THEATER REVIEW

Cabrillo’s Shakespearean chaos

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A big, unwieldy, not-always-comprehensible William Shakespeare play like “As You Like It” seems an unlikely choice for the stout-hearted thespians in the Theatre Arts Department of Cabrillo College.

One considerable obstacle is that this production, which doesn’t quite have the quality of Shakespeare’s top-notch comedies, includes more than 30 performers. Thus, it takes both a creative director and set designer to accommodate all of them, thanks to an adaptable set that includes massive gray stones in a haphazard design, tall, leafy tree limbs covering the entire theater ceiling, and a second level that is used extensively (especially via a tall, wooden ladder that actors climb up to the blackened balcony).

The very first scene features two sweet-faced girls, Isabell Yarme and Seija Mauldin Nores, as the younger versions of Rosalind and Celia, singing a pure song when Duke Frederick (a snarling Shanye Wessell) and his menacing henchmen force the Duchess Senior (Kendra Kannegaard), as well as her lords and ladies into exile in the Forest of Arden. But the Duke keeps the Duchess’s daughter, Rosalind, as a companion for his own daughter.

Much ado about a lot of silliness happens, some of which is easy to follow while at other times antics and events seem nonsensical. At the heart of the story is Rosalind, who grows into a beautiful young woman (skillfully played by Eliza Noemi) and is steadfastly protected by her cousin Celia (a nice turn by raven-haired Rachael Heller).

The handsome young hero of the story is Orlando de Boys (not surprisingly played by the handsome young Jacob Ellis, initially somewhat wooden, but warming to the role later in Act I). It’s fortunate that Ellis is quite athletic because he gets pummeled royally by Duke Frederick’s hefty wrestler (Travis Wychoff) but wins the match in the end. For some reason, Orlando’s arrogant brother Oliver (a stilted Alexander J Leos) has kept Orlando in poverty since the death of their father. But one day Orlando hits the lottery: He wins money from the wrestling match and he meets — and instantly falls in love with — Rosalind.

Meanwhile Duke Frederick decides Rosalind is a threat to his rule, so he banishes her. Little does he realize that his own daughter, Celia, will remain true to her cousin and join Rosalind on the road. Because they’re women, they know it will be dangerous to travel alone, so a) Rosalind disguises herself as a man and b) they convince the clownish Touchstone (a raffish Davis Banta) to go with them. Orlando then discovers that his brother Oliver is plotting to have him killed — such brotherly love! — so Orlando also takes to the forest where he first joins up with the exiled Duchess and her entourage, then later writes copious love poems about the fair Rosalind. Since he posts them on every available tree, naturally Rosalind and Celia find and read them.

There’s much more — especially many more couples falling or trying not to fall in love — but that’s enough of the storyline for now. Director Sarah Albertson does her best to juggle a boat load of performers and short scenes and, for the most part, does it successfully.

Among other standout performers are Elizabeth Gaona as Corin, an old shepherdess in Arden Forest, and Maia Thomas as the servant Audrey, who manages to trap the crafty Touchstone into marrying her (rather than just bedding her). Justin Singleton as Jaques, a lord in Duchess Senior’s retinue, is a puzzleman. He plays a key role and is delightful at times, strolling into (and sitting in) the audience and fervently charging up and down the tall ladder. But at other times, his immobile face makes it appear he’s not even excited about speaking his lines.