

# Success of an All-Male Version of 'As You Like It'

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BY KENNETH A. HURREN

LONDON—The sexual ambiguity of Swinging London (girls in jackboots, military tunics and trouser-suits, and long-haired young men with bells on, to say nothing of necklaces and floral smocks) has found a theatrical manifestation this month at the Old Vic of all places.

Britain's National Theater company is staging an all-male version of Shakespeare's "As You Like It" with four of its most promising young actors getting into drag (the show-biz term for female impersonation) to portray Rosalind, Celia, Audrey and Phebe. What's more, it has turned out to be a rollicking success—like almost everything to which Sir Laurence Olivier's gifted aggregation turn their hands. But there are some observers, including this one, who feel that, what with Franco Zeffirelli's bizarre production of "Much Ado About Nothing," and now this, the high young talents of the Waterloo Road are pushing their luck.

An all-male "As You Like It" is certainly a novelty. And the boys have a lot of fun in their wigs and miniskirts (yes, it's an eccentric production in more ways than one). But whether this is a suitable approach to the Bard, by a company dignified by the name of National Theater, is a point verging, at least, on the moot.

*Hurren is a British freelance writer who occasionally contributes to Calendar.*

In future years, when the full plans of the National Theater reach fruition and they have their hoped-for "second stage" for experimental work, this sort of romping might be countenanced cheerfully enough. But for the moment it seems, on the one hand, to be just a shade self-indulgent, and on the other, to be making dubious use of the acting talents at their disposal.

In Anthony Hopkins and Ronald Pickup, the company has two young actors who may well prove to be the Olivier and Gielgud of their generation, Hopkins, in fact, deputized for Olivier in Strindberg's "The Dance of Death" during the National director's recent hospitalization, and he was impressively good. It is common knowledge that Pickup is being groomed for Richard II and eventually, in all probability, for Hamlet. It is an alarming thought that, following the acclaim that has greeted his Rosalind, Pickup could find himself diverted instead to Juliet, Cressida and Desdemona!

The thought has probably occurred that the production has a sort of validity in as much as Shakespeare wrote for all-male companies, anyway. But, although several pages of Old Vic program notes are devoted to "the Elizabethan convention whereby female roles were played by boys," no one is actually suggesting that a return

to that convention is a motive in the present case. The four female roles are not played by boys, but by men whose ages range from 27 to 37.

Further, a return to Elizabethan-type performances is hardly possible without commanding also an Elizabethan-type audience, by whom the all-male convention would be accepted as normal rather than, as must inevitably happen now, as a dubious gimmick.

The program notes on the production, incidentally, must be among the most antic and irrelevant ever published, for there are further pages devoted to extracts from an essay called "Shakespeare's Bitter Arcadia" by the Polish

In the only program note that really matters, the director of the piece, Clifford Williams (borrowed from the Royal Shakespeare Company when the National's own man, John Dexter, turned the job down), points out that his own intention was almost exactly opposite.

"I have found much illumination in 'Bitter Arcadia,'" he writes, "but this production is not designed to demonstrate ideas advanced in that essay. Nor is it my purpose to reintroduce the convention of boys acting women."

Williams goes on to claim that he is employing an all-male cast to get rid of the eroticism, not to increase it. He

are arrayed in a great deal of white and silver plastic, black leather and fun fur, and the designs would surely excite the envy of the swiftest young things of Carnaby Street.

There are exceptions: the much put-upon Orlando, for instance (played by Jeremy Brett more sturdily than you might imagine from his Freddy in "My Fair Lady"), has to make do with a sort of Huck Finn outfit in the plastic forest.

Among other characters, the usurping Duke in dark glasses, white topcoat and fur collar is a comic-strip gangster; and I couldn't go along with the melancholy Jaques as a senile, etiolated Aguecheek. But Touchstone, miming played by Derek Jacobi in the accents of an effeminate Cockney hairdresser, has never, in my experience, been funnier.

## More Distasteful

We must get back, though, to the "girls." I don't think I'd ever find them acceptable. I'm clearly not kinky enough to go along with Prof. Kott's eroticism bit; and I'm afraid—despite Williams' search for purity—the wooing by Orlando of Rosalind in her disguise as the boy Ganymede seems to me even more distasteful than usual in this convention.

But all this apart, and taking the idea on its own terms, the production founders in the inconsistency of the actors' approach to female impersonation.

Charles Kay as Celia appears to have been influenced by such comedian-dragsters as the London nightclub favorite Danny La Rue: he's amusing but I doubt whether his effects are quite what Mr. Williams, not to mention Shakespeare, had in mind.

Anthony Hopkins' Audrey is more legitimately comic, but this too is a burlesque impersonation like a burly football-playing adolescent making the best of his embarrassment at being chosen for the girl's part in a college spoof, Richard Kay's Phebe, contrarywise, is pure girl—a straight, clever impersonation with no concessions to masculinity.

Ronald Pickup's Rosalind doesn't go nearly so far, for all the delicately studied touches of femininity, Pickup goes brilliantly into reverse and comes over with remarkable conviction as a girl impersonating a boy.

There has been much comment on Pickup's remarkable resemblance to Vanessa Redgrave in this role, and it is possible that the actor has been influenced by Miss Redgrave's own radiant, definitive Rosalind, for the resemblance is more than physical.

But he does look so uncommonly like her that the two must surely be brought together, sooner or later, as the twins of "Twelfth Night." If they can agree, that is, on who plays Viola.



professor, Jan Kott, whose ideas had been suggested in some quarters as the inspiration for the production. Kott lines out the theory that boys playing girls (especially boys playing girls who are pretending to be boys) adds an extra dimension of eroticism to the proceedings; and further, that this effect is just what Shakespeare, whose own sexual propensities are commonly assumed to have been somewhat ambiguous, was aiming at.

Kott elaborates this notion with a great deal of high-flown applesauce, but don't give it a second thought. For this, too, like the "Elizabethan convention," turns out to be a red herring.

wanted to kick the surface sexuality out of the play and bring out the "spiritual purity" of love, its "interior truth."

This is a beguiling idea, which could be applied to any romantic drama by a director who didn't want to confuse the audience by having them think of the protagonists as men and women, and it has no especial relevance to "As You Like It"—and rather less, unfortunately, to what goes on in this version of it.

It might also be argued that the nature of the costumes—fetching though many of them are—affords far more distraction from the play than the presence of actresses. The characters