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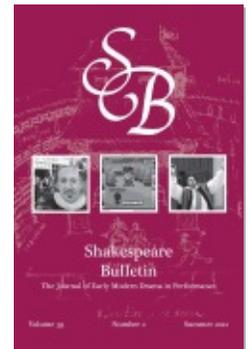
As You Like It (review)

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Shakespeare Bulletin, Volume 39, Number 2, Summer 2021, pp. 283-286 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/shb.2021.0027>



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and of the overt artificiality of the blanket's "magical" palace texture created through Zoom. It was a moment which captured the simultaneous realness and unrealness of virtual theater which Seaton has understood perhaps better than any other director this year; and which she has used to create brave, distinctive, and innovative work that is pioneering and defining what is possible in this new medium.



As You Like It

Presented by **Flagstaff Shakespeare Festival**. Streamed digitally at flag-shakes.org, 11–27 September 2020. Directed by James Cougar Canfield. Avatar and Sprite design by Nathan Leigh. Costumes by Hannah Fontes. Editing and original music by Sean Golightly. Stage management by Becki Zaritsky. With Bill Chameides (Duke Frederick/Duke Senior), Hannah Fontes (Celia), Gustavo Flores (Touchstone), Keith Hale (Oliver), Rapheal Hamilton (William/Brother Jacques/Lord), Ryan L. Jenkins (Orlando), Nick Marchetti (Charles/Phoebe), Jacob Nichols (Silvius), Suze St. John (Adam/Corin), Melissa Toomey (Jacques), Audrey Young (Audrey/Le Beau), and Becki Zaritsky (Rosalind).

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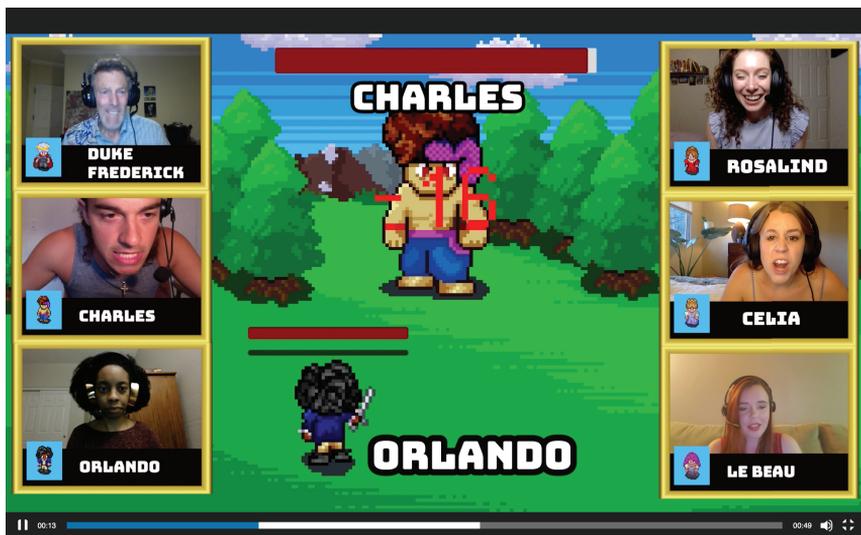
Flagstaff Shakespeare Festival's recent virtual production of *As You Like It* gives new meaning to Jaques's musing that "All the world's a stage, / And all the men and women merely players" (2.7.140–1). In this case, these players are quarantined actors inhabiting 16-bit character avatars who navigate a pixelated Forest of Arden that evokes the nostalgia and aesthetics of role-playing video games from the early 1990s.

This metatheatrical production concept, devised by director James Cougar Canfield, emerged in response to a need to shift Flagstaff Shakespeare's repertory model online as COVID-19 rapidly spread during the pre-production period. With company members sheltering in place across the country, Canfield took cues from memories of watching his mother play *Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past* as a child, as well as his own daily practice of exploring the idyllic wilds of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* during the early phase of quarantine. Here, the imagined vintage computer game *As You Like It* acts as a recursive metaphor for the production—becoming its own green world to provide the twelve performers of the ensemble an escape from the doldrums of self-isolation.

The opening moment of the production features a charming framing device focused on Becki Zaritsky, the actor who plays Rosalind. The audience, positioned as if watching from the screen of Zartisky's computer, watches a largely silent dumb show as she enters her real-world bedroom and casually checks her phone, only to find a message that spurs her to plug in her gaming headset and log onto the game. After a few keystrokes, she slowly draws her eyes up to us and flashes a fourth wall-breaking smile before Sean Golightly's pitch-perfect synthesized main theme fades in over the title screen of the game. Not only does this sequence effectively center Zaritsky-as-Rosalind as our primary focus, but it also provides a quaint analog frontispiece which will be bookended by her sublime delivery of Rosalind's epilogue, delivered in the same setting.

