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Adapting Virginia Woolf's 500-Year-Old Dandy Profile Theatre's Sarah Ruhl Season Concludes with *Epic Orlando*

By [Thomas Ross](#)



Profile Theatre at Artists Repertory Theatre, 1515 SW Morrison, Wed-Sat 7:30 pm, Sun 2 pm, through Nov 22, \$15-32, profiletheatre.org

IN A VIDEO INTRODUCTION to *Orlando* at Profile Theatre, playwright Sarah Ruhl says that it's rare for a female playwright to be told that "she has a body of work." But it shouldn't be a surprise that plays created over a lifelong career might feature varying subjects, styles, and settings, but hang together around consistent themes and attitudes. A discussion of women's lives is especially apt before *Orlando*, Ruhl's adaptation of the 1928 Virginia Woolf novel. *Orlando* is the story of the titular man (Beth Thompson), born rich and pretty in the Elizabethan era, who at the age of 30 falls asleep, wakes up a woman, and lives through the next few centuries.

Woolf's sentences follow her typically loopy trains of thought in and out of scenes, through fantasies and satiric jabs at the lifestyles of the ages she describes, while never losing sight of her subject, the beautiful Orlando (modeled after Woolf's lover, Vita Sackville-West).

That free-wheeling narration should be difficult to reproduce on stage, but it's smoothly adapted by Ruhl, who surrounds Orlando with four ensemble members credited as

"chorus." The chorus often speak together, like when Orlando asks a bird, "What is life?" and the chorus respond with a whispered, "Life, life, life! Cries the bird." This is one of many scenes where Ruhl's adaptation is simpler and more emotionally moving than Woolf's novel. Where Woolf's bird is sarcastic and mocking, Ruhl's is a gentle reminder to live.

Having lost a lot of Woolf's literary play, much of the comedy in this adaptation comes from the acting: Ted Rooney makes Orlando's most confusingly lustful experience all the more hilarious in his cartoonish portrayal of a cross-dressing Romanian archduke, while Elizabeth Rothan brings sharp immediacy to even the most minor of characters. Crystal Munoz and Ben Newman, meanwhile, have the more emotionally effective characters in Orlando's two greatest loves: Munoz is as brilliant as ice as Sasha, male Orlando's beautiful, intelligent Russian princess; while Newman brings some much-needed tenderness to female Orlando's life as her husband. These relationships are the most fully realized and powerful parts of the play—unsurprising given Woolf's subject was a veiled version of her lover.

Since virtually all of the text of the play comes from the novel, Orlando often uses the third person to describe himself/herself, making the lines between individuals and society all the harder to track.

That trick gives the script some of its smallest, finest jokes, as Thompson adapts to using female pronouns, but her physical performance is even more impressive. We would know Orlando is beautiful even in the dark simply because Woolf won't shut up about it, but Thompson conveys the character's two bodies beautifully. As a young man, Thompson's Orlando is passionate and violent, always "flinging" himself places, riding the roots of an old oak tree like a horse. Later, Orlando the Victorian woman feels a vibration rise through her body, settling on her empty left ring finger. The unhinged but balanced spontaneity Thompson brings to that scene would feel forced and pretentious from most actors, but here it's credible and moving.

In fact, the single most impressive thing about this production is not its comedy or its emotional truth, but just how effortlessly the direction, design, and performances evoke the particular smooth frenzy of Woolf's best work in *Orlando*. To cover a life, even the stretch from 16 to 36 years old, is an achievement, but Woolf spans 500 years of history, Ruhl demands that it be done virtually without a break, and director Matthew Zrebski & Co. prove that it's the only way to do it. Despite being meticulously choreographed, it feels fresh and real and totally natural.

In that video intro, Ruhl describes her career as one "of interruptions," three of which were her children, and seems to imply that a woman's life is thought of as too chaotic for a through-line. It's easy to see this elegant, immersive production of *Orlando* as a rebuttal to that sentiment and to the underlying one. Woolf saw it, too. There's no such thing as a "woman's life"—only a life, and the infinite lives within it.