

DAILY NEWS

Shakespeare brings crowd to its feet

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"All the world's a stage" - including Central Park.



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Cast members keep young viewers involved as a masked Charles and Orlando spar.

The New York Classical Theatre starts its sixth season in the park with a short run of Shakespeare's comedy "As You Like It." But it's a real run.

The free production moves around a lake near the 103rd St. entrance known as the Pool. The troupe uses nature as its backdrop and, as the actors move from "set" to "set," so does the audience - sometimes at a fairly steady pace.

"Instead of just plopping the play in the park setting because it's free," says artistic director Stephen Burdman, "the goal is to make it look like they just happen to be there and the audience is just spying upon all this stuff. It gets the audience very involved. Having a physical involvement with the play as well as an emotional involvement, is not just sitting back and letting it happen but being active and understanding the journey of the characters."

The performances, relocations and all, are accessible to even the most Falstaff-shaped fan. The action only moves a quick, 30-second stroll to the next location. Audiences regularly include people in wheelchairs and kids in strollers. It makes a great introduction to Shakespeare for the most squirmy child.

The crowd that gathers has reached as many as 500 people - not counting the occasional pet or squirrel.

"I'll be bold," says Burdman. "I'd like to think that Shakespeare would have liked what we're doing, because we're really opening it to everybody like he did."

"As You Like It" fit neatly, especially during a scene when Orlando hangs "tongues" (or sonnets) on trees professing his love for Rosalind. The troupe used blue ribbons to actually hang the love poems on the trees.

Actors can enter the scene from any direction, and sometimes weave their way through the crowd, spouting dialogue as they go. "Come hithers" and "onwards" lead the viewers to their next spot.

The cast learns to expect the unexpected. The actors rehearsed in the park, training their voices for volume and their reflexes for unforeseen obstacles. Occasionally, a little girl - or, in the case of the June 2 performance, a group of little girls - will try to converse with the pretty actresses or a dog will bark and run across the stage.

"I thought it was cool and different because we got to run around," said Lydia van der Swaagh, 9, Greenwich Village. "I liked how they worked the park into the show," said her sister Hannah, 20. "We really were a part of it."

"As You Like It" runs through June 26, with performances Thursday through Sunday at 7 p.m.