

[« Back](#)

Shakespeare festival opens with 'Twelfth Night'

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PRESCOTT -- If there was still any doubt the St. Lawrence Shakespeare Festival has reached a new level of maturity, Twelfth Night should dispel it.

The festival started its ninth season Saturday at the Kinsmen Amphitheatre by reprising a play for the first time in its history, having staged Twelfth Night, as it was titled then, in 2005.

That in itself is a great sign of confidence, as is the ease with which director Craig Walker and the cast handle the subtleties of this complex comedy, and the fascinating risks they take with this staging.

In Twelfth Night, twins Viola and Sebastian are caught in a shipwreck and land in Illyria. Each believes the other to be lost.

To make her way in Illyria, Viola dresses as her brother, pretends to be "Cesario" and enters the service of the lovestruck Duke Orsino. "Cesario" is entrusted with delivering love letters and speeches to the object of the duke's affection, the Countess Olivia, who will have none of him, but falls immediately in love with the Duke's "boy."

The subplot, which is arguably more memorable than the main plot, involves Olivia's drunken uncle Sir Toby Belch and his cohorts, who hatch a hilarious scheme to undo Olivia's self-righteous steward, Malvolio.

First among the risks in this production is Walker's choice of setting, turning Illyria into pre-Home Rule Ireland.

The result is a sometimes subtle interplay of different accents, usually (with the notable exception of Olivia) used to denote social class, and references to enforced servitude to the British, which could threaten to distract the audience.

Luckily, great acting all around and Shakespeare's universal comedic truth overcome this peril. This truly is a story that could happen anywhere.

The benefit of this Irish staging is an added musical richness to what is already a richly musical play.

Twelfth Night is replete with songs, some melancholy and some intended to remind the audience that all of this is in good fun, and the setting allows these pieces to be infused with delightful Irish melodies -with "Molly Malone" and "The Belle of Belfast City" tossed in for good measure.

On the subject of risks, this Twelfth Night sees the local company showing increased boldness with staging effects, most notably with the presentation of the shipwreck and a daring use of the amphitheatre's infrastructure to portray Malvolio's imprisonment.

And with Twelfth Night more than any other lost-sibling Shakespeare comedy, there is an implicit risk in casting the twins Viola and Sebastian, a job the festival does remarkably well.

Canadian Idol finalist Elena Juatco is an excellent choice for Viola/Cesario, keeping her delicate feminine features while ostensibly hiding her femininity in male garb, while Aldrin Bundoc, while fully masculine as Sebastian, is close enough in appearance to Juatco for the identical twin premise to function as intended.

Orsino, meanwhile, is adroitly played by Quincy Armorer, perhaps best known to local festival fans as Orlando in As You Like It (2008), while Kerry Ann Doherty, last year's Lady Macbeth, brilliantly swings from austere in her rejection of the duke to couch-hoppingly giddy with love over Cesario -all with the added challenge of that Irish accent.

The play would not hold together without the superlative performances by Bruce Beaton as Sir Toby Belch and his cadre of comic conspirators, the foppish Sir Andrew Aguecheek (Warren Bain), the wise fool Feste (Brent Buchanan) and the devilishly shrewd Maria (Janet Martin).

Nor would Twelfth Night succeed without a memorable Malvolio, and festival artistic director Ian Farthing makes

a welcome return to acting to take on that role.

The play's signature scene sees Malvolio dressed in ridiculous attire and acting improbably jolly in a misguided attempt to woo Olivia, and Farthing, who plays the role with exaggerated physicality throughout the play, appropriately delivers the evening's comic highlight.

Yet Twelfth Night is, in Walker's words, "not a knockabout farce," but a comedy with subtle undercurrents of melancholy and darkness.

This is underlined by the play's ultimate dismissal of Sir Toby (whom Shakespeare conspicuously excludes from the happy ending scene), and this production's compelling performance of the final song, "Hey Ho, the Wind and the Rain."

As it did with *The Merchant of Venice* in 2008, the company uses music to remind the audience that a man's undoing, deserved though it may be, is never a trivial thing, as Farthing's Malvolio sits, dejected and defeated, listening to Feste sing a song about life's ultimate futility.

Unlike *Merchant*, however, this one is all in good fun, as this Malvolio will ultimately remind us.

The festival's second play, *All's Well That Ends Well*, opens tomorrow night (Wednesday) at 7 p.m., with a "pay what you can preview" tonight.

The season runs until August 13, alternating between the two plays.

Tickets are \$25 for adults, \$20 for students and \$80 for a season pass. Children 12 and under get in free. Performances run Tuesday through Saturday, with matinees on Wednesday and Saturday.

More information is available by calling 613-925-5788 or at www.stlawrenceshakespeare.ca.

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