

GOING JAPANESE

KENNETH BRANAGH FINDS FAR EASTERN INSPIRATION FOR HIS NEW, ALL-STAR FILM VERSION OF *AS YOU LIKE IT*

The last time he visited Shakespeare, director Kenneth Branagh re-imagined *Love's Labour's Lost* as an all-singing, all-dancing 1930s musical comedy. Now, five years later he's back at the Bard with a 19th Century, Japan-set version of *As You Like It*.

The traditional tale of Rosalind and Orlando's romantic courtship, of Touchstone the clown and "melancholy" Jaques has moved, Forest of Arden and all, to the bustling port and leafy environs of old Kyoto.

Branagh explained: "I visited Kyoto for the first time 15 years ago and felt the sublime landscape and fascinating culture could be an inspired setting for this quintessential romantic. With sumo, martial arts and cherry blossom, we hope that the drama and the

and actually very unEnglish. The idea was to try and promote to the audience this sense they might actually want to be there and respond to the meditative qualities of it all."

Joining Branagh, firmly behind the camera this time, is a typically eclectic Anglo-American cast mixing established talent (Kevin Kline, Janet McTeer, Adrian Lester, Brian Blessed, Alfred Molina) with several rising stars (Bryce Dallas Howard, David Oyelowo, Romola Garai).

As You Like It marks Branagh's fifth Shakespeare film adaptation following *Henry V*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Hamlet* and, of course, *Love's Labour's Lost* but is the first in which he hasn't appeared himself. He's flanked by a number of his regular collaborators including cinematographer Roger Lanser, production designer Tim

be a very good context for this play. The late 19th Century period in Japan was one in which they were going through the process of moving from an agricultural to an industrial nation and so they let Westerners in and also sent thousands of their own people to the outside world.

"Our world in the film is meant to revolve around one of those treaty ports which existed in the Meiji period. These were basically large areas around the ports where Europeans and other Westerners, including non-slave Africans, were allowed in. In many cases, the people went native, would wear the clothes and even practice martial arts."

This clash of cultures afforded Branagh a chance to be much more inventive with his casting, notably with some key characters like the three de Boys boys, Orlando, Oliver and Jaques played by British actors, Oyelowo, Lester and Jothan Annan. Of the cast generally, he commented: "They are all very easy on the ear. This is very naturalistic sounding; there's lot of beautiful prose, which feels particularly real and conversational."

Apart from one short, this is Branagh's first feature directing assignment for more than five years, since which he has mainly concentrated on award-winning leading roles in film and TV like *Shackleton*, *Harry Potter & The Chamber Of Secrets*, *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, *Conspiracy* and *Warm Springs*.


Was there pressure on him also to appear in *As You Like It*? "A bit, but I made it pretty clear from the word 'go' that with this budget and this schedule, I'd be much happier just directing. And I've so enjoyed

it that way. There's been more time to concentrate.

"With the other pictures, there'd been enough time and enough long-term planning to feel as though you could work on your own performance as well as everything else. But there was only room to do one or the other here – and I was very happy just to direct.

"Do I miss not playing a role in this film? I can honestly say, not one iota. Actually quite the opposite. I find it quite a relief not to and am actually staggered at what the cast achieve especially when you look at someone like Kevin Kline doing 'All the world's a stage...' in one continuous shot. Take Fred Molina as Touchstone – a part I've played. He's a thousand times better than I'd be and more interesting.

"So I don't really want to direct when I'm acting or vice-versa. Will I actually do both again? I suppose so, but who knows?" sighed Branagh, as he was summoned back to the set. ■ **QUENTIN FALK**

 *As You Like It* was originated on 35mm Fujicolor Super F-500T 8572 and Super F-250T 8552

joy can combine to produce a wonderfully enjoyable film."

With most of the filming taking place at Shepperton studios, the nearest they actually got to the real Japan were a few days of location shooting in the magnificent West Sussex gardens of Wakehurst Place renowned for the variety of trees - including Japanese maples - and shrubs grown for their tinted foliage and berry.

"It was," Branagh noted, "a terrific place where we were able to shoot verdant stuff - plants, flowers and particularly moss - which was very unusu-

Harvey, editor Neil Farrell and composer (also actor) Patrick Doyle.

In between set-ups, he expanded on the Japanese "inspiration": "There are two central themes in the play – one is romantic love, the other is getting away from the rat race. My first trip to Japan was in 1990 and I was immediately struck by the clash between what's peaceful and natural – reflected in gardens – and the neon-lit world of most Japanese cities.

"The possibility of keeping that very sharp tension and the way it sits in the Japanese world felt like it would



Photo main: Kenneth Branagh directing *As You Like It*; above: on the set



‘ALL THE WORLD’S A STAGE,
AND ALL THE MEN AND WOMEN
MERELY PLAYERS; THEY HAVE
THEIR EXITS AND THEIR ENTRANCES;
AND ONE MAN IN HIS TIME PLAYS
MANY PARTS, HIS ACTS BEING SEVEN AGES’



THE DP VIEW

ROGER LANSER

The hall in the Japanese palace was the most challenging to light. Ken had asked to be able to shoot multiple 360 degree steadicam shots both for day and night scenes. Production designer Tim Harvey had over 35 Japanese lanterns hanging in the set as well as cloth draped as ceiling pieces. This made it hard to light from above so we had to rely on soft light from the lanterns and hidden maps from the floor.

The palace was also used for a Kabuki Theatre performance as well as a Sumo wrestling ring. The wrestling was lit from from a lighting rig with six rock 'n' roll par lamps; the practicals and ceiling cloths had to be removed and the lighting rig lowered into place. It gave me an exposure of T5.6 and this heavy top light was fills with 5ks and Kinos hidden around the ring.

The Kabuki performance was lit with soft lights from the floor and Kinos hidden behind cast members and columns. We were always having to light with steadicam in mind.

Ken wanted a "Ring event" look so the people watching the match dropped off into darkness. This is where the Fuji stock is so excellent at maintaining velvety blacks while giving you a great expose latitude. ■