ACTING SHAKESPEARE: A Roundtable Discussion with Artists from the Utah Shakespeare Festival's 2022 Production of *All's Well That Ends Well*

Isabel Smith-Bernstein
USF Dramaturg and Director of Seminar

Featuring: Yvette Monique Clark, Jeremy Thompson, Keven Kantor, Rob Tucker

Stewart Shelley: Welcome to our Actor's Panel. We are delighted to welcome members of the panel and Dr. Bernstein, who is our dramaturg and director of seminar. We have Yvette, Jeremy, Kevan and Rob ready to discuss the show, answer questions, and share insight. This is our incredible group of Wooden O participants. We also have a few people joining us via Zoom. So, without further ado, I will turn that over to you.

Smith-Bernstein: I'll give a little bit of background about this play, and then I'm here to moderate if you need the moderation, but everyone here is smart and capable. As Stewart said, my name is Dr. Isabel Smith-Bernstein. I was the dramaturg for *All's Well That Ends Well*. I've been at this festival since 2015. I also do all the seminars in the mornings.

All's Well That Ends Well is a play that was written by Shakespeare. This might be a little bit of information that you already know, since this is a room of scholars, but it was written by Shakespeare

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in about 1605. It was very hard to date for a really, really long time because it has a lot of really weird textual things about it. And one of them is that it has to have been written after about 1620 when you were allowed to say God on the stage again because our text for *All's Well* from the folio mentions God and Christianity quite a lot. And that, of course, was banned for a very, very long time. So, the dominant theory about *All's Well* now is that it was written in 1605 in between Shakespeare's writing of *Othello* and *Lear*. There are a lot of linguistic similarities between *All's Well* and *Lear*. Then it was edited by our friend Thomas Middleton in about 1620. And that's why it talks about God, and that's why some of the jokes in *All's Well* are incredibly hard to understand and also very vulgar at the same time. That's Middleton, right? And so, it does seem that our text, our only surviving *All's Well*, the folio version, is an edited version by Thomas Middleton. And so of course, as a team, for us, that meant wading through a lot of particularly difficult language because Middleton is not Shakespeare. Me and the director and the voice and text coach, Philip Thompson, actually changed a few of the words in our production of *All's Well* just for clarity, and we rewrote a couplet, too, one Diana speaks, just for clarity, so the audience can follow along.

In the seminar, I usually talk about how *All's Well's* a little bit of a problem play, and what that actually means. The term a problem play comes from a theater critic in the 1800s, who was actually writing about Henrik Ibsen. He was writing about how Ibsen's plays are all about societal or social problems that are not easily fixed in the course of a play. So, we were writing about Ibsen originally and saying that the play is about problems and not that it is a play that is a problem, but now that term has taken a life of its own.

All's Well is definitely a play about social problems. Perhaps, maybe, it also is a bit of a problem, but I think it's been labeled in an unfair way that has relegated it to a corner for most of its life. And then, of course, it's a problem play in another sense. It came to mean that play of Shakespeare's that you can't categorize, which I think is silly, because obviously Shakespeare was unconcerned with any kind of modern genre. He wrote comedies and tragedies. It's a comedy if someone gets married and not everyone's dead at the end of the play. And it's a tragedy if everyone's dead at the end

of the play. And it's my own personal thought that in Shakespeare, the real difference is that in comedy, the characters have to live with all of their choices. And in a tragedy, they all die because of their choices. And so that is *All's Well*. Everyone has to live with their choices. It's very much a play about very messy people of being messy and those who witness or try to guide, like the Countess. And ultimately, those youth just won't listen.

Our production was directed by Melinda Pfundstein, and she set it in the interwar period, as a means to bring it forward in time, so that our context for it is the same as what Shakespeare's audiences' would have been, because we have no concept of the Italian Wars, which is what Shakespeare is writing about. And so in this period, we immediately have context for that, and it actually frees us to watch the play and listen to it. So we're not all in the audience thinking, "What do I know about the Italian wars?" Probably nothing, because they're kind of insignificant today. Also, in our play, the text is shortened. It's condensed a little bit, but we're not actually missing anything, except for a six-line epilogue given by the King at the end of *All's Well*, in which the actor steps forward and says, "I am not a king. I am an actor. Please applaud." As far as epilogues by Shakespeare go, it is not a good one. There is also a strong indication that it was written by Middleton and not Shakespeare. And so we cut that in favor of an air raid siren.
So that's a little bit of primer on *All's Well*. I'd love it if everyone could introduce yourselves. Tell us your name and your pronouns if you want. My pronouns are she, her, hers.

