Acting Edition

Orlando

by Sarah Ruhl

Adapted from the novel by
Virginia Woolf

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SAMUEL FRENCH

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ORLANDO was produced by Signature Theater in New York City on April 2nd, 2024. The performance was directed and choreographed by Will Davis, with sets by Arnulfo Maldonado, costumes by Oana Botez, hair, wig, and makeup design by Krystal Balleza & Will Vicari, lighting design by Barbara Samuels, and sound design by Brendan Aanes. The Intimacy Coordinator was Ann C. James. The Props Supervisor was Matt Carlin. The Production Stage Manager was Kasson Marroquin. The cast was as follows:

ORLANDO . . . . . .Taylor Mac
SASHA. . . . . Janice Amaya
THE QUEEN . . . . . Nathan Lee Graham
THE ARCHDUKE/ARCHDUCHESS . . . . . .Lisa Kron
THE CHORUS . . . . . .Rad Pereira, Jo Lampert, TL Thompson

ORLANDO was commissioned by Joyce Piven and was first produced at the Piven Theater Workshop, directed by Joyce Piven.

It was subsequently produced at the Actor's Gang in Los Angeles, produced by Tim Robins, and directed by Joyce Piven.

It was then produced in New York City at Classic Stage Company, produced by Brian Kulick, directed by Rebecca Taichman.

CHARACTERS

ORLANDO

and

THE CHORUS

SASHA
QUEEN ELIZABETH (THE QUEEN)
THE ARCHDUKE/THE ARCHDUCHESS
MARMADUKE BONTHROP SHELMERDINE, ESQUIRE
SHAKESPEARE
MISS PENELOPE HARTOPP
A WASHERWOMAN
FAVILLA
CLORINDA
EUPHROSYNE
A RUSSIAN SEA-MAN
AS YOU LIKE IT ORLANDO
ROSALIND
A SEA CAPTAIN
A MAID – GRIMSDITCH
A CHAPLAIN – DUPPER
A SALESPERSON
AN ELEVATOR OPERATOR

SETTING

Elizabethan England to the present moment.

TIME

PART ONE

The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

PART TWO

The eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, and the present moment.

CASTING NOTE

Orlando may be cast with all kinds of genders, may be double-cast, may be produced with two principal actors and as few as three gifted, transformational, virtuosic chorus members or as many actors as you can fit on a stage and pay. The doubling outlined for the chorus members in this script reflects the doubling from the Signature Theater production and can be used as a guide for casting.

PLAYWRIGHT'S INTRODUCTION

My encounters with Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, a queer classic, have been encounters with joy. Woolf apparently wrote *Orlando* with more joy, buoyancy, and speed than any of her other novels. The character of Orlando, based on Virginia's lover Vita Sackville-West, famously begins life as a man in the Elizabethan era, trots through a couple more centuries, dodging various lovers, and in the eighteenth century, after a long sleep, wakes up, a woman. Woolf wrote in a letter, "I have written this book quicker than any; & it is all a joke; & yet gay & quick reading I think; a writer's holiday."

Woolf apparently had so much *fun* writing the book that it felt like a holiday, like not-work, a triumph over the melancholy and writer's block that sometimes plagued her. Woolf wrote in a letter to Vita, "Yesterday I was in despair... I couldn't screw a word from me; and at last dropped my head in my hands; dipped my pen in the ink, and wrote these words, as if automatically, on a clean sheet: *Orlando: a biography*. No sooner had I done this than my body was flooded with rapture and my brain with ideas. I wrote rapidly until 12." That spark of joy in the work is what first attracted me to the novel – the palpable feeling of joy in the speed of Woolf's invention – that rush of language – an incandescent and yet almost physical quality. For one thing, it's *funnier* than her other books. I can almost feel Virginia willing Vita to laugh over her shoulder while reading the pages.

Orlando was light years ahead of its time (1928) in terms of its expansive, fluid, liberatory views of gender and sexuality. Conversations around gender have changed monumentally in the culture since I first adapted this novel in 1998. At times it feels as though we are only now catching up to Virginia Woolf, who wrote in *A Room of One's Own* that the "androgynous mind is resonant and porous...transmits emotion without impediment...is naturally creative, incandescent, and undivided."

