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**Play review: *As You Like It*, directed by Kimberley Sykes**

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gentleman. Doran needs to be more alert to the fact that his casting is skating on very thin ice. Other minor performances were pure caricature: Michael Patrick's 'Oirish' Elbow and Lucio, played by Joseph Arkley, with a Dali moustache and Terry Thomas voice: a terrible cad.

The final scene took place in a railway station (design by Stephen Brimson Lewis), the idea being, presumably, that justice, in such a public space, is seen to be done. Phelps' Isabella, now sans wimple, in simple shift and loose blonde hair, embraced the kneeling Mariana (Sophie Khan Levy) as she interceded for Angelo's life. The various revelations and episodes of poetic justice followed to the applause of a small crowd of onstage spectators. Suddenly the stage emptied and only Vincentio and Isabella were left alone. The lights (designed by Simon Spencer), with obvious ominous import, suddenly dimmed and the Duke made his clumsy proposal, his hand outstretched towards her: 'What's mine is yours, and what's yours is mine' (5.1.536). She turned from him downstage to display a look of appalled horror not unlike Munch's *The Scream*, albeit that she didn't go the whole hog and hold her hands to her cheeks. Doranism remains alive and kicking.

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*As You Like It*, directed by Kimberley Sykes for the Royal Shakespeare Company, The Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, 9 May 2019, front stalls. (colour plates 8a and 8b)

**Reviewed by:** Agnès Lafont, Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3

Regularly performed by the Royal Shakespeare Company – five times since 2000, the most recent being Maria Aberg's 2013 production – *As You Like It* returned to the main stage in 2019 in an effusive staging. Kimberley Sykes made many bold choices, the most striking of which was perhaps its sense of communality. Following Artistic Director Gregory Doran's remit that the RSC 'reflect the nation', Sykes multiplied inclusive attempts to connect with the audience in its diversity and multiplicity, moving beyond the company's established colour-blind policy to cast a hearing-impaired actress to play Audrey (Charlotte Arrowsmith), which apparently afforded the opportunity to create a special connection between her and William (Tom Dawze). (Since Arrowsmith was absent for the performance I attended, and as her understudy [Emily Johnstone] was not hearing-impaired, I didn't witness the numerous gestures adding proximity between the two actors.) Sykes also kept the house lights on when the scene moved to the forest of Arden, sustaining the spectators' commitment; this was particularly effective in a number of powerful moments. Rosalind (Lucy Phelps), the androgynous heroine of the performance, had an invigorating proximity and a closeness with the audience, knowingly helping her cloyingly juvenile Orlando (David Ajao) to enter what felt like her game. Touchstone (Sandy Grierson) also energetically played to the public, as his jokes and pantomiming were either aimed at or clearly about them. He brought a lot of physicality to the performance, with an irreverent approach that was less court-jesterly and perhaps more Kemp-like, with his long-hair,

smudged eye-makeup, spangled top and yellow check trousers, partly covered by a grey dressing-gown: in his obviously tasteless secondhand costume, he seemed to jig in and out of the play with the panache of a stand-up comedian, which was hilarious at times.

Economy prevailed in the staging. Stephen Brimson Lewis's setting was generally simple and drew on the audience's imagination, and more significantly on their bodies. If we took on the standard role of court spectators at the wrestling match, it was as trees in the forest (on which Orlando hung his love verses) that we contributed to very special instances of communion in the play: the main auditorium is naturally conducive to an in-the-round playing space, but the usage of soft lighting in this human forest of Arden created a sheltered and intimate place where Jaques (Sophie Stanton) quietly delivered her Seven Ages speech. This effective moment also worked thanks to careful blocking during the banquet scene, with the banished members of the court sitting in rags around a cooking pot, while a weakened Adam (Richard Clews) was carried into the circle by Orlando, the audiences on stage and around it being united.

Bretta Gerecke's cleverly recycled motley costumes partly came from the RSC wardrobe – presented on hangers and racks onstage at one point – in order to create a 'mish-mash that celebrates the art of theatre-making' (Sykes, director's note, 11 February 2019). They enhanced the destitution of the outcasts, the poverty of the shepherds, and above all the artificiality of role-playing. Jaques's ironic phrase about 'motley's the only wear' (2.7.34) did not apply to herself. She was simply dressed in a plain dark costume covered by a long coat, showing how she always stood out, aloof, in contrast to the otherwise collaborative production.

