Drama

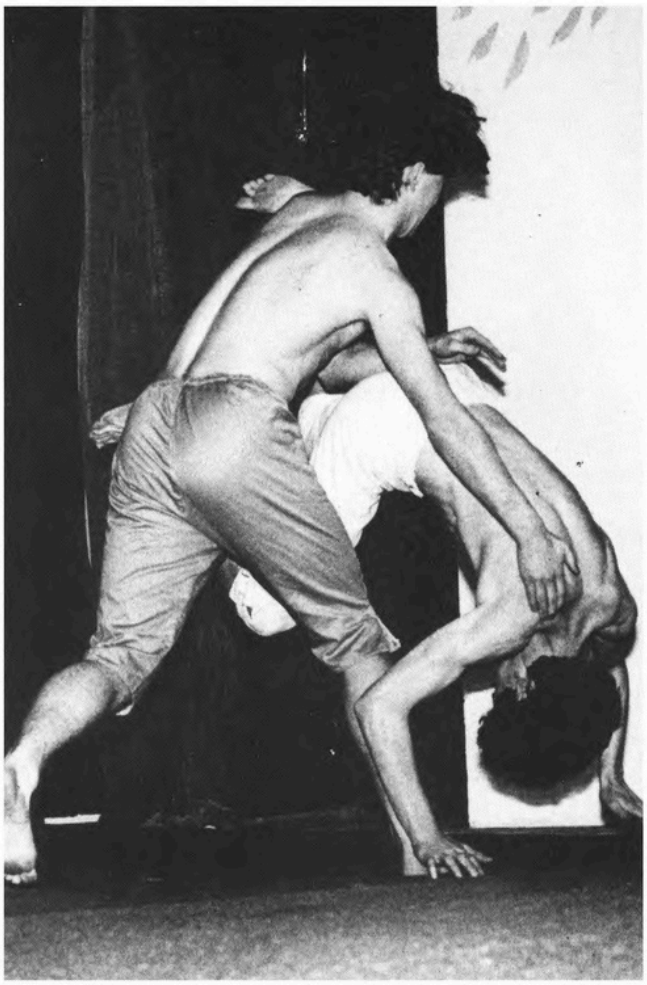
The XXI Club: "AS YOU LIKE IT"

It must always be considered something of a risk to put on Shakespeare at school at a time when an audience's minds are likely to be full of the excellence offered by the R.S.C. no more than half a mile away. Perhaps encouraged by the success of "Hamlet" two years ago, Mr. Armstrong chose to take his reputation into his hands once again. And yet, perhaps the concurrent R.S.C. season gave the production an advantage in that people would probably sit down to watch it and fully expect to be a little disappointed. As it was, there were very few disappointments at this production, and a substantial number of pleasant and even joyous surprises.

"As You Like It" as a play is fine fodder for a good evening's entertainment. Its plot is light-hearted and undemanding; it provides song, dance, wrestling and spectacle; it has a philosophical clown to laugh at and a despotic villain to hate; and various well-known quotations keep popping up, like "All the world's a stage", which will keep the attention of the least literary audience. The play makes no demands, is not intended to be a harrowing or didactic experience, and in places resorts to awful transparent techniques in order to contrive the happiest possible ending. The number of marriages in the final scene is surpassed only by the number of deaths in "Hamlet" or "King Lear". This production succeeded admirably in conveying the spirit of the play: one came away feeling quite exhilerated by the pervading sense of enjoyment.

For this atmosphere, I feel that Mr Walton and his ensemble must take a large part of the credit. It might seem perverse to mention the music in the first place, but for me the music was the highlight of the show, performed with gusto and style and giving the whole play an extra exuberance and sparkle. The mood was set for the play by a discreet musical opening which also acted as a signal that the play was about to get under way; the transition from music to the opening scene, with Richard Stephenson strolling onto the stage still strumming away, was most effective and inspired. The music throughout the play had a jazzy feel, most of the singing being handled most charismatically by Mark Squires, as Amiens, who presented his songs in his best George Melly voice. The play's final stages also included some amusing and well-arranged dance – and the opportunity to witness Mr Squires (as the God of Marriage) prancing about the stage in Morcambe-and-Wise fashion was surely a rare one. Mention must also be made of the two young pages, Richard Hall and Rehan Khan, whose singing (despite what Touchstone might have thought) was tuneful and confident.

