

# Working as a Director: An Interview with Aaron Posner

## Terri Bourus

Perhaps Aaron Posner was born to be a great stage director, or perhaps he achieved his considerable expertise in directing following his education in theatre at Northwestern University, or perhaps, after directing at least twenty-four plays over a span of fifteen years, his greatness was thrust upon him. Whatever the case, and however he got where he is today, Posner has proven himself worthy of the term “great”. His recent production of *Twelfth Night* (2003) at the Folger Theatre leaves little doubt that he is an accomplished director and that he understands the complexities of directing Shakespeare. In addition to *Twelfth Night*, he has directed several other Shakespeare plays, including two others at the Folger Theatre, *As You Like It* (2001) and *Othello* (2002). The inventory to date also includes three other productions of *As You Like It* (1989, 1990, 2000) plus *Hamlet* (1991), *The Tempest* (1993), *The Taming of the Shrew* (1995), *Henry V* (1996), *Much Ado About Nothing* (1997), and *A Midsummer’s Night Dream* (1998). The latter production, staged by the Arden Theatre Company, of which Posner is a co-founder as well as resident director, received the Barrymore Award for both Outstanding Director and Outstanding Production of the 1997 – 1998 season. Posner took some time to speak to me about his approach to directing, and, in particular, his experience directing Shakespeare and *Twelfth Night*.

**TB:** What first led you into the theatre? Did you intend to be a director, or was it a process of discovery?

**AP:** I started the way a lot of other people do, as an actor. I found out two things: first, that although I was OK as an actor, I was not good enough when I looked at myself in comparison to actors I really respected. Secondly, I discovered that acting, at least for me, was not as complete a challenge as I wanted. Acting did not give me the control of the process that I began to find I wanted, or the ability to pick the kind of material that I was burning to do. That was key for me. It was my love of stories, my love of literature, bringing these people to life, that led me into the theatre in the first place. And it was never about the performances as much as it was about the rehearsal – it was always the process of exploring, getting to know these characters, seeing the stories come to life – that excited me. I began to realize that directing would give me the challenge I wanted.

So by the time I was in college, while I was still acting, I began choosing the shows I would act in by who the director was and if that director was someone who would be really interesting to watch. That was what led me into directing. That, and the challenge of being handed a blueprint that is a text, whether those are the stories that I’ve adapted myself (I do a fair amount of adapting from literature where it is truly more of a blueprint, something that needs to be recreated and adapted into a text for performance), or whether it’s an already exiting play, or whether it’s Shakespeare. Shakespeare is halfway in-between an original adaptation and working on a pre-existing play. There is, of course, the existing play, but the process of reinterpreting and connecting a Shakespeare play with a contemporary audience is more akin to the process of

adapting literature than it is to directing a play. You're going to jump in there to reexamine and re-explore it. Without a strong interpretation, you do what's there in the text. But if you're interested in finding something new or personal in the work, you ask yourself how you can find new ways in. Then it does feel more like literary adaptation.

**TB:** That does seem to play into the choices you made with *Twelfth Night*.

**AP:** Yes. *Twelfth Night* is a good example of my trying to ask myself provocative questions and letting the play emerge from the answers. What was Shakespeare most interested in exploring in the play? Or, maybe a better way to say that is, what was Shakespeare most interested in exploring in this play that most resonates with me as a person, as an artist? Then I can look at it and try to find what interests me: I try to find ways to pull that out of the mix and then accentuate those things, bring that vision to clarity.

**TB:** Does a Shakespeare play complicate that process?

**AP:** You have a text. Here's the play. When directing at the Folger, you can assume that most of the audience (unless you're staging an obscure or underperformed play like *King John*) have read the play. So if you don't make strong choices, the danger is you end up with just another run-of-the-mill production that doesn't illuminate anything for anyone. The audience is familiar with the plays. So the question becomes not what is the story but, rather, what in the story can be made more interesting, can be re-explored, reexamined, reread,. That's what engages me.

**TB:** When you direct Shakespeare, do you look at what other directors have chosen to do?

**AP:** There are many different approaches. Some directors get excited by the visual aspects of the production, like the movement. I'm interested in movement, of course, but I'm more interested in finding the best way to tell the story. That comes out of the mission of the Arden Theatre, of which I am a co-founder; that is, we want to tell the greatest stories by the greatest storytellers of all time. With that in mind, I'll say that I want to be clever, but it's not about how clever I can be. I want to be visual, but it's not about how visual I can be. It's all about the story. Here's a story that I wouldn't tell if I didn't think that it was worth telling. In that case, what is the clearest, strongest, most compelling way that I can tell it, and what is necessary in order to tell it that way?

**TB:** How did you get involved with the Folger Theatre?

**AP:** I went to the Folger to see my friend Holly Twyford; while I was there, I met Janet Griffen, director of the theatre program. I invited her to Philadelphia to see Arden's production of *Much Ado About Nothing*, and she liked. She invited me to come down to the Folger Theatre to direct *As You Like It*.

