

(PIANO MUSIC)

DREW LICHTENBERG: Welcome to The Shakespeare Theatre Company's Prosecast.

(PIANO MUSIC)

HANNAH HESSEL RATNER: Hello! Welcome to the Prosecast for Shakespeare Theatre Company's "As You Like It." Our production of "As You Like It" will be running October 28th through December 7th at the Lansburgh Theatre, and, today, I am here, Hannah—this is Hannah Hessel Ratner, the Audience Enrichment Manager here with Drew Lichtenberg, our Literary Manager and Production Dramaturge, to talk about the play. We are back after a summer of no podcasts to start to fill your ears again with lots of podcasts. So, hi, Drew!

LICHTENBERG: Hi, Hannah!

RATNER: So, on today's podcast, we're going to be talking about "As You Like It," and we're going to teach you at least five things, probably more, about the play: Its location, history, characters—and we are going to spend a lot of time talking about the character, Rosalind.

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, Rosalind is one of Shakespeare's greatest characters. Michael Attenborough, who's directing this production, likes to say that she's Shakespeare's most triumphant attempt at writing a woman.

RATNER: (laughs) I like that you had a slight British accent when you said that, of course, because he is British.

LICHTENBERG: Yes, I always fall into Michael's very posh, southern England accent when I imitate him. It's one of those things that you try to not fall into somebody else's accent when you're talking to them, but, it's very hard to resist

RATNER: Well, and it gives us a little taste of his personality as you do a semi-impersonations.

LICHTENBERG: Mmm hmm.

RATNER: So, in addition to talking about Rosalind, we're going to be joined, later in the podcast, by the actress playing the character, the actress, Zoë Waites, who's at the Shakespeare Theatre Company for the first time, so it'll be really great to have her.

LICHTENBERG: She's in America for the first time.

RATNER: Oh, really? I didn't realize this is her first American performance.

LICHTENBERG: I believe so. Yeah. She's come "across the channel," as they say.

RATNER: So, Drew, could you give us a quick synopsis for the play, for people who might not be familiar with it?

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, well, "As You Like It"—it's a difficult play to synopsise, in part because it's very strange. It has the tragic, actually first half, kind of similar, in some ways, to "The Winter's Tale" or Shakespeare's romances. It's this tale of banishment, exile, loss. It has a kind of wintery or autumnal feel, and Rosalind is at the very center of the story. She's the daughter of the banished Duke, and she finds herself exiled along with him. So, she goes to seek him out in the Forest of Arden, and, halfway through the play, there's this remarkable change that largely happens because of Rosalind herself. She has fallen in love with this beautiful young man, Orlando, and as she falls more deeply in love, the world itself seems to change, right? It turns into springtime, it turns into summer, the world kind of blossoms or blooms around her, so, it's very important to find a good Rosalind when you're doing a production of this play, and she's really at the center of the dramaturgy in a way that maybe Hamlet is similar. There are very few other characters in Shakespeare who have so many lines or are at the center of so many plots in their respective plays—

RATNER: —and really drive the plot through the ending.

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, and, really, it's about charting their evolution and their change as people, as human beings, and also just their incredible intelligence, and also their ability to feel emotions and describe their emotions as they're feeling them. So, yeah, "As You Like It," in some ways, is very much a story about this extraordinary character, Rosalind.

RATNER: Well, before we go deeper into Rosalind, let's talk a little bit about the setting. Many people might know the play as the one that is set in the Forest of Arden. There are many Shakespeare comedies that feature multiple locations and a change from being a kind of colder, courtly world to a more natural, green world, where the things that were so in the court become exploded out, and people can undergo these kinds of transformations. We see it in "A Midsummer Night's Dream," we see it in "Two Gentlemen of Verona," we see it in "The Tempest," but this one is a very special location.

LICHTENBERG: Yeah. It's hard to describe the Forest of Arden, in large part because we get all this information about sort of offstage scenes in the play, where they describe crazy things happening, like, we know that there's lions and serpents at one point.

