



## Production Notice

# A Passion for Love, and for Theatre

by Michelle LaFlamme. Published in 2019 Issue 1.

For the productions: *Shakespeare in Love* (2019, Bard on the Beach). Performance Attended: 2019-09-18. See production details at the end of the review.

AS PART OF THE CELEBRATION OF THEIR THIRTIETH SEASON, [BARD ON THE BEACH](#) PRODUCED *Shakespeare in Love* at Vanier Park in Vancouver. The play ran from June 2019 until September and on closing night, the theatre was filled to capacity with a generous audience who appreciated the fast-paced delivery and metatheatricality inherent in a play about staging a famous play. Shakespeare's creative process and imagined inspiration for *Romeo and Juliet* is the central narrative for a production that stages the rehearsal process, along with several behind-the-scenes conversations with actors and writers. *Shakespeare in Love* offers a fictionalized reimagining of how Shakespeare created his "original" version of *Romeo and Juliet*. In doing so, *Shakespeare in Love* presents a version of *Romeo and Juliet* that makes claims about the creative process, class, and gender by hinting at what might have been the backstory to Shakespeare's adaptation of the actual star-crossed lovers play. As it stages the creative process of writing and rehearsing the first *Romeo and Juliet* performance, *Shakespeare in Love* addresses both romantic love and the romance of the theatre head-on.

The drama concerns an actor's love for the theatre as a means of escape, a shared love of language and play script production, and the love she shares with a playwright for whom her passion is inspirational. Bard on the Beach's production was exceptional in portraying these complex relationships by effectively drawing the audience in to witness the creative process and experience the power of the muse. The production dramatized the delight of working with an ensemble to see a play realized in rehearsal and eventually placed fully on its opening-performance feet. Of course, the success of the production owes much to its director Daryl Cloran, whose staging of this adaptation—based loosely on the Oscar award-winning 1998 romantic comedy film written by Marc Norman and Tom Stoppard—seemed perfectly suited to its Bard on the Beach home.

The real-life Vancouver audience is invited to fall in love with theatre as Shakespeare falls in love with Lady Viola de Lesseps, an aristocrat weighed down by a loveless marriage proposal, who seeks solace by disguising herself as Master Thomas, the male-gendered juvenile lead actor

playing Romeo in the original production of *Romeo and Juliet*. Viola likewise falls in love with Will the playwright, while her love for illicit performance in the theatrical arts grows equally strong. Both the forbidden love between Viola and Shakespeare and the restrictions against women playing female characters are challenged in this exuberant celebration of romantic love and the romance of the theatre.



Figure 1. Charlie Gallant as Will Shakespeare and Ghazal Azarbad as Viola in her disguise. Photo credit: Tim Matheson.

Adding to the production's exuberance, this *Shakespeare in Love* incorporated several musical interludes under the musical direction of Mischelle Cuttler, either as choral works performed by the talented ensemble, or from a lone actor whose single voice kept the mood of the play consistently on point. Such musicality was assisted in its simplicity by Cory Sincennes's set and costume design, which was particularly minimal. Whether on the sparse main acting area or on a parapet, the flexibility of the stage space enhanced the creation and development of this play produced within a play. Scene changes were swift and efficient, with simple settings easily evoking ballrooms, pubs, Lady Viola's bedchamber, rehearsal space, and ultimately The Rose playhouse stage itself. A final theatrical element was the superb choreography of the fight scenes,

staged by Jonathan Hawley Purvis, which allowed actors to brandish swords with incredible dexterity, thus bringing apparently controlled chaos to the stage.

The talent of the acting ensemble, the simple set, the fine martial choreography, and an overarching symmetry in staging all created the perfect dramatic vehicle for the play. Such symmetry was most evident in the climactic denouement offered by the opening performance of *Romeo and Juliet*, with the Bard on the Beach audience privy to both onstage and backstage action via a dividing curtain suspended over a simple rotating dais.



Figure 2. Charlie Gallant's Will Shakespeare shares a barroom chat with Austin Eckert as Kit Marlowe. Photo credit: Tim Matheson.

With love and romance at the forefront, *Shakespeare in Love* also documented the tension between the artistic process and those who held the purse strings for theatrical productions—most notably by dramatizing the pressure for the playwright to produce pages of dramatic material in order to meet the obligations for content demanded by The Rose playhouse's owner, Philip Henslowe. Effortlessly played by Scott Bellis, the production's Henslowe was the perfect foil for the Will Shakespeare of Charlie Gallant, a principal character caught in the tension between two rival theatre companies. Gallant portrays the difficulty and joys of the creative process while under this pressure. In one comedic scene, Austin Eckert as Kit Marlowe feeds lines to

Shakespeare, at the same time Shakespeare attempts to woo Ghazal Azarbad's subtly portrayed Viola, an act that suggests how the mastery traditionally associated with Shakespeare's writing may have had sources other than his own inherent genius.

