

Royal Shakespeare Company, 1980–1

(director Terry Hands)



An apprehensive Touchstone attempts to play the protector as the newcomers meet Corin in the forest (Act 2 Scene 4).

Most critics found this production delightful, even irresistible, ‘a bawdy, richly comic romp, visually masterful, completely accessible’ (David Ford, *Hereford Evening News*, April 1980). However, for some, director Terry Hands nearly went too far with the comic business in his desire to convey the frenzy of love, with a multitude of ‘chases, leaping entries [and] running exits ... [which] suggest the work of a ringmaster more than a director’ (Irving Wardle, *The Times*, April 1980).

The scenic design and lighting provided some ravishing stage images. The court scenes took place against floor and walls of white fur cut across by steel pillars, suggesting airless claustrophobia. The forest was portrayed initially as a ‘place of sky-seeking birches through which a smoky morning haze quietly filters’ (Michael Billington, *Guardian*, April 1980), and gradually transformed from an arena of intimidation into blazing, abundant fertility. ‘It is one of the production’s boldest strokes to present the forest, from scene to scene, as each inhabitant imagines it’ (Michael Coveney, *Financial Times*, July 1981).

Performances were widely admired. Susan Fleetwood as Rosalind was singled out for much praise for her particular combination of ‘looks, presence and a nimble intelligence’ (Michael Billington, *Guardian*, April 1980). Derek Godfrey as Jaques was wise, articulate and perceptive, and quite clearly attracted to Ganymede, even going so far as to make ‘him’ a gift of a red rose. Joe Melia as Touchstone (pictured above) changed dramatically ‘from tri-corned courtier into a loony Pan capering wildly in a grass skirt’ (Michael Billington, *Guardian*, July 1981).

A key text for this interpretation was Rosalind’s assertion that ‘Love is merely a madness.’ This volatile, lively production, which movingly suggested the voyage from wintry darkness into warm light, climaxed in real festivity when the aged Corin reappeared as Hymen on a straw-decked rustic cart puffing on his briar pipe.

- 1 Study the image from this production, which shows Rosalind (far right), Celia and Touchstone meeting Corin. What is suggested by the way this moment has been staged?
- 2 Which of the above comments and descriptions have intrigued, inspired or annoyed you most, and why?