RATNER: Right. There's something kind of biblical about the Forest of Arden, that it—

LICHTENBERG: There's also a biblical quality to it. There's also a kind of Classical quality. Rosalind, when she goes to the forest, dresses up as a boy, and calls herself Ganymede, who was the page of Jupiter, and also, her cousin, Celia, doesn't dress up as a boy, but she also chooses a Latin, Roman name. So, it's this place where contradiction is allowed to be possible.

RATNER: Well, can you talk a little bit about that with the Latin names and this Classical reference because that kind of ties in the kind of notion of Pastoral comedies that Shakespeare's audience may have been familiar with, and Shakespeare kind of plays with the trope.

LICHTENBERG: Well, yeah, the Pastoral was this very, very popular sort of genre in Elizabethan England in the late 1580s/early 1590s, and it was this kind of "Never Never Land," in which everybody was a shepherd, and every shepherd was in love, and every shepherd also was a poet who wrote about his love, and usually it was a he, right?

RATNER: Right.

LICHTEBERG: Usually, it was a lovelorn shepherd boy who would write about this object, this love object.

RATNER: It was usually a shepherdess.

LICHTENBERG: A shepherdess. Right. Exactly. It's a very idealized kind of "Never Never Land," and what Shakespeare does, in many ways, is he's kind of taking this genre that all of the courtly aristocrats in the Elizabethan world were like, "Oh yes, it's so true that shepherds love—" I'm doing Mike Attenborough again—and he reverses it. He had not only shepherds writing bad poetry about their love, but he has shepherdesses writing poetry. Orlando, who also goes to the Forest, is Rosalind's love object, not the other way around. She very much falls in love with him and remakes him into a mate who is suitable for her, which is a total reversal of gender roles. In fact, everybody in the play is obsessed with poetry or with song or with philosophy or with some kind of art, but they're putting that out into the world except for Rosalind.

RATNER: I mean, it's interesting because we are in this very kind of serious plot people being banished, courts being overthrown, people in exile—

LICHTENBERG: Yeah.

RATNER: —but, once they're there in exile, they're not really talking about "How do we get back;" they're talking about, you know, art and life and the world and poetry.

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, they're like, "Oh, God, such a long journey. We're so hungry. We're so exhausted," and then that seems to kind of dissipate, and they stop thinking about material needs—

RATNER: Right.

LICHTENBERG: —and they start thinking about deeper—

RATNER: The Garden is such a magical place, where we can think on this higher level.

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, and you were talking about biblical illusions. On some level, it's like the Garden of Eden.

RATNER: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: It's where you can fall in love, and it's where there is no sin—

RATNER: —and there is a snake.

LICHTENBERG: There's a snake, there's an old character, named Adam, there's Old Adam in the play.

RATNER: Yeah, there are references to Eden, I believe, throughout the play.

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, Duke Senior, who is the banished Duke—he's introduced to the audience in this extraordinary speech, where he says, "There are sermons in stones and books in the running brooks, good in everything." He has this kind of pantheistic, religious belief in the goodness of nature and the

goodness of this place outside of society. So, yeah, Shakespeare's interested in taking the Pastoral, which is this genre that is very remote to modern audiences—and even probably to him, as somebody who was from the midlands of England—and he's interested in reversing it and showing how kind of ludicrous it was. I mean, it's very intentional that the first people Rosalind and Celia meet in the Forest of Arden is an actual shepherd who does not look or act like a pastoral shepherd at all. He speaks very plainspoken-ly and says, "Oh, sheep are dirty, and I handle sheep all day, and I'm tired."

RATNER: Yeah. They are the real shepherds.

LICHTENBERG: Yeah.

RATNER: I mean, Shakespeare's putting onto stage the people who he would have known growing up or who wouldn't have lived too far from—

LICHTENBERG: Yeah. So, you know, the Forest of Arden, it's this place that contains multitudes. It's this place of contradiction, impossibility. It's a place of the theatre in its purest form, and it's panoramic as well. It's a place where you can see every kind of walk of society.