These stripped-down choices exposed the inner workings of the theatre, as the explicit shift between the Court and Arden illustrated. Under full house lights, everybody was laughing and changing costumes onstage, making us feel as if the characters were escaping to the audience. Emily Johnstone's (as Amiens) beautiful interpretation of 'Under the Greenwood Tree' eased our mutual entrance into the pastoral world of the play, out of Duke Frederick's (Antony Byrne) oppressive court in which green elements were scarce and tamed, like the bright green lawn on which the two girls were talking in the opening scene and tottering in heels. Sharing a moment of intimacy, Rosalind and Celia shed their shoes, prefiguring Arden Forest where everybody went barefoot. On the lawn, Le Beau (Johnstone) was particularly off-balance in her tight grey suit and matching shoes, her gawkiness quickly turning into comic relief in a courtly world where formality was essential. Eventually, Rosalind's heartfelt epilogue, showing the organic experience of the forest she brought back to the court, laid bare the structure of the comedy, meta-theatrically. A simplicity that the final *deus ex machina* apparition of Hymen, the giant puppet, with all its beautiful graphic qualities and its impressive stage machinery, lacked. This apparition created a stark contrast with the Glastonbury atmosphere of the rest of the play.

The other notable mark of the production was the prevalent gender-bending, which took its cue from Rosalind: 'I'll have no worse a name than Jove's own page / And therefore look you call me Ganymede' (1.3.123–4). Phelps was constantly, flirtatiously and effectively playing on her different roles, and her unstable gender made for some funny moments (Orlando found it hard to keep up with her and this reviewer found it difficult at times to believe that she should be so head over heels in love with him). Other

moments were more poignant: when in Act 4, Orlando rehearsed his wedding kiss with Ganymede, she was dressed as a man but playfully put a rednose on, and the audience collectively held its breath while their emotions shifted from ironical distance to shyness, love and fond intimacy. While casting Jaques as a woman is not a first (see Cathleen McKague's review of Jillian Keiley's production in the 2016 Ontario Festival, *Cahiers Élisabéthains* 92.1 (2017), pp. 82–4), changing Silvius into Silvia (Amelia Donkor) added a hitherto unseen female love story to Shakespeare's script. Yet this gender change was distracting and counterproductive, at least for this reviewer: the production made same-sex union possible by switching pronouns, thus rendering ineffective Hymen's threat to Phoebe in the original text: 'You to his love must accord / or have a woman to your Lord' (5.4.128–9). Phoebe's (Laura Elsworthy) subsequent marriage to Silvia is hardly a satisfactory solution for her romantic dilemma: Hymen made her shun Rosalind for no valid reason since she was now rightly entitled to choose between two women. Further, this took the irony out of Shakespeare's parody of Petrarchan *religio amoris*, weakening the pastoral section. In contrast, the evolution of Celia's (Sophie Khan Levy) sisterly bond to Rosalind was genuinely represented: shedding her initial pink princess-like dress, ultra-protected by her violent father, she revealed herself to be Rosalind's best friend as well as 'coz', in comfortable skirts that made her appear joyous and liberated, opening up to the freedom of the forest.

The production beautifully played with communal feelings and offered a green world that was happy and participative thanks to the energetic pace and its sustained comedic tone. It undoubtedly challenged masculine supremacy through its casting choices and asked questions on the cultural situation and the political function of theatre, on par with Shakespeare's interrogative theatre. Though not all choices may have succeeded, and while the relationship between Orlando and Rosalind took time to strike the right balance, the vibrant ensemble's teamwork and full-on engagement with the production's physical elements and with the public made for an inspirational performance.

### Author biography

**Agnès Lafont** is Senior Lecturer in early modern English Literature at Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3, and a member of the Institute for Research on the Renaissance, the Neo-classical Age and the Enlightenment (IRCL). She has published articles on mythology, edited *Shakespeare's Erotic Mythology and Ovidian Renaissance Culture* (2013) and co-edited with J. Valls-Russell and C. Coffin, *Interweaving Myths in Shakespeare and his Contemporaries* (2017).

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*King John*, directed by Eleanor Rhode for the Royal Shakespeare Company, Swan Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, 16 December 2019, front stalls, stage right. (colour plates 9a and 9b)

**Reviewed by:** Ben Haworth and Peter J. Smith, Nottingham Trent University

Symptomatic of this production and its frenetic inclusivity was the cyclorama hanging upstage (design by Max Johns). The illustration (also used for the cover of the