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California Shakespeare Theater shakes up 'As You Like It'

By Sophie Braccini



Jessica D. Williams (Rosalind), Maryssa Wanlass (Celia), and director Desdemona Chiang. Photos by den

New California Shakespeare Theater director Eric Ting has defined an artistic line guiding the East Bay Shakespearean company toward contemporary social relevance, and better accessibility to the great classic work.

His choice of Desdemona Chiang to direct the opening season with "As You Like It" is therefore logical, since Chiang says that for her, theater is a political gesture. She brings a transposed vision of Shakespeare's comedy to a setting relevant to our time, redefines gender roles, and lets the actors slightly dust off the language. The ambitious but respectful production promises to be a highlight of East Bay theater this spring.

Chiang carries with grace a first name that sounds like predestination: it is after Othello's wife Desdemona that she was named. She confesses that it was not an easy name for a little girl and explains how at nine years of age she checked Othello in her school's library to understand who her namesake was. "I opened the first page and reading the words, it looked like English, but I

could not understand a thing," she recalls. She later discovered the great English writer's poetry and relevance, but from this initial frustration she drew a desire to break the language barrier and make Shakespeare understandable and accessible to many.

"Shakespeare was a populist," says Chiang. "He was commissioned by the Queen but his work is activating for the people." So her objective is to extract the central theme of the play and make it meaningful to a 21st Century audience.

"As You Like It" is a pastoral play where banished, formerly privileged youth experiment with new relationships and personae. Chiang understands it as a play about community. "Everyone who goes to Arden is banished, they come there under duress, yet at the end of the play everyone gets married." She says that the story shows how to find love and connection out of tragedy.

In the 17th century setting the two opposing worlds are the Court, the place of civilization and intrigues, opposed to Arden, the romanticized countryside, realm of sheep and shepherds, where everything is more natural and honest. Chiang turned the setting completely on its head. For her the Court is a place of wealth, and today that means real estate. "Napa Valley, wine country, that's wealth, that's leisure, that's Court," she says. Meanwhile, the renegades of today dwell in the margins of the industrialized world, in abandoned warehouses. That's where she placed those who were chased from their life of leisure and learned to survive.

Chiang explains that she also enjoyed exploring with the actors the gender roles in the play. Rosalind is one of the most endearing feminine Shakespearean characters for our time. She is a resourceful young woman who ventures in the unknown and takes a gender disguise to transcend societal rules. In the play, Rosalind's disguise as a boy is interpreted as a constraint that she has to endure, but Chiang wants to show that in fact it is freeing for the young woman, an opportunity to explore new territories and discover the masculine part in her that was always there. The director highlights that the play functions on identity changes and people exploring alternatives ways of being.

Jessica Williams plays Rosalind. She trained at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama and the Interlochen Arts Academy, has performed on B.B.C., in England and the East Coast as a Shakespearean actress among other deeds. It is her CalShakes debut. James Carpenter who was a magnificent Iago in last season's "Othello," plays Rosalind's father and uncle. Maryssa Wanlass plays Celia, Patrick Russell is Orlando, Craig Marker is Oliver. They are just a few members of the very strong cast chosen by Chiang.

Ting said in a press release that the play's theme of personal exploration is very emblematic of the Bay Area, "In my time here, I've been struck by how this community is a beacon for those seeking to redefine themselves - for those seeking to expand their sense of 'family.'"

The play opens the 2017 season of CalShakes at the Bruns Theater in Orinda. It begins with previews on May 24 and opening night is May 27. The play will run until June 18. Tickets and more information are

available at www.calshakes.org.



Jomar Tagatac (Jacques) listens to director Desdemona Chiang.

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