

SHAKESPEARE FESTIVAL REVIEW

'All's Well' with Shakespeare productionBy **Tarry Pow**

For the Citizen Patriot

Unlike most romantic comedies, Shakespeare's "All's Well That Ends Well" doesn't provide the audience with sympathetic lead characters to root for.

The young lovers, Bertram and Helena, are unlikable in their own specific ways. Bertram is a callow skirt chaser, and Helena is a stalker who occasionally prompts an eerie reminder of Glenn Close in "Fatal Attraction" — "I will not be ignored!"

The best-written parts are given to characters less central to the action: the Countess, who is both Bertram's mother and the guardian of

the orphaned Helena; the courtier Lafeu, who is a bit of a Polonius-type windbag but upholds the old noble virtues; and the ailing King, whose miraculous cure springs into action a plot of amazing improbability even by Elizabethan standards.

Can this seldom-performed play nevertheless entertain? Yes, as the Michigan Shakespeare Festival production demonstrates.

Given the nature of the piece, which was not pulled from Shakespeare's top drawer, the best hope for a present-day director is to set the play in some kind of Ruritanian never-never land and treat it like the fable it really is.

If you go ...

■ **What:** "All's Well That Ends Well"

■ **Where:** Michigan Shakespeare Festival in the Baughman Theatre of the Potter Center at Jackson Community College

■ **When:** 7:30 p.m. today, 2 p.m. Saturday and Sunday, 7:30 p.m. July 25 and 26

■ **Tickets:** Call 796-8600.

That, in effect, is what director John Neville-Andrews achieves by choosing a Regency setting, where a dandified concern with appearances matches the play's oratorical excesses.

As Helena, Dana Dancho, speaks the part well, but is a little static in her movements, though she livens up

in the later scenes.

The splendid Paul Molnar invests Bertram with more dimensionality than Shakespeare has provided for the character and, against the odds, does manage to provoke some sympathy.

The standout performance belongs to Janet Haley as the Countess, followed closely

by Paul Hopper as the King and William Irwin as Lord Lafeu.

Haley takes full possession of the verse, bending it to her will and squeezing every ounce of dramatic significance from the lines. It's a delight to watch such a professional at work.

Hopper likewise is at total ease with his lines, and once his fistula has been cured by Helena, he brings a delightfully impish humor to the role. Irwin provides a waspish dignity to Lord Lafeu.

Two other fine performances to watch for are Larry Smith as the braggart soldier Parolles and Mark Stephen Gmazel as a splendidly costumed clown.