Clark: I'm Yvette Monique Clark. I play the Countess, and my pronouns are she, her, hers.

Thompson: Jeremy Thompson, he, him, his, and I play G. Dumaine.

Kantor: My name is Kevin Kantor. My pronouns are they, them, theirs. I play Paroles.

Tucker: My name is Rob Tucker, and I played Lafeu and the Duke of Florence.

Audience member: While we're in the introduction phase, since we're a repertory theater, would you also share what other shows you're in?

Clark: I play Willetta Mayer in *Trouble in Mind*.

Thompson: I also play Eddie Fenton in *Trouble in Mind* and in *King Lear* I am the Duke of Burgundy, a knight, a servant, and the herald.

Kantor: I also play Trinculo in *The Tempest*.

Tucker: I also play the Beadle in *Sweeney Todd*. I play a knight, a doctor, a captain, an old man of 85 in *King Lear*.

Smith-Bernstein: I also worked on *Sweeney Todd* and *The Tempest*.

Audience member: I wanted to ask about the acting choices for Paroles. So, there's hypocrisy throughout the whole play, and you're being called on yours. And you can be the victim, or you can get out in front of it. Lots of choices how to play that. Reminds me of Shylock a few years ago. He had the same choice, knowing, "Okay, I'm the victim here. But wait a minute, again, they're all hypocrites." I'd love for you to talk through how you chose your response. Because you were angry. You stayed angry. And that was a choice. And I thought it worked fabulously, but I'd like to hear your thought process.

Kantor: I was really drawn to doing this contract because Melinda had reached out to me after conversations with Isabelle about how they wanted to approach the role of Paroles in the show, and particularly leaning into the queerness that is already very existent in the text. It is very much there in a show that is largely about gender and sexual agency. And so, for the lack of a better word, traditionally, we have someone that we perceive to be a man performing masculinity to the point of bravado and fluidity. And this approach was something that worked to sort of invert that. And to your point, everyone in this show, especially the principals specifically, but even beyond them, are messy and do their fair share of messy shit and lying. And so it begs the question, why is it then Paroles who is always on the receiving end of all of this criticism? And I think one of the ways that our production answers that question is that it's their perceived otherness. And I find it interesting in that context that you also bring up Shylock.

My choice, to borrow your words, to stay angry, is because I was not interested in telling a reformation story. While there is language in the play that suggests that there is a change and that Paroles's understanding of how it is that they might be able to survive this world shifts, especially after the interrogation, I was

not interested in playing a Paroles who has decided to abandon what makes them them. And we see that a little bit in the design, right? I come back in Act 5, and I've been stripped of some of my fabulousness, but I think that stripping requires a certain righteous and rightful indignation towards the wrong that has been done to them.

Audience member: Yeah, I would like to see just a little bit of your fabulousness be kind of kept—

Kantor: Well, I'm still in that corset.

Audience member: I love that last speech after the interrogation, to the audience.

Kantor: There's lots of conversation about how an image like that would be perceived, right? And we all have to understand as a cast what we're co-signing too, in that it is impossible to receive that imagery without a current cultural zeitgeist in mind. We need to know that whether or not a particular character thinks that, the actor thinks that their core motivation is grounded in prejudice against explicitly, visibly queer people and that that is what we will receive as an audience, at least to an extent. I would not suggest that that is every character's core motivation. I think for a lot of folks it could be Paroles's perceived proximity to power in their relationship to Bertram. And when we have complicated motivations like that, often our subconscious will default to the least common denominator, which is that person is different. So, I think it is unavoidable and also an important, ugly, messy truth that we are exploring with the text.

Smith-Bernstein: Jeremy, do you want to talk about that a little bit? As one of the leaders of the interrogation?

