

Cheek by Jowl, 1991

(director Declan Donnellan)



Rosalind 'disguised' as Ganymede (centre) talks to Orlando as Celia watches (Act 4 Scene 1).

Declan Donnellan's highly praised all-male production was performed in an openly 'non-illusionistic' style. It began with the entire cast on stage, all in black trousers, white shirts and black braces, who then divided up into male and female characters. Individual character costumes were created by additional token items. For example, Rosalind wore a headband and dress for the court scenes, but with no 'female padding'.

Donnellan saw the play as being primarily about how love has the power to transcend our socially constructed concepts of 'masculine' and 'feminine'. This viewpoint was most convincingly expressed through Adrian Lester's highly praised performance as Rosalind (see above centre). 'Adrian Lester's triumph is that, without attempting to look the part, his softly spoken six-foot male Rosalind exudes an utterly convincing sensual femininity (devoid of the camp clichés of a female impersonator), whose disguised encounters cause Patrick Toomey's intent Orlando to express his sexual embarrassment through hilarious, manly, playful shoves' (Ian Dodd, *Tribune*, December 1991). When Rosalind finally revealed her 'true' identity, this Orlando briefly stalked off, as if overwhelmed by the conflicting emotions and gender confusions that were flooding in on him, before returning to claim his bride.

Equally moving was Tom Hollander's portrayal of Celia. She and Rosalind were presented as lovers in the opening scenes, until the arrival of Orlando. In the forest scenes this Celia spent much of her time wandering about disconsolately waiting for her own Mr Right to appear. One critic described her as 'a shrewd, humorous girl, capable of being poisonously demure: a performance of impudent and endearing maturity which never mocks the character' (John Peter, *Sunday Times*, December 1991).

However, this unusual production did prove a little too much for some reviewers. One such critic acknowledged Adrian Lester's fine performance as Rosalind, but felt obliged to add: 'It can't be denied, however, that his disturbing sexual ambiguity left this hetero viewer feeling decidedly uncomfortable' (Charles Spencer, *Daily Telegraph*, December 1991).

- 1 Study the image from this production. In what ways might an all-male casting like this lead the audience to see the play in a thought-provoking new light?
- 2 Which of the above comments and descriptions have intrigued, inspired or annoyed you most, and why?