



Shakespeare in the Park set to lively Americana beat

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Amy Stumpf | 12:46 p.m. CDT August 15, 2014

Nashville Shakespeare Festival presents "As You Like It" with Depression-era backdrop, Americana soundtrack



(Photo: Jeff Frazier)

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- This time, artistic director Denice Hicks has re-imagined the Forest of Arden as a shanty town from the 1930s, where exiles of all stripes have gathered to escape the corruption of the city and enjoy a renewed sense of peace, love and community.
- The Depression-era setting works surprisingly well, thanks in large part to the Americana music provided by singer/songwriter David Olney (who takes on the role of Amiens).
- But what makes this production really sing is the captivating performance of Emily Landham as Rosalind.

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Theater review

As the sun went down Thursday, a gentle breeze stirred and audience members greeted the evening with joyful anticipation. One could scarcely imagine a better way to kick off The Nashville Shakespeare Festival's 27th annual Shakespeare in the Park — or a more perfect setting for Shakespeare's beloved pastoral comedy "As You Like It."

This time, artistic director Denice Hicks has re-imagined the Forest of Arden as a shanty town from the 1930s, where exiles of all stripes have gathered to escape the corruption of the city and enjoy a renewed sense of peace, love and community.

It's an interesting choice, particularly when you consider the play's underlying themes of court and country — the proverbial haves and have-nots. But the Depression-era setting works surprisingly well, thanks in large part to the Americana music provided by singer/songwriter David Olney (who takes on the role of Amiens). Featuring original songs written just for the show, there's an unmistakable feeling of warmth and optimism here that's hard to resist.

But what makes this production really sing is the captivating performance of Emily Landham as Rosalind. Full of wit and charm, she wrings every ounce of gender-bending fun from the challenging role, bringing the audience along for a joyous ride.

Amanda Card matches the tenor of Landham's performance perfectly as the devoted Celia. And Jaye Phelps serves up an especially engaging Touchstone, delivering withering commentary with unbridled physicality.

Houston Mahoney provides a worthy hero in Orlando, and Santiago Sosa makes a strong NSF debut as the conniving Oliver. Nat McIntyre loses himself in the dual roles

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of Duke Frederick/Duke Senior. And Brian Webb Russell and Phil Perry provide marvelous support as the loyal Adam and Corin, respectively.

Derek Whittaker is hilarious as Jaques, a man who “can suck melancholy out of a song, like a weasel sucks eggs.” Whittaker and Olney share great chemistry in musical interludes such as “It Almost Makes Me Laugh (Jaques’ Song).” And music director Stan Lawrence leads a stellar band of musicians billed as “Billy Shakes’ Peers.”

Morgan Matens’ set evokes a rugged “Hooverville,” with Anne Willingham’s lighting adding even greater depth. June Kingsbury’s costumes are terrific, and Pam Atha’s spirited choreography adds to the homespun charm.

In a week that has brought such distressing and heartbreaking news, it seems only fitting that audiences should retreat to Centennial Park for a much-needed respite. As we are reminded by Shakespeare’s timeless comedy, the forest — and indeed theater itself — can provide healing and a renewed sense of optimism. And in these troubled times, that’s something we all could use.

If you go

What: Nashville Shakespeare Festival presents “As You Like It”

When: Through Sept. 14. Performances at 7:30 p.m. Thursdays-Sundays (plus Labor Day Monday), with pre-show entertainment at 6:30 p.m. (A special sign language-interpreted performance is set for Aug. 30.)

Where: The Bandshell at Centennial Park, 2600 West End Ave.

Tickets: \$10 suggested donation

Info: Blankets/lawn chairs welcome; bleacher seating available. Food/drink vendors onsite or bring your own picnic.

Contact: www.nashvilleshakes.org



