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Theater: Shakespeare In The Park "Ends Well" With "Measure"

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**ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL **
MEASURE FOR MEASURE ***
SHAKESPEARE IN THE PARK**

Shakespeare in the Park has experimented the last few seasons with performing plays in repertory with the same cast. It's proven a very strong success. With both shows alternating you can catch two different productions in a week. With the same general cast, you have the fun of seeing actor after actor tackle radically different roles or give a subtle spin to similar characters. The longer timespan may also have kept the biggest names from committing which might also be a good thing. Star-heavy casting sometimes tilts the shows

towards those names. This summer you genuinely have a sense of a company coming together to present these shows. Here's hoping they continue with this approach. If the Public Theater is our de facto national theater, then for a few weeks in the summer we get to see what it would be like to have an ongoing theater company a la the RSC in London. Here's a video chat with some of the male cast members.

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Both plays are romantic dramas, rather serious in their way but filled with entertainment. They work wonderfully with the outdoor setting -- as darkness creeps in, the shows themselves get more and more weighty. In general, they are both acted quite well. *All's Well That Ends Well* is rather poorly directed by Daniel Sullivan, who enjoyed a great season on Broadway with *The Merchant Of Venice* and *Good People*. The set is dominated by a large, imposing balcony running across the stage with staircases leading down. He makes almost nothing of it, turning this large structure into a major distraction. Both shows are rather slowly paced and keep the text basically intact, though *All's Well* is the one that feels more draggy.

It didn't help *All's Well* that I just saw an **absolutely marvelous, definitive production at London's Globe Theatre**. It's considered a "problem" play because our heroine Helena (Annie Parisse) yearns for Bertram (the talented Andre Holland) who is - how to put this? -- a jerk. The more we admire her, the more we wonder what she sees in him. The London production decided there was no problem and presented Bertram with his warts and all. Love isn't logical, after all. Plus, they emphasized his youthful impetuosity. He may behave like a cad from scene to scene, but at least we know he believes in his own passions -- however much they may be the opposite of what he swore to believe a minute ago -- down to his core. Not so here, where Bertram is more typically calculating.

John Cullum and Tonya Pinkins are strong in their significant roles as the mother of Bertram and the King Of France, especially when Cullum gets to drop the hammer on Bertram. It gets a little lively at the end, when all the couples are intertwined for good (whether they like it or not), but the show takes too long to get there.

And look at Reg Rogers. He plays a cowardly friend of Bertram's called Parolles. Comic relief, Parolles came to life in London as a real person, not just a fop to make sport of. That made his humor funnier and his comeuppance more painful. Here, Rogers is just a fool. But in *Measure for Measure*, he plays Lucio with more subtlety, getting more laughs and creating a genuine man in the process. It's typical of director David Esbjornson's more thoughtful work in *Measure*.

The show begins with demons prowling the stage (our inner id or at least our fear of sexual desire made manifest). They prompt the Duke (Lorenzo Pisoni) to high it out of town and put his confidant Angelo (Michael Hayden) in charge. The Duke wants to see how Angelo will perform and expects a man of such sober character can clamp down on vice more convincingly. And how. Angelo outlaws all fornication outside of marriage, which soon means he must execute a fine young man Claudio (Holland again) who has impregnated his fiancée. Claudio begs his sister Isabella (Danai Gurira) to plead for mercy from Angelo. To his shock, Angelo finds himself deeply, furiously desirous of Isabella and says he will spare her brother's life if she gives up her maidenhood to him. Oh the villainy! The show has a vague rock and roll feel, with punkish, comically sexual costumes by Elizabeth Hope Clancy, a memorable music and sound score by John Gromada (aided by Acme Sound Partners' strong sound design) and even ending with the Rolling Stones performing "Sympathy For The Devil" (a bit of a stretch, that one).

The exceptional Dakin Matthews does his usual yeoman's work in dual roles. Carson Elrod has fun playing a male prostitute, Pompey, wandering through the crowd and teasing the audience during one scene, offering his services to a hulking executioner in another. David Manis -- just like Rogers -- creates a more believable dullard (and therefore a funnier role) in *Measure* than he did in *All's Well*.

Pisoni is a very unmemorable Duke; it's almost a surprise at the end to realize this is his play. He delivers the poetry and music of Shakespeare, rather than the meaning -- always a fatal mistake. He's not bad, just not nearly as good as his two main costars in *Measure*. Just as the actress Annie Parisse did



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marvelous work in *All's Well* as Helena, *Measure* is dominated by Isabella. It makes sense that a star would be born out of doors and that surely seems true here for Danai Gurira. She shows a fierce intelligence and commitment to her part that makes this show come alive whenever she is onstage. Gurira has been on Broadway in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, had a small role in TV's *Treme* and other parts here and there but truly flowers here.

She is matched line for line by Michael Hayden as the corrupt Angelo. Their scenes together when they spar for the life of Claudio and the soul of Isabella are electric and worth waiting online all day for. That's why people return again and again to *Shakespeare in the Park* -- free theater, fine casts, a convivial audience, sometimes great productions that become the talk of the season, and once in a while a chance to see a new talent flourish.

The Theater Season 2011-2012 (on a four star scale)

All's Well That Ends Well/Shakespeare in the Park **

Broadway By The Year: 1997 ** 1/2 out of ****

Measure For Measure/Shakespeare in the Park ***

One Arm ***

Spiderman: Turn Off The Dark * 1/2

Unnatural Acts ***

Zarkana **

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 was provided with free tickets to this show with the understanding that he would be writing a review.

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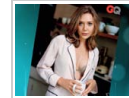
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