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As reported by Jen Larson

On June 21st, the Public Theater in New York City officially launched its historic 50th anniversary season of "Shakespeare in the Park" at the Delacorte Theater with an innovative and bluegrass-infused production of *As You Like It*.

At first glance, one might not assume that the work of William Shakespeare and bluegrass music would be a natural fit. But thanks to the creative vision of director Daniel Sullivan, composer Steve Martin, a remarkably talented cast, and an acoustic music ensemble solidly anchored by Tony Trischka, we once again have proof of the genre's versatility and ability to convey a wide variety of emotions.



As You Like It is a romantic comedy originally published in 1623. In addition to being Shakespeare's most music-filled play, it is also famous for the monologue that begins, "All the world's a stage." The plot consists a series of interlocking episodes that revolve around nearly universal themes, including sibling rivalry, the fickle nature of love, lust and longing, and the endurance of family bonds and friendships. Though Shakespeare originally set the play at court in France and in the mythical Forest of Arden, Sullivan relocates the story to the rural American South of the 1840s.

The play begins at the fortress-like log homestead of Duke Frederick, who has usurped power

from his elder brother Duke Senior, and in a fit of rage, banishes all of his followers. This disgruntled group retreats to the bucolic Forrest of Arden for a series of escapades during which they engage in lively and at times poignant dialogue about rural life and mortality, and partake in a deer hunt. Meanwhile, two brothers--Oliver and Orlando de Boys--are bitterly at odds over the fact that the elder refuses to honor his duty to help the younger advance in his education and court prospects. As a result, younger brother Orlando takes matters into his own hands and challenges Charles the Wrestler to a prize match, managing to infuriate the Duke and his beguiling daughter, Rosalind. Like his fellow courtiers, he and his elderly retainer flee to the forest. The Duke mistakenly assumes that Rosalind is in cahoots with Orlando, and banishes her. She daringly assumes the disguise of a young man named Ganymede and proceeds into the forest with her cousin, also disguised.

The plot thickens when Ganymede encounters the lovelorn Orlando, pining over Rosalind. Instead of revealing her true identity, Ganymede offers Orlando a "bromance" of sorts, advising him on how to get past his feelings as a ruse to probe the depth of his love for her. Further complications arise when a local shepherdess develops an impossible crush on Ganymede, while Touchstone, a court jester, becomes enamored of a randy goatherd. The story concludes in a joyous crescendo of revealed identities and intentions, fervent declarations of love and a multiple-nuptial hoedown, replete with high spirited flat-foot dancing.

In comedy, as in bluegrass, timing is everything, and in this production, it is deftly handled by a stellar cast that includes Lily Rabe (Rosalind/Ganymede), Andre Braugher (Duke Senior/Duke Frederick), Renee Elise Goldsberry (Celia/Aliena), Omar Metwally (Oliver de Boys), David Furr (Orlando) and Oliver Platt (Touchstone). *As You Like It* also features musical direction by Greg Pliska and sound design by ACME Sound Partners. Live, onstage music duties are more than capably handled by Tony Trischka (banjo/musical direction), Tashina Clarridge (fiddle), Jordan Tice (guitar), and Skip Ward (bass). Jesse Lenat, a Brooklyn-based actor and singer/songwriter who plays the role of Amiens, contributes lead vocals.

Award-winning musician and bandleader Tony Trischka is widely considered to be a master of the five-string banjo. With a career spanning over 35 years, he has led and appeared with several innovative bands (Country Cooking, Breakfast Special, Skyline) and performed with luminaries such as Peter Rowan, Richard Greene, and Stacey Phillips. In January 2007 Trischka released, to critical and popular acclaim, *Double Banjo Bluegrass Spectacular*, which featured new music and performances by a legion of legends that included Earl Scruggs, Béla Fleck, Alison Brown, Tom Adams, Kenny Ingram and Steve Martin. In 2010 he produced Martin's Grammy-nominated album, *Rare Bird Alert*.

Fiddler Tashina Clarridge is a Boston-based musician with roots in bluegrass, Irish, old time and Texas fiddling styles. She has performed at Carnegie Hall as part of MacArthur Fellow/Grammy-winning bassist Edgar Meyer's Young Artists program; shared the stage with Darol Anger, Tony Trischka, and Mike Marshall; and is a Grand National Fiddle Champion and 11-time Grand National finalist.

Guitarist Jordan Tice, an accomplished instrumentalist and composer, has toured Europe and the U.S. and appeared in concert with Mark Schatz, Frank Wakefield, Darol Anger, Paul Kowert, and Brittany Haas. He has released two solo albums on Patuxent Records as well as one as part of a trio, Corbett, Chrisman, and Tice, with Wes Corbett on banjo and Simon Chrisman on hammered dulcimer.

Rounding out this talented ensemble is Ohio native Skip Ward, a Grammy- winning bassist who puts his classical and jazz training to excellent use in a wide variety of genres ranging from bluegrass to fusion, rock and blues. Skip is no stranger to major theatrical productions, having toured with such productions as *Million Dollar Quartet*, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *Cats*, and *West Side Story*, to name a few.

Trischka and his merry band of musicians perform a pre-show set of bluegrass tunes that includes such classics as "Earl's Breakdown," "Sandy Boys," "Blackberry Blossom," and "Clinch Mountain Backstep." Throughout the play, in delightfully choreographed moments, the band emerges from the forest to accompany the exiled court and punctuate their various turns of fortune with lilting fiddle and guitar arrangements and up-tempo music contributed by instrumentalist, writer, composer and reigning IBMA Entertainer of the Year, Steve Martin.

As lyricists are concerned, Martin couldn't have had a more illustrious co-collaborator than William Shakespeare. He rises to the occasion by setting Shakespeare's verses to music in four featured songs, "Under the Greenwood Tree," "Blow Blow Thou Winter Wind," "The Horn," and "The Lover and His Lass." Martin also contributes two fine original tunes, "Run Orlando Run" and "Trip Audrey Trip."

The Public Theater's brilliant staging of *As You Like It* as a rustic American tale, with Steve Martin's creative musical compositions, is a winning combination. With the addition of Tony Trischka and company, it is no surprise that critics and audiences alike have enthusiastically received this production. As Trischka reflects, "By the end of its run, *As You Like It*, with its bluegrass score, will have been seen by approximately 50,000 people. A good portion of those folks may well have not had much exposure to bluegrass."

The fact that bluegrass music was performed before an appreciative audience of this size in a relatively short amount of time--the play ran from June 5-30, inclusive of previews--demonstrates the power of such a production to expand bluegrass music's fan base beyond traditional contexts. This bodes well for the viability and relevance of the genre.

Speaking both as a New Yorker and as a bluegrasser, I found that experiencing Shakespeare steeped in the "high lonesome" sound in an outdoor theater seemed to magically dissolve the surrounding urban sprawl on a warm summer night, and transport a thoroughly modern metropolitan audience to another place and time. The classic themes of conflict, love and familial relations heard in any number of bluegrass standards can indeed be found in the "ancient tones" of Shakespeare's timeless poetic language, which made for a wonderful and memorable evening. What a rare pleasure it was to hear the powerful sounds of bluegrass resonating over the rocks and rills of Central Park in the heart of New York City!

JEN LARSON is a Brooklyn-based bluegrass vocalist, guitarist and songwriter, and IBMA member (Leadership Bluegrass '10). In addition to performing regionally in the Northeast, Jen serves as the Assistant Visual Resource Manager for the Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.

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