

Fun, youthful, pastoral

Trimmed script makes the play, paired with "Hamlet," the happy flip side.

April 18, 2011 | By Wendy Rosenfield, For The Inquirer

Play's the thing in Philadelphia Shakespeare Theatre's toy-strewn, youthful production of *As You Like It*, currently running in repertory with *Hamlet*. In the latter, Mary Tuomanen dons the heaviest pair of man-pants in English theater to decry the world's "unweeded garden." But here she goes gamine, frolicking in set designer David Gordon's neatly trimmed forest of Arden as Rosalind, expelled from Duke Frederick's court with her cousin Celia (a sweet Victoria Rose Bonito). Of course, Tuomanen still ends up dressed in boy clothes, but only temporarily, and to comic, rather than tragic, effect.

In Arden, much as at court - where Celia and Rosalind appear inside an oversize gilt picture frame among blocks and stuffed animals - a playground atmosphere pervades. The forest is a backyard-size lawn with a swing, slide, and little pine clusters that serve as cover for peering garden gnomes. Vickie Esposito's costumes echo this theme, with earthy brown bottoms and candy-color tops, as though the actors were wildflowers decorating the grass. Director Carmen Kahn is determined to have fun, bathing the tale in sunlight, and even morose Jaques (Ames Adamson, who also plays the Duke), with his "All the world's a stage," and downer of a "Seven ages of man" speech, is pleasant to have around.

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Amid toys and sunlight, "As You Like It," with Mary Tuomanen (left) as Rosalind/Carysmede ...

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Kahn has done some neat trimming of the script, while adding, via composer Fabian Obispo, some amiable pastoral music, along with a big, cheery 11 o'clock number. Clearly, Kahn and Company are dedicated to *As You Like It* - with its brother-betraying and amorous crazy-making - as *Hamlet*'s happy flip side.

Tuomanen has quick timing and instincts, and she brings an immediacy that leaves many of her castmates playing catch-up. Other standouts are Adamson, who, with his lush red beard and dry delivery, could pass for Zach Galifianakis' spiritual father, and Chris Faith, who always seems to embrace foolishness even when not playing the fools (costumer Esposito gives his rotund "wrestler" Charles a unitard and lucha libre mask). The play's actual fool, Touchstone (Johnny Smith), has less of a presence here, perhaps the result of Kahn's editing.

Purists might scoff at this free and easy vibe, which comes at the expense of some of the play's weightier sentiments. But right now, with spring just sprung, it's hard to resist a production that emphasizes love and fun, and sends you out thinking how nice it would be if all trees budded with amorous poetry.

As You Like It

Through May 15 at Philadelphia Shakespeare Theatre, 2111 Sansom St. Tickets: \$25-\$35. Information: 215-496-8001

or www.phillyshakespeare.org.