



BEYOND THE STAGE

Dramaturgy Notes for the Illinois Shakespeare Festival



INTERVIEW: ON TRACK WITH CASTING

Festival Dramaturg **Kee-Yoon Nahm (KN)** speaks with Artistic Director **John C. Stark (JS)** and Associate Artistic Director **Robert Quinlan (RQ)** about auditions and the casting process for the Illinois Shakespeare Festival (ISF) 2020 season. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

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KN: So tell me, how many actors have you looked at so far?

JS: I would say about five hundred actors. I actually started shortly after the last season was over by going to Utah Shakespeare Festival and meeting people. I saw around twenty actors there. I also visited the American Players Theatre and the American Shakespeare Center in September. In the meantime, Robert has been scheduling the larger auditions.

RQ: We have several avenues to meet actors: open auditions in Chicago for Equity actors (members of the union that represents actors and stage managers), as well as EMCs (Equity Membership Candidates), which is the group of people who will eventually join Actors' Equity. Non-Equity actors can also get on a waiting list for those auditions. We also have an open call for general auditions here in Bloomington-Normal. Finally, we have video auditions. Anyone from around the world can audition for us, really. We had a couple hundred submissions this year, and we narrowed that down. I would say that we contact 5–10% of the total group, asking them to either come to callbacks in Chicago or here in Normal, or send their callback audition via video.

KN: Do you know what roles you need to fill by the time that you schedule callbacks?

JS: The three directors make suggestions about actors that they saw during auditions. That gives us a hint about casting requirements. Some directors give us descriptions for the type of actor that they wish to cast. This includes gender requirements because we are changing some of the characters' genders.

RQ: It is a combination of actors who the directors suggest and bring to the table, actors that John and I see through our audition process, and actors who we already know, including some of the actors on the ISF Honor Roll. We always ask directors for their ideas about the characters and they respond in different ways. One of the directors this season put together a detailed breakdown of each character and their qualities.

KN: Like personality traits?

RQ: Yes, personality traits—so and so should be tough and no nonsense, another character should be hilariously funny and over the top, for example. So we know that they are looking for certain qualities in the actors. Of course, the actor does not just play that one role in the season. We have to make sure that the personality fits somewhere in all three plays, which can be challenging. We do have an idea of, let us say, how many men and women will be in the company and how they would track through the three shows. But when we start considering actual actors, they often do not make total sense in those tracks. So we have to improvise the tracks on the fly. Every time we have cast the season, we have ended up significantly changing those tracks to fit the actual human beings playing the roles.

KN: Some of our readers may not be familiar with the concept of tracks. Could you explain what that means?

JS: A track is the roles that a given actor plays in each of the three productions. When we are in the casting meeting with the directors, we will put up the actors' headshots on a board and lay out all the roles. It looks like a grid or an Excel spreadsheet. For example, one of the tracks that I have in my head right now (which will probably get blown to pieces later) is that the actor for Francis in *One Man, Two Guvnors* would also play the Porter in *Macbeth* and Pompey in *Measure for Measure*.

KN: I see that these are all clownish characters.

JS: Yes. If someone can handle Francis, then they can probably handle the Porter's comedy. But it may not turn out that way. Maybe Jenny McKnight, the director of *Measure for Measure*, will have a different feeling about Pompey. Given the specific actor that we are looking at for Francis, the track might change to include, say, the Provost in *Measure for Measure*.

RQ: I remember the first time that we cast the season in this way. We had all the tracks laid out on the board, and we were expecting to stick the actors' headshots under the tracks. But we realized that we needed to cut out the character names from the board and do it in reverse order. We would find an actor who we were interested in, and then build the track based on them.

JS: It is a bit of a puzzle.

KN: What other factors do you consider when selecting actors for the company?

JS: Really, we just look for good actors who can handle the language, who have vocal power and clarity. We want actors who can make the text come alive.

