

The Patterns of Love

by Tom Rowan

Synopsis

Geoff Turner drops by his alma mater, Manhattan University, to visit his favorite former acting teacher, Meg Marshall—and offer her a summer job. He’s been hired to direct *As You Like It* for a new theatre company in Maine, and because the two leading actors have little to no experience with Shakespeare, he needs a good voice and text coach. Meg tells him she’s too busy to accept and sends him on his way—right before being informed by a friend on the faculty that her application for tenure at the University is going to be denied. Suddenly in need of a job, she dashes out of the room to try to catch Geoff.

When she gets to Maine, Meg is introduced to the two novice Shakespeareans hired to play Rosalind and Orlando—both cast in the hopes that their name recognition will sell tickets. Kendra Roberts is a popular TV comedienne, currently starring in a sitcom about the making of a reality show, and Rufus Paisley is a handsome singer (and surfer) from the British boy band Ear Candy. Unimpressed by their qualifications, Meg is thrown for a loop by a key piece of information Geoffrey had neglected to mention: Rufus will be playing the role of Rosalind, with Kendra as Orlando! Indeed, as a way of foregrounding the genderbending aspect of the Shakespeare play’s plot (Rosalind spends most of it disguised as a boy), Geoff has cast male actors in all four of the female roles, and women as their potential husbands. When he takes Meg out to dinner that evening, she chastises him for giving one of Shakespeare’s most coveted women’s roles to a young man. But despite the resulting argument, a spark between the two of them, first ignited during his student days, seems to be reviving.

Meg soon meets the rest of the cast. Loretta Carlisle, a tough, wisecracking former chorus girl, has been incongruously cast as the court jester Touchstone. Leon Jones, a flamboyant drag performer who goes by the stage name Mazurka, will be playing Audrey, the bawdy country wench, and also designing the costumes. Courtney and Nick, a couple of fresh-faced youngsters from the local high school, pursue their own awkward flirtation while playing the lovesick shepherd Silvius and his disdainful beloved, Phebe, while shy college student Shawn Weaver is set to play the demanding role of Rosalind’s loving cousin Celia. Meg is delighted to find one old friend in the cast: the trained Shakespearean actress Erin Hunt, cast as Orlando’s villainous brother Oliver—but taken by surprise when Erin announces new pronouns (they/them) and reveals having recently come out as non-binary.

Two other actors are more traditionally cast. Edgar O’Malley, a retired New York character man who now runs a seafood restaurant in town, will be playing several supporting parts, including the old shepherd Corin and Rosalind’s exiled father, the Duke. And the last cast member to arrive proves a big surprise to everyone: for the role of the melancholy philosopher Jaques, Geoff has obtained the services of Sir Anthony Barstow-Parker, one of the world’s most respected Shakespearean actors—also known for his appearances in blockbuster sci-fi and superhero films.

As rehearsals get underway, the developing relationships among the various company members begin to reflect the plotlines of the Shakespeare play, providing new twists on its themes. Touchstone and Corin debate the relative virtues of court and country life... and Loretta, smitten with Edgar, endeavors to convince him to give New York City another try. Courtney does her best to help football-player Nick adjust to the idea of shaving his legs and wearing a wig. Shawn finds himself more and more enamored of the very appealing Rufus—though too shy to admit it. And even as Geoff’s radical ideas about staging Shakespeare continue to clash with Meg’s more traditional ones, they find themselves spending more and more time together.

Meg’s efforts to coach Rufus in the complex role of Rosalind threaten to backfire. With cherished memories of having played the part herself at a major Shakespeare festival, she remembers every word of it; when she demonstrates some of the lines for Rufus, and rather brilliantly, his confidence in his own ability to master the role is shaken. By contrast, Kendra proves to have a very healthy ego, clashing with Geoff and Meg as she continuously tries to insert extraneous comic business into Orlando’s scenes and modernize the verse. In rehearsal, Erin challenges some of Shakespeare’s outdated sexual politics, irritating Geoff. As in the play itself, flirtatious encounters and surprising alliances add comedic zest to the rehearsal process, and when an unexpected crisis threatens to derail opening night, some last-minute revelations and transformations lead to a satisfyingly festive—and distinctly Shakespearean—denouement.