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Design As You Like It

Design and UWM's Latest Shakespeare

By Russ Bickerstaff

The design sensibilities present on the stage of UWM's Mainstage Theatre can often end up being some of the best in town. Designers working with UWM end up taking some chances that have made for some really impressive work in the recent past . . . their productions of shows like *From These Green Heights* and *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot* have been really impressive visually. Their latest is absolutely beautiful.

Rebecca Hamlin's scenic design on the show is absolutely gorgeous. She's a Chicago-based designer. This is her first time working with UWM—she's a guest artist. Initial appearances give the impression that the cast is literally walking around on Shakespeare's first folio . . . there's a parchment-like feel to the set with lots of rich texture. Gauzy ribbons of text hang down on what at first appears to be fabric, but later turns out to be long, thick, ragged sheets of Mylar or polyethylene. The forest of Arden appears as more and more ragged strips of translucent plastic are lowered . . . and writing this down, I realize that this doesn't sound nearly as cool as it looks. The plastic is covered in bits of text written in various fonts. The name Rosalind appears countless times in the text. The forest of Arden turns out to consist almost entirely of the love struck poetry of the smitten Orlando. There are a number of wooden multi-purpose blocks that get arranged and re-arranged in the course of the program. There's text on the inside of those blocks that extends the visual. Hamlin's first work with UWM is absolutely stunning.

Jeffrey Lieder's costuming for the show is an interesting clash of different styles from various different eras. What at first appears to be an ensemble wardrobe anticipating the Todd Edward Ivans leather and chrome *Othello* that the Milwaukee Rep will be staging in April actually turns out to have a stunning range. Director Bill Watson seems to have given him a huge amount of freedom to go in many different directions at once with the costuming here. There's black leather, yes, but there's also costuming elements that would be perfectly at home in Shakespeare's time that mix fluidly with elements of design that are decidedly more 20th century. That Lieder is able to make it all look so natural together is a huge accomplishment.

Easily my favorite bit of design on the whole production is Lieder's costuming work on the character of the courtier LeBeau. The decision was evidently made that the character would look like a traditional African safari outfit. Real nice and everything . . . but the lever bit of design on the costuming was the pith helmet, which dominated the whole look of the character in a way that reminded me of French artist Moebius' Major Grubert character from *The Airtight Garage*. With LeBeau, the costuming could've *become* the character all too easily. That the costume wasn't wearing her is tribute to the evident stage talent of actress Gemma Fitzsimmons. It's a fairly minor role, but Fitzsimmons imbues it with more than enough casual depth to make it feel fully realized.

Fitzsimmons is one of a handful of actors in the production who add a lot from the corners of the ensemble. Established personalities like John Glowacki and Nick Haubner put in solid performances in major roles, but it's nice to see talent emerging from other ends of this particular ensemble. Gretchen Mahkorn is beautifully musical. Liz Leighton is cleverly comic. It all comes together really well.

My only real disappointment was the design's intrusion into the finale. The end reads like a romantic matrimonial billiards shot as Rosalind (played with sharp wit by Megan Stapleton) where everything falls into the right pocket and everyone gets married. The visuals designed for the big finale (involving a fluffy cloud-like rug and a comic steam punk-style angel) were clever and witty and everything, but they lacked the fluidity that really followed-through on the matrimonial ricochet. I'd seen the delivery on that ending handled much more fluidly before, but the production design of the show is more than enough to make up for any issues there. The stylishness of an inspired design team covers up for any of the production's shortcomings.

UWM's production of *As You Like It* runs through December 11th at UWM's Mainstage Theatre. A comprehensive review runs in the next *Shepherd-Express*. For ticket reservations, call 414-229-4308.