

# My impression from fair em performance

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## **Fair Em Performance Review**

With a black background and a bench, the setting of Fair Em, put on by the Oxford Ensemble of Shakespearean Artists, resembled one that would have been seen during Shakespeare's time. This performance included the usage of Sumptuary Laws and old-fashioned props mixed with modern gestures and color/gender blind casting. Considering the low number of actors and funding for this fantastic play, which was performed and directed by students, the quality was excellent. The casting was not always perfect, such as Frances not being as tan as Blanche is said to be, but the students played their part as well as could be expected of any actors.

Olivia Boyd, playing Em, represented her exactly as I had imagined: funny, overdramatic, and pure; but Manville, played by Gabriel Eisen, was portrayed as nonchalant, while I had thought of him as very cocky and proud. Olivia's facial expressions and hand gestures allowed the play to be the comedy that it was meant to be. For example, her sign gestures and screaming while pretending to be deaf, as well as talking to space while almost walking into the audience as she pretended to be blind, were exaggerated and dramatic. Although I did not expect such overexaggerating, I found it to be a positive addition to the play as it got many laughs from the audience. The looks she gave whenever she realized that she was in a tricky situation, such as when her suitors met with her father, also received positive feedback from the crowd. But Em did not just add to the comedy of the play, she also showed certain characteristics of women at the time, including a woman of a lower social rank's ability to elevate herself by marrying an aristocrat — if she was

found to be attractive— and that women were supposed to be pure and obedient. Her constant praying shows the purity and chastity of a perfect lady, and her being offended by the men's advances but accepting the King's words about marrying Valingford demonstrates courtliness and womanhood. Manville, on the other hand, was underplayed and should have been portrayed as the "cocky, arrogant bastard" who loses everything at the end, rather than as a nonchalant, relaxed character. The only real moment I felt Manville was played as arrogant was when he said "both blind and deaf! Then is she no wife for me," (3. 4. 942) but I was hoping that he would be more convincing, particularly at the end during the scene with both Em and Elinor. At first, I thought he sounded sad because of Em's many suitors, which was fitting and expected, but as the play went on, his tone of voice stayed constant, therefore making it very monotone. Even though his jealousy was well portrayed, as was Em's love for Manville, part of me wishes they had shown their love for each other more on stage, including more touching or physical flirting.

Blanche, played by Frances Parent, looked different than I expected, but her attitude and behavior were flawlessly represented; Noah Lorey, William the Conqueror in Fair Em, comes off as amusing right away, but the "not so well done" disguise added a certain humor to his character and made it easy for the audience to understand that he was pretending to be someone else. Blanche's name quite literally means "white" in French, but per the script, she has a "Colliers sanguine skin," (1. 3. 218) meaning that she is dark-skinned; in the late 1500s, when Fair Em was written and first performed, being dark had a negative connotation and was known to represent low

status. Because of his apparent disgust for her, I had thought of Blanche as a big, tan, unattractive, unclean woman. Unfortunately — for the performance, not for the actress — Frances is neither unattractive nor very tan, and therefore did not adequately represent Blanche and why William was so distraught by his “love” for her. But Frances made up for her lack of a darker skin by taking on the role of a “harder favoured slut” (3. 1. 219) when she grabbed her own cleavage, which might have been seen as taboo at the time, but was fitting for this audience. She was also very dramatic and my personal favorite moment during the play was when Blanche got jealous at the dance and started throwing everyone around. William, who is supposed to represent the French in a reconciliation with the British which never actually did happen, is an overall funny character and anyone who personally knows Noah Lorey knows that he is as funny as William is supposed to be. While William was visiting Sueno, he wanted to disguise himself and drew a mustache on himself; this allowed us to understand that it was still technically William the Conqueror and the fact that it was such a “bad” disguise made it comedic.

The use of Sumptuary Laws was brilliant and showed the social class of the characters while the race/gender blind casting was refreshing to see, but it was clear that some actors struggled with their lines towards the end of the play. Em and her father Sir Thomas Goddard, disguised as the Miller and the Miller’s daughter, were dressed as peasants, which was shown by them only wearing brown and green. Gold and purple, the colors of the kings, were solely worn by William and Sueno, showing their power compared to the rest of the characters. The Laws were also used when Blanche wore the black

cloth that Mariana was supposed to wear; even though Blanche's identity was clear to the audience, William mistook her for Mariana because of the black fabric. I greatly appreciated that some women played men, which was the reverse from what would have happened at the time, adding a modern twist. Elinor, played by Annika McGraw, a white woman, had a Hispanic father, Jose Amador, showing the use of color free casting, another modern touch. Unfortunately, but understandably, some actors, such as Olivia Boyd with " her...his..", started forgetting and messing up their lines.

The play was overall great: good actors putting in effort, old-fashioned background and props, usage of Sumptuary Laws, and modern touches every so often. Some minor flaws were visible, such as the uncoordinated dancing and the leaves getting caught on clothing, but nothing impeded on the message from Fair Em. My only hope for next semester's performance is that they will have a photo of each member of the cast on the playbill.