

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



A Tale of Two *Twelfth Nights*:

***Twelfth Night* presented by University of the Fraser Valley Theater, March 3 – 20
2016, and Trinity Western University Theater, March 29 – April 9 2016**

Aaron Frede

Trinity Western University

aaronfrede@gmail.com

UFV: Directed by Bruce Kirkley and Raina von Waldenburg with Rae Maceachern-Eastwood. Scenographic Design by Parjad Sharifi. Costume Design by Heather Robertson with Natasha Beaumont and Desiree Hale. Lighting Design by Calvin Baker. Sound Design by Matthew Piton. Musical Direction by Emily Eggert-Botkin. Choreography by Kyra Esau. With Delaney Bergstrom (Olivia's Servant/Dancer), Brad Bishop (Second Officer), Russell Blower (Malvolio), Maria Buganska (Curio/Dancer), Beth Caldwell (First Officer), Danny Campbell (Sir Toby Belch), Dyllan Egilson (Sebastian), Reilly Ellis (Feste), Jessica Fowlis (Maria), Eli Funk (Orsino), Noel Funk (Fabian), Ashley Gonzalez-Rivas (Valentine/Dancer), Abigail Kibarita (Feste's Sidekick/Dancer), Jessica Milliken (Viola), James Sloggett (Sea Captain/Priest), Luke Stevens (Sir Andrew Aguecheek), Ashlyn Tegg (Olivia), Dalton Tanciw (Antonio).

TWU: Directed by Kate Muchmore Woo. Technical Direction by Jennifer Hare. Costume and Set Design by Christopher David Gauthier. Lighting Design by Lora-Lynne Hanley. Musical Composition by Tyler Dumoulin. With Jenessa Galbraith (Viola), James Faley (Di'Orsino), Emily Herbison (Olivia), Shelby Wyminga (Feste), Paul Kobilke (Malvolio), Charlotte Elgersma (Maria), Graham Boldt (Toby Belch), Steven Simpson (Andrew Aguecheek), Mikayla Wust (Fabiana), Keenan Marchand (Sebastian), Kate Nundal (Antonia), Corben James (Sea Captain/Priest/Designer), Haley James (Curio), Emmett Hanley (Valentine).

UFV Theater's *Twelfth Night* opened with an empty stage, the floor painted to resemble a dry cracked desert land. Out of the shadows Eli Funk's Orsino strode onto the scene, and the staccato of his high heeled stilettos echoed into the silence. Wearing tight

colored leggings, a loose robe and a feather boa he delivered the opening line: ‘If music be the food of love, play on!’ and struck a pose with one hand raised in the air. As the first scene closed, dancers all similarly elaborately dressed rushed out and surrounded Orsino. The group of bodies writhed in the center of the stage as the bass of music that you would hear in a modern night club started to reverberate. Soon the cast had broken out into a choreographed dance number.

The entrance and the opening scene set the tone for this rendition of *Twelfth Night* which focused on the themes of self-expression, community, and above all, love. These themes are all present within the play and within the idea of the feast of Epiphany from which *Twelfth Night* takes its name. In order to help convey this focus, the play was staged in two important contexts. This modern retelling took inspiration from the Burning Man festival, a yearly event in Nevada that focuses on ten principals which include radical self-expression, communal effort, and radical inclusion. The play also used a technique for acting and presentation called Viewpoints. The director’s notes described Viewpoints as a way of ‘creating performance structures that will allow [the] actors [the] freedom and flexibility to create the performance spontaneously in the moment of performing while still staying true to the structures, the characters, the story, the play’. The Viewpoints method meant that each singular production of the play during its run would be slightly unique as the actors were afforded some freedom to respond differently to different stimuli, while still staying true to the play. This technique provided an avenue to highlight the self-expression that was important to this production.

The play also featured a variety of highly choreographed dances that took place in between scenes and were set to electronic music that would be typical for festivals like Burning Man. These dances embraced the spirit of the Feast of Epiphany with its focus on revelry and fun and also helped to promote the sense of community within the play as all the actors were on stage together for each of these dances, none taking priority over another. The costumes were all reminiscent of the exotic things one might see at a Burning Man event with many of the actors wearing fanciful makeup. Viola and Sebastian were not only dressed the same, but sported the same makeup on their face as well to emphasize the identical nature of the twins.

