



# DEFINING ROSALIND

Helen Hudson interviews Barbican resident **Angela Thirlwell** whose latest publishing venture is a 'biography' of one of Shakespeare's most memorable heroines – Rosalind from *As You Like It*



Angela Thirlwell

At the beginning of February, I had the opportunity of spending some time with Angela Thirlwell at her home in Defoe House. After 25 years of teaching biographical and literary extra-mural classes to mature students for Birkbeck, Angela was commissioned to write a biography. Pre-Raphaelite subjects ***William and Lucy: The Other Rossettis*** (published by Yale University Press in 2003) was followed by a prequel, ***Into the Frame*** (published by Chatto & Windus in 2010), about Lucy's Father, the painter Ford Madox Brown and the four women in his life.

Programme cover for Cheek by Jowl's all-male production of *As You Like It* with Adrian Lester as Rosalind.

The two books, very-well reviewed in both the popular and national press, had biographically analysed in detail at least 6 historical figures. This, of course, required lots of research and triple the work! When thinking about her next biography, Angela wanted to focus on just one person. Angela '...break(s) the mould of biography' said Frances Wilson in the *Sunday Telegraph* and this originality prompted a lightbulb moment. "I suddenly thought, why

don't I write about somebody who is imaginary? Someone who's either in a novel or a play and therefore will live forever."

Angela considered Ophelia, but had a re-think shortly afterwards because "who wants to spend two or three years of their life with a suicidal girl?" She then asked herself who, in fact (but also in fiction), would be really "life-enhancing" to live with for a while? "And I can't remember exactly how the idea came to me but I know I was travelling. I was either in a car or a train or a tube or a bus, and this idea came to me about Rosalind (from Shakespeare's *As You Like It*). This girl who'd got into boys' clothes to tell the truth about love to her lover and to educate him...and in the process, of course, learnt a lot about herself."

Angela had a couple of deadlines to keep in mind for "Rosalind". Eager to publish quickly because her first grandchild was due, and Oberon (her magically named publisher) wanted to time the release for the 400th year anniversary of Shakespeare's death in April 2016. So, unlike the more leisurely years which she'd spent researching in UK and overseas libraries for her previous two books, ***Rosalind: A Biography of Shakespeare's Immortal Heroine*** had a merciless 14 month schedule. This would be a different kind project, though: lots of productions to enjoy along the way, lots of character



analyses from other authors and performers to read, and many interviews with famous actresses... and actors too!

Even in our time, we've had men play Rosalind. In 1991 Adrian Lester won awards for his portrayal of Rosalind in Cheek by Jowl's all-male production which, after premiering in London, toured England and later all over Europe. Adrian is just one Angela's many interviewees.

"The other male actor I interviewed was somebody who played the part in about 1967 at The Old Vic...Ronald Pickup came here and had tea and we chatted about his memories of playing Rosalind. I asked him if he'd like to read one of his favourite speeches and he read Rosalind's Epilogue really, very beautifully and had some very interesting insights."

Angela also interviewed Dame Janet Suzman who played Rosalind in Stratford in the late 1960s, Juliet Stevenson who played it here in the Barbican in the middle of the 1980s, and Juliet Rylance who played at the Old Vic (alongside her new husband as Orlando) in 2010.

Among recent productions, Angela interviewed Michelle Terry, who played Rosalind at The Globe last summer, and Sally Scott, who performed at The Southwark Playhouse in 2014.

Taking all the actors into consideration, Angela's interviews include all age groups from younger performers in their 20s to the most experienced in their 70s.

"I've interviewed one young director, as well... Blanche McIntyre... so it's been fascinating."

Historical research played a big part in Angela's material as well: when the play was first put on, its performance history, what happened to it after the playhouses were closed and when, eventually it came back into the repertoire.

Angela's biography is built with the play in mind:

"I structured it like a play, in a way, so



it has acts and scenes, and an interval. In the interval is Elizabeth I and how the young and dazzling Rosalind might perhaps have been Shakespeare's homage to the aging and autocratic queen."

The theatre Programme, which Angela has included at the end of the book, is as innovative and experimental as the biography itself; this is Rosalind's first biography.

Rosalind's play has a very strong local connection.

"As *You Like It* is part of Shakespeare's First Folio, published after his death by two friends. It came out from a print shop on the corner of Beech Street."

