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THEATER REVIEW

'As U2 Like It' at the Falcon Theatre

The Troubadour Theater Company revamps the Bard's comedy as a freewheeling musical sendup.

By David C. Nichols

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With equal parts iambic pentameter and impish pandemonium, "As U2 Like It" hits the Falcon Theatre. But as brazen and Bono-driven as it gets, this entrancing Troubadour Theater Company riff on Shakespeare's gender-bent trek through the Forest of Arden honors its source more enjoyably than many a legit reading.

The time-honored Troubie tactics -- Brechtian comment, commedia abandon, topical groaners -- are in place. Charles the wrestler (Dan Waskom) is a stilt-walking behemoth. Musical director Eric Heinly's rocking band wears Robin Hood hats. The penalty scarf for straying too far off script turns up.

Yet judicious control carries the day from the pre-show, with director Matt Walker and the invaluable Beth Kennedy completing their makeup behind wardrobe trunks. Walker's sardonic Touchstone launches a tickling rewrite of U2's "Vertigo," the wonderful cast joins him, and it's just warming up. Long before we reach designer Sherry Santillano's forest set, they're on fire.

A fusion of discipline and showmanship distinguishes this outing, the wildest curveball somehow within the Bard's orbit. Breanna Pine's piquant Rosalind and Matt Merchant's statuesque Orlando are so correct in quality that they could play their roles sans shtick or songs. Indeed, the U2 numbers seem almost superfluous, except that their cumulative effect serves the freewheeling ethos and Christine Lakin's pert choreography, not to mention the storytelling.

When the gonzo Rick Batalla turns Oliver's misfired eyebrows or Adam's missing pants into a master class in scene stealing, it's both Shakespearean and house shaking. Katie Nunez gives Celia's forest incognito a delicious Latina spin, Mike Sulprizio makes his dual Dukes a bipolar treat and Audrey Siegel and Matthew Morgan are buffo hoots as overeater Phebe and masochistic Silvius.

Travis Clark and Kimberly Wood finish an unflappable roster that revels in Sharon McGunigle's tweaked Renaissance costumes and Nick McCord's saturated lighting.

Such delightful insouciance crystallizes in two sequences. Kennedy's deadpan Jacques, her white face and throaty delivery far removed from her rubber-mugged "One-Hit-Wonderland" work, nails "All the world's a stage" with a classical poise that hushes the house. The other defining moment comes in Act 2, when it occurs to everyone that all of U2's songs sound alike.

The ensuing contrapuntal melee proves their point with hysterical finesse, which sums up this magical Troubie benchmark.

"As U2 Like It," Falcon Theatre, 4252 Riverside Drive, Burbank. 8 p.m. Wednesdays through Saturdays, 4 p.m. Sundays. Ends Oct. 12. \$32.50 to \$40. (818) 955-8101. Running time: 1 hour, 50 minutes.

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