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REVIEW

Review of Shakespeare's *As You Like It* (Directed by Laurie Sansom for the Northern Broadsides Theatre Company) at the New Vic Theatre, Staffordshire, 10 February 2022

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This production of *As You Like* was all about the outfits. As the audience filed into the auditorium of the New Vic theatre, a wooden coat-stand stood in the centre of an otherwise largely bare stage, and above were strung a series of ropes from which hung garment bags and a selection of shirts, dresses and smocks. Throughout the play, these occasionally descended to stage level, while characters also rummaged through onstage clothes racks and appeared decked out in a dazzling range of garments in all styles from all historical periods: ruffs, tutus, embroidered coat-dresses, military jackets, capes, wrestling leotards, furry boots.

This made for a visually striking show, with the costumes (designed by E.M. Parry) an endless source of ocular entertainment. It was also, of course, somewhat in keeping with the play's themes: the main plot of *As You Like It* focuses on Rosalind, who adopts the disguise of the male Ganymede in order to move safely through the potentially dangerous forest of Arden. Rosalind (played by the non-binary actor E.M. Williams) was therefore decked out in boyish clothes, with a cropped blonde hairstyle, throughout her time in Arden, but she was not the only character to disregard traditional ideas about gendered clothing. For example, Joe Morrow, who has a background in cabaret, played a camp Touchstone in a succession of sky-high heels, skin-tight leggings and brightly patterned tunics; while for the multiple weddings of the play's climax, the various sets of lovers assembled in an extraordinary mishmash of garments and prosthetics, including Silvius (Bailey Brook) in a long cream skirt and knitted shrug which exposed an otherwise naked torso and Audrey (Terri Jade Donovan) sporting a brown false beard.

What we choose to wear is a fascinating issue, lying as it does on the boundary between our private identities and our public selves. Our clothing choices may reflect who we are or feel we are—for example, our age, social class, religious beliefs, gender, and/or sexuality—and how we want the world to see us

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but, alternatively, they may reflect simply how our community wants us to appear, as we work to conform to social expectations or professional requirements. Sometimes our public and private identities may overlap (my office wants me to wear a suit to look 'professional'; I also want to wear a suit, to show that I am a serious, 'professional' person), but at other times they may not. In this *As You Like It*, therefore, with its focus on clothing, I was intrigued by the choices on display and the question of what, if anything, these might be supposed to say about the characters, their identities and their desires. In Act 1, for example, Celia (Isobel Coward) and Rosalind were initially dressed in contrasting styles: the latter in high-fashion womenswear that gave her an exaggeratedly 'feminine' silhouette (a wide corset belt, short skirt, fancy patterned black tights, stilettos, a flouncy blouse) and the former in more 'mannish' attire, with a long fitted jacket, tailored harem pants and flat boots, with her shoulder-length bobbed hair slicked back. In a more traditional production, one might expect both women to start the play wearing more stereotypically upper-class feminine clothes, with the costume changes when they got to Arden then representing a freeing of them from conventional gender and class expectations. Yet this was not the case here: Rosalind was (presumably) not forced to wear highly female-coded clothing in Duke Frederick's court, given that Celia clearly felt no such constraint. How should we interpret her initial choice of outfit, therefore? Should we read it as suggesting that she is initially more wedded to the social norms of femininity than Celia? Or that she simply likes these clothes and that they say nothing particular about her beyond just a matter of her tastes and desires in that moment?

Decoding the clothing choices of this early scene was complicated still further by the decision to play the relationship between the cousins as one initially involving romantic attraction, at least on Celia's part. In the first act, when Rosalind asks her cousin 'Let me see, what think you of falling in love?' (1.2.24), the pair were partially clothed and semi-embracing, their bodies wound round each other, suggesting a physical and mental intimacy that was as erotic as anything else the production presented. Later in the play, when Celia was asked to perform the mock-wedding ceremony between Orlando and Rosalind, her feelings towards her cousin became fully clear: her voice faltered on 'I cannot say the words' (4.1.120), and while the lovers continued their conversation, she made her way quietly across to the other side of the stage where she sat disconsolately, staring at her hands. After Orlando's departure (sent on his way with an impulsively passionate kiss from Rosalind), Celia's attack on Rosalind for her playful misogyny was then given a new meaning by her unspoken emotions. 'You have simply misused our sex' (4.1.191) became here a complaint about Rosalind's failure to recognise the alternative love that was right in front of her. Celia's desire for Rosalind also created a new and interesting subtext in Act 3 scene 4, when she told Rosalind that Orlando's

failure to turn up on time for his mock-wooing appointment meant that he could not truly be in love with her: she was, quite deliberately, attempting to put her cousin off her new romantic obsession.

