

Production Proposal:
William Shakespeare's *As You Like It*
to be produced by Dan Deneen and Neal Meglathey
and directed by Dan Deneen

Production Dates (11 performances)

Thursday – Sunday, 10/21-24

Thursday – Sunday, 10/28-31

Thursday – Saturday , 11/4-6

In Brief

As You Like It is a romantic comedy featuring Rosalind, Shakespeare's most celebrated female comedic character ("Men have died from time to time, and worms have eaten them, but not from love.") Various villains and star-crossed lovers abound, and two great fools, Touchstone and Jaques ("All the world's a stage. . .") We will do a quasi-contemporary staging, with special emphasis on music and the vividness of life in Arden Forest, the enchanted wilderness where most of the play occurs. 15-20% of the text will be cut to bring running time to around two hours. There are 21 named roles, of which two (Martext and Hymen) can be entirely eliminated, and of which at least four may be doubled by a single actors, leaving a need for 17 actors. In addition, at least three musician/foresters will be needed, plus assorted children, dogs, goats, birds, and other beasts as shall be necessary.

Open Audition

Thursday evening, 7/8 and Saturday afternoon, 7/10

Rehearsal Schedule (*seven weeks' regular rehearsal before production week*)

Begin read-throughs and discussion of the play, week of Aug. 9 (two sessions) Regular rehearsals start week of Aug. 30 (twice weekly)

Synopsis of the Play

Nasty Duke Frederick has usurped his brother, Duke Senior, and now rules his ill-gotten domain, arbitrary and violent. Duke Senior has been banished with his faithful companions to Arden Forest, a wilderness in which Frederick imagines his deposed enemies will find a cruel and desperate fate. Rosalind, Duke Senior's daughter, falls in love with Orlando (and he with her) after Orlando survives an attempted assassination arranged by his older brother, Oliver. Facing further persecution, Orlando flees to Arden with old Adam, his father's faithful servant. Frederick then banishes Rosalind to Arden. Celia, Frederick's daughter and Rosalind's staunch friend, chooses to spite her father and join her friend in exile. Rosalind disguises herself as a man, concealing (till the final scene) her real identity from both her father and the love-sick Orlando. Disguised, Rosalind pretends to be Rosalind, and tutors Orlando in the proper ways to love a woman. Sub-plots abound, chief among these the passion of Silvius for Phoebe, Phoebe for Rosalind (in her man's disguise), and Touchstone and Audrey for each other. (Touchstone is a Fool who has come with the two women from Frederick's court; Jaques is the other "fool"—Duke Senior's melancholy companion; and together, the two fools are responsible for some of the most memorable and comic moments of the play.) In the end, identities are resolved, lovers find each other, and everyone gets married. Oliver, who has been sent to Arden by Frederick to find and kill Orlando, is instead transformed by the courage of his brother, and ends up marrying Celia. Meanwhile, Frederick leads an army to Arden to deal with his enemies once and for all, but he, too, is transformed and chooses instead to give everything back to his brother and live the life of a hermit.

The Problem of Language and Old Comedy

It is not, as I've said, what *happens* here that matters, but what is said and how it is said—and therein lies the appeal and the challenge of staging Shakespeare. The problem, as many snoozing audiences have so well understood, is that much of Elizabethan speech has become unfamiliar. Much of the humor in *AYLI* derives from punning that was often too quick even for audiences of Shakespeare's time; most of us today understand the double-entendres and the gutter jokes only from the footnotes in printed versions. Seen as an interaction between writer, actors, and audience, a play is a living thing whose meaning and texture changes over time; because the modern audience in language and sensibility has changed so profoundly, the 2004 play is already transformed from that of 1600—before a single word or line of text is changed. Our task is to make the best of that transformation, to strike a balance between the demands we place on the audience and changes to the text and staging. We do that by relying more on purposeful staging to convey meaning otherwise lost, and, perhaps, by emphasizing elements of romance, character, and melodrama to a greater extent than originally conceived.

And, at the same time, we don't want to get too wound up over the possibility that Uncle Wilbur might not catch every line. I often think of Shakespeare's comedies in terms of music. Listening to Mozart, or Mingus, I hear only part of what is there: there are allusions, wit, and inventiveness that I miss because of the limitations of my musical understanding, even as those limitations do little to diminish my pleasure in listening. Likewise, our pleasure in the language of the play need not be dimmed by the unfamiliarity of sixteenth-century

idiom—after all, there’s nothing wrong with leaving an audience intrigued by the suggestion of yet undiscovered levels of nuance and meaning. (see separate *notes on the revision* for more on the language question.)

Staging the Play and General Ruminations

The play, in terms of what *happens*, is pretty fluffy stuff. It is a romantic comedy, nothing more; and, according to some theories of the play’s curious name, it reflects Shakespeare’s desire to pander to his roisterous audience and sell tickets by serving something up exactly *as you like it*—lots of bawdy humor, passionate lovers, some dastardly bad guys, the requisite pastoral theme, a couple of fools, a noble hero, and a plucky girl at the heart of it all. But is that really all?

To return to the music analogy: as the musician builds lush and intricate substance around the bare bones of a simple melody, so does Shakespeare excel at taking things far beyond the simple form of the comedy: *his* pastoral countryside is the rich and complex world of Arden, *his* fools are second only to Falstaff in wit, and *his* plucky girl turns out to be Rosalind.

