How It’s New York:  *Shakespeare in the Park* is a grand New York tradition.  Maybe it doesn’t bring free theatre to the masses the way it did when Joe Papp started it in 1954 (lines are an all day affair; donors get blocks; line-sitters sell their time on Craig’s List) it’s still an experience to sit at the Delacorte and watch a play as the sun goes down over the buildings in the distance and birds swoop around on a balmy summer night.

How It’s Irish:  Irish actress Peg Woffington rocked the role in the 18th century, which is when we have the first recorded performances (it wasn’t a blockbuster for the bard, either).  OK, the role rocked her: she fainted on opening night.  George Bernard Shaw thought Helena was his ideal of the New Woman.  Gary Waller in *All’s Well That Ends Well: New Critical Essays* cites Stith Thompson and his *Motif-Index on Folk Literature* on how the play uses elements of Irish fairy lore, in which a fairy promises to help a mortal if he will marry her, in its story of Helena curing the king and getting Bertram as a prize.  The play’s story is clearly taken from Boccacio’s Decameron, but Shakespeare and his pals would have known the Irish legends too.  And for me, Bertram’s cruel letter saying he’d be hers when she got a child of his body sounded just like those mean farewells guys (not just demon lovers either) often give naive girls in Irish ballads: we’ll be wed when the sun rises in the West (maybe one reason I was very happy.
to see Bertram the Bounder outwitted in the end). And, while Shakespeare goes under the “England” tab there’s a long tradition of Shakespeare appreciation in Ireland. Here’s the review that I did for Baristanet, a site for Northern New Jersey (a place where theatre includes New York, and local TV news is Manhattan…)

**Mostly Well with All’s Well**

BY Gwen Orel | Wednesday, Jun 29, 2011 12:00pm |

André Holland and Annie Parisse (Joan Marcus)

*All’s Well that Ends Well* is one of Shakespeare’s plays that I don’t know well. Make that: not at all! I worked as literary manager of the Alabama Shakespeare Festival for four years and just assumed I had a passing familiarity with all of the comedies, but I was wrong. The play opened Saturday night, and runs in repertory (meaning it alternates nights and shares cast members) with *Measure for Measure* through July 30 as part of the Public Theater’s 2011 Shakespeare in the Park season. While not the greatest of Shakespeare’s plays, this lovely production makes for a fine night out. Bring the bug spray, take the allergy pills (you could almost see the pollen flying around), try not to mind too much when the person in front of you puts on eyeliner mid-show, and if you want ice cream at intermission, consider going to a street truck instead of the one window open. And enjoy the sunset and the stars when they come out.
The performances are fine—some of them quite wonderful. It has to be said, though, that it’s a strange play. At times it reminded me of TV’s *The Bachelor*. At times it reminded me of *As You Like It*. Pup tents visible on stage and boyish pranks in the open air made me think of summer camp. And towards the end, for a scene, it looked as though it was turning into *Dateline NBC*. Perhaps this is why it isn’t performed as often as many others—and why it seems to have had no recorded performances before the eighteenth century. Would other Shakespeare plays seem so odd to me if I were encountering them completely fresh? But this is not at all to say it’s not engaging or worth the trek.

To enjoy the play you have to enter into its world. It’s a world where marriages are often arranged, where loyalty to a king trumps personal preference about love, and where the idea of stalking just hasn’t come up yet. Basically, if the king wants you to marry somebody and there’s nothing overtly wrong with that person, you’d better do it or have a good reason why not.

*All’s Well That Ends Well* tells the story of Helena (Annie Parisse), daughter of a recently deceased physician, who serve the Countess Rousillion (Tonya Pinkins) and her household. That household includes young Bertram (André Holland), whom she loves for reasons the play never clarifies. When Bertram goes to Paris to serve the sickly king (John Cullum), she finds an excuse to go after him—by curing the monarch. The Countess is wise to her, and actually approves. Her reward for curing the king is marriage to any man she chooses (this would be the Bachelor scene, cunningly directed with all the men facing upstage as they stood eagerly for Helena’s perusal). Naturally, she chooses Bertram. For reasons we also don’t understand, so reluctant is he to be with her that he runs away to fight after the forced wedding, leaving her still a virgin. There’s a war going on which is not at all clear, but apparently the French are aligned with Florence in some kind of war in Italy. Bertram also leaves her a letter that says he won’t be hers until she can produce a ring from his
finger and a child of his in her belly.
That’s the part of the story that’s a bit fairy-tale like, or at least like something from an Irish Ballad. Naturally, so resourceful is Helena that she contrives to do just that, relying on Bertram’s lust for a virgin named Diana (Kristen Connolly), and his rascally nature. A bunch of other things happen – it’s a very plot-driven play – including a faked death (the part that will remind you of As You Like It), but it comes well in the end. That is, if you’re Helena. The faked death is what leads, towards the end, to a Dateline moment when it looks like Bertram’s being accused of murder.
Along the way there is comic relief in the person of braggart Parolles (Reg Rogers), and the way he is hoodwinked by his comrades (the summer camp moment). They blindfold him and pretend to be the other side arresting him,

Tonya Pinkins (Joan Marcus)

speaking a made-up language. The company have great fun with this, particularly Carson Elrod as the interpreter (pretending to make up a language for all he’s worth). But unlike the hoodwinking of Malvolio, the psychological torture, such as it is, seems easily justified, and Parolles, we are assured, will be all right.
While the play takes a while to get going– if you read this review or the synopsis in the program, the first few scenes will drag– it does kick in once Helena cures the king. Director Daniel Sullivan has set the
whole thing in what looks like World War I Europe, a conceit which allows for beautiful costumes (Jane Greenwood) and confusing battles and young men in pup tents (scenic design by Scott Pask). Beautiful underscoring is used throughout to help set moods and change scenes.

As Helena, Annie Parisse aches with vulnerability and charm, her husky voice displaying such intelligence that we just have to accept that she’s swallowed Oberon’s love potion, because there is little to love about her paramour. André Holland’s Bertram occasionally is funny but overall plays the young lord as a self-centered brat. As the Countess, Tonya Pinkins shines; she’s both noble in demeanor and yet utterly recognizable as the strong mother of a ne-er-do-well boy. Reg Rogers’ Parolles hits his consonants hard and makes all his esses serpentine; his conceit makes him both irritating and wonderful. The character also trades barb for bark in a way Malvolio could only envy, and Parolles hams up the odd logic from his first words to Helena: “are you meditating on virginity?” It has to be the strangest pick-up line ever recorded (and it doesn’t work, but it does get him a conversation).

Though I can’t credit him by name, one of the lords in the King’s court, when told by Helena that he was too young and happy for her, won over the entire audience by his sweet, mopey “I think not so.” He even clapped sulkily after she chose Bertram. Whoever this young actor is, he did a lot with the one line, and I hope next time he’ll be facing the audience when he delivers it (in the text he’s “Fourth Lord”). John Cullum’s King of France, somehow, is bland, despite the Hugh Hefner-ish bathrobe, but as a dry, wry noble lord Lafew, Dakin Matthews excels. And the Brothers Dumaine, nobles who take part in the fun of tricking Parolles, played by Lorenzo Pisoni and Michael Hayden, have leading man charm. Kristen Connolly makes a smart, appealing Diana, and Caitlin O’Connell a savvy mother to her.

Because its several plot strands don’t knit together tightly, this may not be one of your favorite Shakespeare plays. But there is something rather sweet about a mother siding with the son’s would-be girlfriend instead of his lying butt, and watching a
A clever woman uses her wits to get what she wants. Whether that leads to a happy ending for her may be another story.