RQ: We are performing two of the season's plays outdoors in a large space. That requires a certain vocal power and facility with language. That does narrow the group of actors we can even consider. We need actors who have the kind of training that can really play in the Ewing Theatre.

KN: Are you ever concerned that an actor is playing two characters in different plays that feel too similar? Is that something that you want to avoid?

JS: Yes. That did occur in the 2018 season, although it made sense in this case. Katherine Fried played Viola in *Shakespeare in Love*, Catherine in *Henry V*, and Anne Page in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. All those characters were similar in that every one of them was forced into a marriage that they did not want. Now, we softened the arranged marriage plot in *Merry Wives* because it took place in the 1970s. So the end result was that the couple actually did like each other.

RQ: Katherine did have different love interests in all three plays though. That is something we think about: will the romances be the same actors across different plays? We try to avoid that as much as possible so that the plays feel different.

KN: I find this conversation interesting because it also makes me think of how Shakespeare's company worked—the Lord Chamberlain's Men. Shakespeare wrote many of his plays for the same group of actors, and so you had Richard Burbage play all the tragic heroes, for example. I wonder whether it all started to blend together for Elizabethan audiences after a certain point.

JS: I would imagine it did to some degree.

RQ: That is something else we have to balance. We try to bring in a lot of new actors each season and ask the directors for recommendations. We do not want the same person to play the lead role in every production. But we do want to keep some consistency so there are some actors from the past that the audience can recognize.



Katherine Fried in
Shakespeare in Love (2018)

KN: For audiences who have been coming to ISF for a long time, it is like an extra reward to be able to remember when, say, an actor played a similar role three years ago and make that connection.

RQ: The actors have to spend so much time together, too. That is another thing to consider. We try to discern, as much as we can, how an actor may be like to work with because the company lives together almost like a family for three months. We ask, “Will they get along? Are we bringing personalities that will mesh well together?”

JS: We lucked out the first couple of years I have done this! So far it has been good.

KN: Could you talk more about your philosophy when it comes to changing the genders of Shakespeare’s characters? It is often necessary in modern productions because there are so few roles that are written specifically for women, but what is the thought process behind some of those decisions?

RQ: You have to think about gender as a storytelling element—how gender operates in a given play. Some plays lend themselves easier to changing roles from male to female if you want to have more balance in the company. In other cases, when the play is about gender, it can be more difficult to change the character’s gender—for example, in plays where a woman dresses as a man for different effects. Of course, there are exceptions. I recently directed *As You Like It*, in which we changed many of the characters’ genders, even though this play features a woman going around disguised as a man. It depends on the

individual director. We asked the 2020 season directors in advance about their thoughts on changing characters' genders, before we got into the casting process.

JS: Robert makes a good point about the gender politics of a play. There are two plays I can think of in recent memory where changing genders is more difficult. *Shakespeare in Love* was a show about gender and gender on stage, so we could not change much. Because it was a modern play, there were a couple more women's roles but not many. In this coming season, *Measure for Measure* is also a production that explores gender politics to a great degree. I think that Jenny McKnight, the director, is weighing that balance. We are looking into what roles can be changed while still keeping the tension. This is a play about women's agency, as well as the lack thereof.

KN: What is the next step in the casting process?

RQ: We have narrowed down the large group of actors for the callbacks. We will see about thirty people in Chicago and about thirty here in Normal. Also, we will receive about sixty video callbacks, which we will share with the directors. When all is said and done, we will sit down with those 120 or so headshots and start talking through the season as a whole. We enter the casting room where we have these boards up with the names of the characters and all the headshots. We close the door, and the idea is that we do not leave the room until we have a draft of the acting company done. This casting meeting is one of the only times that the three directors will be in the same room. Because of that,

between John, myself, and the directors, we want to get the casting done in that meeting.

JS: And then we will all scream and go have a beer.

KN: It looks like you have some long days ahead of you. I am excited to meet the company once you figure it out through this complicated yet fascinating process.