

Theater: An All-Male 'As You Like It'

Clifford Williams Puts New Light on Play

By CLIVE BARNES
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LONDON, July 5—The British have a way with classic revivals, which is just as well because traditionally the British theater is full of them. The British have learned that a good old play is better than a bad new play, and on the whole the London theater is the better for it.

There is, however, more than one way with a theatrical classic. You can, for instance, treat it as a living work of art, or you can, equally for instance, treat it as a deadly fossil. A couple of good examples, neatly illustrative of both approaches, are currently to hand on the London scene, Shakespeare's "As You Like It" for the National Theater at the Old Vic, and Wilde's "The Importance of Being Earnest" at the Theater Royal, Haymarket. "As You Like It" is fantastic, one of the most dazzling, sheerly enjoyable Shakespearean productions I have ever seen; the Wilde is a pompous and deflated bore.

Clifford Williams, director of "As You Like It" (he also directed "Soldiers" on Broadway earlier in the year) has had the apparently extraordinary idea of using an entire male cast. Nor are Rosalind, Celia and the rest played by piping voiced boy-actors as they were in Shakespeare's own day; they are played by grown men in drag. The results could have been objectionable or hilarious, but they are merely poetic.

It was Jan Kott, the Polish-Shakespearean scholar currently exerting an enormous and spasmodically beneficial influence on so many Shakespearean productions, who stressed of late the sexual ambiguity of Shakespeare's heroines. Not only were they intended to be played by boys, but Shakespeare quite frequently delighted in flaunting their gender at the audience. In many of the plays the heroines dress up as boys—a fine point indeed when it is remembered that they were in fact being played by boys.

According to a program note, Mr. Williams's purpose has been to produce "an atmosphere of spiritual purity which transcends sensuality in the search for poetic sexuality." This may be so, and I think it succeeds. But where the production is also outstandingly brilliant is in throwing a strange and new light upon some of the darker recesses of Shakespeare's play—speeches spoken by a girl dressed as a boy to a man, take on a totally different nuance when they are spoken—as Shakespeare intended—by (as it were) a boy dressed as a girl dressed as a boy!

Mr. Williams has also placed the play in a cold landscape of modern, yet timeless myth. The forest of Arden, in Ralph Koltai's cool and steely architectural setting, is a place of plastic and Perspex, beautiful, clinical and cold.

Against this gray and white shifting jungle, Mr. Williams juggles his actors and permits them to give a delightfully unaffected yet still imaginative performance. The National Theater gets better and better. Presumably it is the most accomplished group of actors ever gathered together in the history of the English-speaking theater, and the acting standards are extraordinarily high. But I think I have never seen the company work better than in this.

Ronald Pickup gives a most moving performance as Rosalind. Within a minute or two you forget that this lanky, touching figure is a man (although he makes no effort to disguise his voice) and you see him as a soul in love. The overtones and undertones in this magic Arden seem transparently clear, and Mr. Pickup is fortunate to have such a sensitive and expressive Orlando as Jeremy Brett.

But from top to toe this is a great cast: Derek Jacobi's cuttingly humorous vaudevillean Touchstone, Charles Kay's simpering coquettish Celia or Robert Stephen's wintry Jacques are particularly fine in a cast that has no weakness. All Shakespeare should be such a positive, mind-opening and delightful experience.