



# BEYOND THE STAGE

Dramaturgy Notes for the Illinois Shakespeare Festival

## WHY ADAPT THE CLASSICS?

The Illinois Shakespeare Festival will offer “a fresh look at classic stories” in our 2019 season, presenting brand new adaptations of *As You Like It* and *Julius Caesar*, as well as Jane Austen’s beloved novel *Pride and Prejudice*.

**But what does it mean to adapt a well-known work for contemporary audiences? What does adaptation actually involve?**

All productions adapt Shakespeare’s language to some degree. Many of the Bard’s plays exist in multiple versions: the First Folio text and one or more Quarto editions. As such, directors intrinsically choose one text over another, even if that “choice” is the one that most audiences are familiar with. Furthermore, the logistics of staging figure into the adaptation process. Modern productions often rearrange scenes to accommodate for intermissions, scenic transitions, and costume changes—all things that would not have been issues in Shakespeare’s time.

To keep things moving along, productions may decide to cut minor characters (Do we really need a *Third Gentleman*?) and obscure jokes and references (Elizabethans sure loved their...falconry puns). Directors and dramaturgs generally “massage” the text to fulfill certain practical needs, while still preserving the beautiful poetry and intricate characters that Shakespeare wrote.

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THIS ARTICLE IS ABOUT:  
**AS YOU LIKE IT**  
**PRIDE AND PREJUDICE**  
**CAESAR**

We chose to present the productions in the 2019 season as “new adaptations” because we wanted to feature our directors’ creative work that exist alongside Shakespeare and Austen’s language. The three directors chose to adapt these titles because they wanted to engage in dialogue with the original works, finding ways to support and enhance them as they find new life on the stage.

Robert Quinlan, who is working with composer Jordan Coughtry on *As You Like It*, calls Rosalind **“one of Shakespeare’s most ingenious creations,”** and admires **“how a brilliant, witty, and independent woman handles the complexity of falling in love.”** That complexity, Robert notes, is conveyed through language first and foremost.

Deanna Jent, who has been developing her stage adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* for some time, explains: **“I want to preserve as much of Austen’s language as possible, because sentence structure and word choice are part of the unique artistry of the novel.”** Adapting fiction for the stage offers a unique opportunity to give voices and bodies to Austen’s many characters.

*Caesar* makes the most changes to the original play, updating the Roman setting to a modern political world—classical oration turns into PR strategy. Still, director Quetta Carpenter points out that her work is grounded in **“respect and love for what Shakespeare wrote,”** making deliberate choices to **“make the play clearer without losing the spirit and musicality of the original language.”**

Since the adaptations are firmly rooted in the original texts, audiences already familiar with Shakespeare’s plays and Austen’s novel can enjoy the productions as new interpretations of these lasting classics, in the way that theatre enthusiasts talk about “Orson Welles’s *Macbeth*” or “Ian McKellen’s *Macbeth*,” even though these actors played essentially the same character.

There is much to look forward to in these new adaptations if one of the original works happen to be your favorite. Robert and Jordan’s music, inspired by early-twentieth century music hall entertainment, will give Rosalind and Orlando’s comedic romance a rollicking rhythm. Quetta’s media-saturated, always-online environment will bring new meaning to the idea of the Forum that was central to Roman public life. And Deanna’s stage adaptation begins with a fun problem: which character will say the novel’s famous first sentence? (See the show to find out!)