Though I added one word to *Orlando* last week, I wrote the first draft relatively quickly, twenty-five years ago, aided by the intrepid speed of youth. I was asked originally to adapt the novel when I was just out of Brown University, where I had studied with the great Paula Vogel, and where I decided to become a playwright. Another mentor, Joyce Piven, with whom I had studied acting, asked me to adapt *Orlando* for her theater company in Evanston. At my tender age, I already was a Woolf devotee, and had devoured and loved the novel. I had looked to literary models of expansive non-fixed desire and liberatory views of gender to make sense of growing up, and I had already inhaled Woolf. I said yes to Joyce immediately. Lucky for me, I was too young to be daunted by the epic scale of the novel. When people ask me how I distilled the novel, I answer that, though there were complexities along the way, the first draft was simple: I chose my favorite, most theatrical bits and then put them in an order.

What a profound joy to finally land at Signature Theater, twenty-five years later, with the incredible director Will Davis. When I first met Will for coffee to discuss *Orlando*, among other possible theatrical ventures, and we talked, and talked, and talked, I thought: where has this artistic collaborator been all my life? We seemed to share a language and a mission. Working with Will post-pandemic, he reminds me why I ever wanted to do theater in the first place – a conjuring of joy, possibility, community, and transcendence.

Building an ensemble production around the divine center of Taylor Mac has been a profoundly happy experience. I've known Taylor since we were at New Dramatists (down the block) together as playwrights. I'd always admired Taylor as a writer and performer, and when I saw the seminal *24 Decade History of Popular Music*, with Taylor moving through the centuries and in and out of genders, in Machine Dazzle's epic costumes – I gasped inwardly, thinking – Taylor Mac must play Orlando someday! This production has managed to include so many writer/performers I have long admired, including Lisa Kron – fitting for a story with writing at the center of it.

Just before we started rehearsals at Signature, I had the pleasure of seeing (and hearing) my almost grown-up daughter, Anna, in the play, playing the violin and the bass, at her high school. To see kids I had known since kindergarten now inhabiting these roles with such life-affirming playfulness was a trip. I thought of Orlando's line "This must be middle-age. Time has passed over me…" I know of no better definition of growing up than the one provided by Woolf in *Orlando*: "I am growing up. I am losing some illusions, perhaps to acquire others." The director of that high school production, Laura Barnett, pointed out that the word "love" is used thirty-six times in the text, and Orlando is thirty-six years old by the end of the play.

I have always been a sucker for a good love story. I am beguiled by artistic works of dedication that are intrinsic gifts before they ever reach a wider audience. I am of the belief that the wider audience gets a taste of the initial gift. Thanks to this extraordinary group of performers and collaborators for putting this work into your hands, in the present moment.

For Joyce Piven & Polly Noonan;
for Virginia Woolf & Vita Sackville-West

PART ONE

ACT ONE:
The Elizabethan Age.

Scene One:
Orlando.

ORLANDO. HE –

CHORUS. HE!

ORLANDO. *(To the audience – a conspiracy.)* He – for there could be no doubt of his sex…

CHORUS. Though the fashion of the age did something to disguise it –

ORLANDO. was in the act of brandishing his sword –

CHORUS 3. for the age was Elizabethan.

CHORUS 4. Their morals were not ours.

CHORUS 6. Nor their poets, nor their climate

CHORUS 7. nor their vegetables even.

CHORUS 5. Everything was different.

CHORUS 4. The rain fell vehemently or not at all.

CHORUS 3. The sun blazed or there was darkness. Violence was all.

ORLANDO. And so, Orlando – for Orlando was his name – brandished his sword and –

Orlando swings his sword wildly, killing no one.

I do so long to chop the head off an infidel, but I

am, as yet, only sixteen.

CHORUS 5. sights exulted him –

CHORUS 6. the birds and the trees –

ORLANDO. and made him in love with death…

Orlando looks at the Chorus. They disperse.

I am alone.

CHORUS 4. He sighed profoundly.

Orlando sighs profoundly.