RATNER: So, where are we?

LICHTENBERG: Well, that's an interesting question. Shakespeare—the source for the play was a contemporary of Shakespeare's, named Thomas Lodge, and he set it in the French forest of Ardennes, and in Shakespeare's—in the Folio, it's spelled "Ardennes" and "Aden," which was an actual forest near Shakespeare's hometown of Stratford-upon-Avon. The Avon River is right next to the Forest of Arden, and, in fact, Shakespeare's mother's name, her maiden name was Mary Arden. So, in some senses, Shakespeare's— he's living in London, he's writing for the Lord Chamberlain's men, and he's writing this play that takes him back, imaginatively—

RATNER: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: —to where he probably ran through the brooks as a kid.

RATNER: But then, characters' names still have the French references.

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, we have a character named Jaques, right? It's often pronounced Jacques, but nobody really knows. It may also be a joke on a jakes, which was slang for a water closet, a privy. So, there's this sense of ambiguity that's inherent to the world of Arden. It's French and it's also English.

RATNER: Yeah. I mean, the other thing that I love—one of the references, as the wrestler Charles is describing the Forest of Arden and the Duke there, he talks about them as the merry men with an allusion to Robin Hood and the Merry Men, which, of course, would have been a familiar story to Shakespeare's audiences. In fact, probably the year before "As You Like It" was first produced—though, the dates we don't have specific dates—but we do know that there were multiple Robin Hood plays in London at that time, so, this is the idea of bands of merry men roaming through British forests.

LICHTENBERG: Right, bands of brothers, and, you know, Robin Hood, if you look at it as a story, it's also a story about brothers who were feuding, which is one of plots we have in "As You Like It," and it's about

banishment and exile, right? Robin is a knight, who has a fight over inheritance, and he runs off into the forest, and he becomes an outlaw—

RATNER: —and love from the outlaw to the lady.

LICHTENBERG: Right, and it's in the forest that he can fall in love with Maid Marian, and live outside of society, and kind of have a sort of open relationship. It's interesting because in that line— the full line is "Many a merry men flock to him and fleet the time carelessly as they did in the Golden World," which is an illusion to Ovid, the idea of this Classical golden world that appears in the *Metamorphoses*, so, even in that very line, we have the juxtaposition of Medieval and Classical Greek.

RATNER: So, do you think that we have a contemporary version—and we haven't talked about this production at all yet, but this production isn't set historically. It's set more generally.

LICHTENBERG: I think more directors, actually, have trouble setting this play because the Pastoral is such a specifically Elizabethan form, and I think Frank Kermode, the great late critic, says, "'As You Like It' is occupied too much by things that no long make any sense to us. We're not preoccupied by writing sonnets to people that we're in love with." But, if you think about it, I always look at the American Western as nobody nowadays is a sheriff who gets in gunfights with bad guys wearing black hats, and yet, we can make these movies and know what these characters represent in the kind of mythic sense in American history, and also what they represent as archetypes of good versus evil and living outside of the law. So, in some way, Shakespeare's writing a Western. He's going into the wild West. The wild West is just this forest, where you can be Robin Hood.

RATNER: Well, that's great! So, I think that covers the Forest of Arden for now. We might get back to it as we talk about other things, and we'll be joined shortly by Zoë Waites.

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RATNER: Alright, well, we are back talking about Rosalind again, and, as Drew mentioned before, her character is almost a Hamlet-esque character. Really, she has more lines than any Shakespearean woman, with the exception of Cleopatra, and I actually looked at the numbers. It's 677 lines versus Cleopatra's 686, so, they're pretty close, and certainly, more than any other character in "As You Like It," and, just as a reference point, Orlando only has 297 lines.

LICHTENBERG: You've more than twice as many lines as Orlando.

RATNER: Yeah.

ZOË WAITES: Yeah. Everyone, please remember that.

