

Early Modern Literary Studies

***As You Like It*, presented by the Pittsburgh Public Theater at the O'Reilly Theater,
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Adapted and Directed by Ted Pappas. Scenic Design by James Noone. Music composed by Michael Moricz. Sound Design by Zach Moore. Costume Design by Gabriel Berry. Lighting Design by Kirk Bookman. Fight Direction by Randy Kovitz. With Gretchen Egolf (Rosalind), Christian Conn (Orlando), Julia Coffey (Celia), Alex Coleman (Corin/Sir Oliver), Douglas Harmsen (Touchstone), Ross Bickell (Duke Frederick/Duke Senior), Anderson Matthews (Jaques), Noble Shropshire (Adam/Mar-Text), David Whalen (Oliver), Theo Allyn (Phoebe), Chris Landis (Silvius), Daniel Krell (Le Beau/Amiens), Lisa Ann Goldsmith (Audrey), Don Digiulio (Dennis/Lord/Forester), David Bielewicz (Jaques De Boys/Forester) and Lindsay Smiling (Charles/William/Hymen).

The Pittsburgh Public Theater supplies its city's metropolitan area with a professional, semi-repertory company that rotates regularly through contemporary, classical, local, and - every two years or so -Shakespearean plays. Over the past six years, the PPT has focused on comedies, offering *The Comedy of Errors* in 2008, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in 2010, and *As You Like It* this year - all three collaborations between artistic director Ted Pappas and designer James Noone. The productions have been characterized by simple, clever scenery, well-rehearsed stage work, and perhaps most noticeably, a keen eye for physical comedy. *The Comedy of Errors* owed as much to vaudeville as it did Plautus, and Pyramus' suicide at the end of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* went on for what seemed like hours, reducing more than one audience member to tears of laughter.

With its focus more clearly on romance than *Comedy* or *Dream*, *As You Like It* lacks the sheer comic momentum that these plays naturally generate. To address this, and to create a production that would appeal to a broad popular audience, Pappas and Noone

judiciously and successfully employed a range of textual and performative choices that had served them well in the past.

A brisk rhythm was established with a combination of careful cutting of lines and dynamic blocking. Few speeches were eliminated entirely, but nearly all were attenuated to some degree. Along with this, the stage of the O'Reilly Theater was especially open, with audience seating on three sides and nearly always empty of furniture, allowing actors to range across it and creating a constant sense of movement and energy. In delivering his 'Seven Ages' speech, for example, Jaques did not stand still for a moment, pacing across the stage to address characters and audience members alike.

Blue lights on a stark white stage created a somber mood for the opening scenes at court. The backdrop, also white, was pierced by four evenly-spaced white doors. Occasionally a pattern of latticework was projected onto the stage floor suggesting a prison. The forest was as light-hearted as the court was grim. To create Arden, the backdrop opened leaving a wide passage upstage. Five-foot wide panels hanging from the flies were spaced incrementally behind the backdrop. On to these and the floor were projected irregular patterns of greens and browns suggesting a thick wall of leaves and flowers. The lighting tones change from blues to yellows further brightening the set.

As with their past productions, Pappas and Noone modernized the setting, roughly to the early part of the last century. This decision was most noticeable in the costumes. Men wore suits and cravats and women wore modest, floor-length dresses. Costume designer Berry used colors to distinguish the court and the country. At court, nearly all the characters wore black; Rosalind and Celia's dresses could have been mistaken for mourning clothes and Oliver looked like an equestrian fascist in black riding boots, jodhpurs, vest, and jacket and matching quilt. Only the lower-status Orlando and Adam departed from this color scheme, wearing drab browns and grays. Touchstone wore a black suit like the rest of the court, but it looked as if it had shrunk several sizes in the wash allowing his wrists and ankles to protrude. A multicolored vest and oversized clown-like shoes completed the buffoonish costume.

Once in the forest, Touchstone's suit changed from black to white, but otherwise retained the comic poor fit. The banished characters retained a courtly appearance, in white and khaki sportswear; their cleanliness making them look more like catalogue models than actual forest dwellers. Those who were native to the forest looked for the most part like stereotypical farmers or shepherds. Audrey wore bright red shoes, a rumpled white dress, and seemed otherwise unconcerned with her appearance. Phoebe

was a conventional country girl with bright red pigtails, a blue and white floral dress, and daisies in her hat. The combination of Audrey's red shoes, Phoebe's red hair, and her blue and white dress suggested the innocence and naiveté of Dorothy wondering through the forests and fields of Oz. Silvius wore an oversized, dress-like sweater and very slim fitted pants, which together made him appear feminine.

