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Culture Club: Directing a Production in Nature

By [Door County Pulse](#), [Peninsula Pulse](#) – June 28th, 2023

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Ryan Schaback as Claudius in *Hamlet*, adapted by Guy Roberts and directed in 2021 by Michael Stebbins. Photo by Heidi Hodges.

by **ELISSA WOLF**, Managing Director, Door Shakespeare

In Act 2, Scene 5 of Shakespeare's comedy *As You Like It*, Celia – one of the protagonists – utters the words, "I like this place, and willingly could waste my time in it."



Elissa Wolf

One of the main themes in this play is courtly life versus country life. At first, that theme may feel distinctly Shakespearean or outdated. But, although we may not hold court anymore, we do understand the idea of work-life balance.

In *As You Like It*, the main characters run away to the forest of Arden to escape from societal pressures. Arden is a place where they can enjoy the simple things, gain a sense of freedom and rediscover themselves. I think many of the visitors who flee to Door County during the summer season can relate to this idea.

Certainly, Leda Hoffmann, the director of *As You Like It*, understands the magical escapism of Door County, and I talked with her about her interpretation of the work.

The following conversation has been edited for clarity and conciseness.

Elissa Wolf (EW): What are some of your favorite things about directing in Door County?

Photo by Ian McLaren.

Leda Hoffmann (LH): First off, it's beautiful here, and some of the most amazing moments I've had as a director have been at Door Shakespeare – there's just something really special about working outside. One of the greatest things about working in Door County is how much professional theater there is here. Being part of this community, getting to see so many other people's shows, being up here with longtime friends, and then meeting new people from different places.

EW: How has the space at Björklunden informed choices for your show?

LH: The best thing about doing *As You Like It* in this space is that most of it takes place in a forest. We are in the woods. You're going to see actors picking up pieces of foliage and using the space. We're letting ourselves tell a really honest story because we don't have to pretend we're in a forest to do this play. There's not a lot of additional scenery because the forest is the scenery.

EW: Shakespeare often uses the forest as an escape for his characters. What discoveries do these characters make when they break away from the structure of courtly society?

LH: The core idea is that people are going to the forest to get away. How perfect to be in Door County – a place where people go to escape the big city and reconnect with nature, reconnect with who they are. There's some beautiful language in this play about the way we connect with nature and people's imprint on nature, too.

And of course, that has massive implications for contemporary society. In the forest, Rosalind wears pants and learns the freedom she can have as a man in this world, but also, Celia plays a shepherdess. You have people like the duke – the most important person for miles around – talking to shepherds. Touchstone, who is from the court, marries a shepherdess. The class and status lines break down as people figure out who they truly are.

EW: How do you strike a balance between the comedic moments of the play with moments of depth?



Leda Hoffmann. Photo by Cheryl Hoffmann.



Welcome to Door Shakespeare. Submitted.

LH: We are trying to tell an honest story. Sometimes it will be serious and moving, and sometimes it will be hilarious. As the actors are playing with these very funny moments, as long as they stay grounded in why these moments are happening, and stay in the real characters that they've created, then they're actually funny, as opposed to trying to be funny. I guess one of the most important rules about comedy is to let the honest truth happen, and it will be funny.

EW: I know Scott McKenna Campbell is the music director for *As You Like It*. How are you incorporating music into this production?

LH: It's been great because I've worked with Scott here before, so we have this lovely connection already. Isaiah Spetz is playing Amiens and acts as the musical anchor of the piece. Amiens plays a bunch of songs that Shakespeare wrote into the script that comment on the beauty of nature, love and the nature of love.

EW: What are you hoping the audience will take away from this production?

LH: This story has an epilogue – spoiler alert! Rosalind gets to sort of talk with the audience right at the very end. And Tina Muñoz Pandya, who plays Rosalind, and I have been talking about what this looks like.

I think the most important thing is that the audience gets to experience a play about what it means to be yourself. Some people in this play – many people in this play, in fact – find their special person whom they want to spend the rest of their lives with; and some people in the play find connection with nature, and connection with family.

It is a love story. It's so much fun. And this play can be very romantic, but it's also a play about family connection, connection to nature, and then connection with yourself.



Deer in the Björklunden Garden. Photo by Heidi Hodges.

EW: What makes outdoor Shakespeare special?

LH: Shakespeare's plays were originally written to be performed without a lot of stuff, which means each play can be done in so many ways. Simplicity is often the most beautiful way to tell these stories.

Outside, there's a certain amount of simplicity and a realness of the elements that really makes this language sing. I said to the actors the other day that whatever the weather is actually doing outside is actually what these characters are witnessing. If it's really hot, the characters are really hot. If it's raining, it is raining. If it's the most beautiful summer night, then that is when the play is set.

You can experience Leda Hoffmann's *As You Like It* at Door Shakespeare through Aug. 26 on Tuesdays and Thursdays, 7:30 pm, and Saturdays, 5 pm, in the garden at Björklunden.

The Peninsula Arts and Humanities Alliance, which contributes Culture Club, is a coalition of nonprofit organizations whose purpose is to enhance, promote and advocate the arts, humanities and natural sciences in Door County.

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