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Theater: Glorious "As You Like It;" "Harvey" Not Invisible Enough

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AS YOU LIKE IT **** out of ****
HARVEY * out of ****

AS YOU LIKE IT **** out of ****
SHAKESPEARE IN THE PARK

It rained on and off throughout the entire Friday night performance of *As You Like It*, this summer's first production during the 50th anniversary of Shakespeare In The Park. It soaked me thoroughly and several times the play had to stop when the rain got especially hard and the show took an extra hour to finish. And I didn't care in the least. When a production is this beautifully mounted and directed, when the acting is this superlative from top to bottom, I didn't just endure the weather, I reveled in it, pleased to offer some small example of endurance back as a tribute to the actors. Last summer at the Globe in London I saw an outdoor production of *All's Well That Ends Well* that was a pure delight in every single role from start to finish. This show will match it in my memory.

The story is one of Shakespeare's romances, with Rosalind (Lily Rabe) and her beloved friend Celia fleeing to the forest of Arden after Rosalind is wrongly banished by Celia's father, the usurping Duke (Andre Braugher). The forest is rather crowded, because it also contains the wrongly banished Duke (Rosalind's father, also Braugher), the wronged Orlando (David Furr of *The Importance Of Being Earnest*, whose character fell in love with Rosalind moments before he had to flee for his life) and various other star-crossed lovers. Invariably, person A is in love with person B who is in love with person C. Rosalind disguises herself as the pretty boy Ganymede for safety's sake and manages to entangle all the lovers further before cutting the Gordian knot she's created in the happiest of endings.

First there is the marvelous, elegant scenic design by John Lee Beatty. The setting is the American frontier and he's conceived of court as a fort, with giant wooden walls reaching up to the sky with soldiers patrolling the ramparts and one sentry perched in an observation box at the top. This immediately makes clear that anyone banished from court, that is the fort, will immediately be at danger among the wilds. When we switch to Arden, the two walls of the fort slide away to reveal a forest. I'm not quite sure how he does it, but Arden is beautifully presented, with the lighting of Natasha Katz a notable plus throughout.

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The frontier setting allows period costumes by Jane Greenwood that clearly establish the roles and social standing of the characters without heavy-handedness, such as Oliver Platt's vaguely gambler/city man duds as the clown Touchstone, who longs for a rustic, big-bosomed gal Audrey, who is covered in dirt and happily lifts her skirt for one and all. This period also allows that man of parts Steve Martin to write a terrific, folkish score that provides excellent settings for the many tunes peppered throughout. (Strong kudos to the onstage musicians.)

Above all, the relaxed, country pace of the music and setting encourage the actors to tackle their roles in a low-key manner. Nothing ruins the jester or clownish subplots more than people hammering away at their laugh lines. Here no one seems over-hyped in the least, with even small roles like Silvius (an actor with the great name of Will Rogers -- he's just tall and gangly enough to pull off playing the original) and Phoebe (Susannah Flood) scoring very well because they're not trying to score laughs. Even the minor role of Orlando's servant Adam is allowed to shine and have his moment thanks to actor Macintyre Dixon.

Along for the ride is the dour Jaques, a man always out of sorts with merriment who often wanders through this play like a wet rag, though he does have the marvelous Ages Of Man speech. Jaques is played by Stephen Spinella; it's the best I've ever seen this role performed. When he stops the merriment at the finale, his essential warmth is allowed to shine through without betraying who Jaques is and it seems less of a rude interruption than ever before. That's no surprise in a show loaded with talent.

Braugher is very good in the dual roles of the Dukes. Renee Elise Goldsberry as Cecile has excellent chemistry with her Rosalind, letting us immediately believe these two are soulmates who would stick by each other through thick and thin. And above all we have Lily Rabe and David Furr as Rosalind and Orlando. Furr was the revelation for me. I saw and enjoyed him and Santino Fontana in *The Importance Of Being Earnest* (though I was mixed on the show). But here he is, the complete leading man, commanding the stage with ease. Like everyone here, he speaks the lines beautifully and never falls into versifying. I know the play quite well but when it's acted as clearly as this, even a newcomer would immediately be able to follow along.