Thompson: Sure. We talked a little bit about this in that paperwork session that you did late in the process about what we were going to do. Let's really clarify. What I remember us talking about were things that we had to be aware of as actors but that maybe the characters weren't aware of themselves, like Kevin just said. That maybe G. Dumaine doesn't think of himself as being homophobic or queerphobic. And especially with the sibling relationship between the Dumaines, and having Tasha, who is playing E. Dumaine as a woman in men's clothing in the military, taking on this more traditionally masculine role. Knowing that the otherness that is still there, and that these psychological forces

are at work that maybe the characters don't even have language to describe themselves, but that they share that lowest common denominator of, "that's different and I don't like that." Especially with masculinity as the default. That in some way it's okay that E. Dumaine is presenting as masculine, but you have this masculine person who's expressing a level of femininity and that somehow all the characters on stage are like "something's wrong there." And that that subconscious thing irks us, not even in the interrogation scene, but from the very beginning. We're still playing with the brandy hand off and all the awkwardness that comes out there. We needed to be aware that it's laced in from the beginning and explodes out at the end in ways that we are definitely intending as the interrogators and then come back around to bite us at the end. And that look that you're shooting towards us at the end, at various different times, where I feel, at least as G. Dumaine living in this world, that Paroles has reclaimed some power at the end, and that we are now screwed, that Paroles has the ability, if they want to, to absolutely torch everyone. And there's a fear.

Kantor: I think it's interesting, and it's also separate from our particular approach, which I would also be remiss not to mention. It's not an entirely novel one. The queerness is in the text, and it has been explored before in other productions, even as rarely as *All's Well* is done. But for all of the language about Paroles being a braggart and a coward and false and untrue, with the exception of the King and the Countess, I would say Paroles has the most power in the play, is the one who gets the most shit done. If it were not for Paroles, I do not think—that virginity scene with Helen, I think spurs on her realization that she has agency. Because of Paroles, Bertram leaves for war. Paroles actually orchestrates everything. They have all the power. And I think it is that power, not only that power, but that power that is perceived in someone that is free from the trappings of these assigned gender roles that everyone else is shackled to, that scares everyone. And that is why they are made to be an ass by everyone, because they feel the need to strip that power away from them.

Smith-Bernstein: Could you talk a little bit more about what motivates your Paroles in doing those things that you just talked about and making those actions happen?

Kantor: Yeah, I would say the macro ones are a sense of agency and freedom, right? Especially in this approach. Again,

to hearken back to this idea that everyone calls this character a braggart and a coward, and I would say Paroles maybe selfishly, but I think textually as well, is actually the bravest person in the play, is someone who is unafraid to be uninhibited in a world that is demanding inhibition. Also, Paroles is in love with Bertram, as Helen is. Why? Who but love knows? This man—I think he's—

Thompson: Well, he's ripped.

Kantor: Right. But it's also deeply, deeply relatable that it's like, "I'm in love with this man." And also, he's sullen, he's dour, he's gloomy. He's almost everything that Paroles and Helen are not. Opposites attract, right? And so I think a lot of his actions, like the other two characters, Helen and Bertram, are born of a desire for sexual agency. Agency as a whole, but particularly *All's Well* is about sex. And I think Paroles spurs Helen on, not realizing that the man that she's going to go after is his own. And then when that happens, Paroles's actions are about getting Bertram as far away from her as possible and then again trying to intervene in the boyish ritual of courtship and at war with Diana. I think it's often read as Paroles wanting these women for himself, and it's like, what play did you read? So, I think it's largely that relationship that motivates him. There's an intimacy there; they grew up together. And I think that Bertram is also someone who has co-signed this fabulousness that Paroles exhibits, and it's one that I think that Paroles is often performing for Bertram. And I also read the play as Bertram being deeply in love with Paroles as well. That was not our production.

Audience member: I was expecting it to be honest. I wanted in the end for Bertram to be in love with you.

Kantor: Well, Paroles has private scenes with Helen and private scenes with Bertram. The two of them never have a private scene together. Paroles is the go-between. That scene when we go off to war is, well we decided it was, riddled with sexual innuendo. Where we arrived in this particular portrayal was through the question of how is this individual granted so much private intimacy with these two characters? Again selfishly, but also textually, I think it's Paroles's play. Paroles has the most private moments with the audience next to Helen. Bertram never has a private moment with the audience.

Smith-Bernstein: This play was billed as Paroles's throughout most of the 17 and 1800s.