**TB:** Considering the number of available editions of Shakespeare's plays, how do you decide on a text?

**AP:** I use a variety of editions with Shakespeare. I should say that I feel an obligation to use the Folger editions, but I should be honest here and tell you that I use a combination of sources; then I create my own text. Then I completely repunctuate it and edit it myself. I edit for clarity, for the ideas I am most interested in exploring. I certainly edit for understanding. I edit for length. I edit to recontextualize and juxtapose scenes in different ways. If there are jokes in the play that are only funny if you have a book in front of you that explains the joke, the references and the language, then I tend to cut those. But sometimes you can get the feel of a joke without actually understanding it. I use that. I will repunctuate when I need clarity, and if I have something that I'm interested in exploring, I'll go ahead and do that, too.

**TB:** Do you find yourself doing a lot of reading before you make those editing decisions or go into rehearsal?

**AP:** Part of the reality of being a freelance director is that I wish I had more time to do more research. The Folger is a tremendous resource, and they give me access to their reading room, so I have a variety of sources if I need them. But to me, the most important part of the process is not the research but the personal connection I can make with the play. I want to explore what the play has to say to me and what it stirs in me that I want to share. And what do I want to share with the audience? I have certain ideas that I want to explore. It's finding that filter that gives me an organizing principle around which I can proceed rather than looking at what Olivier did in '58 or reading literary theory or a critical essay, although there have been times when I read something that makes me think about a scene in a different way. But primarily, and though I'm interested in it, it's only valuable insofar as it helps me find my vision.

**TB:** How did you develop your focus for Twelfth Night?

**AP:** I agreed to do the play, but I wasn't able to articulate my feelings about twelfth Night until I had a conversation with Craig Wright, the person who wrote the music for the production. Then I found myself saying that I thought that everything in this play is about the courage to love. It made me think that «perhaps» the central question the play was asking was «How do you get the love you want? » People are afraid to ask for love; there's all this disguising going on. Look at how they ridicule Malvolio; they make him look like a fool in love. How to get the love you want became a filter through which I took everything. For instance, I wanted Sir Toby Belch to be another person in this search for whether he's going to allow himself to fall in love with Maria. So, again, it's finding that filter that gives me an organizing principle from which I can proceed.

**TB:** What gave you the idea to use a remote control in the scene where Malvolio reads the letter that he believes has come from Olivia's hand?

**AP:** That whole Malvolio thing did not come from any intellectual perspective. I just hate watching people watch people from behind things and pretend they can't hear them when other actors are talking out loud in «asides» that everyone can clearly hear. The actors agreed that they've never really seen it «work». It's long been a theatrical construct that audiences accept, but that's just because it's been done forever and we think, «Well, it's a play and that's just what you

do», but it isn't necessary. There are other ways to handle the scenes. That whole idea came from my turning to my cast and asking what else we could do. Someone asked, «What if we videotaped him»? The original idea was to videotape Malvolio and have the actors (and the audience) watch him on television. But then I thought that, although this sounded fun and interesting, in the interest of keeping with the rest of the production, why don't we do a live, more theatrical version? The cast embraced the concept of the videotape. They didn't embrace the idea of doing it live. But I trusted myself on that one because I thought that the live version would present more/further theatrical possibilities: things you can't do any other way.

**TB:** What gave you the idea to use the stage the way you did, that is, using the ramp with the stairs that created a kind of double-stage?

**AP:** That set, for all of its big glass wall and spiral staircase, etc., is nothing but an «inner above» and «inner below» with two downstage pillars – a straight Shakespearean set. I've done this before. I did a production of *Midsummer Night's Dream* at the Arden in Philadelphia with a set of two huge beds suspended twelve to fifteen feet in the air upstage, and there was a little bed swing that flew in, and there were two rolling beds downstage. At one point in the show, someone pointed out (I hadn't even realized it), «You know what you've got there? It's an 'inner above' and 'inner below' and two downstage pillars». That's exactly what I had. You have to allow yourself to be innovative in the concept of what has been built for you. I don't use the word «blueprint» casually. Shakespeare knew the kind of set he wrote for – and he wrote for that set. If I had a million dollars and I could have things move on and off seamlessly and have things appear and disappear, then I'd still be accomplishing the same set that he did, which was basically using versions of bare stages that allow it to be filled by the imagination. I really embrace that in my work as much as possible.

**TB:** How did you select the music? Is there a specific time period or is it evocative of any particular time?

**AP:** No. In reviews, some people called it the twenties; others called it the sixties – not that that was wrong, but I don't ask the questions «where» or «when». The production is on the stage, and it's at the Folger, and there is a visual look that basically ranged across the twentieth century. Viola and Sebastian felt very sixties; Malvolio might be the twenties; some of the dresses were twenties and thirties era. I consciously stayed away from anything that seemed smackingly contemporary. When I direct, I want to create a space that challenges the imagination and brings the audience into a place that's wholly its own, that isn't a direct reference to some other place. That is not to say that there isn't great value in productions that are locked in to a different time and place, with interesting references and resonances. The music was late twentieth-century; it was pretty contemporary. Some of the songs had been written by my friend Craig Wright, well before the production. He had two bands – the earlier one was The Tropicals, and another was called Kangaroo. Literally, I was beginning the process of connecting with the play and trying out what I wanted to say with it. I was listening to the Kangaroo CD, and there was a song – the one we actually ended up using for the curtain call – titled, «I Got a Thing for You». There is something in the energy and love language the way Shakespeare does. But there was something in this song that made me say, «That's what I want for this show! » I listened to everything I had