RATNER: (laughs)

LICHTENBERG: (laughs)

RATNER: As you can hear, we are joined here by Zoë Waites, who's fresh out of the rehearsal room, so she's going to talk to us about the character for a little bit of time. So, Zoë, what's it like taking on such a large character?

WAITES: I'm trying not to give that too much consideration at the moment. (laughs) It's too scary if you think about it in that way. It just becomes something iconic and something that's sort of beyond you, and so, to be honest, I'm not thinking about the aspect of it at all. Although, you know, maybe once I'm sort of secure with it all, I can remind myself how big it is just to feel like I've achieved something.

RATNER: Pat yourself on the back.

WAITES: Yeah.

RATNER: So, what is it that you're focusing on then?

WAITES: You know, who she is, who she is the relationship of the people that she encounters and who she's involved with, what it is that happens to her during the course of that experience, you know, that sort of however many hours it is that we're going to spend in the company of these people, I guess, you know the key relationships, in particular, what is it, you know, the circumstances, what's happened before the play, how that informs why she makes the choices that she does.

LICHTENBERG: Zoë, you have a British accent.

WAITES: Well spotted!

RATNER: (laughs)

LICHTENBERG: Yes. There's a reason why I am the Dramaturge here at the Company.

WAITES: You're not daft.

LICHTENBERG: You've worked with Michael Attenborough before, correct?

WAITES: I have worked with Michael Attenborough before.

RATNER: (laughs)

LICHTENBERG: How did Mike approach you, and start talking about the character?

WAITES: Yeah, we've done three Shakespeare plays together before, and a very new play, too, so, not only, not solely Shakespeare. He called me one day and said, "Would this be something you'd be interested in doing?" (laughs) I don't think he was expecting me to say no, to be honest. "No, I don't fancy Rosalind." And then, he talked very enthusiastically and sort of infectiously about how he saw the play and how he—I think he particularly—he was very interested, very early on, in this thing about the figure of Hymen, that sort of goddess of love or marriage or nuptial rights, however one wants to sort of see it, and how she sort of negotiates Rosalind's kind of adventure through the play. So, I think he was always very captivated by that idea that Rosalind was somehow almost kind of predestined, you know, that it's some kind of thing that she needs to experience, not that that's some particular relevance in terms of how one plays it as an actor, but he was very excited about that angle. I think always with the comedies, it's very tempting and very easy, particularly in big spaces, for them to become very pantomimic and very crude or very crass-y sort of done, and I know he talked a lot, in the beginning,

about how he didn't want that to be the case, and he wanted to be very—obviously, it's a very funny play, very funny relationships, but that they need to be investigated incredibly seriously.

RATNER: Has your impression of the character changed from starting rehearsals?

WAITES: Yeah, that's an interesting question. I think my anxiety about Rosalind has always been that she talks so much, that that sometimes can be quite difficult to pass the time, as the audience will have to, as somebody who so enjoys the sound of their own voice, and who has so much to say, and I think I have certainly—I mean, I've seen some wonderful people play this part, but I've also sometimes worried that she could tip over into seeming a little bit kind of smug and a bit, sort of, pleased with her own opinions and a bit, kind of, delighted with her sense of being able to boss everybody else around and organize the world that she's moving in. So, I had a sort of anxiety about that aspect of it, not that I thought that's what Shakespeare had written, but I was keen to explore what it is that makes her so voluble and so—needs to keep talking so much of the time, so that's been a big—and I'm sure it will continue to be—a big sort of development, and I think more and more, I think that she, you know, the talking is all to stop the doing, of course, you know, because doing and sort of giving over, giving yourself over to something, particularly if you're very, very sort of intellectually curious and insatiable and hungry sort of person, it can be very difficult just to let go and say, "I abandon myself to these feelings." So, that's, you know, been a real point of interest so far.

LICHTENBERG: It's really just pure "Hamlet," if you think about it.

WAITES: Yeah, absolutely.

LICHTENBERG: The indecision, the talking in place of the doing, right?