The overarching theme of love was demonstrated in various ways, the first was the hyper-sexualization of the relationships between the characters. While the homoerotic elements of the play are certainly present within the text, the UFV production chose to emphasize rather than downplay them as some productions do. During Orsino’s first interaction with Jessica Miliken’s Cesario he caressed his cheek and marveled at the

beauty of his attendant. Even the relationship of Toby and Andrew was portrayed as one in which they might be lovers as they opened Act II Scene III by laying face to face and gazed into each other's eyes before the entrance of Feste. There were moments of Viola and Olivia's interaction where the viewer could sense hesitation in Viola who was attracted to Olivia but loved Orsino. These character interactions helped to emphasize the importance of love in the production of the play and more importantly the radically inclusive love between all sexes.

The play was staged in a classical manner in that there was no set to speak of, just the painted floor. There were some props used, but the only real set pieces were 5 foot tall block letters that spelled the word 'love'. In each of the scenes there were one or two of these letters on the stage in various positions for the actors to sit or stand on. Sometimes the letters were used quite creatively, as the O was often used as the gateway to Orsino or Olivia's court through which the characters had to pass, as well as the 'ring' that Olivia sent Malvolio to give to Cesario after their first meeting. This use of the letter O led to a comical staging of the two characters rolling the giant ring back and forth between them while each insisted the other take it.

The emphasis on community and love resulted in the downplaying of the melancholic aspect of the play. Malvolio is comic and entertaining, but isn't entirely sympathetic to the audience as some plays, such as the Abbey Theatre's 2014 production, have emphasized. Olivia's speech to him at the end was conveyed in the manner that suggests Malvolio was overreacting to the prank that was played on him. While Antonio's love for Sebastian wasn't returned in the end, there wasn't any emphasis on his dejected sorrow or heartbreak. These choices emphasized the gaiety and shifted away from some of the conflicts within the play surrounding the tone.

The final scene of the play emphatically illuminated the embrace of the revelry of Epiphany and Burning Man and the rejection of the melancholy. Rather than being left on stage by himself to sing his mournful song, Reilly Ellis's Feste was joined by the entire cast as they shouted out a triumphal tune amidst, for the first time in the play, the four set piece letters arranged on stage together to spell the word LOVE. The song was sung in a happy tone to convey the emancipating power of love to cast off the drudgery of daily life.

TWU's *Twelfth Night* opened by familiarizing the audience with the characters to the sound of upbeat fifties jazz. One saw Di'Orsino and Olivia in their respective offices with their employees administering changes to the newest fashion lines. Toby and

Andrew chased Sebastian around the greenspace, before halting in wonder as an identically dressed Viola walks past them in the opposite direction before everyone exited the stage. With the 1950s fashion district as the environment for the play, the set was something one might see in the fashion world. It was divided down the middle with a runway, and the two sides served as either Olivia's or Di'Orsino's office as they went about their work designing new suits and dresses. The setting helped to convey the indulgence of the play by playing on the extravagance of the fashion industry in that era. The language was almost completely verbatim with only a few word changes to help situate the viewer more firmly in the setting. Fabian's ruined 'bear baiting' became a 'luncheon', Antonio is wanted by Di'Orsino over an altercation in a 'bar fight' and the servants were sometimes referenced as 'tailors'.

There were several subtle decisions that enhanced the viewing of this rendition of *Twelfth Night*. Di'Orsino was on a golf course in the first scene, lamenting to Curio about the state of his lovesick heart. He missed his putt, perhaps a clever foreshadowing of his failed attempt to woo Olivia. When Olivia chastised Toby for his 'lethargy' in Act 1 Scene 5, the character of Toby had just lain down on the stairs and leaned back as if to rest, however he ended up staring at Feste's crotch. Even though the fool was wearing pants it added an extra level of humor when Toby sprang up to defend himself crying 'Lechery? I defy Lechery!' The use of the combined stage that served as both Olivia's and Di'Orsino's offices also helped to link in the viewer's mind the similar self-indulgent nature of the two fashion moguls.

