

Troubadour Theater Company Spins Shakespeare Like a Copper Penny

Political clowning, from Bono to Barack

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published: September 04, 2008



When, in the midst of being treated for ravaging brain cancer, Edward M. Kennedy opposed doctors' orders and took the stage at the DNC in Denver last week, he spoke with the steady hand and booming voice of what could have been one of Shakespeare's Roman senators. He conjured an idea of party unity, through the idealism of a Camelot, that his mortality — and his resolve to rise above it — made only more romantic. (The more tawdry memories of Camelot — the suspected murder of Marilyn Monroe and the death of Mary Jo Kopechne — were not forgotten but sequestered for the week on the island of Chappaquiddick.)

It's commonplace to describe our nominating process, and our political system in general, as a circus. The carnie traditions are as self-evident on TV broadcasts as the ongoing tensions in American history between the principles so clearly enunciated in our founding documents and the actions of our government, which contradict those principles, and between our ideals as a nation and the behaviors that have corrupted them.

This year's political circus is accomplishing what theater does best, by first acknowledging that we've gone astray (as we always do), then struggling to find a way — through spectacle and speeches — to identify the road we're supposed to be on. This is done through the candidate-actors articulating who we are as a nation and what we believe is possible. It's a collective experience, and almost as sacred as the Super Bowl.

Here's a scenario for a comedy by Shakespeare: Two rival camps, the usurped, starry-eyed Camelotians versus the Grumpy Old Cowboys. The modern GOC was created from the spawn of the goddess Athena and some guy. Athena gave birth to a demigod named Ronald Reagan, who stole his cowboy hat from the famous Camelotian warrior from Texas, LBJ, but that's another story. The Camelotians have been in exile since 1980. (If you honestly believe that the Clinton administration upheld the values of the Democratic Party, I've got a ticket to a fund-raiser for Joe Lieberman you can buy.) The standard-bearer for the usurped army is a wounded soldier named John Kerry. (You should have heard his great speech in Denver, about flip-flopping cowboys. Talk about a dollar short and a day late.)

Shakespeare did actually write this play. It's called *As You Like It*. Its most famous

speech comes from a morose old fellow named Jacques (played here by a woman, Beth Kennedy). It starts like this: "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players. They have their entrances and their exits, and one man, in his time, plays many parts."

Troubadour Theater Company is performing its very loose musical-carnival variation on the play, and has evolved its own commedia genre to the point where its shows no longer wear down their welcome by glibness — or perhaps they've just figured out the kind of tautness that these sorts of adaptations require. This one flows like silk in an evening of unfettered joy and good humor. At least half of the text is improvised around the bones of Shakespeare's plot, and there's an onstage band that vamps the orchestrations to a number of songs by U2. This explains why the Troubadour's event is named *As U2 Like It* — the latest in this company's series of pop-music-infused classical theater/lit riffs that have included *Alice in One-Hit Wonderland*; *It's a Stevie Wonderful Life*; and *Hamlet, the Artist Formerly Known as Prince of Denmark*.

The music is not restricted to melodies by U2. I pulled into the theater at 8:03 for the 8 p.m. curtain, and joined a dozen patrons waiting in the lobby while the company cavorted through its opening number. When the doors swung open, houselights were up, and the newcomers were greeted by the company with a variation on a Carly Simon song: "You're so late, I bet you think this song is about you."

Onstage, somber Duke Frederick (Mike Sulprizio) has usurped the Duchy in France and exiled his older brother Duke Senior (also played by Sulprizio) to the forest of Arden — here treated as a hippified enclave with the band situated under a pastoral gazebo (set by Sherry Santillano). Arden emerges as a kind of metaphor for the Democratic Party and its ostensibly humane values — compared to the dour brutishness of the usurper in charge.

Among Sharon McGunigle's lusciously colorful and animated costumes is a peace-symbol pendant worn by Duke Senior, dangling from a gold chain — the peace symbol is actually the Mercedes Benz logo. You couldn't get any closer to the realpolitik of the Democratic Party with a ticket to ride on Obama's jet.

Such allegory also sneaks up through the jokes.

A gray-bearded servant, Dennis (Travis Clark), snaps out of his foolish prating for a moment with a snide remark to man-about-town Oliver (Rick Batalla), causing the townsman to remark, "I liked it better when you were stupid."

"Okay," old Dennis replies, returning to his village-idiot posture and saying with a moronic timbre: "Offshore drilling is the cure for our current economic crisis."

As in *Twelfth Night*, the plot has a woman (played by a man in Shakespeare's day) going in disguise as a man, for reasons of safety on the road, and to assume some mantle of power. Plug in Hillary Clinton or Sarah Palin as you wish. These plots have been a centerpiece of

gender-studies analysis for decades.

Christine Lakin's choreography of big dance numbers greatly contributes to the production's buoyancy and precision, as do the ensemble's stellar performances, which also include Audrey Siegel's ribald Phebe, with padded bottom, clown nose and panned-on leg hair, which she combs; Dan Waskom's stilt-walking wrestler, Charles; Breanna Pine's sweet-saucy ingenue, Rosalind; Matt Merchant as her hunk-dolt beau, Orlando; Katie Nunez's Latina Celia (with a switchblade and a Mexican dress, of course); and Matthew Morgan's young shepherd, Silvius — even him sucking the toes of his beloved Phebe can't turn her attentions from Orlando.

Narrating as clown/MC, the "fool" Touchstone, artistic director Matt Walker, in red nose and spiked hair, straddles a line between charm and terror, the dueling, mingling, larger qualities of our life in this oddly hopeful, despondent era.

Jacques is a sorrowful lord, and Kennedy delivers his "all the world's a stage/seven ages of man" speech in whiteface — a Harlequin suffering from a deficit of good cheer, or any cheer at all. The interpretation is a childlike parody, accompanied by a guitar and sound effects. It leaves the audience mesmerized.

The final age of man that Jacques refers to is oblivion. You'd have to be dead not to feel it looming on the horizon. Late in the play, the other characters finally get Jacques to crack a smile — a large grin. Change we can believe in.

AS U2 LIKE IT | Presented by TROUBADOUR THEATER COMPANY at the Falcon Theater, 4252 Riverside Drive, Burbank | Through October 22 | (818) 955-8101