WAITES: Yeah, and the consciousness of the talking being in place of the doing as well, so that it's not even—you know, there's a certain amount of self-knowledge there, and yet—I mean, probably more so with "Hamlet"—that she just can't stop, and every moment, every time there's a sort of moment in a scene where it seems like it could be a moment when she might, we have to remember all the times that we mustn't assume, don't we? When we're approaching these plays, that we mustn't assume that it's just normal that she stays in her disguise all the time, and it's just a sort of automatic kind of conclusion. It's so easy when you know the stories, and you just sort of think, "So she's going to be a boy for a while, and then, eventually, she'll reveal herself," but, we, of course, have to be really careful about saying, "Why am I not doing it sooner? What's happening to—," so this just—this not being able to think, "It's okay. He is a good person. He can love me. I can let myself love him, and we can be honest with one another."

RATNER: And, of course, the gender transformation is a big aspect of this play, and in the original production, it would have been a boy playing Rosalind playing a boy playing a girl—

WAITES: —and not even a man. I think people tend to think because we have so many—in the UK particularly, we have a lot of, particularly, all-male versions of Shakespeare now—and I think people tend to think that that what it was, that men played the women, and, of course, it wasn't even men. I mean, it was really, really, really young, like, you know, children.

RATNER: Right, pre-voice changing.

WAITES: Yeah, I mean, they must have been extremely able and talented and imaginative and, you know, as children can be, wonderful actors. Yeah, I mean, that aspect of it is interesting historically, but I can't do anything with that as an idea.

RATNER: Well, from your position though, a woman playing a man, then playing a woman, how are you thinking about gender, and how are you transforming yourself, and does that change more than how the character is acting?

WAITES: Yeah, I think that's still something that's also—that's quite up in the air, even at this stage in rehearsals, and, actually, that's an interesting thing because I think when you think about it out of context, you sort of think, when you're not working on it, "Well, I would do these things," but actually, the kind of great revelation really is that she's incredibly female throughout the play, and everybody makes, everyone—she's described as being as bestowing herself like as a ripe sister. She's—everyone describes her in a way as much as they do Viola in "Twelfth Night" that indicates that she's not bringing off a kind of disguise as a sort of butch macho kind of young man at all. Nobody perceives you in that way—him I should say, no one perceives him, Ganymede, in that way, and actually, I think that I'm maybe thought that I would be spending more time thinking and playing that aspect of it, but, actually, when you're inside the scenes, it's so complex, you know, the way that they're, you know, that she's thinking on her feet and improvising though the duos with Orlando. She can only remember at times—you know, it seems as though she's completely, she's not considering that aspect at all, and, of course, she's dressed as a boy. She has, she is a boy. Everyone accepts her as a young man, all be it one who looks very feminine, and I think there's all sorts of moments to play with for that, you know, moments where she comes up short against her own version of herself, and thinks, "Ah, I think I got too close to giving myself away, so now, I need to find what it might be to approach him in a more masculine way again, and perhaps, I'm going to, you know, make a more boys-y joke with him or—

RATNER: There's a constant shifting of—

WAITES: And obviously, there's a physicality that goes along with the whole wearing trousers and a jacket and a whatever, a tie, and all of those things, but, I think it's not a constant, it's a not a fixed thing. Yeah, I think it's very fluid.

RATNER: Yeah, which actually feel more realistic because—

WAITES: Yeah.

RATNER: —you can't keep up disguises all the time. You just have to be kind of shifting and reevaluating.

LICHTENBERG: You—

WAITES: Yeah, and also, she hasn't—no, sorry. She doesn't know where she's—she doesn't know where she's going. I think that's the other thing that ties in with this sort of, the anxiety with making sure that she's not too pleased with herself, you know, she doesn't know where—how it's going to work out or what's going to happen. We know that, in the end, she's going to get her man, and it's all going to be fine, but she really has to not know that that's the case, and just keep responding in the moment to the situations as they arise, which is often the hardest thing in Shakespeare because it's so hard to keep reminding yourself that you don't know, of all the things that you don't know.