Tucker: I think that actually brings up an interesting point, talking about the text and the sexual innuendos that are in the text, I think it's important to think about also the fact that in many ways our production is grappling with three different time periods at the same time. And the way male affection was viewed in Elizabethan England is a little different than the way we Puritan descendants view it now, and different again from where we set it in France in 1939, the World War II era. In our production, we have to navigate all three of them, so that today is completely under the curtain. That's the beauty of theater and all art. It can be turned in different ways and it's received in the perspective you come from. Which is why you're seeing queer so apparently. It's there in the text, for sure.

Clark: [Speaking of Bertram] He's an ass. That's it.

Audience member: That's your son.

Clark: He's an ass. That's why I know. He's following none of the positive upbringing and he has his privilege, and he's doing nothing good with it. He will not follow in his father's footsteps, as I wish that he would. I guess at the end of the play, you see an inkling that he might, but that's too fast of a turn on a dime for his mother. I'm sad that I don't have any language to express that at the end of the show. But yeah, he's an ass.

Tucker: I actually think Lafeu's is the traditional viewpoint, and was probably more in line with the crowd then. I mean, I think one of the things we were talking about is why people want Bertram. Why do people love him? And I think one of the reasons we get is that he's incredibly privileged and really young. But he's not been anywhere. He's not done anything. So the first time he runs away from home, which feels very teenagery to me, and he probably would have been considered a teenager.

Smith-Bernstein: He is, and the textual evidence is that he hasn't become count as soon as his father dies. He instead becomes a ward of the King of France. He's not an inheriting age.

Tucker: I mean, it's just rash. I mean, you said something in the play—

Clark: "Mad and unbridled, boy."

Tucker: Yeah. And it's just like, oh, I was forced into adulthood by this marriage, which I'm not prepared for nor want, and I need to escape in any way. It's all instinct, instinct, instinct, instinct.

And then there's all these little things, and I think there's—Yes, he is an ass. But, I think that that's what happens when you're a sheltered youth. It's so much money and so much privilege. That's what ends up happening--I mean, we see it in the world.

Smith-Bernstein: Bertram also has all his consent taken away. I mean, he doesn't want to marry Helen, and then he also doesn't want to sleep with Helen, but he gets her pregnant.

Tucker: He wants to go to war. And people keep telling him, "You're too young. You're too young." And he finally is like, "I'm just going to do something for me. Goodbye."

Clark: But he does want to sleep with somebody. It's not Helen, but okay.

Thompson: It's been noted that if you swap the traditional gender roles of Helen and Bertram, Bertram instantly becomes a Disney Princess. You could write that over the plot of *Brave*.

Smith-Bernstein: It's very effective for *All's Well*, for a theater to cast Bertram as a woman as well.

Audience member: I really love the show, and one of the things I really loved about it is—I saw a show a while ago of the same play, where it felt like the director said, "This is a problem play. Make sure no one has any fun at all." That was very tonally one note. So what I really enjoyed about your production choices and acting choices were that you seemed to accept the messiness. You went along with a mixture of charm and shifting sympathies. As much as Bertram fails, there's also this moment where we see exactly what you're saying. He's young. He wants his life to start. And suddenly, Helen cures the king, and he wants to know why do I have to marry her? And that's a good question. I really enjoyed that you kept all those things in play and let the audience sort of work out where their sympathies lie. I was interested, as a question, in how much difference you noticed between particular audiences or how people react to what you're doing.

Clark: Well, they always enjoy Paroles. Always, always.

Tucker: What's weird is that the younger the audience, the more vocal they are about their enjoyment of Paroles. There's some people who are baffled by Paroles. But at the end of the show, every single night without fail, the loudest applause is for Paroles.

Kantor: It is always interesting. This play is hard to do. I think for all the reasons that you just mentioned, and I'm glad

that this production sang to you. It's really difficult. And I think that's exemplified very early on, in the way we begin with a funeral. Everyone's dressed in black. It's dour and bleak. And then I walk down the stairs and am like "Let's talk about sex, baby." When I descend the stairs, and we immediately engage in this sort of vulgar scene about sex looking the way that I do, there is always a sharp intake of breath in the house. I think, night to night, I can clock when the exhale is, and sometimes it's at the end of that scene. Sometimes it's not until the interrogation. I think that's a reality.

