



BEYOND THE STAGE

Dramaturgy Notes for the Illinois Shakespeare Festival



INTERVIEW: IMAGINING THE WORLD TOGETHER

Festival Dramaturg Kee-Yoon Nahm (KYN) has a conversation with director Deanna Jent (DJ), who is adapting Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* for the Illinois Shakespeare Festival (ISF). This interview has been lightly edited and condensed for length and clarity.

KYN: I am curious about the process of adapting *Pride and Prejudice* for the stage. Are there any unique challenges in adapting fiction into drama?

DJ: The biggest problem that I have encountered in adapting novels for the stage is that of time. I can take as many hours or weeks as I need to read a novel, but in theatre, people generally lose interest if the story is longer than a couple of hours. I start the adaptation process by trying to define the thinnest spine of the story — the things I must absolutely keep in order for Elizabeth Bennet's journey to make sense. Once I see how long the spine is, I can start adding in other pieces of plot or character. But it really starts with boiling the novel down to its essence.

The other major challenge was the novel's narrative point of view. I did not want to lose all the wonderful ways in which Austen describes the characters and their actions in the third person. Rather than change everything into present-tense dialogue, I sometimes have the characters speak narrated sections that have to do with

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them. You could say that characters perform Austen’s commentary of them. For example, when the novel narrates that “Mr. Bennet walked across the study,” I would just have the actor do that. But when Mrs. Bennet goes on and on, asking him a bunch of questions, and the novel narrates that “Mr. Bennet made no answer,” there is something more revealing about his character here. The novel tells us that Mr. Bennet is doing something more than simply sitting there quietly. He is making a choice not to answer his wife’s questions. So in my adaptation, Mr. Bennet says directly to the audience, “Mr. Bennet made no answer.” For me, this is similar to the convention of asides in Shakespeare.

KYN: That is not surprising since you have a lot of experience directing Shakespeare—including ISF’s production of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* last year. Did you draw on other ideas from Shakespeare when you worked on the adaptation?

DJ: Shakespeare teaches us a lot about telling a sprawling story within theatrical constraints. In *Henry V*, the Prologue comes out and explains to the audience what the setting is and asks them to imagine the play’s world over the stage. Shakespeare also uses theatrical devices to carry the audience from one place to another. I used that idea as well. In my adaptation, characters travel both in time and location as they speak. They effectively call the setting into existence as they move into it.

KYN: I have to say, one thing that stood out to me when I read your adaptation was just how much travel there is in the story. It seems that important things happen in *Pride and Prejudice* when characters go on a journey. In particular, Elizabeth learns new things every time she leaves home. That structure is clearer in your adaptation because you have condensed the scenes.

DJ: At the core of the novel is the idea that we get stuck in our own stories, our own places of knowledge. Both Elizabeth and Darcy embody this idea. Elizabeth is stuck in her prejudices when she interprets Darcy’s behavior. That is why she must travel—both literally and metaphorically—to gain a new perspective and learn about herself. She has a marvelous line after she reads Darcy’s letter that explains his actions: “Till this moment, I never knew myself.” The same goes for Darcy. All his education could not teach him what Elizabeth made him realize.



Deanna Jent
(director)

KYN: What do you think a theatrical production has to offer to people who have read and love the novel? What do you hope to bring to the story through theatre?

DJ: As with Shakespeare, there is a perception—somewhat justified—that Austen’s language is difficult. Her vocabulary is extensive. Her characters speak in long, yet grammatically correct sentences. There is a sense of formality and decorum to their speech that makes it feel distant from us. Hearing the language out loud can make it more accessible. You might not know what an old English word means, but you can understand what the character onstage is trying to say. Speaking more generally, I hope that audiences can enter the novel’s world and time period while also bringing it to the here and now. The fact that the characters are both themselves and Austen’s commentaries of them can help with that. Theatre is unique in that we all create the fictional world together. The audience imagines the world into existence along with the production.

I am also very excited that we have a racially diverse cast. That theatricality can help connect Austen’s novel with audiences today. Obviously, *Pride and Prejudice* is not primarily about race, but it is certainly about economics and class. And it is about the ways in which we get stuck in our own preconceptions and fail to see people who are different from us. There is something essential about the story that I think is important for us right now. Again, it is similar to the way that we encounter Shakespeare’s great stories and characters.

KYN: Aside from the main characters, who you are looking forward to exploring in rehearsal? *Pride and Prejudice* has an especially large cast of characters.

DJ: I personally have always been attracted to Mary, the third of the Bennet sisters. She is the scholarly daughter who does her duty and loves to sing, but apparently does not sing very well. I love that she has to be dragged away from her books to go to the ball. She ruefully understands the logic of these social obligations. But then, once she gets there, she is all about performing and being a part of the occasion. I love characters who have these kinds of dualities, and I look forward to discovering that aspect of the character.

I also think that the confrontation between Elizabeth and Lady Catherine de Bourgh at the end of the play is one of those scenes that actors cannot wait to get into. The girl with nothing goes up against

the woman with all the status and money — and manages to upstage her in the end. The whole novel points to that scene. I am looking forward to staging it.

KYN: Is there anything else you are particularly excited about at this point in the process?

DJ: I just finished talking to the scenic designer. I look forward to working with the fully realized set at Ewing Theatre. I love that we will have big ballroom scenes in an outdoor space. There will be some spectacle! As I work on the adaptation, I am thinking about how the dance scenes will help tell the story. Because there are so many scenes in the novel where people are watching others or keeping an eye out for who is approaching during a party, I plan to have characters in the “above” (the upper-level platform) watching and talking about the people below.

KYN: Also, since this is a story about how members of a society view each other, I think it will be great to have a large audience all tuned into what is happening onstage. The audience could imagine themselves as other people in this social circle, gossiping and having opinions of others. That could be a fun way for the production and the audience to imagine this world together, as you mentioned before.

DJ: I am excited to explore these ideas in rehearsal!