



## Very happy ending: *All's Well That Ends Well*

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with Stafford Clark-Price & Marni Penning

The director's challenge when mounting a Shakespearean comedy, especially an arcane and wordy one like *All's Well That Ends Well*, is to set up the scenes from start to finish, know how and where to ask for laughs, let the actors loose and trust that even if the audience cannot fathom all the archaic references and complex verse, they will still get the gist of the action. And even if it takes a little schtick once in a while to move things along, well, all's well that ends well.



with Stafford Clark-Price

Orlando Shakespeare Theater's artistic director, Jim Helsing, playing at the top of his game, admirably delivers all these comic goods and more in the company's current production. He renders a delightful and

surprisingly full-blooded version of the Bard's romantic fantasy – a play that, in lesser hands, would have petered out long before its predictably joyous finale.

The plot of *All's Well* is all fantastical fairy tale:

Helena, a lovely servant girl, has fallen hopelessly in love with an aristocrat, Bertram, the son of her noble mistress, the Countess of Rousillon. When the object of her affection embarks for Paris to embrace mentorship by the King of France, Helena decides to follow, hoping by hook or crook to win Bertram's hand in exchange for curing the ailing French king's "fistula" with medicines left to her by her doctor father. The only hitch in her plans was not foreseeing that Bertram might refuse, but under extreme duress, the marriage is performed if not consummated.

Prodded by his oily servant, Parolles, unhappy Bertram leaves his shell of a bride and goes off to fight the wars, while Helena and her countess mother-in-law conspire to force a happier ending. And though it does take more than two and a half hours to finally get there, Helsing and his proficient band of players make the antic journey both funny and moving, combining broad comedy with vibrant and emotionally charged characterizations.

Marni Penning is radiant as Helena; Eric Zivot, perfect as the sly braggart, Parolles; [Steve Hendrickson's](#) portrayal of the king is powerful and poignant; and Brandon Roberts, as Lavatche the clown, and Anne Hering, as the countess, successfully bear much of the heavy comic lifting. Stafford Clark-Price's Bertram could probably use more rambunctious attitude; the stronger his childish defiance and immature self-regard, the greater his redemption and growth can be by the play's end.