It would be a reality anywhere, but it's an undeniable truth that we are creating this piece of art in a place that can have a specific sort of conservative cultural zeitgeist. I think it is actually far fewer folks than we give credit to that are ready to see something like this in the community. But I think they do follow it. I think they follow it and, the way that the play was designed, they know at the end what suffering looks like. I think Helen, Bertram, and Paroles all do their fair share of suffering in this play. So in regards to this shifting alignment of sympathies, I think that's the reality of the piece, too. It's difficult. It's so messy, this play. We are trained to believe that Shakespeare's plays, especially the more popular ones, are something we should be able to easily follow, if not textually then tonally. And this one does not hold your hand in that regard, which is why I think it's actually really fun to do.

Smith-Bernstein: It really is a play about two tricks, right? So, there's the ring trick and then the interrogation, but we only see one of them. I mean, Shakespeare's not going to put the bed trick on stage, but we see very little surrounding it either. And the tricks do kind of mirror each other. And the fact that the trick with Paroles goes too far, actually I think it also must be a comment on the trick with Helen and Bertram, one that we don't see. And then both tricks are about a circle of some kind. So, they're both kind of about sex and virginity. A drum versus a ring.

Audience member: Would you be willing to talk a little bit about the process of putting this together? How much of the interpretation was the director's choice? How much came from the actors? How did that process play out?

Clark: This is my first Shakespeare play. I fell in love with Shakespeare when I was 15 in AP English class. The first play we read was Macbeth. And Lady M spoke to me. I felt like I needed

to know, "Who is this woman?" And I needed to see—I needed to know what it was. And so I've always understood it. I've always read it. I'm not well versed in all the technical things, like, what's the verse and what is the soliloquy. But I have a connection to it. And so when I was offered the role of Countess in *All's Well*, I was like, "It's probably just a couple of lines. I'll be fine." When I got to rehearsal, I was like, "In the name of God."

I had a one-on-one with Melinda, where I was wrestling with how to create the Countess and how much of me should be in her because I am a mother as well, of a son who was an ass. He's a fabulous adult, but from 12 through 17 I thought somebody wasn't going to make it. So, I asked Melinda, "How much of me can I put into the Countess?" She said, "All of it." So, I thought, how did I deal with my son when he was going through his teenage transition? And the instinct was to slap Bertram upside the head. But I had to make do with my face and my tone of voice.

I understand who she is. I love that she is strong. I love that she owns her household. I love that she doesn't seem in a rush to get another man. She has her own money and her own situation, and she's handling it very well. So, it took me a while to figure out how strong to make her. I had to think how to plant my feet. The way I walk as Countess, the way I stand as Countess, all of that had to come into play even before I learned the words. What was her physicality going to be? How much would she tolerate from those who surround her?

As the Countess, Renalda is the closest person to me, so she's allowed more freedom. Like when E. Dumaine tries to touch me, and I'm like, "Are you serious? You don't touch me." So, I had to find who she was, and I found her. I've fallen in love with her. And I think that I'm getting better as it goes. But opening night, if you touched me you could literally feel me shaking. And I never get nervous. It was the anxiety of "I have to say all these words. And people out there don't know what I'm saying." I'm in a zone right now. Even when I mess up, I have things to cover it. Before I didn't have that. I was worrying, "What will I say if I don't say thee? What will I say if I don't say—?" It took a while for me to develop it, but I'm really proud of the work that I've done in this.

Tucker: It's also important to mention that the rehearsal process was so truncated.

Clark: Yes.

Tucker: That's why we had that feeling. Everybody had it. This is not my first Shakespeare, but everybody had that.

Clark: We only had four hours a day.

Tucker: We rehearsed 4 hours a day. How many?

Clark: Twice a week. Maybe three times.

Smith-Bernstein: It comes out to about 16 rehearsals.

Tucker: For *All's Well*, *Sweeny*, and *Lear*, we had 16 rehearsals each, and then audience, and they're like, "Oh, you'll be fine. We have time." We're like, "No, we don't."

Kantor: For Yvette, myself, and Rob, this is our first time at the Festival.

Tucker: It's one of the reasons why you had that fear. Melinda had a very strong idea. She had a very strong directorial vision for it, but there just wasn't a lot of time for us to find our way in. And especially because the play is very difficult and we had to make decisions to help read to today's audience. We presented some questions that had to be answered amongst the folks in the room, mainly you, Helena, and Bertram, I would say.

