

DOWN AND DIRTY

Shakespeare's dark larks.

BY JOHN LAHR



The web of our life is of a mingled yarn, good and ill together,” one of the courtiers in “All’s Well That Ends Well” says in a piece of throwaway brilliance that reveals Shakespeare’s argument and his theatrical game. The ever-changing contradictions of language and of character are at the core of “All’s Well,” but Daniel Sullivan’s well-staged, crowd-pleasing production (at the Delacorte) almost entirely misses them. As admirable as it is on the surface—beautifully costumed in Edwardian elegance by Jane Greenwood and evocatively underscored by Tom Kitt’s original music on the porticoes and porches of Scott Pask’s clever, minimal two-tiered set—the production is an easy-listening version of Shakespeare’s tale of love apparently conquering all, which fails to dramatize the dark, antithetical music underneath. Sullivan, aiming for clarity over complexity, doesn’t risk interpretation. By refusing to

make meaning of the play’s paradoxical melody, he falls into the same trap as Shakespeare’s deluded heroine, Helena (the charming Annie Parisse), an orphan, taken in by a countess (Tonya Pinkins), who triumphs but at her own expense.

Shakespeare’s stage directions call for us to first encounter the Countess and her family in mourning, both for the late Count and for his son, Bertram (Andre Holland), who is leaving home to serve the King of France. “In delivering my son from me, I bury a second husband,” the Countess says in the play’s opening line, positioning herself and the audience instantly in a world of loss. Sullivan, however, contrives to begin the play at a ball, in honor, one assumes, of Bertram’s departure. As Bertram waltzes around the floor with various gambolling ladies, Helena looks on, a fetching, nerry wisp of a wallflower who intermittently breaks into

tears. Her morbid melancholy, it turns out, is not for her recently dead foster father or for her long-dead real father, who was a distinguished doctor, but for Bertram, whom she idealizes as a “bright radiance,” whose “collateral light” comforts her. The resolute and relentless Helena claims to have one big passion; in fact, she has two. It’s her passion for ignorance, contained in her mantra of positive thinking, “all’s well that ends well”—the Elizabethan equivalent of “whatever”—that accounts for her blinkered obsession with Bertram, who is a transparent no-goodnik. Her habit of denial is broadcast in her startling first long speech: “I think not on my father,” she says. “I have forgot him. My imagination/Carries no favor in’t but Bertram’s./I am undone: there is no living, none,/If Bertram be away.”

Bertram is generally considered one of the most unpleasant characters in the Shakespeare canon. If he has any redeeming features, Dr. Johnson didn’t see them. “A man noble without generosity, and young without truth, who . . . defends himself by falsehood and is dismissed to happiness” is how he summed up the object of Helena’s desire. “I am now in ward, evermore in subjection,” Bertram whines to his mother about the King of France at the beginning of the play. When the King (the persuasive John Cullum) commands him to marry Helena, who has saved his life with her father’s medicines, the snobbish Bertram replies, in front of Helena, “I cannot love her nor will strive to do’t.” Later, after agreeing to the marriage, he takes cruel revenge on his bride. “I’ll to the Tuscan wars and never bed her,” he tells his swaggering sidekick, Parolles (the hilarious Reg Rogers).

“All’s Well That Ends Well” is an ironic title; beneath its fairy-tale surface, the play probes the reasons that good people make bad choices. But this production cops out on the “problem” of the play by making Bertram, well, kind of a nice guy after all. He is staged as a smooth, flirtatious operator in a three-piece suit and a rep tie, whose words, like his outfit, are carefully pressed. Holland gives his insolent first speech a matter-of-fact reading that mutes its brattiness. And when Bertram parts from his hated mate he responds to her wistful plea for a goodbye kiss with a long, lingering smooch, a moment of connection that makes a mockery of both his character and the plot. As an actor, Holland is neither

Tonya Pinkins, Annie Parisse, and Andre Holland in “All’s Well That Ends Well.”

predatory nor particularly macho, and, since in his performance we don't see the real dimensions of Bertram's ugliness, we can't see Shakespeare's ironic point. The Delacorte audience never asks itself the question that is the play's essential drama: in Harold Bloom's words, "How can Helena be so massively wrong?"