If Henslowe and Marlowe offered instances of social hierarchy that countered certain romantic views of Shakespeare's innate genius, two memorable scenes with Jennifer Lines in the role of Queen Elizabeth I seemed to support certain idealized views of royal patronage. Dressed in a splendid costume and using grandiose gestures, Lines's portrayal of Queen Elizabeth suggested she had some fanciful personal power over theatre productions during the latter years of her reign. In her final entrance, for instance, Queen Elizabeth walked regally to the stage through the Bard on the Beach audience to make her pronouncements on gender restrictions and to question the possibility of any theatrical representation of love. Although there is no evidence to suggest Elizabeth I ever did frequent a public performance, this dramatic moment of romanticized royal involvement confirmed the prevailing view of Elizabethan power politics, while also elevating the social status of Shakespeare, whose work could attract incognito playhouse attendance from the highest authority in the land.

As suggested by Queen Elizabeth's final fanciful intervention, a larger historical frame for *Shakespeare in Love* was the Elizabethan prohibition of female actors on the public stage, which in turn thwarted romantic ideals of love in the subplot with the Master Thomas disguised Viola and her playwright. With their shared love of language, Will and Viola explore the notion of love as a "riot in the heart," and the importance of passion to nurture and sustain creativity. The relationship between Shakespeare and his muse Viola, who obviously felt the tenderness in his writing, was fundamental to Will's developmental process for recreating the passion between the central fictive characters of Romeo and Juliet. In consequence, with Romeo and Juliet's love mirrored in the growing desire between Will and Viola, that same passion inspires the words for the scenes of Shakespeare's tragedy, which literally were being written in the production's first scene and continued to develop throughout the course of the play. *Shakespeare in Love* explored, therefore, not just the romantic love between two creative people, but also the love for creativity and (for some) the deep, often unrequited desire to be an actor.

With the love of acting so vital for its joyous representation onstage, this production allowed its actors to display excellent chemistry throughout, particularly in the backstage rehearsal scenes and in the ensemble work that embodied the Lord Chamberlain's Men troupe. The delivery and timing in the rehearsals led to many comic moments that worked because the actors were polished and on point, never missing a beat for laughter or a shared look to move the play forward. The mad scramble for the valuable manuscript sheets of dialogue involved the cast members in a complex series of actions both smooth and wonderfully executed. Every bit of stage

business was crafted such that even the supernumerary bit-part players were continually developing their characters even when periphery to the main action on stage. In addition, the vocal skills of the ensemble were utilized to great effect, with choral musical interludes or a single voice keeping the mood of the play consistently on point.

The theatricality of the early modern playhouse world, the performativity of gender, and the collaborative and passionate process of writing for the stage were showcased in a play that offered a glimpse into certain historical constructs, made famous by centuries of romanticized notions about Shakespeare's creative technique and experiences. In witnessing multiple types of love—the love of the creative process, the love between actors struggling to put on a play, and the economic difficulties of any production—the Bard on the Beach audience were offered a glimpse into the seemingly romantic allure of a theatrical construct that relied entirely and unapologetically on a fictionalization of Shakespeare's writing process. No longer the lone genius, the Will of *Shakespeare in Love* needs his star-crossed muse to comprehend the pain of impossible love, staged comically though ultimately tragically by a troupe of actors performing on a budget. The powerful pull of romantic love and the riotous romance of the theatre might create the narrative backdrop for this joyful production. Ultimately, though, *Shakespeare in Love* could not exist unless its twenty-first-century audience was willing to collude in its entertainingly re-historicized conceit.

## Links

Bard on the Beach. <https://bardonthebeach.org>.

The Costumes of *Shakespeare in Love*. Bard on the Beach.

<https://bardonthebeach.org/news/2019/the-costumes-of-shakespeare-in-love/>

## Production Details

### General

Title	<i>Shakespeare in Love</i>
Year	2019
Theatre Company	Bard on the Beach
Theatre	BMO Main Stage, Vanier Park, Vancouver
Start Date	June 12, 2019
End Date	September 18, 2019

### Cast

VIOLA DE LESSEPS	GHAZAL AZERBAD
HENSLOWE	SCOTT BELLIS
JOHN WEBSTER	KATE BESWORTH
WABASH/VALENTINE	ANDREW COWNDEN
NOL	VICTOR DOLHAI
KIT MARLOWE	AUSTIN ECKHERT
WILL SHAKESPEARE	CHARLIE GALLANT
MISTRESS QUICKLY/KATE	MING HUDSON
FENNYMAN	WARREN KIMMEL
QUEEN ELIZABETH/MOLLY	JENNIFER LINES
FREES/LORD WESSEX	ANTON LIPOVETSKY
NURSE	SUSINN MCFARLEN
RICHARD BURBAGE	ANDREW MCNEE
SIR ROBERT DE LESSEPS	PAUL MONIZ DE SÁ
ADAM	CHIRAG NAIK
LAMBERT/NED ALLEYN	KAMYAR PAZANDEH
SAM	JASON SAKAKI
RALPH/CATLING	JOEL WIRKKUNEN

### Creatives

DIRECTOR	DARYL CLORAN
SET AND COSTUME DESIGNER	CORY SINCENNES
SOUND DESIGNER AND MUSICAL DIRECTOR	MISCHELLE CUTTLER
LIGHTING DESIGNER	GERALD KING
CHOREOGRAPHER	JULIE TOMAINO

FIGHT DIRECTOR

HEAD VOICE AND TEXT COACH

VOICE AND TEXT COACH

PRODUCTION STAGE MANAGER

JONATHAN HAWLEY PURVIS

ALISON MATTHEWS

ALANA HAWLEY PURVIS

STEPHEN COURTENAY