Following a genre-perfect scrolling text exposition detailing Duke Frederick's usurpation and exile of Duke Senior, the production completes Rosalind's digital transformation with the selection of her Renaissance-styled avatar. Moving into the narrative proper, Canfield's vision nicely allows the company to similarly re-envision the major moments of Shakespeare's text within the framework of RPG (role-playing game) mechanics. In Oliver's first confrontation with Orlando, upon the utterance of "Wilt thou lay hands on me, villain?," a traditional turn-based combat sequence launches and the performers strategically select from options including *PUNCH*, *SLASH*, and *HEAL*. This gameplay mechanic is expertly deployed at the playtext's two other moments of danger—during the setpiece wrestling match pitting Orlando against Charles in 1.2, and later in a fully hilariously realized boss battle between Orlando and the lioness, which precedes Oliver's melodramatic recollection of the event for Rosalind-as-Ganymede and Celia-as-Aliena in 4.3.

With only a dozen actors at hand to cover the twenty-two named characters in the Folio playtext, many clever choices of doubling are made. Some of these pairings have precedent in the play's performance history—Suze St. John brings wisdom and gentility to her doubling of Adam and Corin, both ready to serve to the "last gasp with truth and loyalty" (2.3.70); and Bill Chameides differentiates his stately Duke Senior from the dastardly Duke Frederick with a particularly wild, monitor-chewing performance. Others are far less common compared to past productions I've seen, including the inspired switching of Nick Marchetti's avatar from Charles to Phoebe in an interlude prior to her first appearance in 3.5—highlighted by the only other deliberate character selection screen within the game itself. This neat choice keeps the eminently watchable Marchetti in play in the latter half, but also adds new levels of complexity



The ensemble in *As You Like It*, dir. James Cougar Canfield. Flagstaff Shakespeare Festival, 2020. Screengrab by Cason Murphy, with permission of Flagstaff Shakespeare Festival.

to the courtship of Phoebe and Silvius as well as a reciprocal catfishing masquerade between Phoebe and Rosalind-as-Ganymede. Rosalind's delivery of her plea to "not fall in love with me, / For I am falser than vows made in wine" (3.5.73–4) comes through with a winking awareness of how Canfield's concept continues to mine clever contemporary substitutes of Elizabethan comic practices. However, FlagShakes's commitment to cross-gender casting is not just played for laughs; it also finds new depths within the romantic heart of the play, most notably between Ryan L. Jenkins's earnest and endearing Orlando and Zaritsky's Rosalind. The chemistry between the two women, even across the digital divide, is as effortless and easy as their comfort with the verse. Zaritsky's deft navigation of Rosalind's amorous love of Orlando and platonic love of Celia situates her as perhaps the best Rosalind I've seen. Her gentle thoughtfulness as the character enlivens the proceedings within the game but also carries over into her non-game performance as well, which we see a glimpse of at the conclusion of 4.1, when she confides to Aliena that "I cannot be out of the sight of Orlando. I'll go find a shadow and sigh till he come" (4.1.203–5). Rosalind logs out of the game world and we return to her real-world bedroom, where she slowly paces back and forth slowly out of the reach of the glow of the computer monitor.

Without his actors occupying the same physical space, Canfield's signature kinetic, physical approach to Shakespeare required some major adjustments to fit the new constraints of Zoom windows. While forgoing the stereotypical gaming snacks in the vein of Mountain Dew and Doritos, the ensemble of *As You Like It* find effective ways to punctuate moments with a flourish of a sticker-covered metal water bottle or a seductive slurp of watermelon. In an extended sequence of hilarity after Celia's exasperated request for food in 2.4, Hannah Fontes spends the rest of the following scenes silently chowing down on a jar of goopy peanut butter while Rosalind, Corin, Touchstone, and Silvius banter.

Although briefly mentioned earlier, special note should again be given to two designers: Nathan Leigh, who created the visual components including character avatars, and local Flagstaff Shakespeare collaborator Sean Golightly, who provided the game's original chiptune score. One of the most charming blends of their work comes when the sprite form of the NPC (non-player character) of Amiens soothes the weary soul of the melancholy Jacques, smartly realized by Melissa Toomey, with some warbled synth guitar-strumming in act two.

During this pandemic, many theatrical productions have embraced elements of video games, particularly those emphasizing collaborative forms of social interaction between artists and audiences across great distances. For all their merits, digital presentations like this will not wholly replace the live performances that regional companies like Flagstaff Shakespeare Festival pride themselves on. However, until we can all safely gather again in the shadow of Mount Humphries in northern Arizona, this production of *As You Like It* stands as a testament to the creative ingenuity of the artists at FlagShakes and a smart, well-crafted gameworld in which we all willingly could, and should, waste our time.



Othello

Presented by the **Stratford Festival** in Stratford, Ontario. 3 May–27 October 2019. Directed for the stage by Nigel Shawn Williams and for film by Barry Avrich. Design by Denyse Karn. Lighting design by Kaileigh Krysztofiak. Music and sound design by Verne Good. Fight direction by Anita Nittoly. Intimacy direction by Siobhan Richardson. With Michael Blake (*Othello*), Laura Condlln (*Emilia*), Amelia Sargisson (*Desdemona*), Gordon S. Miller (*Iago*), Johnathan Sousa (*Cassio*), Farhang Ghajar (*Roderigo*), Michelle Giroux (*Duchess of Venice*), Randy Hughson (*Brabantio*), and Shruti Kothari (*Bianca*).

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