wed Bertram and gain higher societal status no matter what road blocks he throws in her path. Tracy as Bertram is entirely convincing as a young, frivolous liar, who shuns Helena by rushing off to war—the male practice of fleeing intimacy for the battlefield with one's brotherly comrades is not lost on us or on Helena, who vies to survive in a male-dominated world and, in this case, a male-dominated stage.



All's Well □ — □ Left to right: Wesley Mann-Jeff Gonzalez-Dan Tracy
Richard Ercole and Jessica Frey

Originally the play was written without any songs or music, but Treyz chose to serenade us before the play with a medley of songs including the foot stomping, Mo-Town *Chain of Fools*, a sultry rendition of *Love Me Do*, capped off with *You Can't Always Get What You Want*,—songs heralding the thematic bent of unrequited love and the desire for high rank and fortune.

Unlike Shakespeare's leading ladies who flirt lasciviously with their lovers, Helena hardly speaks to Bertram in the course of the play. Frey crisply executes Helena's wit, however, when she verbally spars with Parolles about how to fight to save one's virginity with "warlike resistance"—a dishy setup for the play's litany of charged metaphors for love, war and fealty.

Dan Matisa, in a gender-switch role as the countess is so totally convincing that he endears us to him much like the beefy Margaret Dumont in the Marx Brothers films or Robin Williams as Mrs. Doubtfire. As Bertram's mother, Matisa physically looms over Tracy, diminishing her son both visually and psychologically, sternly intoning a strong voice of reason. Matisa's affectations are perfect—the swooning clasp of hand to head, his forlorn, wispy sighs, his haughty prance embellished by his trailing headdress.



All's Well-Dan Matisa

Wesley Mann juggles three, distinctly different characters: a clown, a lord and an old widow —each transformation captivating enough to harness our credibility. At the end of the play when the clown and lord have a verbal duel, Mann wears the clown costume on one side of his body and the lord's on the other, twisting and turning, instantly modulating his voice for a quick paced dialogue, a *tour de force* of live, special effects. The hilarity is as raucous and entertaining as is the scene of galloping horses where the actors' morph into half-man-half horse centaurs whose fancy footwork bring the steeds to life.

Jeff Gonzalez masterly shifts from a French lord to the German female role of Diana, the character who, at Helena's request, bed-tricks Bertram with a beguiling, coquettish accent that expertly matches Gonzalez's persuasive, feminine body language. The erudite Richard Ercole is the sickly King of France whose aches and pains make us wince, and whose recovery gives us the welcomed, strong voice of authority to lecture Bertram on his feckless rejection of Helena.



All's Well-Richard Ercole and Jessica Frey

The actors assume various roles with great alacrity and the rush of role changes swirl around the three, static characters. But the Shakespearean shape-shifting comes to a stop in a bold moment of candor redolent of the *Dance of the Seven Veils* whose purpose is to ultimately reveal the naked truth of who we really are. In one brief, poignant soliloquy, O'Connell sheds his bravado as Parolles, is humbled for deceiving his comrades and brings us to his defining moment where he embraces who he is— “simply the thing I am shall make me live.” The audience bears witness to Parolles final realization and to the play's underlying message: there are other parts of ourselves who we strive to be and outwardly present to others, but in the end, we must come to grips with our real, true selves.

The Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival's production of *All's Well That Ends Well* is a performance that makes you want to run back and read the bard's words, instilling his grand ability to tease, delight and invite us in for jovial, philosophical reflection.

This is one of three plays in the HVSF's 27th season, the other two are *King Lear*, directed by the festival's Founding Artistic Director, Terrence O'Brien, and Ken Ludwig's adaptation of *The Three Musketeers* directed by Associate Artistic Director Christopher V. Edwards. The season runs through the September 1, 2013.

Featured Image: *All's Well That Ends Well*: Jessica Frey and Dan Tracy
All photos by William Marsh

Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival
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