LICHTENBERG: You mentioned this sort of key decision that she makes in the middle of the play, this really startling thing: She's in the Forest, she's dressed as a boy, Orlando is there, and there would be no ill effect of her revealing her disguise, and saying, "I'm actually Rosalind, this woman that you love."

RATNER: Right, because the disguise is originally created for the journey.

LICHTENBERG: Yeah.

WAITES: Absolutely.

LICHTENBERG: So, I guess the question is—and this is a famous question that many people have tried to answer—is why do you think she doesn't reveal herself to Orlando?

WAITES: Yeah, no, and I think it's important to remember that point that she—I think that we often think that the play is a play in which she puts on a disguise in order to test her man or to trick him, and, in fact, of course, she's already—and not only that, when she hears that Orlando's in the Forest, I noticed only the other day, the first thing she says is "What alas, today, what shall I do with my clothes? I'm dressed as a man. This is a disaster." So, it's definitely not, you know—there's no anticipation of it, and I think that she is—I think she's had a really, really bad recent experience.

RATNER: (laughs)

WAITES: You know, she's been totally—her dad has disappeared, and we, again, when we think of exile in Shakespeare, it's tempting to be romantic about it because you know that you're going to be joined up—you know, if your dad had just been, you know, banished from your life, and he's the only member of your immediate family, and he doesn't take you with him, and you stay, and the—therefore, the father figure in your life is an autocratic, you know/whatever nasty guy, who's only keeping you for one reason, and your position is so, so tricky emotionally, politically in so many ways, she's—she starts in a place of real, apart from this wonderful love that she has, she starts in the place of real loneliness and sense of hopelessness and that nothing's going to happen that's good for her, that fortune has dealt her a really, really bad hand, and I don't feel that she has any particular reason to trust men, so without sort of wishing to sort of—do kind of I think she—her—the men in her life have not offered her a particularly good solutions, and so I think—and the feeling for Orlando, of course, is so completely astonishing to her and completely surprising, as it is when you fall for somebody in that way, and I don't think she trusts herself at all, and nor does she trust him entirely, and nor does she trust it can be this simple. I think that's the thing, unlike Celia.

RATNER: It's a journey of discovery that she has to go through.

WAITES: Yeah, and unlike Celia, who, of course, does trust that it's absolutely the right thing—

RATNER: (laughs)

LICHTENBERG: Yeah. (laughs) Right.

WAITES: —and that's the, you know, this great, joyous moment at the end of the play when Celia and Oliver see each other, fall for each other, "That's it. Let's get married."

LICHTENBERG: “That’s it,” and, actually, it prompts Orlando saying they can no longer live by thinking.

WAITES: “I can no long live for thinking,” and she—and also, I think prompts Rosalind. I think—we were talking about this in rehearsal the other day—there’s a slight little sense of “Oh, my God, so your brother and my sister have just done the thing that we should have just done.”

LICHTENBERG: Yeah.

RATNER: (laughs)

WAITES: “How mortifying! Why are we, so, you know, whatever—What are our problems as people that we we’re not able to just be simple and be released—”

LICHTENBERG: Yeah.

WAITES: “—and, you know, be honest, and give ourselves to one another without this terrible, terrible ceaseless questioning?” I think, too, that also, the —I think she also does have a high expect—I think she wants to be able to have high expectations of what a marriage can be, and that’s been something that I’ve been thinking quite a lot about.

LICHTENBERG: What’s the line: “Men are May when they woo?”

WAITES: Yeah!

LICHTENBERG: “December when they wed.”

WAITES: Exactly, yeah, so, this wonderful section when she says to Orlando, “Don’t say—” she says to him, “How long will you be in this relationship with her,” you know, and he says, “Forever and a day,” and she says, “Say ‘a day’ without the ‘ever.’” Wonderful! I never really understood it before, and now, I’m really thinking it, this idea that she doesn’t want him to be a romantic about the relationship, she doesn’t want to be this, sort of, idealized girl that he will be sort of slightly in awe of, and want to do lovely things for, and then find it horribly alarming when she’s in a bad mood, or she’s being overemotional or is bored or irritated by him. You know, she wants to have a real relationship, and I think that’s something that she doesn’t know necessarily in the beginning, but, she discovers, as she’s having an opportunity to explore what it is to be in a relationship with somebody, and that, I’m finding very interesting.