ORLANDO. And flung himself

on the earth

at the foot of

a great oak tree.

Orlando flings himself down in front of an oak tree.

And in his mind, image followed image:

CHORUS 5. The oak tree was

the back of a great horse

that he was riding

CHORUS 6. or the deck of a tumbling ship –

CHORUS 4. it was anything indeed

so long as it was hard

ORLANDO. for he felt the need of something

which he could attach

his floating heart to.
I will –

CHORUS 7. Orlando thought –

ORLANDO. I will write a great poem
about the Oak Tree.

CHORUS 7. And he tried to describe –

CHORUS 6. for all young poets are forever describing –

CHORUS 7. nature.

ORLANDO. He wanted to match the shade of green
precisely –
The green of the grass, the green of the grass…
The greeny greeny green of the grass –

CHORUS 5. But green in nature is one thing

CHORUS 4. Green in literature quite another.

CHORUS 7. When –

A trumpet sound.

A Trumpet Sounded!!!

ORLANDO. Tomorrow.
I will write a great poem about the oak tree tomorrow.

More trumpets.

Orlando leaps to his feet.

Orlando saw that his great house –
in the valley –
was pierced with lights.

CHORUS 7. Coaches turned and wheeled.

CHORUS 5. Horses tossed their plumes.

CHORUS 4. And why did horses toss their plumes?

ORLANDO. Christ Jesus!

CHORUS 6. **THE QUEEN HAD COME.**

CHORUS 7. Orlando dashed downhill.

The Chorus dresses Orlando.

CHORUS 7. He let himself in at a wicket gate.

CHORUS 6. He tore up the winding staircase.

CHORUS 7. He tripped.

(He was a trifle clumsy.)

CHORUS 6. Through shortcuts known only to him,

CHORUS 7. he dashed –

ORLANDO. and reached the banqueting hall only just in time to sink upon his knees and, hanging his head in confusion, to offer a bowl of rose water to the…

CHORUS 3/THE QUEEN. great

Queen

Herself.

Scene Two:
The Poet and the Queen.

The Queen extends her hand.

Orlando kneels before her.

ORLANDO. Such was Orlando's shyness that he saw no more of her than her ringed hand in water, but it was enough.

It was a memorable hand.

THE QUEEN. A thin hand with long fingers always curling as if round orb or scepter;

ORLANDO. a nervous, crabbed, sickly hand;

THE QUEEN. a commanding hand, a hand that had only to raise itself for a head to fall; yes, the Queen had a hand –

ORLANDO. – Orlando guessed, attached to an old body that smelt like a cupboard.

THE QUEEN. Come.

Orlando approaches The Queen and kneels at her feet.

THE QUEEN. The Queen studied him.

She read him like a page – eyes, mouth, nose, hips, hands... By God! He has the shapeliest legs of any nobleman in England!

ORLANDO. Orlando felt something press against his hair...

The Queen kisses Orlando's hair.

THE QUEEN. *(To the audience.)* He had been kissed by a queen without knowing it.

(To Orlando.) What is your name, dear boy?

ORLANDO. Orlando.

THE QUEEN. Orlando! And what do you want to be when you grow up, Orlando?

ORLANDO. I would very much like to be a poet, your Highness.

THE QUEEN. Ah, romance, folly, poetry, youth! I think you would make a fine poet, Orlando. And I have always wanted a gentleman just your age. How would you like to come to Court, Orlando?

ORLANDO. To Court – that's a very great honor, your Highness.

THE QUEEN. Yes.

(To the audience.) The Queen plucked a ring from her finger –

The joint was rather swollen –

(To Orlando.) Orlando, with this ring, I hereby name you my Treasurer and Steward.

ORLANDO. Thank you, Mum.

THE QUEEN. And The Queen took Orlando to Court.

For the old woman loved Orlando.

CHORUS 6. Lands were given him

a great house assigned him.

THE QUEEN. He was to be the son of her old age.

CHORUS 6. And the flower bloomed and faded.

CHORUS 7. And the sun rose and sank.

The Queen leads Orlando to her bedroom and pulls him down among the cushions.

THE QUEEN. I hope that you will stay with me always.