The costuming also communicated the characters' defining qualities. Silvius' effeminate appearance emphasized his sheepish qualities as he loyally followed Phoebe, doing anything to please her. Phoebe was not ignorant of Silvius' desire, and her red hair amplified her frustration at his nuisances. Touchstone's clowning was focused toward his single motivation – to marry Audrey – and he approached this goal vigorously. His bright colored vest mirrored his bold courtship strategy. As his costuming was more colorful than the rest of the cast, Touchstone was the most straightforward character in the identification and satisfaction of his love interest. Finally, Audrey was ignorant of the world around her and, once he made his appeal, only concerned herself with Touchstone. She ignored convention and taboo, creating visual comedy that echoed Touchstone's.

Perhaps Pappas and Noone's greatest talent with Shakespearean comedy is connecting the text to the audience and making them laugh. The low comic characters were especially effective. Lindsay Smiling, for example, a tall, African-American actor, was triple cast as Charles, William, and Hymen. His Charles was a large, menacing, bare-chested wrestler who nearly got the best of Orlando. William was a tall yokel in overalls and a straw hat who entered to laughter at 5.1 calling his chickens in to feed. Most absurd was an effete Hymen, dressed in a pale blue tunic, breeches, hose, and a powdered wig, looking like he had stepped out of a Restoration comedy. Working just this side of over-acting, Smiling seemed to match the exaggerated costumes and found humor in all three of these characters, despite their different natures.

No character, however, could match Douglas Harmsen's Touchstone for comic effect. Throughout the play his lines were delivered with polished timing, pace, and emotion. Debating Corin over the virtues of a courtier's life (3.2), his tone of voice and twitching body language reflected each positive and negative aspect. Reacting to Duke Fredrick's anger in 1.2, he jumped and cowered into a corner. In 5.1, height became a source of comedic power, as Harmsen confronted the sizable Smiling as William. The clown stood on his toes and used the steps of the stage to acknowledge his disadvantage and take control of it. At the scene's end, he delivered his threatening speech to Smiling with so many asides directed to the audience that he ended up addressing the final lines

to them rather than his rival. And so, more than any other character, he took the audience into his confidence and made them his allies.

Not all of the attempts at audience engagement were as successful. 5.3's song, "A Lover and His Lass," was presented as a sing-along with one of the foresters carrying a placard with the chorus written on it for the audience's benefit. While the audience gamely sang along, the interactive moment did not fit well into this version of *As You Like It*, directing attention away from the stage and placing it on the audience. While the song itself created a clever backdrop for a presentation of each couple onstage, the sign-carrying forester changed location so often it was difficult not to follow him, and only glance at the couples.

Rosalind was the center of the production, doing her best to shape the characters' fates as well as ensure she ended happily as well. Appropriately taller than most of the cast, she began the play as a rational, deliberate young woman. She was not perfectly composed, however. When she first spotted Orlando in the forest in 3.2, she ran in circles shrieking in delight, barely hiding in time for his meeting with Jaques. This giddiness nearly jeopardized her disguise in 4.1 when, during the feigned marriage, they closed their eyes, leaned too close to each other, and came within an instant of kissing. After Orlando exited, Egolf again flapped around the stage, enraptured by the near-kiss and deaf to Celia's scolding. Rosalind also benefited from some clever direction. At 3.2.355 when Orlando, holding her hand, swore "by the white hand of Rosalind" that he is the author of the poetry she had found, Rosalind barely stifled another gasp of joy and the audience laughed with delight.

In the middle of his debate with William, Touchstone observes, "So-so is good, very good, very excellent good. And yet it is not, it is but so-so" (5.1.25-26). While there were moments in the production that were "but so-so," the play's overall effect was, "very good, very excellent good." Comedy and fluid direction successfully entertained the audience. There was nearly always something to laugh at in the foreground or the background, even if the focus of the moment was relatively grave. This approach failed only when the humorous business pulled too much focus away from the central action on stage. Along with Pappas' direction, Noone's design, the costuming, scenery, and lighting all contributed to characterization and left the actors free to focus on their lines. In the end, successfully integrating the conflicts of *As You Like It* and with its (amplified) comic aspects enabled the PPT to offer a compelling and entertaining show.

Work Cited

Shakespeare, William. *As You Like It*. *The Norton Shakespeare*. Ed. Stephen Greenblatt, et al (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997).