RATNER: Great! I think that’s all we have time for. I wish that we could talk to you longer! Thank you so much, Zoë, for joining us.

WAITES: No, thank you! It’s been lovely to chat to you!

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LICHTENBERG: It struck me, as she was talking—she doesn’t want the romantic Orlando, right, “Forever and a day?” She wants “Just say ‘a day’ without the ‘ever.’” In some ways, Orlando comes, and he acts likes a Pastoral lover, and Rosalind’s embodying Shakespeare’s view that the Pastoral is nonsense genre,

you know, bringing everything down to Earth, and saying “This is what love really is. It’s daily fights. It’s conflict. It’s not glamorous. It’s reality.”

RATNER: “And this is what I want out of love.”

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, it’s like the dirty fleece of the sheep, you know. It’s like seeing me without makeup on. There’s this real anxiety, I think, that she has about what happens after you get married, and you have to deal with the real person, which, you know, keeps her—it’s motivating her to remain in disguise, remain in this world of the hypothetical. So, yeah, I mean, obviously, Zoë’s just so brilliant in putting those pieces together, and I think it’s going to be a really special performance.

RATNER: Yeah, definitely. Well, the other thing that the play is really known for, of course, is one of the most famous speeches that Shakespeare ever wrote: “All the world’s a stage.”

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, and it’s a speech that is actually not spoken by Rosalind. It’s spoken by this very strange character named Jacques, “The melancholy Jaques,” as everybody else in the play calls him, and in the context of the play, it does not function in the way that you would think it does.”

RATNER: Right, because we hear that speech, and we think, “Oh, all the world’s a stage. Men and women are merely players. Look, we’re all acting.”

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, we think of it as this profound wisdom, but, in Shakespeare’s time, it was actually kind of a cliché, so it’s similar to Polonius saying “Neither a borrower nor a lender be.” It was this long string of clichés and secondhand opinions snatched out of pop philosophy, kind of like saying that “You should just lean forward,” and Jacques is the most cynical member of Duke Senior’s band in the Forest of Arden, and he says that “Life is nothing but suffering. Life is meaningless.”

RATNER: So, with all of that really depressing talk, do you think that Jacques is considered a clown character?

LICHTENBERG: Well, he’s invented by Shakespeare.

RATNER: Yeah, how—

LICHTENBERG: He’s not in the source material—

RATNER: Mmm hmm.

LICHTENBERG: —and he has nothing to do with the plot, and there’s another character that Shakespeare invents, named Touchstone, and—

RATNER: —who’s a very—a more overt clown character because he is a jester.

LICHTENBERG: —who is the clown. Yeah. He is the clown at the court, and he comes with Rosalind to the Forest, and Jacques and Touchstone are kind of buddies. They’re kind of like a buddy comedy in some ways. It’s one of the hidden stories of this play. They’re drawn to each other. The one character, Jacques, is very chin-stroking, philosophizing dude, who is very cynical, and Touchstone is this guy who speaks in kind of nonsense passages, and is also—it’s hard to actually understand what he’s saying, but

he seems to share the same view of the world as Jacques, which is that, you know, it all just comes down to where you eat and sleep and where you have fun with women. So, they're kind of Shakespeare's way—we talked before about how he's writing an anti-Pastoral, and here he's invented these two characters who are kind of like the sour part of the apple. They're like the worm in the apple, if we're going to follow that biblical image—

RATNER: (laughs)

LICHTENBERG: —that they're like realists or cynics or nihilists in this very utopian world of the Forest, and, you know, it's worth pointing out that in the play, Jacques says his speech, "All the world's a stage," and he ends it with this horrible image of death, "Second childishness and mere oblivions sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything," and then, we see Orlando enter, carrying the body of old Adam, this old, good man, who could not be less like Jacques' description of what it's like to be an old person.

