

LOVE'S LABORS

Delusion and confusion in "As You Like It" and "3C."

BY JOHN LAHR



In “As You Like It,” Shakespeare’s celebration and sendup of the pastoral, written in 1600, his crew of cast-out characters wander into the Forest of Arden, a place whose name evoked not only the geography of Shakespeare’s Edenic Warwickshire but also the paradise of his childhood. (Mary Arden was his mother’s maiden name.) The paradox of the pastoral is that the dream of the natural requires artifice. Central Park, where a rollicking production of “As You Like It” (directed by Daniel Sullivan, at the Delacorte) is being staged, is a particularly piquant location for Shakespeare’s ironies: a man-made Victorian Arcadia, where twilight dapples the landscaped canopy of maple trees and ducks float on an artificial lake beside the theatre.

As we enter the Delacorte, a raggedy group of rustics are banjo-picking and fiddling bluegrass music (composed by the comedian Steve Martin, with additional arrangements by Greg Pliska) in front of a large wooden stockade, manned by armed sentries. It’s an ingenious transposition, which puts Arden at the edge of the Western frontier and the pristine American wilderness—“Earth’s only paradise,” as the British poet Michael Drayton called the New World, in 1606—an image that resonates as deeply for an American audience as the thought of England’s idyllic greenery did for the Elizabethans. (The set design is by John Lee Beatty.) The fine musicians and their infectious sound are deftly woven

throughout the play, turning up in the woods, around the campfire, even in the trees. They deliver “As You Like It”’s essential ingredient: a festive spirit.

As a director, Sullivan is strong on presentation, not penetration. Here he cleverly wrangles a crowd-pleasing show; his flamboyant directorial choices, however, come at the price of nuance. Shakespeare’s play calls for a contrast between the corruption of the court, with its bustling fops and courtiers—“O how full of briars is this working-day world!” Rosalind (Lily Rabe) complains—and the freedom of the natural world. “Here feel we not the penalty of Adam,” the deposed and banished Duke Senior says of his Arcadian bliss (in a line that was cut from this production). But Sullivan’s staging doesn’t actually take us inside the court: the action stays resolutely outside the crude stockade—a place where it’s hard to imagine that a decadent aristocratic life could exist. We get only a wash of the vainglorious court world, with its finery and its violence. (Though there is a terrific fight scene between David Furr’s Orlando, a bumptious, dashing nobleman manqué, and Charles, the Court Wrestler, played by Brendan Averett.) In the absence of a palpable sense of claustrophobia and constraint, of the suffocation that makes transformation urgent, the play loses texture and energy. When the put-upon Rosalind and her companion, Celia (Renee Elise Goldsberry), disguise themselves and escape to the Forest of Arden—“Now go we in content / To liberty, and not to banishment,” Celia announces—we get the idea of liberation but not the thrill of it. In Shakespeare’s text, Celia says to Rosalind, “Let’s away, / And get our jewels and our wealth together.” It’s a teasing, tongue-in-cheek line, but you won’t hear it in this production; Sullivan has cut it. True to form, he serves up the fun but not the finesse.

To enter the forest is to enter a play world—an enchanted space, where time is absent (“There’s no clock in the forest,” Orlando says) and where the power of overheated imaginations puts everyone under a spell. Orlando loves Rosalind; Rosalind, who has disguised herself as a young man named Ganymede, loves Orlando; the shepherd Silvius (Will Rogers) loves the shepherdess Phoebe (Susannah Flood), who loves Ganymede; the fool, Touchstone (the delightful Oliver Platt),

David Furr and Lily Rabe as would-be lovers in Shakespeare’s pastoral comedy.

loves Audrey (Donna Lynne Champlin), the clog-dancing goatherd. The characters' folly is in their lovesickness, an idealization of the other that mostly takes the form of poetry. They are compelled to narrate their love. Orlando pins his poems for Rosalind to trees. Phoebe pens a verse for Ganymede and manages to quote the sophisticated lines of the recently murdered Christopher Marlowe: "Who ever loved that loved not at first sight?" Even the self-loving and melancholy lord Jaques (the excellent Stephen Spinella) puts his suffering on a pedestal. Amid this hubbub of romantic delusion, the courtship of Orlando and the disguised Rosalind—"I would cure you, if you would but call me Rosalind and come every day to my cottage and woo me," Ganymede tells her "love-shaked" object of desire—demonstrates the simplest and most profound form of love: the longing to be seen and accepted for what we are.