This rendition of the play downplayed the homoerotic elements of *Twelfth Night* similar to the 2013 production at the Apollo Theater in London. When Di'Orsino noticed the feminine features of Cesario he stated it as a matter of fact and didn't initially seem to be attracted. In a post play scene the audience saw Di'Orsino with the female Viola to reinforce this heterosexual love. Antonio was played by a woman and renamed Antonia, and while this may have been a choice simply due to available actors, having a woman play a man's role would have added a different tone to the play than changing the role to that of a woman. The female Antonia was portrayed as having a sincere love for Sebastian but that love didn't seem to be returned and it wasn't a homoerotic love. Other roles were also changed to female characters, possibly because of a lack of available male players. Although Fabian becomes Fabiana and Feste is also played by a woman, these changes did not make a statement about the gender bending in the play.

What this production of the play chose to emphasize was the detriment of self-indulgence. The audience was shown Di'Orsino wallowing on his couch in self-pity over his failed attempts to woo Olivia. Olivia appeared at the beginning in a foul

temperament as she overindulged in grief, but her personality takes on a lively form when she meets Cesario. Even Graham Boldt's Sir Toby Belch warned of the dangers of overindulgence, playing one scene as having a terrible hangover –retching between lines. The director's notes focused the viewer's attention in this direction by highlighting a quote from Husam Wafaei: 'Living in a world where people measure their happiness by self-indulgence and decadence, is like watching a whole society being pushed into the abyss of perpetual decay and aberrations'.

This emphasis opened the way to play up the more sobering and melancholy aspects of the play but in some cases these were undercut by the action going on in the background. During two of Feste's most sorrowful and melancholy songs the acting drew the viewer away from the expert singing of Shelby Wyminga. At Di'Orsino's during Feste's 'Come away, Come away, death' Cesario was being fitted for a new suit and awkwardly tried to rebuff the tailor for fear of being discovered, as he attempted to measure her chest and inseam. Seeing Cesario's hesitance Di'Orsino himself came over to help Cesario out of his pants and left her standing there in the middle of the stage in her underpants with an embarrassed look on her face. This physical comedy had the audience laughing while the mournful lyrics of the song were sung.

Also during the final song, the cast exited to have Feste alone on stage singing 'for the rain it raineth every day', but during the song the cast re-entered again in the background and the audience saw Di'Orsino and Viola enjoying each other's company for the first time as man and woman. Even Curio took off her cap and unveiled the longer hair of a woman to the surprise of Valentine who embraced her, showing a happy connection between these two. Olivia and Sebastian, however, demonstrated some of the sobering realities that the play left up in the air by having Sebastian lounge on the couch, disinterested in his wife's work, and also showed Malvolio who had to return to his role as butler despite his vow of revenge. While there were some elements of the final scene that conveyed the uncertainty and unease that the play presented, the touching moments undercut some of the sobering reality of the ending.

It is interesting that two universities within thirty minutes of each other both chose to run a production of *Twelfth Night* only a few weeks apart. The two versions of the play give an example of the breadth that Shakespeare allowed for in his plays as both versions were true to the text, but both chose to highlight different aspects of the play. One might suggest that the more liberal university was more eager to embrace the theme of free love and homoeroticism that the play offers, while the more conservative university chose to highlight the negative effects of self-indulgence. Each also seemed to downplay the very element that the other chose to embrace.

Not only were the plays performed with different emphases, but stylistically they were very different as well. UFV's production was abstract in the extreme, with the empty stage and few set pieces and props. On the other hand, TWU's play was exceedingly realistic with e-cigarettes for the characters, an elaborate set, and even the use of mirrors to place the viewer within the fashion world despite the negative aspects of using mirrors in combination with the overhead lighting. Both plays were expertly acted, and helped to show the breadth and variety that Shakespeare offers. They highlighted the discord within Shakespeare's work itself as the reader or viewer must struggle with the tension between the different elements of the play and decide for themselves the message that is being conveyed.