

Artslandia Orlando Review

<http://artslandia.com/profile-theatres-final-sarah-ruhl-show-artfully-spans-the-gender-gap-and-five-centuries-time/>

## Profile Theatre's final Sarah Ruhl show artfully spans the gender gap, and five centuries' time.



by **Jessie Drake**  
*Artslandia*

Profile Theatre closes their praiseworthy Sarah Ruhl season with a visionary time-and-gender-bending production of *Orlando*. A must-see for poets, gender-benders, feminists, anyone growing older, anyone who has been alone, and anyone who believes in love. Take the prompt to read Virginia Woolf's novel or watch (again) Sally Potter's 1992 film adaptation, starring the divine Tilda Swinton as Orlando, most acclaimed for its lush visual settings and ornate costumes that heighten Swinton's exquisitely subtle performance. Wonder how Profile could possibly depict the elaborate march through five centuries of English history within the confines of a circular low platform stage. Robert Wilson is the only other theater-maker to attempt such a feat in his 1989 stage adaptation, the impossible scale of visuals being irresistible to the avant-garde extremist. In contrast, Sarah Ruhl's play asks for only five actors, the hero supported by a chorus of four. Profile's dynamic cast is eager for the challenge, playing the limits of theatricality. I'm surprised (and impressed?) not to see a movement or dialect coach credited, as both elements had expressive range and precision. Director **Matthew B. Zrebski** has collected **Drammys** for his bold work on *Ablaze: An A Cappella Musical Thriller* and *Bob: A Life in Five Acts*, and now again utilizes the evocative power and humor of a chorus to support a hero's tightly-wound lifetime journey.

Orlando begins his journey alone, under an oak tree, trying to write a poem. The sensitive lead Beth Thompson has entered the circular stage with a boyish swagger, oft-

complimented shapely legs displayed in bright red tights. Not much attempt is made to hide her womanly shape under a white blouse, but that's fair enough; men's fashions were decidedly femme in Elizabethan England. Besides, Orlando's not the only gender-fluid creature on this stage; the chorus joins dressed in androgynous white robes with skull caps, but each will transform into characters both male and female, sensual and strong, young and old, aristocratic and common. Costumes by **Alison Heryer** seem pulled from the trunk of a wandering theater troupe in the best way: they're lovely but worn, built for quick changes to evoke character types from throughout history. The winking introductory line "He was a man, for there can be no doubt about his sex." will prove false over and over again. The pivot point of the story is Orlando's mysterious but matter-of-fact change of sex from male to female at the age of 30. Ruhl's play establishes the baseline of maleness in a speedy, superficial way to emphasize Orlando's more dramatic journey adjusting to the "penalties and privileges of position" of gender in different centuries.

The design trifecta of Tal Sanders (Scenic), Carl Faber (Lighting) and Em Gustason (Sound) excel throughout this production, co-creating the sixth character of Time, proving the wonderful line from Ruhl, "Nothing more disorders time than contact with any of the arts."

### **The 17th Century Man**

Young, boyish Orlando is taken as the treasured lap pet of aging Queen Elizabeth, played by Elizabeth Rothan with stern regality that softens to something seductive and maternal. A great frost hits England, and Orlando's heart is captured by the visiting Russian Princess Sasha, played by the captivating Crystal Muñoz who shines like "fox in the snow, olive tree, emerald" as she ice skates in trousers with boundless energy. Treachery soon follows devotion, Orlando betrays and is betrayed, the ice melts. Orlando welcomes the 17<sup>th</sup> century alone again. Melancholy and foreswearing women, he flees to Constantinople—only to become a woman himself. Orlando returns to England at the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and peering through spy glass on the ship remarks, "All is changed."

### **The 18th Century Lady**

Orlando spends the 18<sup>th</sup> century battling property lawsuits and thwarting unwanted marriage proposals, encountering the societal limitations of assigned womanhood for the first infuriating time. Ted Rooney's hee-hawing Archduke of Romania wins big laughs, as a man in a dress still manages (too?) easily to do—but the gender-swapping chorus gains meaning over time, since this is a male actor playing a man who disguises himself as a woman to seduce a man who becomes a woman... Ben Newman in particular embodies each of his many roles with captivating conviction, whether as a seductive Spanish dancer, or the handsome Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine, or the death buzz of a fly. Both these accomplished actors are relatively new to Portland stages, and I hope to see more from them.

### **The 19th Century Gentry**

The 19<sup>th</sup> century arrives and the chorus slips into posh accents, twitterpated by the invention of muffins and mantle-pieces. Lady Orlando submits to the spirit of the age by learning to dress, though the chorus sagely warns that "Clothes change our view of the world and the world's view of us." Soon enough, Orlando feels a concerning tingling in the left ring finger, agitation and shame, and the inescapable pressure to marry. After

escaping a hilarious haunting by wedding rings and surrendering herself as a bride to nature, Lady Orlando meets Shelmerdine, falls in love in two seconds and is engaged in minutes. Each asks the other, “Are you sure you aren’t a man?” and “Are you sure you aren’t a woman?” because their union is so seamless, their mutual androgyny complementary. It’s one of my favorite love stories in literature, and this scene succeeded in making my heart swell and my face blush.

### **The 20th Century Machinery**

A lightning storm amplifies their wedding vows, and with a flash of red light and the sound of glass shattering, the 20<sup>th</sup> century arrives. Pendulums swing and a light switch threatens Orlando as she adjusts to this age of electricity. The gears of industry turn as the fog rolls in, privacy is lost and the sky is made of metal.

### **The 21st Century...Technology?**

Before the play ends, we can barely hear the ominous sounds of the approaching age, the beeping technologies of the current 21<sup>st</sup> century, an information age that promises that perhaps, finally, we will understand.

Orlando notices that with the passing of time, image follows image, and we lose illusions only to acquire new ones. It might take 500 years to write a poem about an oak tree, but the attempt to capture and deliver an image in words is still a worthy pursuit. And once done, the poem (or the play) wants to be shared with other people. It’s in the sharing that we find empathy, meaning, purpose and love something to buoy us through the ceaseless tides of time.