Rabe of course has gone from strength to strength recently, such as her excellent *Merchant Of Venice*. And she shines here again, handling the boy Ganymede with terrific intensity. Her giddiness at the finale was perhaps the smallest of off notes but frankly I forgave it because she so thoroughly convinced me she was madly besotted with Orlando, or should I say Furr. (If they had broken character at the end of the show to announce their engagement, it wouldn't have surprised me in the least; my apologies to whomever they may be dating in real life, it's just good chemistry. Isn't it?)

This show is every bit as worthy of transferring to Broadway as *Merchant*, though the lack of marquee star power makes that unlikely. If you can do so, [rush to the Delacorte and wait in line to catch this show](#). It would be a bargain at any price.

NOTE: Rabe is apparently in a relationship and Furr newly married. Obviously, their private happiness informed their performances on stage, much to all of our delight. This marks the first and last time I will imagine an on-set romance because of their formidable acting skills and that elusive element called chemistry.

HARVEY * out of **** **ROUNABOUT THEATRE AT STUDIO 54**

Jim Parsons has proven himself a very good stage actor and one can imagine the eagerness at The Roundabout to find a commercial showcase for his talent. It's a shame they didn't stop looking because *Harvey* is such thin, weak fare. Jimmy Stewart starred in the film version of this Pulitzer Prize-winning (!) story of an amiable eccentric in Denver, Colorado named Elwood P. Dowd. Even as a child I knew the movie was pretty weak stuff. Elwood's best friend? A giant, mostly invisible rabbit named Harvey. His sister and niece are mortified by Harvey and finally decide to put Elwood in a mental institution. Hilarity ensues.

The show consists essentially of two jokes: Elwood chatting to the invisible Harvey while people either gape or fail to notice or other characters catching themselves in embarrassment when they refer to Harvey as if the six foot tall rabbit is real. That's essentially it.

The playwright Mary Chase is just as confused as most of her characters. Her play is filled with sermonizing about the joy of nuttiness. Isn't being nice better than confronting reality? Aren't the insane people in the asylum the only ones who truly appreciate life? The show stops every once in a while so Elwood can deliver pablum like that. There's only one problem with all this philosophizing: Elwood isn't crazy! The show makes abundantly clear that Harvey is real, a mischievous spirit called a pooka. It opens doors, flips through books, appears to other characters when it chooses and so on. So all that claptrap about lovable eccentrics is undercut. Worse, Harvey isn't a very interesting sprite. He doesn't cause problems for anyone in the least; about all he does is try to make sure he can hang out with Elwood and drink beer.



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Parsons has a charming stage presence and delivers the one-note role of Elwood quite nicely, though it's not nearly enough to make the show interesting. Poor Jessica Hecht has the biggest role as his suffering sister. She is wrongly detained in the asylum, frantically tries to maintain a social calendar, suffers a nervous breakdown and ultimately realizes her "freedom" from Harvey (mentally castrating Elwood) is too high a price to pay. But Chase's play isn't nearly enough to give her material to work with. She desperately works overtime to try and pump some life into this tepid tale.

In a work this poor, almost no one comes off well, so I won't detail the shortcomings in the set or costumes or performances because I lay the blame with Chase. Rich Sommer of *Mad Men*, however, should fire his agent for taking him from the most acclaimed show on TV to the minor role of the asylum attendant. The utterly unconvincing subplots (such as a romance between a doctor and a nurse) all fall flat.

But two minor pleasures can be had. Holley Fain brings a warmth to the role of the nurse. And Carol Kane and Parsons have a delightful scene together. They create chemistry and humor out of absolutely nothing. It's an all too brief moment of magic in this forced bit of whimsy.

THE THEATER SEASON 2012-2013 (on a four star scale)

As You Like it (Shakespeare In The Park w Lily Rabe) ****

Chimichangas And Zoloft *

Closer Than Ever ***

Cock ** 1/2

Harvey with Jim Parsons *

My Children! My Africa! ***

Once On This Island ***

Potted Potter *

Storefront Church ** 1/2

Title And Deed ***

Thanks for reading. Michael Giltz is the cohost of *Showbiz Sandbox*, a weekly pop culture podcast that reveals the industry take on entertainment news of the day and features top journalists and opinion makers as guests. It's [available](#) for free on iTunes. Visit Michael Giltz at his [website](#) and his [daily blog](#). Download his podcast of celebrity interviews and his radio show, also called *Popsurfing* and also [available](#) for free on iTunes. Link to him on Netflix and [gain](#) access to thousands of ratings and reviews.

Note: Michael Giltz is provided with free tickets to shows with the understanding that he will be writing a review.

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