

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



***Twelfth Night* presented by Propeller at the Hampstead Theatre, July 2, 2013**

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Directed by Edward Hall. Designed by Michael Pavelka. Lighting by Ben Ormerod. Music by Propeller. Sound by David Gregory. Text adapted by Edward Hall and Roger Warren. With Liam O'Brien (Feste), Christopher Heyward (Orsino), Arthur Wilson (Curio / Priest), Joseph Chance (Viola), Dan Wheeler (Sebastian), Benjamin O'Mahony (Sea Captain), Ben Allen (Olivia), Chris Myles (Malvolio), Vince Leigh (Sir Toby Belch), Gary Shelford (Maria), John Dougall (Sir Andrew Aguecheek), Finn Hanlon (Antonio), Lewis Hart (First Officer), and Darrel Brockis (Second Officer).

Propeller, a company created by Edward Hall, is known for its edgy all-male renderings of Shakespeare, including an interpretation of the Wars of the Roses plays entitled *Rose Rage*. Their production of *Twelfth Night*, fresh from a world tour, opened in London at the Hampstead Theatre on July 2.

True to their reputation, the company presented a modern-dress, eerie comedy that blended the dark with the comic. As the audience entered the auditorium, we were confronted with two large standing armoires and other set pieces that suggested the interior of a country house, but all swathed in sheets as if the inhabitants were in mourning. Of course, they were: indeed, at the beginning of the production, Olivia literally bid goodbye to her recently deceased brother who resided in a coffin that rested upstage for the rest of the performance. Feste then slowly approached this scene after begging for a few coins from audience members. When he reached it, he began to remove the sheets with other masked cast members and discovered Orsino sitting in a chair stage right, who began his lament over

Olivia. The music that Orsino asked for, and then interrupted, was provided by the talented cast, all of whom either sang or played instruments throughout.

All of the characters are, in a sense, in mourning, whether for people they cannot have, or people they have lost, and the music that was played or voiced throughout this production was a suitably unearthly hum or series of harsh notes on odd instruments including a waterphone. This gave me the sense of being, like Viola, someone who had just landed in a new country and at first was disoriented.

The company performed as a true ensemble who could create such effects as a silent rendering of the shipwreck in which Viola and Sebastian were separated and a chorus for Feste's songs. When an actor was not onstage as a named character, he often appeared as a silent and masked witness, or provided the 'soundtrack' to the action. They also served as set pieces, for example when three bare-chested masked characters acted as mutable statues in Malvolio's 'letter' scene.

The idea of men playing women can immediately suggest camp, but that was far from the case in this production. The seriousness of the underlying message of the play was also reflected in the thoughtfulness with which the men portrayed the female characters. Indeed, I have never seen a more saucy Maria than Gary Shelford's, nor a more graceful and honest rendering of Olivia than Ben Allen's. (This without benefit of wigs: both men wore their hair short.) These were truthful and sexy performances, and though there was humor in the play, it did not come from their gender reversal, which was earnest and heartfelt. Joseph Chance as Viola was affecting without any nods towards the femininity in his character: he did not affect a falsetto voice but spoke the verse simply and expertly in his own masculine timbre. It was often his role to drive the action along, and though his speech was rapid, he always made his points, and I felt for his position as someone who could not state his unrequited love. It was telling that his voice, and that of his brother's, were not far apart in pitch. In order to portray the twins, Chance and Dan Wheeler wore matching three-piece suits and had dyed their short hair blonde for their roles; appropriately, there was just enough difference in their attitudes and looks for the audience to tell them apart but to accept them as twins.

In keeping with the darker atmosphere, also reflected in the low key lighting by Ormerod, Vince Leigh's Sir Toby was a severe alcoholic, and his relation to John Dougall's Aguecheek reminded one of Iago's to Roderigo, as the money Sir Toby required of Sir

Andrew was clearly his primary motivation. At the end of the play, Leigh's cruelty towards his drinking companion, when he removed the latter's wig to embarrass him in front of the company, seemed more the result of his being a mean drunk than of his thrashing by Sebastian. Dougall's Aguecheek was an ass, but a sympathetic one. He dealt with that 'loss of hair' by silently leaving the stage: what more could be said after reaching that low point?

This melancholy theme continued with the playing of Feste. Liam O'Brien had the costume and attitude of one of the tramps from *Godot*, and his speech had a distinct Irish lilt to it. His bitterness was deep, and though a smile would sometimes play on his lips, it was more like a rictus than a smirk. O'Brien sang Feste's songs beautifully, so that their melancholy was that much more effective. When he commanded Feste to perform, Heyward's strongly determined Orsino couldn't help be spurred to further love sickness, even as O'Brien subtly warned him of its uselessness. (The latter was pleased, and relieved, when he discovered Cesario was a woman—this was his cure.)

The Malvolio of Chris Myles was a prig, but his wasn't initially a comic turn. He was a small man who seemed to strain against his position. This hidden force not only hid his passion for his mistress but also a kinky sexual side, which was only revealed when he wore the yellow cross garters—in this case yellow fishnet hose—but also a large codpiece and a G-string. He enjoyed sneering at his betters, but his motives also seemed to come from his short stature, a Napoleonic frustration.

Of the many eerie moments in this production, one of my favorite occurred when Sebastian stood at the mirrored door of an armoire, and Viola was illuminated on the other side as his reflection or ghost. With its odd touches of music and its moments of real darkness (Antonio was never pardoned by the Duke but led away to prison or worse), the production was also extremely funny in the places it traditionally needs to be. The humor was not only provided by the expertise of the actors but partly accomplished by using eclectic props; for example, when Viola was forced to duel Aguecheek, Chance and Dougall were each given boxing gloves rather than swords. Altogether, Propeller's *Twelfth Night* was a pleasing mixture of the sweet and sour, the disconcerting and light-hearted by turns.