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As We Like It: Shakespeare and “The Stones” make connections with L.A. twists

By Don Shirley

Theater is an inherently local art. It occurs one performance at a time, for a particular audience in a particular place. Although playwrights should never feel constrained to write only about that time and place, artists who capitalize on theater's local roots can create a special bond with their audiences.

As You Like It: A California Concoction, at the Pasadena Playhouse, forges that bond. Like the Shakespeare original, this updated and transplanted version is rife with characters, plots, themes, and jokes. But I was struck by its bounty of good will toward the diverse people and landscapes of Southern California.

Purists might complain that the only good Will Shakespeare is the original. But most locals will find Cornerstone Theater's California Concoction hard to resist. It's a refreshing antidote to the depiction of L.A. in *Crash*. Here's a script that concludes that everyone can learn to get along in the wild, wacky, and open-minded Southland.

In Alison Carey's adaptation, a mayor of modern Pasadena has driven his brother, the ex-mayor, into exile in the Mojave Desert. The new mayor has turned the Rose Bowl into a NASCAR track. But his favorite driver is upset by young Orlando (Leith Burke), the son of one of the mayor's enemies. Soon Orlando and the two mayors' daughters - best friends Rosalind (Christopher Liam Moore) and Celia (Page Leong) - have fled lush Pasadena and are wandering in the desert.

The complicated sexual role-playing of the original script becomes even more topsy-turvy, highlighted by a brilliantly ambisexual performance from Moore - a man playing a woman disguised as a man who sometimes mimics a woman. Kate Mulligan delivers a series of quick but memorably hilarious comic turns that require her to play male, female, and alien (she also sings Shishir Kurup's original songs). Two of the supporting couples are gay and plan to marry, even though this isn't Massachusetts. And Orlando's aged ally - a man in the original - is a woman (Dorothy James) who falls for the ex-mayor (Gerald Hiken).

The local references might make this production a tough sell outside the L.A. area. But for those of us who live here, the inside jokes just keep coming - note that Jaques (Peter Howard) is a disillusioned TV producer who delivers the monologue about the seven ages of man from a Hollywood-centric perspective. If the production feels like a love letter to the citizens of Cornerstone's adopted home in L.A., it's a fitting farewell from director Bill Rauch, who's leaving his longtime job as the company's artistic director.

The Stones is another script adapted from a faraway locale - Australia - to Los Angeles. In this case, few of the words, by Tom Lycos and Stefo Nantsou, had to be changed. L.A. is a natural fit for this story about two young teenagers who make the deadly mistake of playfully dropping stones from a freeway overpass. Worrying about freeway incidents is almost as much a part of our lives as freeways.

The theatrical style here is almost as striking as the stones. Unlike a TV movie, which would employ a variety of realistic locations and actors, *The Stones* has only two actors, Joe Hernandez-Kolski and Justin Huen, each of whom plays one of the kids and one of the investigating cops. Sibyl Wickersheimer created a mostly abstract and highly mobile set that ingeniously serves as the site of the incident, the boys' homes, the courtroom, and the prison. It's also a playground for athletic choreography by Jacques Heim, who sends the actors swooping up and down and around the set, accompanied by bike and skateboard.

Staged by Corey Madden, *The Stones* is a production of Center Theatre Group's youth division, P.L.A.Y. But that shouldn't deter adult Angelenos from seeing this intense burst of stage wizardry.