



Poor Tom Productions' *As You Like It*

Poor Tom Returns Bard to the Boys

BY SIMI HORWITZ

Poor Tom Productions, which bills itself as New York's first all-male Shakespeare company, will launch its

inaugural season with *As You Like It* at the Here Arts Center on March 15.

Founded in 2006 by director Joe Plummer, the company is dedicated to breathing fresh life into Shakespeare by

presenting his plays as close as possible to the way they were done in Elizabethan times. "Shakespeare wrote plays for male actors," Plummer says, "and that's reflected in the language, jokes, and allusions as well as character and story. A repeated theme is women disguised as men, who then spend a fair amount of time on stage as men. There's Rosalind in *As You Like It* and Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* as examples.

"There may be silliness inherent in some of what we're doing, but that's not campy," he continues, contending the silliness serves an important function. "Once you accept the absurdity, you also accept the idea that anything may happen."

Plummer, Poor Tom's producing artistic director, is currently artist-in-residence at the Shakespeare Society in New York and associate director for education at the Williamstown Theatre Festival. The company's artistic advisory board includes Elizabeth Marvel, Tony Award winners Philip Bosco and Roger Rees, and two members of the Royal Shakespeare Company, Andrew Wade and Ron Daniels. According to Plummer, they are all committed to the idea that there is resonance for contemporary audiences in all-male productions of Shakespeare.

"I believe Shakespeare was intentionally exposing gender politics," Plummer says. "He knew the queen's legitimacy and power were questioned because she was a woman. It's against this backdrop that he deliberately wrote plays about strong and intelligent women. Juliet is as smart as Hamlet. Shakespeare was consciously playing with gender reversal and suggesting that gender is less important than we all think. And once you have only men in the cast, the playing field becomes leveled and you see the women's strength in an even more pronounced way."

All-male Shakespeare is still produced from time to time, more often in Great Britain than the United States, though in 1998 an all-male production of an adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*, set in a boys' school and titled *Shake-*

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Shakespeare's *R & J*, was mounted Off-Broadway to critical acclaim. But as far as Plummer knows, Poor Tom is the only American company dedicated to the concept.

"What interests me especially is the energy that will come out of an all-male cast," he says. "That fascinates me. I want to see how we can harness that energy for a contemporary audience. We're not doing any updating. We're exploring what happens when we get 10 guys in a room working on the text, hopefully without preconceptions. And we'll see what develops."

The Homoerotic Question

Producing any play with an all-male cast in the 21st century, however, raises obvious questions: To what extent will homoeroticism play a part in the production? Will its presence violate the spirit of the work?

"The distinctions between sexual love and fraternal love exist in contemporary America," Plummer says. "In 21st-century America we see sexual insinuation all over the place. In Elizabethan times, love between men was valued and fraternal. There was great love between men and it was not necessarily sexual. During our rehearsal process, we'll discover how much we'll be playing with the sexual aspects of love."

Moritz von Stuelpnagel, who will be directing *As You Like It*, says homoeroticism is inherent in the play: Orlando loves Rosalind when she is disguised as a young boy, and that relationship is only

enhanced with an all-male cast. "There is some confusion, and that's what makes it exciting and dangerous," he says. "There's a thin line between androgyny and drag. But in the end it's a play about equality in heterosexual relationships."

Sexuality aside, in productions of at least some of the plays, an all-male cast will allow the audience to focus on elements that are often overlooked, Plummer says, offering *Romeo and Juliet* as an example: "It's not just about lovers, but also the relationship between families. We often lose sight of that. And traditionally the sections after Romeo and Juliet's deaths, which deal with the family relationships, are cut to bits in order to keep the focus on the lovers. With an all-male cast, those interesting sections could be restored."

Plummer and von Stuelpnagel say the major challenge for the actors is handling the heightened language and creating characters with that language; in short, it's no different from any other Shakespeare production. "A man playing a woman is an added element, but ultimately it's incidental," Plummer says. Adds von Stuelpnagel, "The actor will have to be able to access certain parts in himself to make playing a woman truthful. But it's certainly not about walking in a feminine way or looking feminine or anything like that."

Plummer, who will be playing Celia in *As You Like It*, says he wants to suggest her without parodying her: "There is femininity but also honesty. I will not be wearing full costume or makeup."

To what extent costumes, wigs, and makeup will evoke femininity will vary with each production, Plummer says. Even within a production, there may be variations, with the comic characters more exaggerated in their female appearance than the leads. Among the plays that Plummer would like to see the company tackle are *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, and *Macbeth*. "When Lady



Macbeth says, 'Unsex me,' that will have added resonance when a man is playing the part," he says.

Plummer, whose long-term goal is to have a resident company, says he's been thinking about this idea for seven years and essentially raised the money himself from private donors and a few corporations. It's no accident the company is called Poor Tom, with the term evoking "the all-male cast and the no-frills, bare-bones productions," says Plummer. "But it also brings to mind Shakespeare. Edgar in *King Lear* disguises himself as Tom O'Bedlam, a name that was later used to describe beggars who were either released from mental institutions or just feigned mental illness."

And if that isn't an apropos image for a fledgling theatre company, what is?

LARRY BERCOV