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As I Liked It: The American Shakespeare Center's *As You Like It*

Directed by Ralph Alan Cohen
Blackfriars Playhouse, Staunton, VA
Performance Dates: June 13-December 2, 2018

Reviewed by VICTOR GRETO

There may be something at first incongruous about staging Shakespeare's outdoorsy pastoral *As You Like It*, a pioneering romantic comedy that seems to challenge every gender stereotype of the 16th – and 21st – centuries, in a closed-in space like the cozy but bounded replica of the London Blackfriars Theater in Staunton, Va.

But it's more than OK. After all, the theater *is* nestled within the Shenandoah Valley.

In fact, in a seamlessly scene-changing, funny and engaging production on June 24, the American Shakespeare Center players, including a sad-eyed Orlando, played by Brandon Carter, and an aggressively lusty Rosalind, played by Allie Babich, not only did the play justice, but also gave the small audience an eclectic cocktail of Shakespeare's time and selections of modern American music, showcasing the singing and playing talents of most of the dozen cast members. The players, garbed in turn-of-the-20th-century clothing, included impressive moments before the play and during intermission, regaling the audience with music, from standards to rock to rap. Babich's singing voice was melodious and powerful, and Greg Brostrom's (Touchstone) ebullience in both acting and singing were consistently funny.

Part of the conceit behind the ASC's Blackfriars Theater is its avowed fidelity to early 17th-century playacting, including the several parts most of the actors played, interaction with the audience (including a dozen audience "gallants" who sit along either side of the stage), and the lights that remain on throughout the theater, powered in part by nine black two-tiered wagon wheel-shaped chandeliers.

Ralph Alan Cohen's direction was seamless. Cohen, Gonder Professor of Shakespeare at nearby Mary Baldwin College, strides through scene changes as nonchalantly as someone catching their breath before speaking again.

It was far superior watching Cohen's scene changes than watching a movie of a Shakespeare play. While one set of characters left through a door or opening on the right, players spilled from a left door or opening to begin the next scene. This seamless fluidity reminded me of the power of live acting over filmed performances, the encompassing magic of great live performances over the

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harshness of the cuts in many films that often exist only to keep an audience's attention.

The famous gender-bending of the play – boys playing women playing men playing women – elicits both personal laughter and social indifference to the stereotypes. Zoe Speas' Phebe believably falls in lust with Babich's Ganymede. The former's ardent facial expressions make Babich's sexuality irrelevant. And this may be at least part of the point, or one of many. Shakespeare gives men their staid stereotypes of the opposite sex: "Do you not know I am a woman? when I think, I must speak," Rosalind says. But his generalizations are even more on the mark: "How bitter a thing it is to look into happiness through another man's eyes!" Orlando cries. Girls, boys, women, men; it doesn't seem to matter.

Shakespeare also seems comically averse to the allure of cynicism, or pretentious melancholy, no matter how true its arrows hit their mark. This is seen in the character Jacques (finely pronounced "jakes," with all of its scatological implications), and even a bit in Jessica Williams' genderless, laconic performance of this misanthrope. Consciously or not, the choice to create a genderless Jacques is a thoughtful comment on the character's attitude toward life. Williams performed the Seven Ages of Man speech after walking to the front of the stage and looking solemnly out into the audience, as though she were in a Hollywood production that emphasized the worst in dramatics. But this set piece was unlike a 1930s Hollywood production of the play, and not Williams' goal, as far as I could tell. The speech has become too much a chunk of squeeze-dried wisdom at which we may either nod or roll our eyes. Jacques' speech still comically rings true. But there's something almost obnoxious in its perfection, Shakespeare may imply, for an eye toward the predictable endgame is one thing, but both eyes directed toward foreseeable meaninglessness and death can only bring apathy – or a retreat into a monastery.

The experience of a Shakespeare production on a stage like ASC's Blackfriars belies Jacques' melancholy, and perhaps even our own cynicism about how unlike life the play really is. I fell in love, or lust, with nearly everyone on the stage. Not just Babich and Speas, but Meg Rodgers' Audrey, who, somehow, touched Touchstone's – and my – neurotically-guarded heart. Perhaps that was the key to this production: its breathless expectation of Shakespearean love in all its possible forms, and the accompanying innocent exuberance I got from most of the players. Shakespeare's bad guys in *As You Like It* end up converted, literally and figuratively. As we see in much of his other work, this is not the usual world that Shakespeare depicts. He doesn't seem to like or trust unguarded innocence outside the comedies; people die because of it. Just ask Othello.

Then again, the playwright here – and his players – are performing gorgeous poetic variations on a theme. If the theme is love, to that we must inevitably return, where everyone must inevitably return. So, we end with four marriages, prefaced by the god Hymen. "Then is there mirth in heaven, / when earthly things made even/ Atone together," Hymen proclaims. No one, of course,

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may know if Shakespeare's tongue was deep in his cheek when he wrote this, but ASC handled the scene as if it may have been. Hymen is seen atop the stage regaling both players and audience in a wooden manner.

During this production, I also couldn't help but think about what most believe to be Shakespeare's allusion to the death of Christopher Marlowe, spilling from the mouth of a clown: "When a man's verses cannot be understood, nor a man's good wit seconded with the forward child understanding, it strikes a man more dead than a great reckoning in a little room." The cheeky comment seemed odder as Brostrom's Touchstone stumbled over the words (the only verbal stumbling I heard from anyone during the two and a half hours of the play – although I think I saw Babich's face go positively blank at least twice and imagined her scaring up the memory of Rosalind's lines).

Brostrom-Touchstone's gaffe made the lines to me sound even more self-conscious and outside of the play than perhaps the writer intended; from the lips of a sardonic clown the crippled allusion seemed painfully surreal. Brostrom's misstep inadvertently pointed outside the play, briefly shattering its illusion by splashing reality on my dazed enjoyment of the world Shakespeare and ASC's players had created.

I sat in the front row and several times during the production two or three of the players sat at the edge of the stage, their legs dangling in front of me. They looked at each other and spoke, looked at and through me and spoke. It's perhaps a common experience within so intimate a theater as the Blackfriars, but it seemed especially charming and engaging during the ASC's production of *As You Like It*. Shakespeare's language, spoken with passion and sincerity, glibly and knowingly, from talented, enthusiastic actors reveals what I think may be the ultimate skill of great playwriting and acting. You *are* there and you are *not* there at the same time. I don't think an artistic experience gets much better than that.

What I got out of the ASC's production of *As You Like It* was something I decided, mid-play, was exactly *as I liked it*. There's no escaping the dreamy reality of passion, of love that boundlessly grows with each giddy, seamless moment. Perhaps the only thing better than the supreme artist's rendering of such a love is to experience it yourself. I choose to do both, and for the former, I'll take Shakespeare's multifaceted art every time.

Victor Greto is associate professor of Multimedia Communication and History at Wesley College in Dover, Delaware. A journalist most of his life, he has taught both writing and European history for more than a decade.