



HOLDING COURT: (left to right) Francesca Faridany & David Greenspan in Sarah Ruhl's adaptation of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*. Photo: Joan Marcus

Theater Review

Stage adaptation of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* a bit of a drag

Orlando

From the novel by Virginia Woolf

Adapted by Sarah Ruhl

Choreographed by Annie-B Parsons

Directed by Rebecca Taichman

Through October 17, 2010

Classic Stage Company

136 East 13th Street

(212-352-3101), www.classicstage.org

By Scott Harrah

Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, loosely based on the life of the British literature icon's alleged lover, gender-bending poet/author Vita Sackville-West, was intriguing as a novel in 1928, and a bit of a novelty when it was adapted into a film starring Tilda Swinton and the late Quentin Crisp in 1992. However, as a stage adaptation penned by Sarah Ruhl for a 21st-Century audience, the story's subject matter—androgyny and transgender identity—is too familiar to be either shocking or thought provoking in 2010.

Francesca Faridany plays Orlando, the supposedly quintessential Elizabethan Man. Queen Elizabeth I (portrayed with over-the-top camp intent by David Greenspan) befriends Orlando and admires his poetry. However, Orlando soon develops romantic designs on Russian princess Sasha (Annika Boras). Tony-nominated playwright Sarah Ruhl has supposedly left in much of Woolf's florid narration, mostly giving the actors dry dialogue with which to tell the convoluted tale. The first act moves swiftly as Orlando follows Sasha back to Russia. Soon Orlando becomes the British ambassador to Constantinople, and then, at age 30, takes a weeklong sleep and wakes as a woman. The action is purportedly complimented by Annie-B Parsons' "choreography," which comes across as both unnecessary and self-serving.

An epic, romantic pseudo-biography such as *Orlando*—spanning some 400 years in the novel—is not something that translates easily to the stage, especially in an Off-Broadway production. Classic English literature only works as theater when it is mounted with lavish costumes and a full set to anchor the story properly and bring characters to vivid life. Here, Allen Moyer's sparse set adds subtle touches that paint a great visual picture for the audience, such as a white silk cloth to represent frost. Anita Yavich's costumes are more symbolic than realistic. For example, David Greenspan sports a shell of one of Queen Elizabeth I's trademark dresses, with the stiff, raised collar, tailored bodice, and scalloped shoulders. The costumes definitely work, accentuating the fact that Mr. Greenspan is playing the Virgin Queen as a man in drag, but it is, of course, already obvious. Mr. Greenspan also plays such multiple roles as a Romanian aristocrat, but he is primarily effective playing Queen Elizabeth I.

Ms. Faridany has a lush delivery, and she infuses the title character with a lot of energy, but it is not enough to keep us intrigued as the plot progresses in act two and we watch Orlando evolve into a woman who time-travels from the Elizabethan Era to the 20th Century. Unfortunately, Sarah Ruhl's tepid interpretation of *Orlando* neither advances nor enhances Virginia Woolf's venerable story

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