While on the subject of Touchstone, Gavin Pottinger certainly contributed greatly to the audience's enjoyment of the show. On the first night he tended to gabble somewhat, masking several of his most amusing lines; but later in the week, when audience reaction was rather more forthcoming, he was much clearer, delivering his lines with expression. Nevertheless, I felt I should have liked more of the flamboyant clownishness of which we only really got glimpses: Gavin was perhaps too reluctant to move very far.



E. Evans

Richard Stephenson as Orlando managed to sustain an impressive performance, coming across effectively as the romantic hero without exaggerated sentimentality, yet constantly credible. The part of the totally good character is never an easy one to portray without seeming boring. Dominic Armstrong, as the banished Duke, had a similar problem to face; but he too was strong, switching with sensitivity and great effect from his frequent lyrical ponderings to his dialogue with other characters. But if these two male "goodies" were commendable, then the two female "goodies" were quite outstanding. Emma Wetherell in particular, as the heroine Rosalind, was consistently excellent, and her facial expressiveness never faltered. Considering the number of lines she had to learn, her performance was a major triumph. Jane Purdon, as Celia, was also extremely competent: though inevitably overshadowed by Rosalind, she retained vivacity and style throughout, and the interplay between the two girls worked beautifully. Act III scene ii, where Rosalind is trying to persuade Celia to reveal the identity of the poet whose words of love for Rosalind are strewn about the forest, had a realism equalled nowhere else in the play: Jane made excellent use of this rare opportunity to dominate.

I was interested by the effective dress of the nasty characters, almost like Nazi officers, bringing across their unpleasantness even before they opened their mouths. Liam Anderson in particular, as Duke Frederick, showed a calculating truculence which exactly fitted the part, his bawling being convincing and well-timed. The black leather gloves



N. Posner

with which he occupied his hands seemed to add to his overall credibility – and other characters indeed seemed to suffer through having nothing for their hands to do, notably perhaps Orlando, who kept wanting to put his in his pockets but deciding against it. In the first scene Andrew Shaw made good use of a riding crop: he too came across well in the role of Oliver, a very striking figure as he first walked onto the stage, and convincingly grim in his early animosity towards Orlando. We have seen Andrew's ability to play angry parts before, most notably in "Dr Faustus", where he appeared as Wrath personified. In the later part of the play, however, Oliver is a reformed character, and Andrew continued to perform competently even if there was perhaps not as much for him to get his teeth into.

Of the smaller parts, Louise Laggan stood out as Audrey, the country wench with whom Touchstone falls in love. Her attire and her make-up added considerably to her effectiveness; and she adopted throughout a hilarious slovenly stance and well-executed West Country accent. Touchstone's line, "Bear your body more seeming, Audrey", is one of the most amusing moments in the play. Peter Stephenson was also very funny in his fleeting role as Sir Oliver Martext, the country vicar. We saw another silly walk – indeed, Peter seems to be something of an expert at these (as anyone who saw last year's "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat" will realize). Chris Craig, as Silvius, made the best of a tiresome part: his first exit was well staged, with his walking across the set at the back after having once left the stage. Tim Rose was also most amusing as William, the country bumpkin in love with Audrey: this part has great comic possibilities which were used to full effect. A part with fewer possibilities is that of Adam, the faithful old servant of Oliver who helps Orlando escape his brother's wrath. Chris Holland seemed unfortunately neither old nor frail enough to make his part especially convincing, though he would have been good in a younger and more energetic role. I also remained unconvinced by Jane Cox's open-mouthed demonstration of adoration for Rosalind (disguised as Ganymede) in the part of Phebe. This is certainly a difficult effect to achieve; but I have seen the part of Phebe played more coyly, and I felt that the audience were rather wary of Jane Cox's sudden and undeveloped enchantment. Having said this, she brought out Phebe's lack of interest in Silvius with some success, strutting and fretting her hour with vigour. Andrew Hitchcock was effective as the old shepherd Corin – though in conversation with Touchstone tended to be upstaged by the latter. In the singularly colourless role of Le Beau, Dom Hingorani succeeded as usual in stamping his own mark upon his part – in this case with a shallow French accent which both livened up the part and, unfortunately, made his words difficult to decipher. Le Beau, however, is a purely utilitarian character, who does nothing more than convey news. The same can be said of the words spoken by Charles the wrestler (played by Jeremy Cook) and indeed of Jaques de Boys (Ian Ritchey). While Jeremy was a fine choice for the wrestler, he was ill at ease while speaking his lines; though he did provide some effective comic moments during the later song and dance sequences, as did Dai Richards, playing one of Duke Senior's Lords.

