SOFTWARE & TECH

As You Like It 2006

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Rediscovering Shakespeare: An In-Depth Look at As You Like It 2006

When Kenneth Branagh set out to adapt Shakespeare's beloved comedy *As You Like It* for the screen in 2006, he took a bold and visually striking approach that set his version apart from all previous interpretations. Set against the backdrop of 19th-century Japan, **As You Like It 2006** presents a unique fusion of Elizabethan language with Eastern aesthetics, creating a cinematic experience that is as surprising as it is beautiful. This adaptation, which premiered on HBO rather than in theaters, has since garnered a devoted following among Shakespeare enthusiasts and film lovers alike. In this comprehensive analysis, we explore every facet of this remarkable production, from its casting and direction to its thematic depth and critical legacy.

The Journey from Page to Screen: Origins of As You Like It 2006

Kenneth Branagh, widely regarded as one of the foremost interpreters of Shakespeare on film, had long harbored a desire to tackle *As You Like It*. The play, with its themes of love, exile, and transformation, offered rich material for cinematic exploration. After directing acclaimed adaptations of *Henry V*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, and *Hamlet*, Branagh turned his attention to this pastoral comedy. The decision to set **As You Like It 2006** in Japan was not arbitrary. Branagh envisioned a world that would feel both fantastical and culturally specific, allowing the play's universal themes to resonate through a fresh visual language. The result is a film that feels like a dream—a carefully constructed world where Shakespeare's words echo through bamboo forests and across serene lakes.

The Casting Choices That Defined the Film

One of the most discussed aspects of **As You Like It 2006** is its ensemble cast, which blends established stars with rising talents. Bryce Dallas Howard takes on the central role of Rosalind, the clever and resourceful heroine who disguises herself as a young man named Ganymede. Howard brings a luminous intelligence to the role, capturing Rosalind's wit, vulnerability, and romantic resolve. Her performance anchors the film, providing emotional continuity amid the playful chaos of the Forest of Arden.

Opposite Howard, David Oyelowo plays Orlando, the lovestruck young man who must prove himself worthy of Rosalind's affection. Oyelowo's Orlando is earnest and passionate, delivering Shakespeare's poetic declarations of love with genuine warmth. The chemistry between Howard and Oyelowo is palpable, making their scenes together the heart of the film. Alfred Molina brings comedic gravitas to the role of Touchstone, the court jester whose cynical observations provide a counterpoint to the romantic idealism of the main plot. Molina's timing and delivery are impeccable, drawing laughter while also hinting at deeper truths about love and folly.

Kevin Kline, a veteran of stage and screen, portrays Jaques, the melancholic philosopher whose "All the world's a stage" speech is one of the play's most famous passages. Kline's Jaques is weary yet wise, his melancholy tinged with a dry humor that prevents the character from becoming overly somber. The supporting cast includes Brian Blessed as the tyrannical Duke Frederick, Janet McTeer as the exiled Duke Senior, and Romola Garai as Celia, Rosalind's loyal cousin. Each actor brings depth and nuance to their role, contributing to the film's rich tapestry of characters.

The Japanese Aesthetic: A Bold Directorial Choice

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of **As You Like It 2006** is its Japanese-inspired setting. Branagh was inspired by the aesthetics of 19th-century Japan, particularly the Meiji period, which saw the country open to Western influence while preserving its traditional culture. The film's production design, led by Tim Harvey, incorporates elements of Japanese architecture, costume, and landscape. The Forest of Arden is reimagined as a lush, almost mystical wilderness of bamboo groves, moss-covered stones, and tranquil streams. The court scenes are marked by ornate kimonos, samurai armor, and the formal gestures of Japanese ritual.

This setting is not merely decorative. It serves a thematic purpose, reinforcing the play's contrasts between artifice and nature, civilization and wilderness, constraint and freedom. The rigid hierarchy of the court, with its strict codes of conduct, is mirrored in the formal aesthetics of Japanese court life. When the characters flee to the Forest of Arden, they enter a space where these rules no longer apply—a natural world that is both beautiful and unpredictable. The Japanese setting also lends itself to the play's themes of disguise and transformation. Rosalind assumes the identity of Ganymede, and the film's visual style reinforces the idea that identity is fluid and performative.

Cinematography and Visual Storytelling

The cinematography of **As You Like It 2006**, handled by Roger Lanser, is a key element of the film's appeal. Lanser's camera glides through the forest with a sense of wonder, capturing the dappled light filtering through leaves, the reflection of trees in still water, and the play of shadows on the ground. The visual palette is rich and varied, with deep greens, golds, and blues creating a sense of timelessness. The film's opening sequence, which shows the court in all its formal splendor, contrasts sharply with the organic beauty of the forest. This visual dichotomy reinforces the central conflict of the play: the tension between social obligation and personal desire.

Themes Explored in As You Like It 2006

Like the play on which it is based, **As You Like It 2006** explores a range of themes that remain relevant to contemporary audiences. Love, in its many forms, is the central concern. Rosalind and Orlando's romance is the driving force of the narrative, but the film also examines the love between friends, the love between siblings, and the love of nature. The pastoral setting of the Forest of Arden allows characters to step outside the constraints of society and explore their true feelings. The film suggests that love is not simply a feeling but an active choice—a series of decisions that require courage, honesty, and vulnerability.

