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Rating its Degree of Difficulty on a scale of one through ten, I'd give Genesius Guild's opening-night performance of Shakespeare's *As You Like It...* hmm... about a 27.

Let's begin with the weather, because in discussing the Guild's Lincoln Park performances, you oftentimes *have* to begin with the weather. For a June evening, it was pretty bad - the slight chill in the air was compounded by a *bigger* chill as we were lightly misted upon for the show's first half; the stage became so damp that, during a fight scene that found Orlando (Kevin Wender) landing on his backside, the actor landed and promptly *slid* a good two feet. (Granted, it was a pretty cool effect, though Wender did seem in danger of losing his pants.)

Add to this, Saturday's performance was also, in effect, its first *dress rehearsal*; *As You Like It* director Jeff Coussens informed me that the Thursday and Friday night thunderstorms prevented outdoor rehearsals in costume (they took place at Augustana College instead), so the opening-night performance marked the cast's first stab at the material with all of the technical elements in place.

You want more hindrances? There seemed to be an unusual amount of Mississippi River and Rock Island railroad activity that evening - the incessant blaring of barges and clanging of train

tracks became a rather unfunny running gag. At several junctures, a neighborhood party threatened to add its own rock ‘n' roll soundtrack to Shakespeare's poetry. And was it my imagination, or were even the *birds* more aggressively chirp-y than usual?

Considering all this, is it any wonder that *As You Like It*'s first half felt so defeated?

Nothing went *wrong*, particularly; Coussens' staging was more than serviceable, and the focused and sincere cast navigated the slippery set with aplomb. But with the exception of the indefatigable Mike King, who performed Jaques' famed "Seven Ages of Man" speech with panache, the actors weren't presenting Shakespeare's romantic roundelay with a vigor that would've taken our minds off the evening's many, *many* irritants. There were a few entertaining character portrayals (notably by Bob Hanske and Earl Strupp) but no truly joyous or passionate ones, and it seemed as though *As You Like It* might collapse under its exterior pressures.

And then, after intermission, the damnedest thing happened: *As You Like It* became *really* good. The rain stopped, the faraway noises receded, and the cast seemed to find the energy, the *joy*, that had been previously lacking.

Without sacrificing the poetry, Donna Hare - her Rosalind disguised as the male Ganymede - earned numerous laughs with the quick-witted speed of her delivery, and Emily Coussens' Phebe (who doesn't appear before intermission) was deliciously batty. Bryan Woods relaxed into his role as the clown Touchstone; his light-hearted, spirited dallying proved most welcome.

And were any loyal Genesius Guild patrons *not* delighted to see the return of Jonathan Gregoire? As the slow-witted shepherd Silvius, Gregoire again proved not only wonderfully adept at classical verse but a superb physical comedian besides; his backwards fall over a rock was *As You Like It*'s biggest laugh-out-loud moment.

By the final scene, with the satisfyingly-matched characters looking marvelous in Ellen Dixon's ever-colorful (albeit slightly moist) costumes, our audience appeared wetter but certainly *happier* than we'd been two-and-a-half hours earlier. The *As You Like It* participants deserved their curtain-call applause not just for the eventual strength of their presentation, but for their success under less-than-optimum conditions; if Genesius Guild is searching for a slogan for their 51st season, I'm thinking the U.S. Post Office's Courier's Oath might fit the bill nicely.

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