by Craig, and then I called him and asked him to send me everything he had. I found some other songs that just fit the play perfectly. Then I asked him if he would write more songs. He wrote «Marry Me Now» and «Down to Love», the opening song, also used several other times in the play. That was an adaptation of another song about the rain – and, in fact, our set featured the imagery of the rain pouring down the window. «Marry Me Now» was sort of my invention. I wanted something that would help Viola. You're supposed to believe that Olivia just falls in love with Viola. Shakespeare took some things for granted that a modern audience does not. I wanted something else to help her break through to Olivia, so I added two things to that scene. One was the yelling offstage that helps us to feel, hear, and see the persistence of Viola along with Olivia's reaction. I also wanted something unexpected and surprising. That's why I asked Craig to write a song that would reveal Orsino's voice, something straightforward and to the point: «I'm handsome and cool, so why don't you love me? » But the song also had to reveal Viola's complexity (which would clash with Orsino's voice), then show off the two different perspectives. That way, Olivia couldn't fall in love with Orsino, while she had to fall in love with Viola. I feel good about that choice because it accomplished both of those while also being hilarious.

**TB:** All of the actors are musically talented. Was this an intentional part of your casting choices?

**AP:** Yes. I knew that I was going to make this a musical production. After all, there's more music in *Twelfth Night* than any other Shakespeare play. I added songs – forced them in – and so it was a conscious choice to get people in the cast who had musical ability and to use as much music and as many of the actors' musical talents as possible. Sadly, I didn't even use all the talents they have – and I didn't fully anticipate the effect of the music on the audience. But as I sat in with the audience and watched one person after another sit down at the piano, there was a cumulative effect of «Wow! This is a world where everyone can play the piano and everyone can sing». I thought it was wonderful that all the actors played the piano and everyone played at least one other instrument. It made me wish that I could have included all of the songs. But the music worked better than I ever intended, and I feel lucky to have had such an accomplished cast.

**TB:** How important is collaboration to you? How much freedom do you give your actors to participate in the making of the play – in or outside of the script?

**AP:** So many of the best things in the show came directly from the actors. Parts of the play that people tell me are their favorites came directly from the actors. Orsino, for one, was determined to show the audience his growing love for Viola. He has only three scenes in which to do this, but he used every opportunity to show what he experiences as he comes to terms with his emotions. That's just one example. As noted earlier, the use of video in the Malvolio letter scene stemmed from cast brainstorming. I would open up a question to the cast, we would discuss it, and in that way we came up with new ideas that led to even more ideas – time and time again. It was perfect contract, and that's when collaboration is working at its very best.

**TB:** What advice might you give to a young person wanting to pursue a career in directing?

**AP:** Read. I wouldn't advise anyone to direct like me. I do teach directing and, when I do, I try to offer some basic skills in how to read a text, and I give a three-minute directing assignment. I ask questions that I adamantly refuse to answer because they need to find out what stories they want to tell. It's idiosyncratic. I ask «What do you care about? What is interesting to you? » The craft of directing is a series of skills; one needs many tools for the craft, just as a cabinetmaker has a set of tools. It's difficult to be a good cabinetmaker, and it's difficult to be a good director. Have good taste; develop good taste; know that your taste will appeal to some but not others. When the art comes in, that's when you can bring your heart, mind, and spirit to it. It's then that you're able to create something that's important to you.

**TB:** What directors have impressed you and/or inspired you?

**AP:** Frank Galati, my teacher in college, from whom I learned a tremendous amount. Ron Eyre, whom I wrote about extensively in the program notes; he changed my life. Mike Alfred, a wonderful British director. I saw only one of his productions, and I heard him speak, but he changed many of my thoughts about directing. John Hirsh from the Stratford Festival shared some perspectives with me that are now very much a part of my work. And Declan Donnellan is another director I respect tremendously.

**TB:** What's next for you?

**AP:** An adaptation, with three other people, of a book called *Brief Interviews of Hideous Men*, by David Foster Wallace. That will be followed by a production of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. Next Spring (2004), I'll be back at the Folger Theatre to direct a play called *Melissa Arctic*, an adaptation of *The Winter's Tale* by Craig Wright, who did the music for *Twelfth Night*. It will also be a play with music, and it will be a contemporary telling.

**TB:** Would you ever consider directing a film?

**AP:** I'm sure I would if anyone asked. But I don't think it is something I will devote my life to or too eagerly pursue. It's a different world that I don't know much about. Film is an intriguing idea, to reach that kind of audience; but no. Any powers of imagination that I have have always been bent towards how to make something that is uniquely designed to be onstage. But if Disney's listening and they want me to do an animated version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, I'm here for that.