I feel it was difficult for me as Lafeu—I'm playing someone who's probably supposed to be a good 20, 25 years older. I mean, it's literally Lafeu, an old Lord. For me, it was like, okay, well, I need to find stuff to latch on to because otherwise I'd be floundering about who this person is. And I think for me, my character vision really hinged upon my relationship with Paroles and this idea of love and order and loving—very old school. I mean, even his clothes were old. He's like a combination of a dominatrix and. . . The new world is happening, and now they're at war, and I think he just wants to go back to the status quo. That helped me figure a lot out.

Clark: I'm the only one that doesn't have a relationship with Paroles. I only say his name and not in a good voice. I'm the only one that doesn't have any time on stage with them at all.

Kantor: I mean, I grew up with you, but yeah, we do not share a scene. My reputation precedes me.

Clark: He can't come to my house. I love that this production leaned into it unapologetically and allowed all of us to find our place in it. Melinda was brilliant in that and gentle and kind and very, very smart. I enjoyed the process with her so that the fear

of doing this subsided a lot during the rehearsal process for me personally. She was very good with that.

Audience member: How about your mothering of Helen? How about your mothering of the daughter?

Clark: Oh, I love her.

Audience member: That's one of my favorite—

Clark: Oh, Helen is my baby.

Audience member: Do you have a daughter?

Clark: No, I have a son in real life.

Audience member: You mother the daughter so well.

Clark: Oh, I love Helen. I think she's wonderful. And she's also the same age as Bertram. And that's why I can't understand. My son is so crazy. She's smart, and she's strong. She reminds the Countess of herself as a young woman who probably had to marry the Count about the same age she is right now. And so my thing with Bertram is that he's not rising to the station that he is given. It didn't matter how you felt at that time. You had to do what was required of you. And he's not doing that. And here this baby girl is like "I'm going to take care of it." And I was like, "Yes, you are." So, yes, I love her because she reminds me of me.

Audience member: That's so great. It's a great relationship.

Smith-Bernstein: *All's Well* is the only play in Shakespeare's canon that starts with a woman talking, to you.

Clark: And that was terrifying. "Oh, the first line is mine? Great."

Thompson: It's a real parent thing, too, because there was someone in my past who was great, and everyone knew it, and I let get away. And now I've been to her wedding. She's got two kids, but my parents still ask. They're like, "How is Julia doing? What's going on there?" I'm like "It's decades in the past." Everybody knew, and I couldn't see it.

Clark: Youth is wasted on the young.

Audience member: So, as the dramaturg, were there times that you had to correct or redirect things that people are doing to make them fit with what you saw in the text?

Smith-Bernstein: The way that I look at dramaturgy is that it's my job to hold the full context of any given play. This is kind of what Rob was talking about, too, that it's my job to understand the context of when the play's written, so 1605 and 1620, the context

of when the play is set by the playwright, the 1500s, when it's set by the director, in World War II, and when it's being presented, so 2022. I really look at my job as needing know about all of those, but on a sociopolitical level not just knowing the facts about these periods. It's about how people felt about certain things in those periods, as opposed to who was president in this year. A big part of my job is understanding all of those, and how they speak to each other across time, and how they can speak to our audience who is going to receive those. Melinda and I did *Merchant* together, too, and so we have a really great, strong working relationship. And I was involved from the very beginning of this process, so I don't really ever feel like we had to correct. I just have a lot of stuff to offer, and then it's sort of up to everyone to follow those ideas or not. And my feelings don't get hurt.

Tucker: You were invaluable. It wasn't just about the context but in this play, because of the context, the language is so difficult. There were times when we'd do a scene, and I'd realize no one's going to know who bay Curtal and his furniture are. For those of you who don't know, I've got an aside about bay Curtal. And I can hear, and I can even still feel the audience asking, "What?" And for things like that—you were just invaluable to provide context and say, "This is what Shakespeare was talking about. Let's try and find an equivalent. And if we can't, then while it probably would have been a joke in 1605, don't worry about making it a joke. No one's going to get it." That takes a lot of the pressure off. It still feels like a little—this would be funny 400 years ago.