There are, essentially, two settings in *As You Like It*—Frederick’s court (Act I, mainly), and Arden Forest. The first act takes place in the modern office of Oliver, Orlando’s brother. A sleek décor—smoked glass table empty except for a speakerphone, one chair, a laquered liquor cabinet, and on the wall, a bank of video displays (or perhaps a single LCD-projected image) on which flicker dark image loops of mass graves, shopping malls, beauty pageants, traffic jams, children fighting, linebackers, war, famine, and so on. Oliver is handsome and polished—an ambitious and successful executive willing to do anything to further his career and the fortunes of his boss, Frederick—a crass but powerful mobster. Beneath it all, however, disorder and disfunction run riot: Oliver is consumed with jealousy and hatred for his brother, and is a coward at heart; Frederick has, for reasons never made clear, destroyed his own brother’s fortunes, and now rules in a capricious and irrationally violent manner. Things, despite the affluent appearance, don’t really work very well in Frederick’s world: his orders are bungled, his assassins fail, his daughter disloyal; even language and wit suffer here—when Orlando and Rosalind first meet, they can manage only trite superficialities; in Frederick’s world, the only reliable thing is the spirit of malice.

Arden Forest, where most of the play from Act II on takes place, is the opposite of Frederick’s world. It is, first of all, *timeless* (as opposed to the bulldog bite that *right now* has on Act I.) In Arden, we are never quite sure about the where and when—it could be the Ice-Age, Middle Earth, or a post-apocalyptic future. Arden is manifested by “Arden Village”—a living and constantly growing backdrop of people, animals, and objects, with actors and musicians wearing and using things that alternately and simultaneously bring to mind hunters, farmers, hippies, gypsies, headhunters, outlaws. In many respects, of course, it is exactly the savage wilderness Frederick imagines: good people *do* suffer hunger and cold, dangerous animals prowl, deer are butchered that men may eat, words have barbs, and feelings are hurt. What Frederick cannot imagine, however, is how much *more* there is to Arden—in a word, *life*. There is order here—the organic integrity of Life as opposed to the disorder of Frederick’s world. Arden is a celebration of life, a place bursting with wit, magic, music, and love. It is where people rise to their highest nature because the forest resonates with what is best in us, where people rise to that best nature inevitably because the world is so bright and alive that nothing else is possible. Arden is what Eden would have been if God had relented and let the kids stay on after the apple episode; Arden is a wattle-and-mud village in a green, forgotten corner of Guatemala; Arden is the immigrant’s dream of a new world; Arden is the hairy place in northern California that everyone was looking for in 1967;

Arden is hope over despair, life over death. All of which, of course, would be really boring, except that this is *Shakespeare's* Arden, which means that we will not be allowed to take any of it too seriously, nor forget that some day Duke Senior must return to his court—wiser and gentled, perhaps—but must return all the same.

There are more songs—five in all—in *AYLI* than in any other Shakespeare play, and music will be a key component here. We may not do all the songs, and those that are done will emerge seamlessly from the Arden setting, either surrealistically like Bjork's pieces in *Dancer in the Dark*, or as the sudden flowering of rhythmic and melodic fragments bubbling in the background of certain scenes. The musicians will be onstage as Arden Village residents, cooking, tending animals, children, scraping hides, carving, combing goats, feeding falcons, dancing, humming, laughing—and the musical pieces per se will emerge from these activities. The music will draw on the hard-edged buzzing rhythms of late medieval “profane” music (think of *Carmina Burana*—the historical re-creations, not Carl Orff), with some Incredible String Band, hiphop, and sufi chants.

Why all the fuss with a contemporary setting and the happy wilderness tribe? Why not the “traditional” halberds, doublets, and codpieces? In 1600, power could be conveyed in a stage shorthand involving trumpets, armor, castles and swords. In 1600, the pastoral was shorthand for the familiar idea that our true nature and highest calling was to be found in the natural life of the countryside, and thus, Arden itself offered “explanation” for the transformations in the characters. Neither of these conventions are applicable today: castles and armor signal old-time quaintness, and nothing about people wandering off to a place called Arden Forest will nowadays trigger an automatic association with pastoral transformation. The castle is where *power lived* in 1600, and that's why Shakespeare places his characters, especially his villains, in castles. The corporate boardroom is where power lives today, and that is why we update the set—not because our audience will necessarily like it better—but because it is *truer to the author's intent*.

The grange space will be used in the usual configuraton (sorry, Barbara!). Flat black paint (on fabric or existing surfaces) will kill light reflection from the floor and walls. Oliver's office is downstage right, in front of the proscenium arch. Entrances to Arden occur in a stylized “forest” downstage left. Center stage is an indeterminate field for action for either world. Upstage, behind the proscenium arch, Arden Village will gradual take shape as we move into Act II and beyond, little by little, people and things are added until by the show's end, Arden threatens to spill its lush abundance right out into the audience.

But now, a new problem. If all of this—the contrasting sets, the video, the shocking modernity of Oliver's office, the vividness of Arden, the music, the falcons and other animals—is too overwhelming and distracting, then the show will fail. The energetic staging we have in mind exists only to intensify and clarify the interactions between Rosalind and the other principals; at every moment till the final curtain of the final show, we are ready to jettison elements of that staging if it isn't working toward that primary goal. This is, above all, Rosalind's play; and if in the end she doesn't capture every heart in the audience, then we've got nothing. And speaking of Rosalind, let's end with dear Harold Bloom, merely one of the latest of a long line of critics to have fallen hard for Rosalind: *If she cannot please us, then no one in Shakespeare or elsewhere in literature ever will. . . She is a kind of miracle.*