

# The San Diego Union-Tribune

**In a world of gender rigidity, La Jolla Playhouse builds an oasis in love-affirming ‘As You Like It’**

***This fresh, funny and musical take on Shakespeare’s cross-dressing classic features a cast of transgender, non-binary and queer performers***

By Pam Kragen  
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A scene from La Jolla Playhouse’s “As You Like It.” (Courtesy of Rich Soublett II)

In La Jolla Playhouse’s fun, entertaining and deeply touching staging of William Shakespeare’s “As You Like It,” the forest where the characters escape the rigidity of court life continuously transforms from a bare black and white stage to an increasingly lush tropical garden, awash in color and teeming with romance.

In a production featuring a cast entirely of transgender, non-binary and queer performers, this Arden forest becomes a thriving and fertile oasis where the characters are free to love, laugh, sing, dance with and marry whomever they please. And everyone lives happily ever after.

Even the famously melancholy philosopher Jacques has a bit of a spring in their step in this staging co-directed with verve, joy and humor by Playhouse artistic director Christopher Ashley and transgender director-choreographer Will Davis. San Diego’s Diversionary Theatre, the nation’s third-oldest LGBTQ theater, is an associate producer on the project.

“As You Like It” opened Sunday, the day after a gunman arrested for hate crimes killed five and injured 25 others in an LGBTQ club in Colorado Springs. Sunday was also the 23rd annual [Transgender Day of Remembrance](#), which was created in 1999 to honor lives lost to anti-transgender violence. Watching this joyful and carefree tale unfold onstage in light of the rising number of anti-trans bills and laws nationwide felt emotional and cathartic.



Peter Smith, left, as “Rosalind” and Esco Jouléy as “Orlando” with the cast of La Jolla Playhouse’s “As You Like It.” (Courtesy of Rich Soublett II)

The central love story in “As You Like It” is between Rosalind, a banished noblewoman hiding in the forest disguised as the boy Ganymede, and Orlando, a runaway duke’s son who pines for Rosalind and practices his wooing skills on Ganymede. In most “As You Like It” stagings, Rosalind’s disguise requires a liberal suspension of disbelief. But it works in the hands of talented non-binary actors Peter Smith, who’s gently reserved as Rosalind and luminously sensual as Ganymede, and Esco Jouléy as Orlando, who mixes rugged muscularity with adolescent giggles of tongue-tied infatuation.

Other standouts in the cast are power singer Alanna Darby as the funny and flirtatious shepherdess Phoebe; a lively Rami Margron as Jacques; a jubilant and playful Cody Sloan as the enraptured clown Touchstone; a tender-sweet Jen Richards as Rosalind’s bestie, Celia; a fierce Tairekca L.A. as Orlando’s murderous older brother, Oliver; and an adorable Jess Barbagallo as the hopelessly smitten shepherd Silvius. Rachel Crowl does triple-duty as the gentle shepherd Corin, the arch villain Duke Frederick and the bass player in the onstage bandstand.

Under the musical direction of T. Carlis Roberts, this production’s characters don’t just speak their truths, they sing them, including Calum Scott’s heartbreak ballad “Dancing On My Own,” Tracy Chapman’s escapist “Fast Car,” the Talking Heads’ “This Must Be the Place” and even a fun “Hey Nonny Nonny” rap song. The contemporary costumes by Mel Ng mix gender-neutral fashion with a few eye-popping drag gowns and the vibrant scenic design is by Emmie Finckel.

Theater has long been a space of acceptance for LGBTQ artists. But for this vulnerable population, their formerly safe spaces of nightclubs, schools and even restrooms are increasingly threatened. That’s why La Jolla Playhouse’s “As You Like It” feels like such a welcoming and warm place to spend a few hours with this talented company of artists.