Kantor: As a theater practitioner, I have always been keenly aware of how indispensable dramaturgs are. Isabel proved that point. One of my favorite moments in the show is because of something that she offered. We were talking about the cultural significance of the King demanding that Helen and Bertram take hands in that moment, and the weight of what that action could mean in the time period in which it was written. And once I was aware of that, I decided, it's absolutely crucial that I make him take my hand in the following scene the same way that he and Helen take hands. So, the next time we ran that scene, I offered him my hands, just as Helen did in that scene, and for Paroles, in that moment, it's a reassurance that you are, in fact, mine and everything's going to be okay. At least that's what's happening in

my mind, having just watched myself lose him in that way. I was able to mirror that exact image in the following scene, which was something that would not have existed had Isabelle not given that information.

Audience member: If it's not funny now, why not cut it?

Smith-Bernstein: We cut 90% of the jokes that weren't funny. All the ones that remained are in Rob's text. And the reason that that line is still in the play is because those jokes happen in a rhythm in the scene and if you take out his asides and if you only pick the one that still lands, that's very weird. All of a sudden, he makes an aside.

Tucker: I think it's just part of the question of the scene, why Lafeu is suddenly breaking the fourth wall and talking to the audience. When he doesn't do it throughout, it's hard.

Smith-Bernstein: And then perhaps the most difficult joke in the play, we just couldn't take out, which is the one about the tailor.

Kantor: So, for context, he asks me who my tailor is, and I say—

Tucker: Because he's trying to play it nice. My character is trying to be friendly and reach out by asking, "Who is your tailor?"

Kantor: I say, "Sir?", as in "Fuck you."

Tucker: I'm like, "Oh, I know him well. Sir."

Kantor: It's not very funny, but I get it.

Tucker: It's very difficult to cut. It's like the only time in that whole scene where I'm like, "Oh, I'll pursue the amity." And it seems it doesn't work out between the two. It's like, "Okay, we want to hate each other then. Okay, fine." But if you cut it, then it removes some of that messiness that we want to see in the characters—it means Lafeu doesn't need to be messy.

Smith-Bernstein: The actual textual joke though is that Paroles says, "Sir?" And then Lafeu thinks that is the name of the tailor. I think it's a little bit hard to make land.

Tucker: I always read it as he didn't think the name was "sir." He was playing off the response, meaning something like, "Oh you're being an ass. Sir. Yes. The name of that tailor. I know him well." That's what I assumed. But that's really hard to play with a Lafeu in 1939.

Kantor: I like Lafeu and Paroles's relationship. And it is one of far more significance than perhaps our production displayed in that, in the text at the end, Paroles becomes Lafeu's fool or pool boy, if you will. There was a lot of conversation about whether we wanted to keep that language. I thought, with the arc that we were telling, it felt a little superfluous. But it's not, insofar as it regards Shakespeare's worldview that to become a fool is actually an ascension, even though it's a demotion of status, it's an ascension to wisdom, power, accessible truth. And again, because I think everyone is gay, I think the relationship between Lafeu and Paroles is also indicative of an old guard queerness in the relationship and a new guard queerness, in that Lafeu feels maybe curiosity, or maybe instinctual disdain against someone who is free.

Tucker: It's probably significant somewhere here, but I feel like Lafeu is actually someone who's very traditional and has been forced into a traditional role, but inside is the biggest queen. He follows decorum, is married, and has a daughter who also gets kind of screwed over by the end of the play. She was supposed to marry Bertram, but we don't talk about it ever. So, for Lafeu decorum is more important than any personal feelings, much in the same vein as Countess. And I think the thing that really sets Lafeu off is that Paroles is not only loud, but they have no regard for social status. In that moment, it's that he suddenly pops off at me for asking a simple question. But I think that in the larger sense, it connects to his indignation that Paroles dares to be free. You see it a lot now, with people reacting by saying that others are "Too loud, too much, too much. Calm it down."

Kantor: This has been very rewarding, given my track this season because if you've seen *The Tempest*, I'm in two roles that are admittedly a little femo-center wearing a bright red lip, which is actually not my wheelhouse. I do a lot more sword swinging, literal sword swinging. I play a lot of men. So, it's been nice to be able to explore this side of myself through this track. I think that some people watched this and thought, "Oh, surely that's what you do all the time." And it's not. So, it's been really fun.

