

In program notes for "As You Like It," Brass Tacks Ensemble spells out a list of goals for its TreeTown Festival staging. The introduction concludes by asserting "a theater which entertains without provoking an audience is not a theater which interests us."

Unfortunately, this production falls short on both counts. Director James Ingagiola's interpretation of one of Shakespeare's most benign plays is provocative without being particularly entertaining. I suppose that could be a Brechtian ideal, but it's also a deadly combination.

And how about sparing some of the signs, too? Brass Tacks has opted to introduce every scene with a sign at stage right. There's "DUKE FRED FINDS FAULT," "BOY MEETS GIRL: OR, EXTRAORDINARY HOW POTENT CHEAP VERSES ARE," "WHY DO POOLS FALL IN LOVE?"; and yes, even "HAIL TO THE VICTORS." The latter sign elicits eye-rolling and a grimace from jester Touchstone, a role played and enlarged by director/actor

Ingagiola.

Maybe that's the biggest misstep of this admittedly daring dud. Brass Tacks has always prided itself as a group ensemble sans any hint of star-tripping. So what's Ingagiola doing onstage half the time, mugging like a cigar-chomping election ward-heeler each time he ever so slowly lifts one sign to reveal the next? Or hamming it up like a combination of Nathan Detroit and an overcoated flasher as he plays hard-to-get with country wench Audrey (Mindy Ra)?

It's a self-indulgent performance intended to grant Touchstone psychological if not physical powers nearly the equal of Prospero. Much of the time one senses the court fool is playing stage manager to the entire ensemble.

With a great gift for leering-eyed skepticism - Groucho Marx and Bill Murray come to mind - Ingagiola might have pulled off this court-jester-as-God stance. Instead he succeeds in casting a sour tone over perhaps Shakespeare's most effervescent play.

between actors and audience for nearly three hours. A few pristine exceptions are Joselle Norton, whose Rosalind is as impishly delighted to pass as a teen-aged boy as any irrepressible Rosalind ought to be. Her wooing-instruction scene with true love Orlando (Patrick Morgan) is more amusing than usual, since the staging suggests Orlando - whose normally unaccountably myopic during this sequence - is well aware who he's "practicing" with.

Morgan is a constantly amusing Orlando, so consumed in talky, pompous earnestness that perhaps he really can't see the forest for the trees - in this case a couple of leaf-adorned coat racks, upon which he merrily pins love notes).

Aral Gribble turns the nearly wordless role of Orlando's aged servant Adam into a constant mini-drama of silent, near-senile beseeching. And Melanie Wilson, in the role of Duke Frederick's daughter Celia, glows in some private world of her own, always accompanying friend Rosalind, but remaining utterly mysterious.

her's Dogpatch look was a constant amusement. Rob Sulewski's Jacques is so opaque and de-energized he lends all the more power to Touchstone, the play's other resident cynic. Scott Blair never seems villainous as Orlando's evil brother Oliver, while Ian Stines shows only that his Charles the wrestler has an appalling glass jaw. As Hymen, God of Marriage, Tom Vesota looks abashed.

As Touchstone declares near play's end, "*The fool doth think he is wise, but the wise man knows himself to be a fool.*" I think with all due respect to Ingagiola, he may be guilty of over-analyzing the incongruities in this light-as-a-feather play. He might do well to apply Touchstone's wisdom to his own ringmastering.

"As You Like It" continues at 8 p.m. Thursday-Saturday, and 2 p.m. Sunday at Performance Network, 120 E. Huron St. Tickets are \$15 general, \$12 students/seniors. Thursday is Pay-What-You-Can Night. For details call (734) 663-0681.

Plainsville, Texas also shared the silver medal. Maxim Philippov, 28, of Russia and Antonio Pomba-Baldi, 26, of Italy. No bronze medal was awarded.

Wang Xiaohan, 20, of China and Oleksiy Koltakov, 22, of Ukraine were the remaining finalists.

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