

Theatre Review: Twelfth Night

Leticia Magalhaes da Silva Pontes

Error and Sweet Violence: Shakespeare and Renaissance Comedy and Tragedy
(HPEN5033, HPEN6033)

DR. Peter Mitchell

03/10/2024

The production *Twelfth Night* by the Globe Theatre, was directed by Tim Carroll, choreographed by Sian Williams and designed by Jenny Tiramani, it was directed for the screen by Ian Russel, composed by Claire Van Kampen and with music directed by Adrian Woodward. This play was capable of presenting to the public a performance full of laughter, complex interactions and enriching moments. *Twelfth Night* was one of the many comedies written by William Shakespeare that is still present in the lives of the present population. The story tells us about Viola, who, thinking her brother, Sebastian, has passed away after a shipwreck, seeks refuge in the land of Illyria where she then decides to change her identity to a man called Cesario. Following this plot we then get to meet wonderful characters such as Olivia, a lady who has been refusing to marry under the excuse of mourning over her brother who had passed away years ago. We also meet her servants, Maria and Malvollio who both have the intentions of their own. Olivia then falls in love with Viola - Cesario - after the latter was sent as a messenger of Orsino, a man that wishes to marry Olivia. The story plays with the tropes of misunderstanding and miscommunication, and also a bit of revenge, something that was not very common for Renaissance comedies. Nevertheless, the play is filled with funny moments and brilliant acting. It is also important to mention that the production wanted to give to the public an experience of how a play during the Renaissance period would look like. Which means that the cast was all composed by men, where even the female characters were performed by men. And that the stage would not present a lot to the public, having the play rely on the audience's imagination of how Illyria would look like.

The casting was definitely one of the best things about this production. John Paul Connolly as Antonio; James Garnon as Fabian; Paul Chahidi as Maria; Ian Drysdale as the Priest/Valentine; Colin Hurley as Sir Toby Belch; Jethro Skinner as Captain; Peter Hamilton

Dyer as Feste; Mark Rylance as Olivia; Samuel Barnett as Sebastian; Johnny Flynn as Viola; Ben Thompson as Curio; Stephen Fry as Malvolio; Liam Brennan as Orsino; Roger Lloyd Pack as Sir Andrew Aguecheek. The cast was responsible for bringing the best from Shakespeare's text. The intonation and body language performed by the actors only enhanced the production to its best. However the highlight of the play was definitely the actor Mark Rylance who portrayed the character of Olivia which was, by far, the best thing about the performance. The character of Olivia, was funny, witty and extremely direct and real. She definitely knew what she wanted and the way she wanted, and was always very clear when something bothered her. Her character had little to no filter which could contradict how women of that status should behave themselves back then. However, all these traits are still perceptible when reading the play, those only truly come to life by acting and Mark Rylance was certainly capable of that. It was a delight every time he showed up on the stage since we, as the audience, knew that laughs would soon approach.

As mentioned before the theater production aimed to give the audience the experience of watching what a true Renaissance play would look like, and that inclined the scenery, or the lack of it. The production of *Twelfth Night* had a basic setting for the character, but it rely quite a lot on the imagination and interpretation of its audience. The play was set in Illyria, on Olivia and Orsino's houses to be more precise, so the setting would "change" depending on which characters were on stage. That complicated things a bit, since it could get a bit confusing of where and what was happening on stage since you could not rely on the setting to guide to where the story was going. Nevertheless, it did make the play a lot more interesting since it forced the public to pay extra attention to what was presented on stage so you would not be lost on the next scene.

The story itself brings a very interesting and rather complex topic. When Viola decides to cross dress as a man, Cesario, although she does not like it she admits realizing how being a man gives oneself a lot more opportunities and freedom. This addresses how the systematic gender roles were so dividing and how Shakespeare wanted to challenge that in his writing. Another interesting topic that comes with Viola dressing as a man, is the fact that two characters fall in love with her while disguised as Cesario. And although Olivia is in love with Cesario she soon forgets him after meeting Sebastian and finds out the whole truth. However, it was not clear who the character of Orsino's fell in love to, Viola or Cesario, since in the final act of the play he still refers to Viola as a boy and confuses the twins, Sebastian and Viola a couple of times. This brings an interesting take on the play since some people might interpret that Orsino was actually in love with Cesario and not Viola, while others could say the opposite. This play is also important to show that topic such as cross - dressing and homosexuality has always been present in theaters, music, literature and everyday lives in general.

In conclusion, the production of Twelfth Night can be a great introduction to Shakespeare's work in drama. It is funny, smart, witty and creates good discussions about the characters and the plot itself, which contains topics still very relevant to this day, such as sexual orientation and gender roles in society. The casting choice was incredible with each actor bringing their own take on the characters, but still keeping the essence of Shakespeare's creation. The scenery, although mainly present in the public's imagination, adds important details to the play. Not only it shows how performances used to happen in the Renaissance period, it also stimulates the audience to exercise their imagination and their attention on what is happening on stage. Twelfth Night is a great comedy to be enjoyed by all types of public, it will bring you laughter and reflection at the same time, making it great for introduction to Renaissance

period not only to younger audiences such as teenagers, but also a more mature public that might be looking for an ideal play to start into the world of Dramatic comedy and tragedy.