Ian Ritchey was forceful as Jaques de Boys, a character whose introduction into the play must be regarded as a very weak resort on Shakespeare's part: he brings the news that, miraculously, the wicked Duke Frederick has been converted by an old religious hermit, and has not only decided against flinging a huge army against all our heroes, but has even returned to Duke Senior everything he snatched from him in the first place. The idea of having Ian rushing up the aisle from the back of the theatre is not new, but it achieved the desired effect.

After all is said and done, however, good as all the other players might have been, it was Jonathan Pye as the melancholy Jaques who stood out for me. This was a marvellous piece of casting in the first place, but Jonathan filled the stage with his presence and had the audience in the palm of

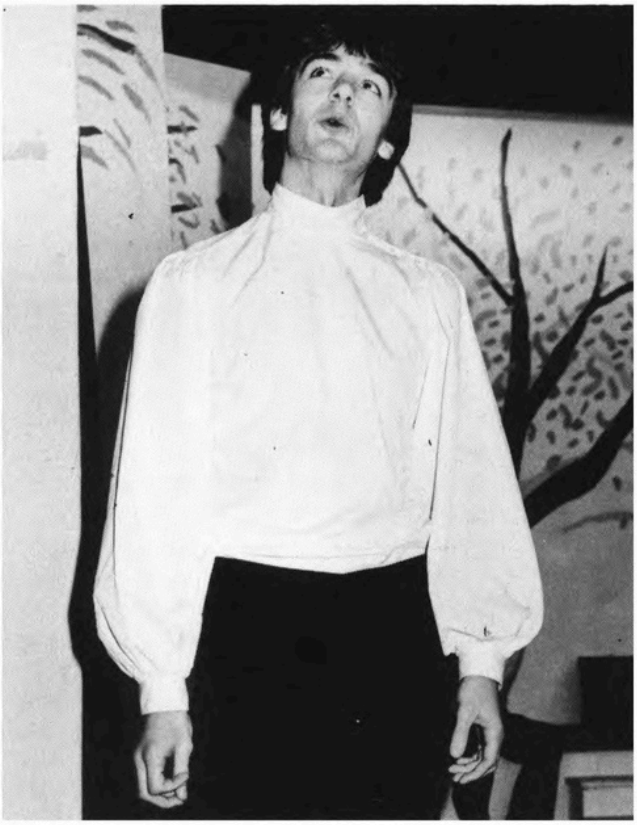
his hand. Relishing and making brilliant use of every word, he waved his arms with disparaging appropriateness, held his head high, leaned forward and drawled or spat out every syllable with superb expressiveness. One of the finest lines was in his discouragement of Audrey and Touchstone from getting married by Sir Oliver Martext, where he says that Martext will merely "join you together as they join wainscot then one of you will prove a shrunk panel, and like green timber, warp, warp." He was also responsible for what must surely be the comic highlight of the performance, namely his song, flamboyantly executed in a partnerless tango style. In a show full of impressive individual performances, reflecting the high degree of histrionic talent which currently exists in the two schools' respective sixth forms, Jonathan Pye's portrayal was a particularly golden streak.

Turning to the background in which the action so competently took place, I found Lance Charlton's trees pleasingly simple and spacious, and was glad that no attempt had been made to clutter up the stage with three-dimensional forest effects. I would have liked to see more use made of the extension to the stage, jutting out towards the audience: seeing as they had gone to the trouble of putting it there, it could have been used just a little bit more, to make certain scenes more intimate, for example. As it was, I felt that when action receded into the back of the stage, things became a little inaudible. Luckily this only happened about twice; but even Dominic Armstrong managed to muffle a few words upstage on one occasion. If your reaction to this criticism is "He's scraping the barrel a bit", I'm happy to say you are absolutely right – one feels forced to be pedantic if the overall standard of the production is high, whereas with a poorer performance one feels obliged to be kind.



It is possible at a school production to be entertained for all the wrong reasons: laughing at your peers cocking up their lines is often quite a satisfying experience. Happily, though, I came away from "As You Like It" having been thoroughly entertained for all the *right* reasons: fine acting, great comedy, imaginative and bold music and joyful, irrelevant dancing. I wonder if I was alone in wanting to jump up on stage and join in.

Paul Bajoria



Photographs by N. Posner

