



## Vibrant Love's Labor's Lost Adds Vivid Colors to Glorious Oregon Setting and Dazzling Night Skies

by Jim Volz. Written on 2011-07-22. First published in the *ISE Chronicle*.

For the production: Love's Labor's Lost (2011, Oregon Shakespeare Festival, USA).

IN THE HANDS OF AN UNINSPIRED DIRECTOR, SHAKESPEARE'S SOMETIMES MELANCHOLY, TOO often enigmatic *Love's Labor's Lost* is generally a snoozer. On the scholarly side, the *LLL* reader needs to be a Googling researcher to decipher the stream of topical references, nonsensical wordplay and cluttered imagery.

Fortunately, the joy of attending the world's great Shakespeare Festivals means that audiences are often treated to directors who can whimsically or woefully marry an Elizabethan play to a modern day audience. In recent years, this reviewer has witnessed Australians who were captivated by the usually puzzling *Pericles* (Bell Shakespeare Festival in the Sydney Opera House), Canadians mesmerized by a bloody *Titus Andronicus* in a tent (Vancouver's Bard on the Beach) and Brits devastated by a 5 ½ hour London production of *Rose Rage* (think Henry VI and the War of the Roses).

So, it's not a surprise that a clever director (Shana Cooper) and an ensemble of bright actors generally manage to create a *Love's Labor's Lost* that captures the Bard's brilliant comic sense without muting the yearning, bittersweet quality of the text.

Scenic designer Christopher Acebo, costume designer Christal Weatherly and lighting designer Marcus Doshi create a series of colorfully playful settings in the Spanish province and the play opens on OSF's expansive Elizabethan Stage, with King Ferdinand of Navarre (Mark Bedard) and his three pals (Berowne, Longaville & Dumaine) roughhousing with a football, girly magazines, and a large trashcan (where they are reluctantly disposing of their dorm room goodies at semester's end).

Of course, the play revolves around Ferdinand's insistence that they all stick to their studies and forswear women for three years (much to the dismay of the incalitrant Berowne (aptly played by Greg Linington)). Rounding out the fasting-foursome, the oft ridiculously clad Ramiz Monsef

as Longaville and John Tufts as Dumaine have a great sense of physical comedy and make for much merriment throughout the play (especially when the four French damsels appear and thwart their plans). Kate Hurster is a dazzling Princess of France and Tiffany Rachelle Stewart (Maria), Christine Albright (Katherine) and Stephanie Beatriz (Rosaline) are in turn, coy, fetching and determined enough to keep the production focused and the main plot on track.

Unfortunately, though peopled with marvelous actors, the loquacious lower-class characters always play as long-winded, excessively written silly people penned by a young playwright in love with his own cleverness. Jack Willis, Jonathan Haugen and Gina Daniels are crystal clear and strong as Don Armado, Costard and Jacquenetta. Overall, the Bard's country characters offer interesting thematic counterpoints to the wooing royalty but the transitions and connections are fuzzy and too often feel like an inconvenient interruption of the young lovers' journeys.

Most scholars speculate that *Love's Labor's Lost* was first performed in 1594, with Shakespeare around the ripe old age of 30. There are nearly 23,000 words in LLL and audiences always seem to struggle with approximately half of them. Even the uproarious disguised dancing Russian would-be lovers masquerade goes on too long and *The Nine Worthies* extravaganza seems like one more bit of unnecessary comic relief when the audience just wants to cut to the chase. Is this a boy gets girl romantic comedy or a frustrating *Remains of the Day* relationship quadrupled?

As it turns out, OSF's *Love's Labor's Lost* is a bit of both—made palatable by a seasoned company, colorful, inventive uses of the space, whipped cream pie fights, a dash of directorial dexterity, and the glorious night sky on a chilly night over the Elizabethan Stage in Ashland, Oregon.

*Jim Volz is an international arts consultant, author, producer, and professor based in Orange County at California State University, Fullerton. He served as a longtime critic/arts columnist for New York's Back Stage and founding editor of the Shakespeare Theatre Association's international magazine, Quarto. He has produced over 100 professional productions, consulted for over 100 arts institutions and published more than 100 articles on management, arts criticism, Shakespeare, and theatre in American Theatre, Oxford University Press's Theatre Research International, Hollywood's Drama-Logue and myriad other articles for national and international publications. He is a Ph.D. graduate from the University of Colorado, Boulder. jvolz@fullerton.edu*