

OregonLive/Oregonian Orlando Review

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Profile Theatre's 'Orlando' is a sparkling gem of a production (review)

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It's no surprise that ever-whimsical playwright Sarah Ruhl would choose to dramatize Virginia Woolf's eccentric novel "Orlando." The result is a fun-filled theatrical excursion across centuries and continents. Under Matthew B. Zrebski's careful direction for Profile Theatre, this spirited, fanciful play has been shaped into a sparkling gem of a production, a fitting grand finale for Profile's 2015 season, which has been devoted to Ruhl's work.

The play traces the exploits of Orlando a young 16th-century English lad who becomes a beloved page of Queen Elizabeth, falls in love with and is abandoned by a mysterious Russian princess, wanders off to distant Constantinople in the 17th-century, is suddenly transformed into a woman and moves back to England, where she marries a reasonably free-spirited sea captain in the 19th-century, only to finally to flourish as a fully independent woman in the 20th-century.

The play probes the nature of gender identity -- playfully taking on the restrictive social institutions, cultural assumptions and period clothing that work to press us into narrowly defined gender categories. But even more than gender the play explores the multiplicity that comprises personal identity. We are each so many different people, and we need to embrace them all.

Strengths: This is a wonderfully conceived production. It dances with a contagious ebullience, and we can't help but be carried away by the lively spirit of the piece's humor even as we ponder the philosophical and psychological issues the play explores.

Significant Performers: Beth Thompson's plucky, self-possessed portrayal of the ever-changing Orlando carries us through the various plot and character permutations. She negotiates gender lines with incredible ease. She masters the bold physicality of the young masculine Orlando, but most fun are the scenes immediately following Orlando's transformation into a woman, when Thompson's Orlando struggles with expected gender tones and gestures — drolly shifting back and forth between male grumbling bluntness and flighty, fluttering femininity.

In support of Thompson, Crystal Munoz, Ben Newman, Ted Rooney and Elizabeth Rothan give us a number of gender-bending, broadly humorous portraits of queens, princesses, archdukes and archduchesses as well as servants, sailors and street people.

Production Design: Tal Sanders' scenery, Alison Heryer's costumes, Carl Faber's lighting and Em Gustason's sound are crafted into a delightful whole, which is as elegant as it is appropriate to the buoyant spirit of the play. Sanders gives us a white circular acting space with a single small diaphanously curtained booth on its upstage edge and a large halo of white oak leaves suspended above—all marvelously set off in space by a background of black curtains. Similarly, Heryer costumes the actors in off-white and pale-colored period costumes accented occasionally by darker pieces like the skullcaps all but Thompson wear. The contrast of light with dark accents is certainly pleasing, but when washed with colored light the stage world can in an instant become a cold wintry scene or a warm gentle spring meadow. Such is the magic of this production.

Take Away: The wild flights of imagination that characterize this play may not be for everyone. But for those of us who are willing to take wing with this production of "Orlando," there's much to celebrate.

-- Richard Wattenberg for The Oregonian/OregonLive
