



**As You Like It** by William Shakespeare  
 Performed at **Royal Exchange Theatre**  
 directed by Greg Herzov  
 Reviewed by **Charlotte Starkey** July 2011

[illegible]

This production of *As You Like It* merits a visit. It is a challenging creation crossing time and cultural divides between the Elizabethan and modern worlds, largely set in a contemporary context in the props and dress of the characters but suggesting, too, the Elizabethan world out of which the play grew. It is witty and technically quite beautiful at times. The casino-style set of the early backdrop with bunny girls and the self-mocking male mirror images, reminiscent of Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, gave an indeterminate late pre-millennium context.

What some may find puzzling in this early scene does invite an important insight into the play. *As You Like It*

is a play about the folly of male desire especially when it is translated as 'love' – courtly love in the original sense. Orlando falls in love with himself being 'in love' and fails to recognise Rosalind when she stands before him in the forest. She is in disguise but reminding us that deception, especially self-deception, is the source of much human folly and potential danger. Orlando pins verses on trees, generally makes a fool of himself. Here all the men in the Playboy Club appear as comic mirror embodiments of their own fantasy of women. Later images of a bottled gas stove, bicycle, discarded car bonnet can be seen to reinforce the idea that male desire often ends in a clutter of accumulated assertions which do not amount to very much. The Forest of Arden in this production is often more like Touchstone's back yard. Yet the performance does attempt to address the play's transposition from a world of familial struggle and political failure to a pastoral landscape of woods, song, playful deceptions and love, converted in this production into a social world reminiscent of a gang of lads out for a romp in the park.

There is always a risk when seeking 'relevance' for a Shakespeare play to create a modern context for the action. At The Royal Exchange costumes could evoke the Elizabethan court world in the flowing colourful dresses of Rosalind and Celia, timeless in this attire, the pastoral Arden in the motley and gentle, sometimes insistent, music of the guitar with its echoes of a lute. The movements and sounds of the forest world were updated as mobiles, rising and falling speakers, suggested simultaneously the multiple movements and sounds of woodland: "Tongues I'll hang on every tree" says Celia (Kelly Hotten), a convincing partner to Rosalind throughout. At one point the lighting suggested Chinese lanterns (the programme notes give their own different version of this), the rise and fall creating disturbance, cacophony and significant moments in scene changes.

Dramatic performance always utilises the space which exists between the audience and the action especially if we can 'know' the original context of that. Elizabethan and Jacobean England had a much more clearly identifiable social structure. When Jaques pronounced that "All the world's a stage, / And all the men and women merely players" his words spoke instantly to an audience familiar with the pomp, pageantry and deceptions of England's court down river and the actual experience on stage. Transposing that world into a casino type club indicates the problems of translating language into a modern context whilst touching a key intention defined

in the text itself that the play deliberately reaches out to the wider world, “This wide and universal theatre”, in Duke Senior’s words. In the challenge the production invites us to fill the historical space imaginatively whilst exploring all that is happening with the technical gadgetry of the lighting and sound which The Royal Exchange provides.



Greg Hersov’s production has obviously grown out of an engagement with the multiple levels of the original play. *As You Like It* (c.1599) presents opening scenes of social and political power, a dukedom falling apart through incompetence, betrayal and greed, disgruntled young people thwarted in relationships, raunchy yokels who have a view on everything that’s likely to happen (Ian Bartholomew as Touchstone caught much of this) and the underpinning philosophical view

of life that sees every action as somehow inevitable, every conclusion as fatally scripted by someone else. Jaques (James Clyde) grew into this demanding and rich role. Jaques has obvious parallels in Malvolio and in Hamlet's character even though I feel the 'Seven Ages of Man' speech, a gift to any actor as a major statement, is too important to be contained within the general drift of the dialogue. It casts its light into the darker world that always lurks within Shakespeare's plays including

central dramatic concern with the nihilism embedded in human constructions of reality explored in *As You Like It*. It knits together a *Richard II, Henry*

*IV*  
(both plays),  
*Hamlet*

,  
*King Lear*  
and in the insights of Caliban in  
*The Tempest*

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*As You Like It* is a play of language, beautiful, clever, musical language which makes it easy for us to understand why Shakespeare provoked such envy among his fellow dramatists. Hersov's production tried to engage us with this. Shakespeare's wit and versatility with word-play, his power in the alliterative patterns of a sudden image or speech, unfold deep levels of thematic and emotional structure and unity. It is always important that the poetry is heard. Hersov has decided to destabilise the conventional woodland setting for the poetry with a surrealistic image of a constantly shifting set of sounds and colour suggesting depth and mystery for the language.

All this reveals how richly varied interpretations of Shakespeare can be. Seeing the play performed anew connects us with the perennial concerns of Shakespeare's plays from *A*

*Midsummer Night's Dream*

through  
*Twelfth Night*

and  
*Hamlet*

to  
*King Lear*

,  
*The Tempest*

and

*The Winter's Tale*

. The dreams of youth, both comic and sad, transform into the tragedy that befalls a person when, having achieved a position in life, they still fall victim to their own constructed delusions. Cush Jumbo has a strong stage presence at many key moments and creates a witty disguise as Ganymede. Touchstone in his beach outfit looks like an aged reject from Club Med, or a Saturday afternoon fisherman without his rod. The gun slinging gamekeeper and companions are like a bunch of Birmingham aspirational builders on a shooting party. If this is the Forest of Arden it is downgraded to a fly-tipped Warwickshire park with ambitions to be a touching, faded, rural innocence encapsulated in the roles of Silvius (William Postlethwaite) and Phoebe (Zora Bishop) enacting their own confusions.

The seeds of the developing tensions which preoccupy Shakespeare much more seriously both before and after this play was written are embedded within its metaphor of life as theatre. Close to, and just outside, Shakespeare's theatre, there was a court world populated by the masquerades, deceptions, murders, loan sharking, espionage and double identities of many hangers-on – just like today. Perhaps a context closer to contemporary power centres would have helped with this point. Some may feel that more of that darker side could have balanced the contemporary suburban pantomimic and comic elements. The insistent rhythm of James Dey's guitar, the very presence of the troubadour himself created a choric presence and indicated, alongside the lyricism, darker, stronger, more disturbing sounds. Companions to the poets and musicians of the Elizabethan age, indeed sometimes within these creators of beauty, are the creatures of deceit and betrayal. Rosalind in this production forcefully and with wit, indicated a fundamental insight that men and women are self-mockers of their own imaginings as she swaggered in mock-male pose taunting Orlando. In the perception that we are entrapped by our own language (Aristotle wrote of it in his *Poetics*) resides Shakespeare's force on stage – he endows his characters with a language which structures the conflicts, tensions, comedy and tragedy of the self-delusion which he sees as the human predicament.

Shakespeare's title, then, indicates one way in which to approach this production of *As You Like It*. It can be approached exactly as you like to take it – pantomimic, intense; comic, serious; romantic,

bawdy; 'contemporary' in a very loose sense, with echoes of the Elizabethan world suggested; a play about the quest for individual identity, a portrayal of social disintegration. The production pointed to something more than 'comedy'. Not one character is clearly defined as 'heroic' or 'the main character'. It is essentially a spectacle of comedy, beauty and some sadness built around the quest for identity and love and infused with colour, sound and constant movement. In an unexpected way this performance suggested why courtly love was so powerful a concept before, during and after Shakespeare's day and why it will always remain comic – at least when taken seriously by those ensnared. It is the woman, Rosalind, who has the last word in a colourful, musical, witty and provocative production.