**Did you leave anything out of the final book that you thought you might have included when you began?**

"That's a very interesting question. I did leave out quite a lot of the more academic stuff about the sources for Rosalind and of this girl who changes her identity and gets into boys' clothes. There is quite a lot in classical mythology and in other texts prior to *As You Like It*. I pared that down a lot. Then I have a chapter about Rosalind's Afterlife. It's about her "daughters" in literature and in life today. I pared that down a lot as well because some people who read the book in script didn't understand the point of that chapter, though other readers really loved it!"

This has been an empowering experience for Angela.

"It was exhilarating and rather thrilling because I was doing something I was going back to... my real love which is literature, rather than the art history of my previous biographies. Of course I'm now entering into the whirlpool of Shakespearean scholars and that's terribly frightening, but on the other hand I feel I'm doing something that's completely different from their work and quite playful."

**Can you give us an insight into Rosalind that we might not have if we hadn't studied the text at school?**

"The greatest insight is that she's an independent-minded woman who takes control of events; that, in some ways, she's rather like Elizabeth I who was on

the throne at the time. Elizabeth was a really powerful woman with "the heart and stomach of a king" who looked like a woman on the outside. Rosalind, on the other hand, looks like a boy on the outside because she gets into the clothes of Ganymede - but she has the beating heart of a girl.

I think it's about being proactive, taking control of your life, being independent, the modern taste for androgyny and that she partakes of both sexes. She tells us about the experience of love from both ends of the sexual spectrum."

**How radical would that have been at the time?**

"Well, it was, of course, absolutely conventional that boy actors played the female roles. They were not into boys' clothes as quickly as possible because they would feel most comfortable in boy's clothes, but it's radical in as much as Shakespeare is giving this particular woman, Rosalind, about a quarter of all the lines in the play. More lines than any other of his heroines, even more than Cleopatra. She is the absolute lodestar and the focus of the play and, when she's on stage, you can't look anywhere else."

**Do you think Shakespeare knew someone like Rosalind?**

"I have a theory that the character of Rosalind may have been inspired by his eldest daughter, Susanna, who was seventeen when Shakespeare wrote the play. Susanna's epitaph at Holy Trinity Church at Stratford-upon-Avon makes me think she may have had this same wit and wisdom he gives to Rosalind."

**Who would you like to see play Rosalind?**

"That's very difficult because there are many actresses in the past I would love to have seen play the part and there are actresses who have never played the part, such as Judi Dench. I would love to have seen her play the part."

"Harriet Walter never played the part. And Ellen Terry regretted, always, that she never played Rosalind, but, instead of that, she wrote some lectures which she took all over the world, and

in which she performed more or less the whole play of *As You Like It* with herself as Rosalind!"

We discuss the modern actresses who would make a good Rosalind, and Angela suggests modern and rather androgynous actors like "Tilda Swinton or the Irish actress, Saoirse Ronan, who played Eilis Lacey in the recent film of Colm Toibin' novel *Brooklyn* would be ideal casting."

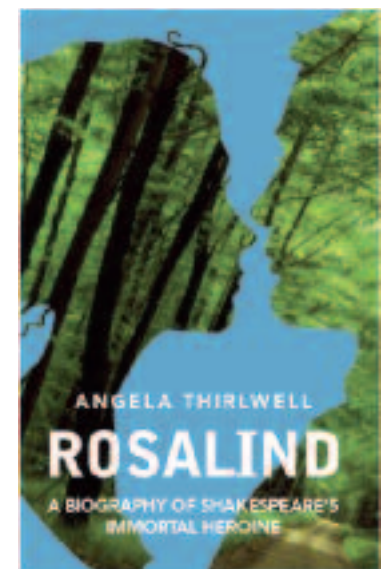
"And on the male spectrum, somebody like Ben Whishaw, could play the part."

Rosalind's independence and androgyny could come straight off the catwalk, I think.

"That's why Rosalind is right in fashion now. It's why her story is our story and why she is for all time and why she is for men and for women.

Angela will be doing a Platform Talk at The National Theatre at 5:30pm on the 16th May alongside the great Shakespearean actor, Michael Pennington, who's written a book on his tour of King Lear.

She is also at the Shakespeare Saturday event being held at the Chipping Camden Literary Festival on the 7th May near Stratford-upon-Avon.



On the doorstep, the Barbican Library also has an event planned for "Rosalind" on the 8th June 12:30 to 1:30pm.

Angela's website at <http://angelathirlwell.co.uk/> has up to date event details and more information and news and you can also follow @angelathirlwell.

We look forward to this year of both intense Shakespeare scrutiny and fun, and wish Angela the greatest success!

Provisional cover art for Angela Thirlwell's forthcoming 'biography' of Rosalind