



BEYOND THE STAGE

Dramaturgy Notes for the Illinois Shakespeare Festival

INTERVIEW: MYSTERIES OF LIFE AND LOVE

Festival Dramaturg Kee-Yoon Nahm (KYN) has a conversation with director Robert Quinlan (RQ) and composer Jordan Coughtry (JC), who are co-adapting Shakespeare's *As You Like It* for the Illinois Shakespeare Festival. This interview has been lightly edited and condensed for length and clarity.

KYN: Robert, what drew you to *As You Like It*? Why did you want to direct this play?

RQ: I love *As You Like It* because it is really entertaining and a wonderful introduction to Shakespeare—a kind of gateway play. I think the character Rosalind is one of Shakespeare's most brilliant creations. It's just a total delight to see a character be so witty and self-aware, and to watch her struggle with falling in love. I am also drawn to how the play explores the mystery of falling in love and the freedom that characters find in the Forest of Arden. The forest changes people. They go through huge life changes by coming into the forest and examine what life really means.

KYN: Are there parts of the play that you find satisfying and fun?

JC: Anytime Orlando and Rosalind are together, it is spectacular. I always love it when the audience knows more than either of the characters and are able to watch them figure things out. The

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AS YOU LIKE IT

audience knows what Rosalind is doing, although Orlando doesn't. They are in on the joke. They watch Rosalind make it all work, and sometimes falter and slip a little bit. For me, *As You Like It* has always been a beautiful, fun, and weird play. The play is strange because it is full of normal-ish people, unlike *A Midsummer Night's Dream* where there are fairies or other Shakespeare plays with powerful kings. The characters in this play all feel like real people who are in strange circumstances. There are two worlds of the play—the court and the forest—and characters in one world are shot into the other.

RQ: In some ways, the two worlds do not make sense to each other. The people in the court do not make any sense in the forest. A group of mismatched people come together in this play.

KYN: Right, every time a character from the court enters the forest, it feels like they have to readjust to the new setting and a new tone.

RQ: And the contrast is wonderful. You have Touchstone and Corin having a conversation, and they cannot make sense of each other. Or even Touchstone and Audrey—even though they are falling in love, they do not really understand where the other person is coming from.

JC: Yes, exactly. The play is full of these amazing characters who do not really belong together but still make a home together in the forest. They make this world for themselves. That is the part that really hits home with me. These people may not belong together, but they make it work under extraordinary circumstances.

RQ: *As You Like It* is a wonderful comedy with so many witty, delightful, and human moments. But there are also passages of incredible poetry that kind of sneak up on you. This is the play that has the “Seven Ages of Man” speech. And then there is the wooing scene between Rosalind and Orlando, which is delightful but also takes you by surprise. It is almost like she takes him through all of the different possibilities of what might go wrong in a marriage, as if they go through an entire relationship in one scene. The play is shockingly observant about human nature.

KYN: What was the adaptation process like?

RQ: Jordan and I started meeting in August, once every week for two hours. We started talking through the play and what we responded to. It was nice because we had breaks in between those meetings and



Robert Quinlan
(director)



Jordan Coughtry
(composer)

we would each go away and look at scenes, and Jordan would come up with musical ideas. One thing we discovered along the way was that music could play a key role in structuring the piece. The play has this idea of the seven stages of man. We figured that the adaptation could be structured into seven “chapters,” with each chapter having its own musical interlude. The play broke down pretty nicely that way, so that was a fun day when we had that revelation.

JC: Robert had this idea of using music to bridge the scenes, sometimes even having one song cover a couple of scenes. My first thought was that it was not going to be possible—especially when he mentioned the late-1910s as the time period for the music, inspired by music hall entertainment. I do not really know that music. The stuff that I usually write is more folky. I did not think I could do that. What I said, of course, was “Yes, I can take a look at that.” It was remarkable when I worked on some of those seemingly impossible bridge songs—how it all fit so nicely. It really started coming together, and I was excited. The music at the time was happy and upbeat, even when talking about the First World War and our soldiers dying over there. That was an interesting idea. Things are rough at the beginning of *As You Like It*. There has been this big usurpation and people are banished. It is a wild and dark time. We were interested in the contrast between the peppy music of the 1910s and these dark, almost violence scenes. It felt like people were trying to have a good time even though the world is falling apart.

KYN: When I hear the music you have written, it also reminds me of vaudeville. It is interesting to think about vaudeville as a form of theatre that has all of these elements that do not quite fit together. But the point of vaudeville is that things are so varied and inconsistent and different from skit to skit. That style fits very nicely with the play.

JC: Robert had the idea of Touchstone being a kind of emcee figure who speaks directly to the audience and guides them through the play. The association with vaudeville lends itself nicely to that because Touchstone addresses the audience directly a lot. Plus, he is a little zany. He is the clown. The scene with Corin is almost like a two-person vaudeville scene with many great jokes.

KYN: The city slicker and the country bumpkin!

RQ: Having Touchstone be a kind of emcee also offers a lovely opportunity at the end of the play for Rosalind to step in and take over to deliver the Epilogue. She has not really spoken to the audience much throughout the play, but she has the last word, which I love.

KYN: The play's whole premise of characters fleeing the evils of the court and coming into touch with nature is rooted in the pastoral genre of Renaissance culture, but I also wonder if it resonates with our lives today. What do you hope this play can mean for audiences living in the present time?

RQ: The court has become a toxic environment in which people have become obsessed with how they appear. There is a lack of generosity and a lot of anger in the world of the court. The solution that characters find is to flee to the Forest of Arden where they can really think about what is most important in life — which is each other. The characters escape into humanity and love as they enter the forest. I think these are things that a lot of people long for right now. People long for connection, common grounds, and resolution. And I think this play offers some hope that way.

JC: I also think we are at an interesting time in thinking about relationships and gender, what it means to be oneself in this world, and connection. I think one thing that the play shows us is that love is not understandable. It is an experience you have with other people by interacting with them directly. When we are in danger or in chaos, or when we are literally or figuratively lost, we can always be safe in our love for one another. We are always safe in compassion and generosity, reaching out and communicating with people — being in the same room, being in the same woods.

KYN: And it is something that you can only recognize once you have the time and space to breathe a little bit, as the characters do in the Forest of Arden.

RQ: Which is not that different from the time and space that you allow yourself when you sit in an audience with other people to see live theatre. Going to see a Shakespeare play — and outdoors at that — is magical. You feel like you are a part of human history when you watch these characters wrestle with the mysteries of life, the same mysteries that we are trying to figure out for ourselves. It is a beautiful communal experience.