



Wooden O's As You Like It: Shakespeare Speaks for Self-Actualization in Northwest Forest

by Melissa Walter. Written on 2016-04-25. Published in 2017 Issue 1.

For the production: *As You Like It* (2015, Seattle Shakespeare Company, USA). See production details at the end of the review.

HEAVY RAIN FORCED THE WOODEN O PRODUCTION OF *AS YOU LIKE IT* INDOORS ON JULY 26TH, 2015, but a determined audience of about seventy people set up obediently inside the green tape on the concrete floor of Seattle Center's Fisher Pavilion. Given the prominence of Microsoft and Amazon in the region, it seemed particularly appropriate that we were encouraged to download a mobile app to learn about Seattle Shakespeare and donate, and offered the incentive of a portable device charger for a donation of fifty dollars or more. During the announcements, a Carhartt-overall-clad Adam (Eric Ray Anderson) began mowing the "lawn" with a push-mower.

Excellent live music in a folk or bluegrass style (fiddlers, banjo, guitar, and voice, performed by Anderson, Amy Fleetwood, Spencer Hamp, Kate Jaeger, Maya Sugarman, Sean Patrick Taylor, and Duncan Weinland) opened the show proper, but mostly characterized the pastoral space. In this production, the pleasurable, powerful "forest" was the hippie side of the Pacific Northwest. Touchstone (Brian Simmons), Rosalind (Brenda Joyner, in a plaid shirt, toque, and jeans with threadbare knees and thighs) and Celia (Hana Lass, with a pink bandana on her head) backpacked through the audience, associating us, the merry theater-goers, with the region's great outdoors and pastoral possibilities. In making this choice, director Annie Lareau echoed and gave a local twist to choices made in the 2005 productions at the Stratford Festival in Ontario and Guthrie Theater in Minnesota, which also associated the forest with a sixties era or esthetic.

Just as Shakespeare's *Arden* shelters a diverse assortment of pastoral figures and tropes, from the literary shepherd-poet Silvius to the hard-handed Corin, Wooden O's pastoral space picked up on a range of behaviors, styles, and esthetic choices associated with the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s, and by some with the Pacific Northwest itself. While at court, Duke Frederick (Heather Hawkins, a female character in this interpretation) sported a platinum blond bob and

a matching cream colored silky-lacy jacket, and dressy skirt and blouse, along with power pearls and makeup, but her pastoral opposite, Duke Senior, (also played by Hawkins) was a wholesome, long-haired earth-mama, with loose Indian print clothing, and sandals. Oliver (Evan Whitfield) appeared in the space dressed for orienteering with a raincoat, and compass and whistle, but it was not long before he too had a bandana on his head. By the end of the play, Celia wore a crown of flowers and a transparent aqua kimono embroidered with feathers.

The various antics of the pastoral characters expressed friendly irony towards countercultural aesthetics and behaviors. Hamp's Silvius was a sweet-faced airhead with blond dreadlocks, probably stoned as well. Sir Oliver Martext (Anderson again) wore a leafy crown like Bacchus, and had *Hare Krishnacymbals* and a big, naked, hairy belly. His strange "ceremony" for wedding Audrey and Touchstone included downward dog and other yoga poses, and seemed disconnected from the actual couple. Corin (Fleetwood), the laboring shepherd whose lines usually bring some class analysis into the play, here became (unaccountably to me) a female tarot reader in a medallion-fringed headscarf. In one scene, Fleetwood was weaving a basket. These characters populated a playground where the courtly figures (here perhaps Seattle's corporate employees, especially those who maintain a love-hate relationship with such topics as work-life balance, tarot, prayer flags, and tie dye) worked out their identities and relationships.

The main characters fell in love haplessly and absurdly. Rosalind's big eyes and frank gaze showed us that something very basic was happening. The initially self-possessed Orlando (Jason Sanford) had "weights upon [his] tongue" indeed, letting his chin drop forward as if his brain had been eaten. Celia witnessed Rosalind's transformation with shock, but her own was equally sudden. In this context, Touchstone's love for a voluptuous Audrey (Jaeger) seemed more gradual and realistic. As he became more and more involved with the pastoral space, he lost his jacket, took on a patchwork vest, and started wearing his erstwhile pocket-handkerchief as a scarf. In spite of Jaques erupting with disjointed warnings ("alimony!" "prenup!") to Touchstone during some of the wooing, Audrey was treated with more dignity than in some productions. She was only slightly loopy, and very sexy, and Touchstone was at her mercy. At one point they even barked at each other. Yet, Jaeger was also an excellent singer and her song about "spring time, the only pretty ring time" was one of the lovely lyrical moments in the play.

