

GOOD TO KNOW!

WSC AVANT BARD
theatre on the edge

A teaching and discussion resource from WSC Avant Bard theatre (wscavantbard.org)

February 21 to March 23
at Theatre on the Run, Arlington, VA

Virginia Woolf's classic

ORLANDO

Adapted for the stage by Sarah Ruhl

Orlando: A Biography, Virginia Woolf's gender-bending classic novel, was way ahead of its time when it first came out in 1928. But today's gender revolution means that Orlando's time is now! Adapted for the stage by MacArthur "genius" playwright Sarah Ruhl, *Orlando* invites you to embark on an amorous adventure—a time-traveling journey with a winsome young man who wakes up one morning in the throes of a surprising transformation.

DRAMATIC DISCOUNTS FOR GROUPS

Just \$15 per ticket for groups of 5 to 9,
\$10 each for groups of 10 or more.

Call (703) 418-4808 weekdays 11 a.m. to
3 p.m. or email wsc.tix@gmail.com with
"group sales" in the subject line.

Ask about having a member of the
Orlando Creative Team talk with
your group before or after you see
the show!

*"I wish you
could live
in my brain
for a week.
It's washed
with the most
violent waves
of emotion."
—VIRGINIA WOOLF*



4 Cool Things to Know About *Orlando*

1. *Orlando* was written as a love letter

Virginia Woolf wrote *Orlando* (1928) to her friend and lover Vita Sackville-West and modeled the character of Orlando after her. Vita was an aristocrat, heiress, and author, a poet, gardener, and cross-dresser. After reading the book, Vita wrote to Virginia, "[Y]ou have invented a new form of Narcissism—I confess—I am in love with Orlando."

The novel is "the longest and most charming love letter in literature," said Vita's son Nigel Nicolson in his book about his parents' unconventional relationship, *Portrait of a Marriage*. "[Virginia Woolf] explores Vita, weaves her in and out of the centuries, tosses her from one sex to the other, plays with her, dresses her in furs, lace and emeralds, teases her, flirts with her, drops a veil of mist around her."

2. *Orlando* was written in a literary form invented by Woolf

Woolf said that the book began as a joke but turned into something more serious. *Orlando* plays with time, history, sexuality, and gender. It also plays with conventional biography and the question of whether it is ever possible to really know a person's identity.

Orlando is a sublime example of Woolf's *Granite and Rainbows* ideas about biography, in which fact and fantasy—solidity and intangibility—are combined to create a narrative. Upon conceiving *Orlando* in October 1927, Woolf wrote in her diary, "And instantly the usual exciting devices enter my mind: a biography beginning in the year 1500 and continuing to the present day, called Orlando: Vita; only with a change about from one sex to the other."

3. *Orlando* is peopled with real-life characters

And were they ever characters! Many are based on people from Vita's life, as well as her family history. *Orlando* is of course Vita—as well as representations of many of Vita's male ancestors, who were reflected in both *Orlando*'s male and female personas.

Queen Elizabeth is the Tudor queen, who had a relationship with the Sackvilles. In the play she mentions she has the heart of a man—this is taken from Elizabeth's speech to the land forces at Tilbury in 1588 as they were waiting for a siege by the Spanish Armada.

Orlando's lover, the Princess Sasha, is based on Vita's lover Violet Trefusis. The two met when they were 10 and 12 years old, started a relationship when they were 14 and 16, and saw each other off and on for 10 years, much to the chagrin of Violet's mother.

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The Archduchess/Archduke is based on Henry Lascelles, 6th Earl of Harewood, who unsuccessfully proposed to Vita in 1912. Lascelles followed Vita as far as Italy, but she avoided conversation with him by using tactics like playing lawn tennis.

4. *Orlando* was written in response to gender inequality

The home *Orlando* keeps returning to is an allusion to Knole House, Vita's ancestral home. It was one of the most famous private houses in England, dating back to the 13th century. Queen Elizabeth I gave it to the Sackville family in 1566.

Knole is huge—a "calendar house" with 365 rooms, 52 staircases, 12 entrances, and seven courtyards. When Vita's father died, the estate was inherited by her male cousin. As a woman Vita was not allowed to inherit the house, which she felt was rightly hers, because of English inheritance law. Virginia Woolf began writing *Orlando* as a way to compensate Vita for what she had lost: she gifted Knole House to Vita for eternity by giving it to *Orlando*.

Two years ago the current owner of Knole House said in *The Telegraph* that he is considering giving the house to one of his daughters. If he follows through, she would be the first Sackville woman ever to own the house in its 500-year history.

Great Websites for More About Virginia, Vita, and *Orlando*

The Virginia Woolf Blog: <http://virginiaWoolfblog.com>

The BBC's interactive timeline of British history:
http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/interactive/timelines/british/index_embed.shtml

Knole House's official trust: <http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/knole/>

Online text of Woolf's *Granite and Rainbows* essays:
<https://archive.org/details/graniterainbowes00wool>

"How Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* Subverted Censorship and Revolutionized the Politics of Lesbian Love in 1928": <http://www.brainpickings.org/index.php/2013/10/11/virginia-woolf-orlando-lesbian-readings/>

"Throw Over Your Man": Virginia Woolf's 1927 love letter to Vita Sackville-West:
<http://www.brainpickings.org/index.php/2012/01/20/virginia-woolf-vita-sackville-west-love-letter/>
Vita Sackville-West's love letter to Virginia Woolf:
<http://www.brainpickings.org/index.php/2012/07/10/vita-sackville-west-love-letter-virginia-woolf/>

Written by Jenn Book Haselswerdt, dramaturg for WSC Avant Bard's production of *Orlando*