

Don't miss the fine acting in *All's Well That Ends Well*

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The notes for the Stratford production of Shakespeare's *All's Well That Ends Well* call the comedy one of the Bard's "problem plays."

The problem is that it's hard for playgoers, especially modern playgoers, to accept the play's basic premise. The play has at its center a strong female lead who makes decisions that seem a bit incomprehensible.

The pleasures in this Stratford production are in the small gestures and rich use of language as performed by a fine cast of

Shakespearean actors.

Helena is the orphan daughter of a physician. She has come under the patronage of a widowed countess whose husband was treacherous to the physician.

Helena falls in love with the countess' handsome but arrogant and snobbish son.

When she cures an ailing king, she asks the king to force the young man to marry her. Instead the young count runs off to war and she sets out to trick him into marriage.

Ignore the plot and concentrate on the acting.

The great William Hutt plays the ailing king. Hutt has the remarkable facility for speaking Shakespeare's language as if it were his normal speech. He also has a wonderful sense of timing and gesture. He finds the humor where others would miss it.

Domini Blythe is also at home with Shakespeare's language.

■ Whatever Shakespeare might have been saying about class differences (of *All's Well That Ends Well*) becomes muddled in the plot.

Her countess is warm and sympathetic. Even the most difficult passages become comprehensible.

Lucy Peacock is also at ease with Shakespearean language though she seems to play the central role of Helena a bit too stiffly. Her many long speeches get us no closer to understanding why Helena stalks after an impudent boy.

Benedict Campbell handles the low humor of the jester Lavatch skillfully, though some of the word play has lost its

sting. Tim MacDonald has fun as the bragging and posturing Parolles, who is finally revealed as a coward. Sara Topham is attractive and blithe as the young maid seduced by the cadish count.

Richard Monette's direction is deft and capable. The comic encounter to unmask Parolles is especially well done.

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All's Well runs through Aug. 31 at the Festival Theatre.

The Scarlet Pimpernel

Class differences are at the heart of Beverley Cross' stage version of Baroness Orczy's popular melodrama *The Scarlet Pimpernel*.

This production is part comedy, part swashbuckler.

Sir Percy Blakeney, the fop-

pish lover of drink, games and theater, is secretly the dashing Scarlet Pimpernel, who leads a merry band of Englishmen dedicated to saving the necks of French aristocrats from the guillotine of the French Revolution. His name is taken from the small red flower he leaves as his calling card.

Sir Percy has recently married a French actress, Marguerite, who has Republican sympathies and may or may not be in league with the revolutionaries.

Director Dennis Garnham keeps the action moving smoothly back and forth from France to England. The clever mechanics of the set are a show in themselves on the Avon stage. The frame for the guillotine becomes a rocking ship, a grubby tavern and a count's ballroom.

Peter Donaldson and real-life wife Sheila McCarthy play the Blakeney and his spouse. (They

also play the despicable Peachum in *Three Penny Opera*.) They have a lot of fun with the roles, especially Donaldson who gets to dress up in a variety of disguises. He does not, however, fit the usual image of a dashing hero.

Peter Hutt is the villain, Chauvein, special agent to Robespierre. He wears black and looks a lot like Richard Nixon with a five o'clock shadow. His performance is uneven and a bit confusing. Perhaps a little more "Snidely Whiplash" would carry the idea more effectively. Though the audience did hiss him.

The production has its moments but never rises to true heart-stopping melodrama.

The Scarlet Pimpernel continues at the Avon through Nov. 2. (For a look at the *Shaw Festival* see Sunday's paper.)

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for the Endangered series. Along the way he met Josephine in a television conference in Washington, D.C. Jabara continued producing documentaries including *The Golden Jacal* for National Geographic, and various footage for television stations in Italy, Germany, The Netherlands, France, and Australia. Their second son, Jordan, was born in Africa while filming *Kratts Creatures* for PBS and TV Ontario. Their film about a Nepali village and its tigers is still on view at The Smithsonian Institute.

"Basically we're filmmakers finding a good idea and taking it to production," said Jabara, who this fall will teach film at Michigan State University where he lectures regularly. "We're looking for interested parties to help in all ways including investors for our modest budget and creative marketing plan. In addition to looking for distributors we're planning to offer it as a fundraiser to nonprofits."

"Making a feature film requires so many details. At the end of the day it's we're storytellers who hope to make a difference in the quality of life."

For more information about auditioning for the role or helping in any way, call the East Lansing production company at (517) 351-1660 or send e-mail to movie@oursmallplanet.com. More information can also be found at the Web site: www.oursmallplanet.com.



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