Another key theme is the nature of identity. Rosalind's disguise as Ganymede allows her to test Orlando's devotion, but it also gives her a freedom she does not have as a woman. She can speak her mind, challenge authority, and shape her own destiny. The film raises questions about the performance of gender and the ways in which social roles constrain individual expression. When Rosalind finally reveals her true identity, it is a moment of liberation not only for her but for all the characters who have witnessed her journey.

The Forest as a Space of Transformation

The Forest of Arden in **As You Like It 2006** functions as a liminal space—a place between worlds where transformation is possible. Characters enter the forest as exiles, outcasts, or seekers, and they emerge changed. Duke Senior, banished by his brother, finds solace in the simplicity of forest life. Orlando, fleeing the cruelty of his own brother, discovers his own strength and worth. Touchstone, the cynic, finds unexpected companionship. And Rosalind, the heart of the story, orchestrates the happy ending that brings all the characters together. The forest is not a paradise; it has its dangers and discomforts. But it is a place where truth can be spoken and love can flourish.

Critical Reception and Audience Response

Upon its release, **As You Like It 2006** received a mixed to positive response from critics, with particular praise for its visual beauty and strong performances. Some reviewers expressed reservations about the Japanese setting, arguing that it felt gimmicky or distracting. Others found the juxtaposition of Shakespearean language and Japanese aesthetics to be inspired, creating a dreamlike quality that enhanced the play's romantic themes. The film's television premiere on HBO meant that it reached a broad audience, many of whom were encountering Shakespeare for the first time. For these viewers, **As You Like It 2006** served as an accessible and engaging introduction to the Bard's work.

Over time, the film has gained a reputation as an underappreciated gem in Branagh's filmography. Fans of the play appreciate its fidelity to the original text, while newcomers are drawn to its visual splendor and emotional depth. The film has been particularly praised for its portrayal of Rosalind, with Bryce Dallas Howard earning acclaim for her performance. Howard's Rosalind is both intelligent and vulnerable, capable of wit and tenderness in equal measure. Her portrayal has been described as one of the finest interpretations of the character on film.

Musical Score and Sound Design

The musical score of **As You Like It 2006**, composed by Patrick Doyle, is an integral part of the film's emotional impact. Doyle, a frequent collaborator with Branagh, draws on both Western and Eastern musical traditions to create a score that feels both timeless and specific. The use of traditional Japanese instruments, such as the shakuhachi flute and the koto, adds an authentic texture to the soundscape. The songs from the play, including "Under the Greenwood Tree" and "It Was a Lover and His Lass," are performed with a folk-like simplicity that suits the pastoral setting. The score enhances the film's atmosphere, evoking the tranquility of the forest and the tumult of romantic longing.

Comparing As You Like It 2006 to Other Adaptations

Shakespeare's *As You Like It* has been adapted for film and television several times, with notable versions including the 1936 film starring Laurence Olivier, the 1978 BBC television production, and the 1992 film directed by Christine Edzard. Each adaptation brings its own interpretation to the play, but **As You Like It 2006** stands out for its audacious visual concept. While previous versions often set the play in a generic pastoral landscape, Branagh's decision to locate the action in 19th-century Japan gives the story a distinct cultural and historical context. This choice invites viewers to see the play with fresh eyes, noticing details and themes that might otherwise go unnoticed.

The film also differs from other adaptations in its pacing and tone. Branagh's version is leisurely, allowing scenes to unfold with a contemplative rhythm that mirrors the forest setting. The comedic moments are balanced with more reflective passages, creating a nuanced portrayal of love and exile. While some viewers may prefer a more energetic approach, the film's deliberate pace allows the characters and their relationships to develop naturally.

The Legacy of As You Like It 2006

More than a decade after its release, **As You Like It 2006** continues to find new audiences through streaming platforms and home video. Its unique aesthetic and strong performances have ensured its place in the canon of Shakespeare film adaptations. For students studying the play, the film offers a valuable resource, bringing the text to life with clarity and imagination. For casual viewers, it provides an entry point into Shakespeare's world, demonstrating that his works can be both accessible and deeply moving.

Kenneth Branagh's adaptation has also influenced subsequent productions of *As You Like It*, inspiring theater

directors to experiment with non-traditional settings and cultural cross-pollination. The film's success proves that Shakespeare's plays are remarkably adaptable, capable of thriving in any cultural context when handled with care and creativity.

Conclusion: A Timeless Comedy Reimagined

As You Like It 2006 is a film that rewards repeated viewing. Each encounter reveals new details—a subtle gesture, a line of dialogue delivered with unexpected meaning, a visual composition that captures the beauty of the natural world. Kenneth Branagh's adaptation is a labor of love, a testament to the enduring power of Shakespeare's comedy and the limitless possibilities of cinematic interpretation. By setting the play in 19th-century Japan, Branagh created a world that is at once exotic and familiar, a space where love, laughter, and transformation are possible. For anyone seeking a fresh perspective on one of Shakespeare's most beloved plays, this film is a treasure waiting to be discovered.

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