Given this, though, it was uncertain whether Celia's decision to dress in male-coded clothing at the start of the play should be seen as in any way an indication of her sexual preferences, since within the dress conventions of the LGBTQ+ community, it could be read as indicating her status as a 'baby butch'. Later, of course, the play requires Celia to fall in love with Orlando's brother Oliver (Reuben Johnson). Did Celia's costume change from trousers in the court to skirts in Arden reflect this, as a visual indication of her gradual transition from queerness to heterosexuality? Or is this an inappropriately limited reading, which seeks too neatly to fit Celia into the category of either 'queer' or 'straight', while also imposing too strict a link between being gender-non-conforming in one's dress and queer in one's sexual preferences? Essentially, then, I wondered to what extent clothing in this production was being treated as a signifier, giving characters the ability to express their true selves, and to what extent the production was instead implying that people may have no single, stable gender or sexual identity, beyond the immediate desires they feel in the moment, which would suggest that we should treat what we wear simply as an endless moveable feast of experimentation and play.

The transition from Celia loving Rosalind to Celia loving Oliver was achieved via a striking orgiastic dream sequence, loosely based on the play's Act 4 scene 2 in which Duke Senior's men kill a stag. In the dream, Celia was embraced first by Rosalind but then by Oliver (whom she had not yet met in reality at this point in the play), while Rosalind went off with Orlando. Again, though, this sequence felt like it raised more questions than it answered. Was the dream a prophetic foreshadowing of the true love at first sight that Celia was soon to feel for Oliver? Or was it an attempt to suggest the changeable nature of desire, as the participants in the dream switched partners as time went by? Is Celia destined for Oliver by fate, or is he just the person who happens to be most immediately in her orbit when it is time to end the scene?

Perhaps I am being overly literal, attempting to nail down the 'meaning' of a production which was primarily interested in the human capacity for change and unpredictability. Why should any of these characters be neatly categorisable in terms of either their gender identity or their sexuality? That said, there were ways in which the production's joyful embrace of the non-binary did feel somewhat at odds with the neat, heterosexual sorting of the play's action. The end of *As You Like It*, notoriously, features a pile-up of magically improbable events: the spontaneous repentance of both Duke Frederick and Oliver as soon as they step into Arden; the rapid pairing-off of Oliver and Celia; the way in which Phoebe simply accepts her match with Silvius despite having spent the

majority of the play insisting that she doesn't want him. The potential arbitrariness of this ending felt even more emphatic here: in a production so focused on the fluidity of desire and the capacity of people to love beyond the barriers commonly imposed by society, why should Phoebe reject Ganymede/Rosalind simply because she discovers that 'he' is actually a woman? And why should Rosalind be so fixated on the (in this production) rather flavourless Orlando, and never notice the adoration coming her way from Celia?

I do not think that Orlando's blandness was the fault of the actor, Shaban Dar, meanwhile. Instead, I would suggest that the production did not entirely know what to do with him, as the leading 'straight' man in a world otherwise full of queerness. It did a good job of mocking Orlando's Petrarchan languishing (the scene in which his poetry is discovered hanging on the trees was a memorable one, with multiple characters simultaneously reading bits of it out, along with interpolated bits of other verse, both Shakespearean and not, in a mad cacophony), but Dar was given little else to do while in Arden, and so his character came across as somewhat passive and underdeveloped. As a result, I ended up feeling that I wanted the Northern Broadsides team to have the courage of their convictions and give me a much more radical reworking of the play, where heterosexual marriage was not presented as the ultimate happy ending, and in which Rosalind and Celia were given more opportunity and encouragement to explore their own relationship.

That said, there was much to like in this production—not least, some wonderful performances. To list just a few, not only did Williams and Coward make a solid double-act as Rosalind and Celia (with Coward's no-nonsense practicality serving as a foil to Williams's nervy energy), but I also very much enjoyed Adam Kashmiry's Jacques: a character who clearly took a deep pleasure in his own self-indulgent melancholy. Claire Hackett, playing both Adam and Corin, was adept at bringing out the humour of both parts, from Corin's plain-speaking to Adam's self-romanticising; and Morrow's Touchstone immediately established himself as an audience favourite with his archly deadpan comic delivery. The show was also creatively staged, with a collection of hatstands emphasising the theme of clothing while also doubling as trees, maypoles, and (when turned on their sides) bramble thickets and stags. The scenes set in the Duke's camp seemed almost entirely detached from the antics of the various sets of lovers (which is always a potential problem with this play, given its sprawling, episodic structure), but they were nevertheless beautifully played: more melancholy and bleak than is common in many productions, giving the air not of a nostalgic 'golden world' (1.1.113) but of a chilly refugee camp, with a softly-spoken Duke Senior (Ali Gadema, who also doubled as a coldly flashy Duke Frederick) working to cheer up his disconsolate followers. Ultimately, I left the theatre not entirely convinced as to the overall coherence of what I'd seen, but nevertheless impressed by the energy and

ingenuity of the production and the sheer abundance of ideas that it spilled out onto the stage.

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