Charming as this relationship was, in the end the play seemed most interested in relationships among women. Celia reacted with distress when she was quietly observing Rosalind's infatuation with Orlando, and her line "Shall we be sundered," brought tears to my eyes. Kelly Kitchen's female Jaques also encountered Rosalind with more sympathy than this character sometimes does. And the play's exploration of female relationships also took on new resonance because the Dukes were female, expressing complexities of the mother-daughter bond. An

added song, printed in the program, mentioned that Rosalind’s “momma left her to find another life” and began by speaking of “Mothers and daughters, husbands and wives/Finding our place in each other’s lives.” On the line “You are a fool,” the Duke slapped Celia like a narcissistic stage mother. Rosalind’s voice broke when she reunited with her own mother on the lines “To you I give myself, for I am yours.” It felt good to see that bond repaired.

The chorus of the added song stated, “You need to find a life as you like it ... Love will come in the frayed edges/If you built your life as you like it. You’ve got to live your life as you like it.” The song thus enlists Shakespeare’s title into an earnest and even possibly burdensome project of finding one’s bliss. In this mostly depoliticized pastoral space, Jaques brought out the social criticism available in the mention of soldiers and justice in the “All the world’s a stage” speech. Kitchens was also a standout performer. When she entered laughing on the line “I met a fool,” she was holding Touchstone’s clown nose, and we were laughing right along with her. She winked at the audience on the line “all the men and women merely players,” as if to suggest their dating antics. But when Orlando forbade anyone to touch the food, Jaques took a bite out of an apple, then impaled the fruit on Orlando’s sword. She achieved the satirist’s alchemy of rapport, remove, sadness, and amusement.

Another potential moment of contemporary social criticism arose because Sanford, who played Orlando, was an actor of color in a mostly white cast. Orlando’s betrayal by his brother and the ruling forces at court thus could have had political resonance given the current Black Lives Matter movement. I was not sure whether Lareau wanted to evoke these meanings or not. (It is perhaps notable that Kenneth Branagh’s 2006 movie cast a black actor in the role of Orlando.) Except in these ways, the play seemed mostly to ignore the 60s (and later) drive for social change, and instead focused on individual development, both celebrating and lightly satirizing the earnest efforts of urban moderns to imagine, create or connect with alternative, more harmonious ways of living. Shakespeare’s play seems large enough to both stand for these efforts and gently mock them.

Melissa Walter is Associate Professor of English at the University of the Fraser Valley near Vancouver, Canada. She is currently editing The Two Gentlemen of Verona for Internet Shakespeare Editions, and co-editing, with Dennis Britton, an essay collection on the topic of “Rethinking Shakespearean Source Study.” She has published articles on early modern drama and prose, including on European novellas in England, The Dialogues in the English and Malaiiane Languages and Fletcher’s Island Princess, and works by Shakespeare, Middleton, Webster. She has reviewed dance and performance for plankmagazine.com as well as the ISE. She is completing a book on Shakespeare’s comedies and the Renaissance novella in England.

Production Details

General

<i>Title</i>	As You Like It
<i>Year</i>	2015
<i>Theater Company</i>	Seattle Shakespeare Company
<i>Theaters</i>	Seattle Center Fisher Pavilion (USA)
<i>Start Date</i>	2015-07-09
<i>End Date</i>	2015-08-23

Cast

DUKE SENIOR	HEATHER HAWKINS
ROSALIND	BRENDA JOYNER
DUKE FREDERICK	HEATHER HAWKINS
CELIA	HANA LASS
ORLANDO DE BOYS	JASON SANFORD
ADAM	ERIC RAY ANDERSON
TOUCHSTONE	BRIAN SIMMONS
LORD JAQUES	KELLY KITCHENS
CORIN	AMY FLEETWOOD
SILVIUS	SPENCER HAMP
AUDREY	KATE JAEGER
SIR OLIVER MARTEX	ERIC RAY ANDERSON

Creatives

DIRECTOR	ANNIE LAREAU
COMPOSER	EDD KEY
COSTUMES	KELLY McDONALD
MUSIC	ERIC RAY ANDERSON
MUSIC	AMY FLEETWOOD
MUSIC	SPENCER HAMP
MUSIC	KATE JAEGER
MUSIC DIRECTOR	JON LUTYENS
MUSIC	MAYA SUGARMAN
MUSIC	SEAN PATRICK TAYLOR
MUSIC	DUNCAN WEINLAND