RATNER: So, what do you think Shakespeare was trying to accomplish by adding in these characters?

LICHTENBERG: I think he was trying to write a play that encompassed everything that he could find in his imagination of the world. He wanted to have the cynical realists and nihilists alongside the, kind of, love-struck shepherds. He wanted to have the real shepherds. He wanted to give us a panorama of all walks of life.

RATNER: So, it's interesting because it actually is a really good transition to the last thing that we wanted to talk about. I mentioned before that we don't know the exact date for "As You Like It," but all assumption is that it was produced in 1599, and that, potentially, was the first production in Shakespeare's Globe Theatre.

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, and I think part of the reason we know this is that there was this list published in 1598, where they list off all of Shakespeare's comedies, and they don't list "As You Like It." But, they do list a play called "Love's Labour's Won." There's "Love's Labour's Lost" and "Love's Labour's Won."

RATNER: Ah, the missed "Love's Labour's Won," where we can find out what happened to them!

LICHTENBERG: Right. Scholars have been trying to find out that play for—I mean, they say, "It's 'All's Well that Ends Well.'" But, yeah, it—there was also this law that was passed by Elizabeth, saying he could no longer write historical characters onstage, so Shakespeare had all this success with the histories, and his company had a fight with their landlord. They had to move theatres—

RATNER: Literally.

LICHTENBERG: Literally. They actually snuck in at midnight and stole all of the floorboards and took them down to South London, across the Thames, and, if you look at "As You Like It," it's sort of Shakespeare's design for a different kind of play, one in which it's seemingly political on the surface, but is reflective of every aspect of contemporary Elizabethan life—

RATNER: —and it stands at the point of just before he starts writing all of the romances, and he's—

LICHTENBERG: Yeah. If he did write “As You Like It” in 1599, he also wrote, in the one of two-year period, “Julius Caesar” and “Hamlet,” maybe “Measure for Measure,” “Othello.” You know, it was just this incredibly productive period, and, “As You Like It,” is, in many ways, the beginning of it.

RATNER: So, there’s a lot of information about this play, and I feel like we’ve only just kind of—

LICHTENBERG: —scratched the surface.

RATNER: —very lightly, very lightly scratched the surface. Luckily, we’ll have many more opportunities to talk about “As You Like It” once we go into production discussions throughout the entire production and our “Asides Live” symposium. Plus, everyone gets to take home the “Asides” these days because the “Asides” and the programs have merged, so that’s really exciting. So, as an audience member, there are lots of ways you can get more information about “As You Like It” and learn oh so many things—

LICHTENBERG: —and if you want to meet Hannah and me, you should come to our “Bookends” discussion, which is the first Wednesday of the show, after it opens.

RATNER: Yes, it is Wednesday, November—

LICHTENBERG: November 5th.

RATNER: November 5th. So, that will be a really wonderful conversation before the show and after the show and November 16th is the Symposium where we’ll have lots of special guests talking about the play, so we hope you can join us for that as well.

(PIANO MUSIC)

RATNER: And, for now until “The Tempest” coming up soon, I’m Hannah Hessel Ratner—

LICHTENBERG: —and I’m Drew Lichtenberg—

RATNER: —and also wanted to add a special thank you to our Sound Engineer, Roc Lee. Thank you so much, Roc. And, we will talk to you about other plays soon.

RATNER: You’ve been listening to the Shakespeare Theater Company’s Prosecast, Episode number 21, featuring Hannah Hessel Ratner, Drew Lichtenberg and, special guest, Zoë Waites. You can find additional episodes and subscribe to the podcast by searching iTunes for “Shakespeare Theater Company Asides” or visit the “Asides” webpage at asides.shakespearetheatre.org. Tickets for “As You Like It” can be purchased by calling our Box Office at (202) 547-1122, or simply visiting shakespearetheatre.org.