Lily Rabe seems perfectly cast as Rosalind. Swift, smart, big-hearted, and playful, she shares with her character a natural robustness. She's easy in herself, and she has the intellectual and emotional sinew to juggle Rosalind's contradictory impulses for adventure and surrender. When Celia tells Rosalind that she has seen Orlando in the woods, Rosalind replies with an avalanche of questions, concluding, "Answer me in one word." Rabe makes both Rosalind's giddiness and her clear-eyed wit memorable. "Sell when you can, you are not for all markets," Rosalind admonishes the balky Phoebe when she scorns her inamorato. Rabe's charisma is helped by her graceful, athletic body and her husky voice, but what really shines across the footlights is her authenticity. At the finale, swept up in the high spirits of the wedding hoedown, Rabe's Rosalind kisses Orlando and lets her lips linger on his as they start to sashay around the stage in a kind of spirited Texas two-step. Shakespeare provides a song for the elegiac moment: "Hey ding-a-ding ding/Sweet lovers love the spring." For me, whatever the Bard had to say about joy and passion and the fragile hope for fulfilled desire was clinched in Rabe's gesture.

Gender confusion is an inherent part of the upside-down comic world of "As You Like It." Since men played the women's roles in Elizabethan theatre, Rosalind's disguise offered the audience a

kind of homoerotic hall of mirrors: a man playing a woman playing a man playing a woman. In Shakespeare's epilogue—which is fudged in this production—Rosalind breaks the dramatic frame to address the pit directly. "If I were a woman I would kiss as many of you as had beards that pleas'd me," she/he said.

The Freudian nightmare takes an altogether more punishing twist in David Adjmi's smart and well-written new play "3C" (directed by Jackson Gay, at the Rattlestick), which refers to the cheap and cheerful Santa Monica apartment rented by two twenty-somethings, Linda (Hannah Cabell) and Connie (Anna Chlumsky), in the coke-snorting, disco-dancing, let-it-all-hang-out yesteryear of 1978. The dilemma of the men and women who collide in Adjmi's farce about sexual identity isn't that they've overshot the runway; it's that they don't know where to land. The isolated Linda, who says, "I'm ugly and I look like a dyke," hankers for their new tenant, Brad (Jake Silberman), and possibly also for Connie. "You're always on dates. I hardly ever see you anymore," Linda complains, adding, "Maybe you could help it if you'd stop wearing tight shirts and shaking your boobs everywhere." Brad has jumped ship after falling for his former roommate, the macho Casanova Terry (Eddie Cahill), who teases him about being a "faggot" while coming on to him. Connie, who is as mindless as a stone ("Appearances can be deceiving," she says. "On the other hand, you can't judge a book by its cover"), appears to want anything that moves, in order to fill her colossal emptiness.

Without condescending to his lost souls, who are all accident-prone in their own way, Adjmi manages to make a spectacle of their self-loathing and the way they unwittingly undermine themselves. Through oblique, knowing dialogue, he demonstrates his characters' passion for ignorance, their hapless and hilarious inability to understand their own desires. For instance, Brad, who has recently returned from Vietnam and who admits that "sometimes I don't want to live anymore," asks Terry, "Do you . . . Do you ever feel . . . like . . . empty?" Terry considers the question for a moment:

TERRY (*quizzically*): You mean like hungry?
BRAD: No . . . I mean . . . inside.
(*Silence*)

TERRY (*sincere*): Inside where? (STOP; then *playfully, fobbing it off*.) You're such a little faggot. (*Slaps his knee, as if speaking to a dog*.) C'mere, faggot.

At the finale, Brad, bursting into racking sobs, finally comes out of the closet to Terry in front of everybody. "I . . . I . . . I love you," he says. The avowal stuns the others into a momentary silence that strikes him as funny, and he starts to laugh hysterically. In an amusing and awful dénouement, the others all join him in manic, braying hilarity.

CONNIE (*trying to be funny*): I'm a faggot, too!

TERRY: Yeah, me too.

LINDA: We're all faggots!

TERRY: I'M A FAGGOT.

CONNIE (*excitedly*): BOB HOPE'S A FAGGOT!

What plays at first as solidarity—a sort of sexual Spartacus moment—is actually a spectacular demonstration of the characters' refusal to think or feel. The psychological stasis that Adjmi captures with such skill is the bright doom of an unexamined life.

You can't accuse the Broadway musical team of John Kander (music) and the late Fred Ebb (lyrics) of trading in the downbeat. "First You Dream," an anthology staging of their best work (conceived by David Loud and Eric Schaeffer, who also directs the sextet of fine-voiced singers, at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, in Washington, D.C.), is a testament to their rousing, rambunctious expertise. Although Kander and Ebb can be poignant ("I Miss the Music," "Maybe This Time") and nostalgic ("Only in the Movies"), their theatrical calling card is showstopping optimism ("New York, New York," "Cabaret," "Ring Them Bells"). Their musical strategy is to strike up the band, get the trombones blaring, the banjo plunking, and the cowbells clattering, and go for joy. Their mission statement is perhaps best set out in "Razzle Dazzle," from "Chicago": "Give 'em an act with lots of flash in it / And the reaction will be passionate." The song goes on, "Give 'em the old double whammy / Daze and dizzy 'em"—a line that sums up the exhausting cheerfulness of this performance, which includes thirty-eight songs in about two and a half hours, and would have been twice as effective if it were half as long. ♦