ORLANDO. Yes, Mum.

CHORUS 7. And the flower bloomed and faded.

CHORUS 6. And the sun rose and sank.

CHORUS 7. One day, a trifle bored, Orlando wandered through court – and came upon the servant's quarters – where he saw –

ORLANDO. Oh!

A rather fat, shabby man, with a tankard of ale beside him –

CHORUS 6/SHAKESPEARE. And a *pen.*

ORLANDO. He was not writing. He seemed in the act of rolling some thought up and down,

SHAKESPEARE. to and fro in his mind until it gathered shape.

His eyes, clouded like stone, were fixed. He did not see Orlando.

ORLANDO. Was this a poet? Orlando wanted to say, "Tell me everything, everything in the whole world!" For he had the wildest, most absurd ideas about poets – but how to speak to a man who sees –

SHAKESPEARE. Ogres, satyrs, perhaps the depth of the sea –

ORLANDO. And not you?

The man turned the pen in his fingers, this way and that, mused, and then, very quickly, wrote half a dozen lines.

SHAKESPEARE. Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?

Thou art more lovely and more…more…more…temperate!

The Poet notices Orlando.

Yes?

ORLANDO. Orlando, overcome with shyness, darted off…

For he was terribly late.

THE QUEEN. Where have you been, dear boy??

ORLANDO. I'm sorry, Mum, I got lost.

THE QUEEN. No matter. Shall we play a game, Orlando?

ORLANDO. Yes, Mum. What is the game?

THE QUEEN. First you recite a Petrarchan sonnet on my eyes, and then I challenge you to an ode upon my feet.

ORLANDO. Yes, Mum.

THE QUEEN. And if they are very good, you may kiss me.

ORLANDO. Yes, Mum.

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?

Thou art more lovely and more temperate –

THE QUEEN. You may kiss me.

She kisses him, passionately.

This –

The Queen breathed –

is my victory!

CHORUS 6. And the flower bloomed and faded.

CHORUS 7. And the sun rose and sank.

Orlando sighs.

THE QUEEN. What *is* the matter, Orlando?

ORLANDO. Mum?

THE QUEEN. Are you quite content? You don't seem your usual self. Did you enjoy the parakeets from the Azores?

ORLANDO. Very much, Mum.

THE QUEEN. Perhaps you are bored. Perhaps you do not play with boys your own age quite enough.

ORLANDO. How could boys my own age compare with a Queen, Mum?

THE QUEEN. That's the spirit, Orlando.

Scene Three:
Man's Treachery.

CHORUS 7. The long winter months drew on.

ORLANDO. Frost covered all the trees –

THE QUEEN. And the nights were of perfect stillness.

CHORUS 7. One morning…

THE QUEEN. The Queen was getting dressed.

CHORUS 7. *(Dressing The Queen.)* Your stockings, Mum –
your farthingale, Mum –
which was tightened and
fastened –

THE QUEEN. Not too tight!
Until the Queen floated
as if on her own island.
She powdered her face.

CHORUS 6. She was practicing a speech.

THE QUEEN. My loving people. I know I have the body but of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too –

CHORUS 7. when all of a sudden –

THE QUEEN. the Queen saw in the mirror…

CHORUS 6. Which she kept for fear of spies…

THE QUEEN. through the door…
a boy…

ORLANDO. Could it be Orlando?

THE QUEEN. kissing a girl –
Who in the devil's name *is* that brazen hussy?

THE QUEEN. Snatching at her golden sword she struck violently at the mirror.

CHORUS 6. The glass crashed.

People came running.

CHORUS 5. She was lifted and set in her chair again.

But she was stricken after that

and groaned for many years:

THE QUEEN. Man's treachery.

CHORUS 5, 6 & 7. It was Orlando's fault, perhaps.

ORLANDO. Yet, after all, are we to blame Orlando?

He was young, he was boyish.

He did as nature bade him do.

CHORUS 7/CLORINDA, CHORUS 5/FAVILLA & CHORUS 6/EUPHROSYNE. It is certain indeed that many ladies were ready to show him their favors.

They giggle.

WAIT, THERE'S MORE!

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