Urban Dystopias: Reapproaching Christine Edzard’s *As You Like It*

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When Christine Edzard released her film version of *As You Like It* in October 1992, the pressure to be successful at the box office was not an overriding important concern. The director’s independent working conditions, her tight budget (£800,000), limited filming period (only five weeks) and art-house distribution suggested that her film would be artisanal in nature.1 Refusing to sit easily alongside other major Shakespearean cinematic productions, Edzard’s *As You Like It*, in fact, reveals greater affinities with the avant-garde genre, a ‘personal mode … made by individuals or very small groups of collaborators’ and unmarked by ‘commercial imperatives, corporate hierarchies and a high degree of specialization and division of labour’.2 Viewed in such terms, *As You Like It* emerges as experimental and challenging, a work by a relatively emancipated filmmaker which dispenses with convention and tradition to create a unique Shakespearean utterance. Concentrating on its distinctive relocations, its utopian aspirations and its doubling arrangements, and using insights gained from a specially commissioned interview with the director herself, this essay argues that the film can only be fully appreciated when assessed in its own avant-garde terms as a postmodern experiment attendant upon, and sensitive to, a *fin-de-siècle* moment.

**Determining Locations**

Edzard’s best known work prior to *As You Like It* was a BBC adaptation of Charles Dickens’ *Little Dorrit* (1987). The similarities between this six-hour epic and Edzard’s film are telling. Both highlight the city as a metaphor; both consider the complexities of viewing circumstances from double perspectives; and both centre upon observing societies at
work. In approaching Shakespeare’s play, Edzard drew directly on her experience of adapting Dickens’ novel. As she explained in interview:

in the case of Dickens, the truth of the character is in the nineteenth century, and the truth does not materialize until you start putting in all the detail. The issue with As You Like It is completely different. First of all, I don’t believe that you can reach the sixteenth century in that sort of way. It’s too remote: it would become an archaeological dig. The nineteenth century has a closeness to us in reproduction terms. The intention of the play is that it is a play and that it is meant to be rethought every time you do it. A film has to be as tightly rooted to its origins as is feasible, and it has to carry the message that the past has changed to us.³

Because Edzard’s As You Like It relocates the play to a contemporary, urban environment of the 1990s, it might be suggested, then, that the director’s agenda is to update seemingly remote Shakespearean preoccupations. Thus the court becomes a corporate business emporium and the forest a wasteland. This urban relocation is given a further twist in that both imagined worlds are envisaged as urban dystopias: the corporate world, though architecturally grand, is corrupt and shallow, while the wasteland is shabby, containing no permanent buildings. Such is the visual logic of Edzard’s film, moreover, that a frisson of meaning is created between the 1590s and the 1990s: the contemporary London of modernity is connected to its early modern predecessor through a transcendent vision of national blight. As the historian Asa Briggs notes, ‘the difference between relative and absolute poverty continues to shape all discussions on social stratification’. Today’s ‘buskers, beggars, sleepers-out and squatters generate conflicting reactions that would have been familiar at the end of the pre-industrial sixteenth century⁴. By directing attention to economic parallels which recur at salient historical junctures, Edzard establishes a recognizable world which is not too distant from a modern audience’s experience.

Elaborating this link is the use of contemporary dress: As You Like it is the first modern dress Shakespeare film of recent times. Costume supplies the characters with a background, an identity and a past. For example, the film follows the banishment of Rosalind (Emma Croft) with a contrived scene, which places her and Celia (Celia Bannerman) in a large closet. Celia hectically rummages through her clothes while arguing that she and Rosalind should seek Duke Senior in the Forest.