

ON LOCATION

A GIRL WITH GOALS

By Kate Tremills



Take Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* and kick soccer into the mix and you've got *She's the Man*, the latest in the growing girl-empowerment genre.



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No one plays with gender and power quite like Shakespeare. From *Taming of the Shrew* to *As You Like It*, in comedy and in drama, old Will knew how to push the boundaries of accepted roles. Perhaps this was inevitable in a time when men played women on the stage. But Shakespeare reached beyond a simple change of appearance; his plays explored the fundamental tension between the sexes, in love and in wit.

Remaking classic plays and novels is ever-popular in Hollywood. The stories are classic for a reason, offering up characters and situations that are timeless. Even better, after a few hundred years on the shelf, those stories are public domain. No money need ever change hands, at least with the original author.

Presenting 400-year-old material to an audience without sending them into high school flashbacks is, however, a hefty challenge. One that Lauren Shuler Donner, Jack Leslie, Andy Fickman and Amanda Bynes gladly took on, however, in morphing *Twelfth Night* into the new DreamWorks feature *She's the Man*.

Leslie, writer and executive producer on the project, believed the story was ripe for adaptation. “Shakespeare’s ideas and characters and themes transcend time,” he explains. “I think [Kenneth Branagh’s] movies have shown it doesn’t have to be people running around in tights. [Baz Luhrmann’s] *Romeo and Juliet* worked really well in modern-day Miami, and that was literal except for the setting. Modern teenagers relate to the themes and the ideas and the emotions, just like people did then.”

Shot in Vancouver, B.C., *She's the Man* takes the original, cross-dressing comedy and places it in the modern context of a boys' prep school. When the soccer team is cut from Viola's (Amanda Bynes) school, she disguises herself as her twin brother and takes his place at Illyria Prep for two weeks. A love triangle emerges when Viola falls for her roommate, Duke (Channing Tatum), then finds herself the object of affection of Olivia (Laura Ramsey), the girl Duke adores.

Working from the fantastical, gender-switching premise of the original, the filmmakers wanted to find an approach that would ring true to today's audience. They pushed beyond Shakespeare's original love story to a gritty, girl-empowerment

premise. What field was ripe for present-day gender battles? Their answer was simple yet sublime: sports.

“Soccer showed that, physically, there are differences between men and women,” Leslie explains. “You can be a really good female soccer player, and if you play on a men's soccer team, it wouldn't necessarily be as easy as you might think. Because physically, guys are bigger and they play differently. Part of the arc of our character is that she goes in thinking that she's cock of the walk. But it's really a different game and she has to work with Duke. Part of it, too, is that she thinks, ‘If I can just be a boy, my problems will be solved.’ What she comes to realize is that guys have their own problems and it's just not that easy.”

Sports and gender are familiar and beloved territory for producer Lauren Shuler Donner, who also helped make the gridiron flick *Any Given Sunday*. When offered those themes combined with Shakespeare's comedy, she just couldn't resist. “What appealed to me personally,” she explains, “was that it was *Twelfth Night*. I have a real fondness for that play and had always wanted to update it. I like the premise and what it has to say: Anything boys can do, girls can do better. I think that's fun and strong; it's girl empowerment. And it was very funny.”

Everyone involved was drawn to the project because of *Twelfth Night*, but, ultimately, an adaptation has to stand on its own. “Maybe you do your first draft [close to the original],” notes Jack, “but then you sort of have to forget the source material because it tends to hamstring you, whether you're adapting a foreign movie or a book or whatever. A lot of our plot points were very close. Ultimately, we thought we can't have it just because it was in the Shakespeare text. It's going to bog us down.”

To assist with the transformation, DreamWorks brought in the writers Karen McCullah Lutz and Kirsten Smith. Lutz and Smith are veterans of adaptation, Shakespeare and strong female characters fighting the empowerment battle. Their pedigree includes *Ten Things I Hate About You* and the hits *Ella Enchanted* and *Legally Blonde*. Jack valued their input deeply, both as writer and as executive producer. “What [Lutz and Smith] did,” he explains, “was say, ‘This kind of works from the original; but... let's abandon that.’ It was a

very collaborative process.”

The director, Fickman, believed soccer was the bridge between the audience and the potentially unbelievable, cross-dressing storyline. “Once you knew that it was going to be a little more gritty and real,” reflects Fickman, “the comedy could play in a stronger place of reality. Amanda's character is so unreal, better to let her be the one that steps outside of the bar of reality.” To leap that bar, the audience must be hooked by a series of questions: “What length would you go to if I took away your favorite passion? What length would you go to if you could continue playing? Would you switch genders for a little bit? Would you put on a wig and pretend you're a boy? I think that drive becomes believable.”

The filmmakers consciously drew on the rich history of gender-switching movies. Fickman wanted his young cast to be familiar with classics like *Some Like It Hot*, *Tootsie*, *Victor/Victoria*, *The Birdcage* and *Just One of the Guys*. “We knew that we wanted it to be believable,” says Fickman. “All the other characters – in *Tootsie*, in *Doubtfire*, in *Birdcage* – they're all performers by nature. So the idea of putting on theatrical makeup, or of Harvey Fierstein making you up in the prosthetic wig – here we didn't have that option. Here it was more, ‘What would a 17-year-old girl do?’ Even if she had a friend who is a hairstylist, as she does, what could they get away with on a quick basis?”

She's the Man pushes beyond *Twelfth Night*'s desperate circumstances to make Viola's choice to switch genders a powerful one. She takes command of the situation, only to find herself in choppy water than planned. “A lot of the movie is more about her being caught than anything else,” adds Jack. “It's done in such fun. Whereas a *Boys Don't Cry* came from a very dark, psychological place, this is a girl who just wants to play soccer.”

Adapting classic material comes down to the choice between an unwavering faithfulness or using the original as a springboard. The creative team behind *She's the Man* picked the latter, creating a modern film that would entertain while posing timely questions. They adeptly walk the line between gender conditioning and girl empowerment. A consummate, thematic tightrope artist himself, no doubt Shakespeare would approve. - MPM