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Transgender Characters in Shakespeare

As You Like It, dir. Desdemona Chiang, California Shakespeare, 2017

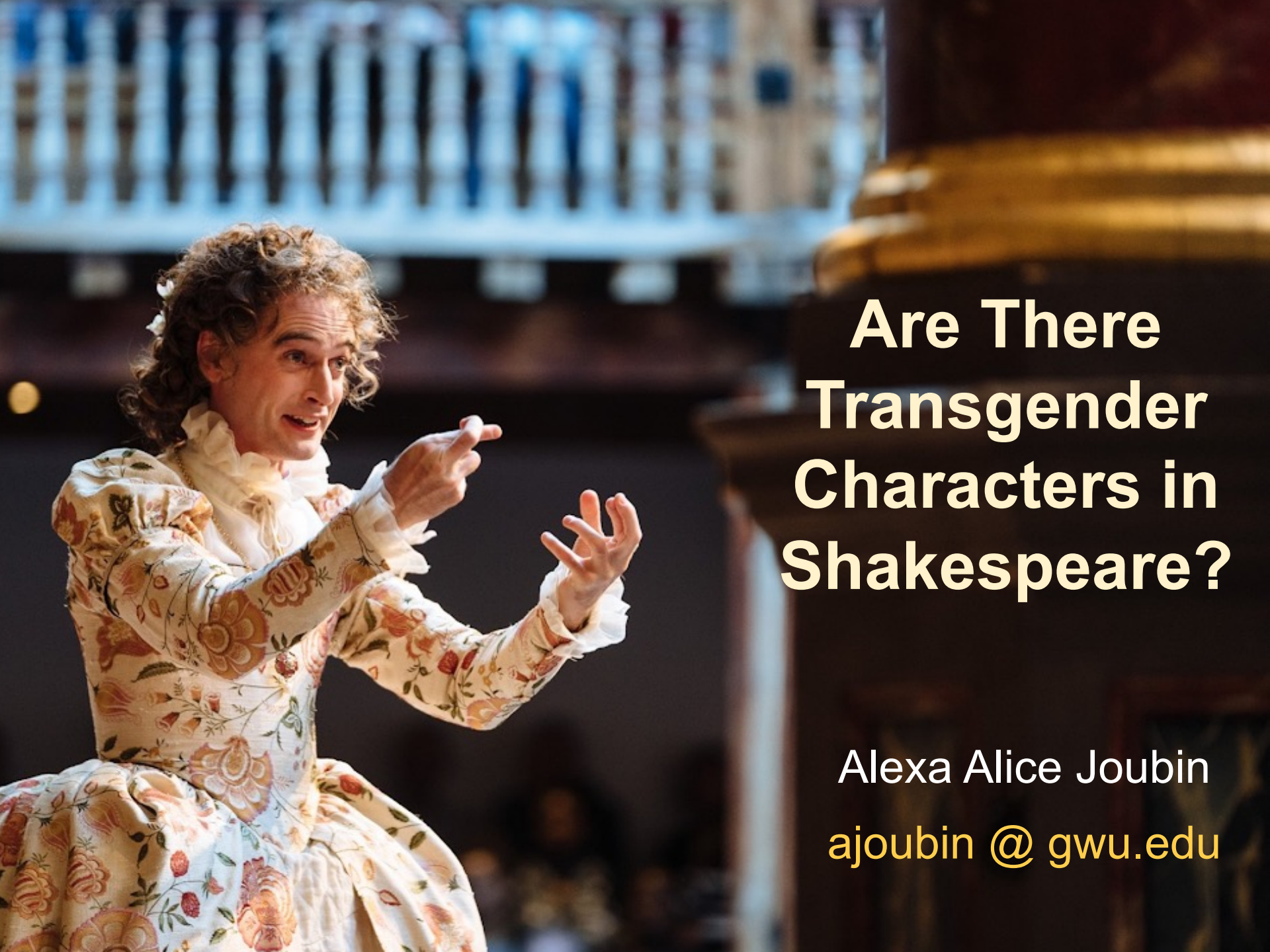
Thematizes queer homelessness & features trans actors



Hamlet, dir. Daniel Winder, Iris Theatre, Covent Garden, London, 2019

Non-binary actor Jenet Le Lacheur
as Hamlet (pictured)





Are There Transgender Characters in Shakespeare?

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Gender in *Twelfth Night*

- Cesario as a trans man is the main character
- Transing gender to make life worth living
- Other characters' **speech acts** affirm / undermine Cesario's personhood
- **Examples** of speech act: naming, apologies, consents, invitations, sentencing, etc.

“Crossdressing”?

- “Crossdressing” is a misnomer -- sartorial camouflage that compartmentalizes genders
- Traditional criticism overlooks transgender cues; assumes stable binaries
- Regards **crossdressing** as a convenient and temporary dramatic device
- Suggests that trans bodies are inauthentic

Gender in *Twelfth Night*

- ORSINO: But died thy sister of her love, my boy?
- CESARIO: I am **all the daughters** of my father's house,
And **all the brothers** too:
and yet I know not.

Gender in *Twelfth Night*

- ORSINO: **Cesario**, come;

For so you shall be, while you are a **man**;

But when in other habits you are seen,
Orsino's mistress and his fancy's queen.

Gender in *Twelfth Night*

- Cesario never changes into “maid’s garments”
- Orsino continues to call him boy and Cesario
- Double **weddings** announced but not staged (Cesario + Orsino; Sebastian + Olivia)
- Cesario does not have any lines after Orsino’s declaration of love
- Journey to an elsewhere without returning

Cisgender Sexism

- Literal-mindedness seeks false clarity
- Suspension of disbelief of gender crossings
- **Solution:** Suspend cisgender bias !

Tacit / Overt Transness

- Body is temporally bound
- Somatic practices index transness only in a particular moment in time
- Transness can become overt or tacit over time
- Gender = What one does or says in a given space at a given point in time

Tacit / Overt Transness

- Embodiment shows that text alone does not encompass everything words connote
- Words are both a spatial and temporal concept
- Gender = interpersonal relationships that may shift over time

Conclusion

- Falstaff as the Witch of Brainford to escape Ford's house in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*
- Imogen as the boy Fidele in *Cymbeline*
- Rosalind / Ganymede, Celia, Phoebe, Audrey in *As You Like It*

Conclusion

- Shakespearean theatre is trans theatre
- But current legislation criminalizes transgender people and performance
- Anti-trans attitudes endanger classical (and Shakespearean) theatre
- High-school drama programs are withering
- Theatre festivals are shrinking



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Yes!

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