

Shakespeare Festival proves 'All's Well'

Judging by the satisfying finish of the first Grand Rapids performance of the Michigan Shakespeare Festival, I'd say "All's Well That Ends Well" is a self-fulfilling prophesy.

The romantic comedy is one of two shows being presented this weekend in the Grand Rapids Ballet's new theater, which proved a gracious setting for the festival's first foray outside Jackson. A half-full house of about 150 seemed to enjoy themselves, with many staying for a talk-back afterward.

Director John Neville-Andrews has filled the show with lots of funny business, including a red-nosed clown. He has moved Shakespeare's 17th century play to the early 19th century, when women were beginning to be a little more independent minded.

Helene is just such a woman. The daughter of a doctor, she has the knowledge to restore the King of France to health and, as a reward, the king agrees she may marry any of his young lords. She chooses Bertram, the Count of Rousillion, whom she has admired for sometime.

But Bertam, thinking she is beneath him, heads off to war right after the impromptu wedding. He sends a note saying he will be her husband only if she can get his ring on her



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hand and become pregnant by him. Determined, Helene heads off to Florence to find a way to do both.

Paul Hopper rules the stage as the foul-tempered ailing king, full of bluster and doubled over in pain. He's even more boisterous when healed. Shakespeare's words roll off his tongue so easily and are easily understood.

Dana Dancho, who portrays Helene, is not so comfortable with the Bard's language. She announces every phrase with the same intensity, struggling to enunciate the lengthy passages. It's not until the second act she relaxes enough to begin portraying her character.

Paul Molnar, on the other hand, is quite believable as Bertram. Although his character is a bit of a jerk, he makes him forgivable.

In fact, all the soldiers did an excellent job, vying for Helene's hand and later playing a trick on their foppish captain, Parolles. Larry Smith dresses flamboyantly as Parolles with a lace hanky in each hand, but he doesn't really seem to get into the part.



COURTESY PHOTO

A lecture: Foppish Captain Parolles (Larry Smith) gets a lecture from Lord Lafeu (William Irwin) in "All's Well That Ends Well," the first Grand Rapids show presented by the Michigan Shakespeare Festival.

Janet Haley portrays a very royal and dignified Countess Rossillion, Bertram's mother. She's at her best when she lets her guard down a little, especially when she dons a red nose to communicate with Lavatch, a puppet-packing clown played by Mark Stephen Gmazel.

The company has furnished the stage with a well-built backdrop of stairs and balconies that are more frame than furniture in this performance. Most of the action takes place center stage with four screens moved to various positions to shape each set

"All's Well That Ends Well"

★★★ (out of four stars)

Length: 2½ hours (with one intermission)

See it: "All's Well That Ends Well" repeats at 2 p.m. today at the Grand Rapids Ballet's Peter Martin Wege Theatre, 341 Ellsworth Ave. SW. "Julius Caesar," the second production in the Michigan Shakespeare Festival will be presented at 7:30 tonight and 2 p.m. Sunday.

Tickets: \$24-\$27, \$15 students, through Ticketmaster, 456-3333.

while a picture of an appropriate setting, such as battlefield, palace or cottage, is projected on a screen above.

Like the set, the costumes are richly done, heavy with lace, trim and sparkles.

Although some of the actors are outstanding, others, especially minor roles, seem very inexperienced. But the performance moves along quickly to a conclusion that is quite pleasing.

Shakespeare fans won't want to miss this opportunity to get a taste of the festival's 14 years of experience in classic theater.

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AUGUST 2, 2008

GRAND RAPIDS PRESS