Helena is not in love; she is lovesick. We meet her in a traumatic time. In the face of enormous loss, she experiences love as a kind of regression, a longing for an embrace that is more primal than passionate: by marrying her foster brother, this orphan hopes to insure that she will never again be abandoned by her family. In order to meet Bertram's swinish challenges and win his hand, Helena undertakes a series of audacious exploits with an aggression that contradicts her shellac of charm: she wagers her life, makes a gruelling pilgrimage, bribes conspirators, and engineers an elaborate bed trick. At the finale, she gets her happy ending, but the play smiles at it with cold teeth. Helena never changes, and, on the evidence of the dialogue, neither does Bertram. Even his final vow of love before the King is expressed in the weasel-worded conditional tense: "If she, my liege, can make me know this clearly/I'll love her dearly, ever, ever dearly." Shakespeare leaves Helena and Bertram condemned to the blindness of their unexamined lives. Their union is the joining of two people who have no idea who they are.

The limits of seeming and being are also tested in the ferocious free-for-all of "Measure for Measure" (at the Delacorte, under the direction of David Esbjornson), Shakespeare's last comedy, which was written in 1604, when he was forty. Comedy is the province of youth, whose frivolity owes its insouciant cruelty to the lack of a sense of limitation; by middle age, playwrights are better acquainted with loss. Although no character dies in the rapacious universe of "Measure for Measure," death seeps into every roiling corner. Set in Vienna, which was Catholic and for centuries the seat of the Holy Roman Empire, the play is pitched between the countervailing forces of excess and restraint, license and abstinence. The Duke (Lorenzo Pisoni), disguised as a friar, goes underground to observe his community; in his absence, his austere deputy, Angelo (Michael Hayden), rules that fornication is punishable by death.

To set an example, he orders the execution of a young nobleman, Claudio (Andre Holland), who has failed to post his marriage banns but whose partner is with child. The Draconian judgment sets in motion a battle between liberty and authority, immorality and mercy, through which the boisterous, soiled Elizabethan world is laid bare.

Of the two plays on offer in this summer's Shakespeare in the Park program, "All's Well" is the better production, but "Measure for Measure" is by far the better play. The pressure of its rancid claustrophobia dissipates in the Delacorte's gorgeous open-air setting. Despite an eerie Hieronymus Bosch-like opening, in which horned, red-eyed devils emerge from the crepuscular gloom to skitter on all fours around the stage, Esbjornson can't seem to quite unlock Shakespeare's nihilism, in part because the major roles are not well cast. The plot hinges on Claudio's sister, the pious nun Isabella (Danai Gurira), who must persuade Angelo to release him. She has "a prone and speechless dialect/Such as move men," Claudio says. But that come-hither thing is exactly the quality that Gurira lacks. She's reserved and steely, but without the wit to clinch the comedy of her religious hypocrisy. Angelo offers to trade Claudio's freedom for Isabella's virginity, a deal that Isabella is not prepared to make. ("O, were it but my life,/I'd throw it down for your deliverance/As frankly as a pin," she tells her brother.) There's little chemistry between Gurira and Hayden, who, as Angelo, is supposed to have "snow-broth" for blood but from whom we feel neither ice nor fire.

Here, the minor characters fare much better, especially John Cullum as the sane, ancient Escalus, Reg Rogers as the blustering Lucio, and the mischievous Carson Elrod as Pompey, a kind of punk pimp and executioner-in-training. "Pray, Master Barnardine, awake till you are executed, and sleep afterwards," he calls to a perpetually drunk murderer who is scheduled to die with Claudio. And, although he has only fourteen lines in the play, Barnardine (the terrifying and terrific Lucas Caleb Rooney)—"careless, reckless, and fearless of what's past, present, or to come"—is the soul of comic anarchy. "I will not consent to die this day, that's certain," he says, lurching around the stage in a kind of mad frenzy, which plays as comedy's refusal to suffer. ♦