It Takes a Village
Most playwrights’ thinking about intermission amounts to two narrow questions: whether to have one and where to place it. Very few writers spend pages describing what might they plan or expect will go on between the acts—let alone decide to rename the intermission “a second act,” as Jeff Whitty does with *Head Over Heels*.

Not that Whitty has explicitly spelled out what is meant to transpire in this longish between-time. Working with director Ed Sylvanus Iskandar, who specializes in immersive, sprawling, party-like theatrical events, Whitty has conceived the play’s visit to “The Village of Interval” as a smorgasbord of extra-theatrical happenings.

So, this venue-wide “village” will be a place where a band jams in the courtyard while an Elizabethan trio plays in another part of the theatre, where scenes may transpire around those waiting in line for the restroom or having a smoke outside, and where some curious patrons might take a backstage tour. Iskandar, for his part, has speculated that a Go-Go’s karaoke might be in the mix. “The feeling of casual social engagement with the offer of diversions will be closer to a concert at a club or a live band playing at a watering hole,” he said.

The method of their madness
As with many aspects of *Head Over Heels*, this may all sound like mere larkish fun, but it has a serious underlying purpose.

“We’re returning to something fundamental about how human beings have interacted with theatre events throughout all theatre history,” said Iskandar, citing not only Elizabethan theatrical traditions but Greek festivals, medieval mystery cycles, Restoration-era comedy, opera and more, “theatre cultures that were inherently and compulsively social. That focused, uninterrupted attention that is now the norm has only been around (and not exclusively) from Ibsen onwards—a vast minority in terms of numbers of years. If we could once again make the experience of society integral to the theatre, perhaps theatre will once again become integral to society.”

The “Village of Interval” section also serves a dramaturgical function, as a way to give the audience a chance to “experience some part of the journey the characters are going through,” Iskandar continued. “Just as the royal family encounters a sudden lack of structure that invites a break in routine, the audience will encounter something different that will invite a break in their routine at the theatre. The interplay between imposed structure and unbridled freedom is critical both to the text on the page as well as onstage.”

Iskandar is practiced at this kind of all-inclusive theatrical meal: At New York’s Flea Theater, he has staged multi-hour renderings of Sophocles and the Bible, with food and drink included, and he staged Amy Freed’s *Restoration Comedy* as a disco hoedown to the music of the Scissor Sisters. Iskandar’s first collaboration with Whitty was an intimate loft staging of the playwright’s *The Further Adventures of Hedda Gabler*, in which patrons mingled with the cast before and after the show—and Whitty himself was drafted to play the title role.

While Whitty concedes that “the words ‘audience’ and ‘participation’ put together are my least favorite combination,” the choose-your-own-adventure aspects of *Head Over Heels* are meant to remain just that: a choice, which audience members can take or leave. Still, whether they join the fray or not, Whitty and Iskandar want patrons to get something of a contact high from the sense that, as Whitty puts it in a prefatory note, “When the audience walks into the Allen Elizabethan Theatre, they are entering a party.”—Rob Weinert-Kendt
An edited version reprinted from OSF’s 2015 Illuminations, a 64-page guide to the season’s plays. For more information, or to buy the full Illuminations, click here. Members at the Patron level and above and teachers who bring a school groups to OSF receive a free copy of Illuminations.