

Edinburgh Festival Fringe 2018 Review: Side By Side Theatre – As We Like It****

‘Having a learning disability is no barrier to creating theatre that is thought provoking, enjoyable and accessible to everyone’ (Susan Wallin MBE, Artistic Director, Side by Side Theatre)

In William Shakespeare’s *As You Like It* dukes, courtiers and country folk run around in the Forest of Arden, falling in and out of love and trying to find one another (or avoid one another), until they eventually sort themselves out. There’s quite a lot of gender-bending, even by Will S’s standards, and the forest is seen as a magical, mystical place, an idealised version of nature where everything is better than it was back in town.

In Side By Side Theatre Stourbridge’s wonderful *As **We** Like It*, time has moved on – to 1967 and the Summer of Love, when rules were broken, personal happiness was paramount and, as Timothy Leary famously said, everyone wanted to turn on, tune in and drop out. And where better to do all that than in a leafy woodland glade, complete with trees made out of coat stands



As You Like It includes many of Shakespeare's most famous speeches, and more songs than any other Shakespeare play – which is handy for this cast, who sing and dance their socks off with gusto. In place of *Under the Greenwood Tree* and *It was a Lover and his Lass* the 60s scene is set by everything from *Friendship to Smile an Everlasting Smile*, *Good Day Sunshine* and a gloriously uplifting rendition of *The Rhythm of Life*.

Side by Side Theatre Stourbridge is a special theatre company that gives learning disabled actors the opportunity to develop their skills in the performing arts. The company was founded in 1997 by Susan Wallin, who remains its artistic director today. The cast is made up of actors with a wide range of learning disabilities, who take on the responsibility of performance without any additional support. This is their fourth re-imagining of a Shakespeare play as part of the Royal Shakespeare Company's Open Stages Project.

But if you think learning difficulties mean substandard productions, you're so wrong; *As We Like It* is well acted, hugely entertaining, and very professional. These actors have memorised a complex script and thrown themselves into performing it with skill and enthusiasm. Unlike some amateur thespians (including a few I've seen at this year's Fringe), they have few inhibitions, never look embarrassed, and share

their infectious *joie de vivre* throughout.

Several clever ideas are used in this play to move the story forward. As the first scene opens, a newspaper vendor shouts out the headlines ('Duke flees to forest with hippies'), so we soon know that things are not going too well at the court. Later the same device brings us up to date with the forthcoming wrestling match between Orlando (Rosalind's would-be suitor, played excellently throughout by James Emtage, who brings great sensitivity to the role – and also has a fabulous voice for sixties' style singing) and Charlie the Choker (Ben Rees). From the bowler-hatted and besuited fans at the match to the flower power hippies in the forest, costumes are superb; in the commune in particular you would be forgiven for thinking you'd stumbled into Woodstock or an early Glastonbury.

Once Rosalind, her cousin Celia, and her fool Touchstone have fled the palace for the forest, things become more anarchic by the minute. Suzie Schwartz as Rosalind is word-perfect at all times, despite having more to say than virtually anyone else, and Sarah Field as Celia – surely one of the shiniest stars in this talented line-up – is a born actress. When Celia is cross, everyone knows it – her facial expressions and hand gestures speak (very funny) volumes. Her furious reaction when her father tells her she can no longer be friends with Rosalind – 'But! **BUT!!**' is full of frustration and defiance. She's not going to put up with any nonsense, as is shown again later when she gives Orlando his marching orders.

Once everyone is safely in the forest, the real fun begins. And as Rosalind's exiled father – now transformed into Big Daddy – says 'Despite the cold weather we are free to be ourselves here'. The courtiers are free from the court, and the actors are free from preconceived ideas about their abilities. As the Duke/Big Daddy (also the newspaper vendor) Chris Male is brilliant; he inhabits the character of the charismatic hippy leader so perfectly that when his followers

dance round him in *The Rhythm of Life* we feel we could be back in a 1967 production of *Hair*.

Of course life is really no easier in the countryside than in the town. The complicated sub-plot involving the tangled affairs of Silvus (well played by David Atkins) Phoebe, Audrey (Amanda Hill, another actor whose facial expressions convey so much) and William shows us that wherever we are, love is never easy. Some people end up with what they want, some have to compromise. The mournful Jacquis (the versatile Ben Rees again) delivers Shakespeare's famous 'All the world's a stage' speech with real insight and emotion, and just when we are all descending into the gloom, the melancholy is skilfully cut by the lone female voice of Claire Atwood singing *Always Look on the Bright Side of Life*.

As We Like It is a great production, and one that represents everything that the Fringe is supposed to be about; open access for all, experimentation, freedom, and the idea of performing for the sheer fun of it. Shakespeare's plays were originally staged for rowdy crowds in the Globe Theatre, but are now so often seen as something highbrow, intellectual and only for the chosen few; *Side By Side* sweep away our preconceptions and reclaim Shakespeare for us all.

As We Like It is at Paradise in Augustines, George IV Bridge (Venue 152) at 1.20pm until Saturday 18 August. Tickets are available from the Fringe Box Office and online [here](#).

Side By Side Theatre Stourbridge can be contacted through their website: <http://www.sbstcs.org/>