Smith-Bernstein: We're running out of time, but any other things for the cast?

Audience member: I've been coming to the festival for many, many years, and this is the first time I've seen this production. I

just wondered why do you think it's not a very popular play? It's not performed very often.

Tucker: I think it's hard to put on.

Smith-Bernstein: I think a lot of our sensibilities about what a good play is came from the Victorians, and the Victorians didn't love this play. It is really messy, and it doesn't have a clear structure like a play should for them. And then the Victorians started publishing these readers for school with scenes and monologues from various Shakespeare plays. And what we think of now as the good Shakespeare plays were all in those readers, and those readers came to the U.S., too. And so I think part of it is just we've inherited a lot of baggage from the Victorians. Also, it is a hard play.

Tucker: I think having the two authors conflict very strongly in it, makes it very difficult to be like, "Okay, why?" Because as an actor and as a director, you have to be like, "Okay, why does this happen here? Why does this person say this? Why am I doing this? What motivates that and where does that lead to and why is this important for them to know—the audience?" And I find that with this play, answering all of those questions can get you a little bit in the middle of the woods, and you can't see the forest for the trees. And some of it's like, "Ah! Does it matter?" Big questions.

Thompson: That "Does it matter?" is something that I've heard from people who have come and seen it. I was timing it out the other day and people were asking what's the inciting incident in this play? Where is the conflict? And it really takes off when Bertram rejects Helen at the wedding in public. It's the same at the beginning of *King Lear*, a scene that should happen in private happens in public, and so no one can back down, and so everything explodes out from there. In *King Lear*, it happens, Act 1, Scene 1. In *All's Well That Ends Well*, it happens one full hour into the runtime of the play. There's a lot of exposition and a lot of setting up these characters, and I love nothing in the world so much as good exposition. So, I'm fascinated. But a lot of people are like, "Get to the reason why I care for these people."

Tucker: Lots of long scenes. But I think that's one of the reasons why during the last scene where we're supposed to have our reconciliation, we're just like, "No. We don't need this." Even with other plays, *All's Well* is the longest play in the theater right

now, longer than *Lear*, longer than *Sweeny*. It's the longest play. I have a whole hour and ten minutes just sitting backstage. So as a result, we've got to cut some things here, cut some things there, and it's still long. I think it's long.

Thompson: I still love it.

Tucker: I love it. If the actors do the work and the director does the work in the room, it can present something. It's just that work in the room; it's a tall order to take on. This is a challenge. It's not impossible. I think also, to go back to the idea of what makes a good play; it's not a popular title, so people planning it, theaters planning it are like, "Okay now who will come to *All's Well*?"

Kantor: Because the American theatre, lest we forget, is beholden to capitalism. And it's name recognition. We don't know it. And because we don't know it, we're like, "Do I really want to go see it? I know *The Tempest*." And thank God this *Tempest* is not the *Tempest* that we all know. I love the *Tempest* that we're doing here. And yeah, I love it. It's so hard. It is hard. And I think there is so much bad Shakespeare that's not hard.

Smith-Bernstein: It was really hard to cut too, as part of that process, because there is so much exposition, and you have to set up exactly who all these characters are so that Acts 4 and 5 make sense.

Audience member: That was part of the marketing plan, of this show anyway. Come see it because you won't see it again. It is branded as the 'notch in the gun' play.

Tucker: I think it's smart marketing.

Audience member: I think shows like this will last. Thank you for doing it. Thank the Festival. Because that's the only reason we even get a chance to see it is because some festivals will keep doing it because it's awesome, no matter how much work it is to do. We don't care. We just watch stuff.

Thompson: I do think, working with Melinda on this, that she seems to have a love of those shows. I saw the *The Merchant of Venice* that she did. And this one too, is one of those plays that are hard, that have questions, that are messy. She seems to have a love of those and letting us sit with it in the room. Like we said, we didn't have a lot of time. There were times in the room where we'd ask a question, and she pointedly would not answer it,

which could be frustrating at the time. But she was living in that messiness and finding all of these people individually.

Tucker: It was fun. I mean, frustrating as hell. But most actors love nothing better than to have a challenge. Whatever this challenge is, this message that I'm trying to tell, will make me a better artist by doing it. Because I will have learned something, even if I fail spectacularly.