

Misrule and Melancholy: Stamford Shakespeare Company's Gender-Bending *Twelfth Night*

by Stephanie Collins. Published in 2019 Issue 1.

For the production: *Twelfth Night* (2019, Stamford Shakespeare Company, Rutland Open Air Theatre, Tolethorpe Hall, UK). Performances attended: All (2019-06-04 to 2019-08-03). See production details at the end of the review.

NOW IN ITS FIFTY-FIRST SEASON, THE [STAMFORD SHAKESPEARE COMPANY](#) (SSC) HAS A LOCAL reputation for excellence in its amateur productions. Performing three shows each summer, two Shakespeare and one “non-Shakespeare” (usually a family-friendly offering), the company receives visitors from all over the UK who flock to the open-air, six-hundred-seat theatre that SSC is proud to call home. The 2019 season consisted of *Twelfth Night*, *Julius Caesar*, and Noël Coward’s *Blithe Spirit*.



Figure 1. Kieran Reid as Feste, with Lucy Thornton-Reid as Olivia and Tom Westall as Malvolio. Photo credit: Paul Moth, Stamford Shakespeare Company.

The seating at the Rutland Open Air Theatre, [Tolethorpe Hall](#), is arranged in a shallow horseshoe and protected from the elements by a large canopy. It looks down on the wide and deep open-air stage, behind which is a real wooded glade that serves as a backdrop, and as a

barricade between the theatre and the surrounding open fields and farmland. Since the company produces three plays in weekly rotation each summer season, the setting must be changed every Sunday by the stage crew to prepare for the next week's production.

The company's reputation for offering visual spectacle at Tolethorpe means that audiences anxiously await the revelation of each year's Shakespeare play setting. The setting for this *Twelfth Night*, designed by the play's director Liz Cullum, consisted of a small, plain church to stage left, adjacent to a large porch and door which served as the outdoor area and entrance to Olivia's household—including a flat roof on which actors could stand, especially useful when they were tormenting Malvolio later in the production. To stage right, a staircase, apparently carved from rock, wound upwards to a high walkway that was on a level with the top of Olivia's house and spanned the length of the stage.



Figure 2. The set for *Twelfth Night*, as designed by director Liz Cullum. Photo credit: Paul Moth, Stamford Shakespeare Company.

Having performed in five previous productions, I played the regendered Fabia this year in Cullum's *Twelfth Night* offering. Originally written as Fabian, this character was transformed into a woman to counteract the dearth of female roles in Shakespeare's plays, and to accommodate SSC's overabundance of available young female actors. Turned into an Everyman character who, as part of Olivia's household, had the social fluidity to leap from the court to the alehouse, Fabia appeared onstage for much of the play. Not alone in Shakespeare's tale of misplaced and confused identity, the Fabian/Fabia shift was echoed in the casting of Alison Fox as Antonio, an androgynous seafarer whose indeterminate either-way gender could not mask the character's besotted infatuation with Sebastian (Jake Taylor). With the blurring of gender boundaries being one of *Twelfth Night*'s most prominent themes, Cullum did her utmost to ensure this theme remained foremost in everyone's mind throughout the play.

Cullum's playful toying with gender highlighted the overall subversive theme of this production. From its opening scene, where Feste (Kieran Reid) seemed to conjure up the storm that cast Viola (Ellen Fraser) and Sebastian upon the mercy of Illyria, this *Twelfth Night*

suggested that misrule would be the *only* rule. Highlighted from the outset of the play, misrule set the agenda as several ladies, accompanied by the Priest, exited a church stage left in full mourning veils, with a suspiciously “Feste-shaped” lady following behind.

Feste, played with youthful exuberance by Reid (who at just seventeen years old nonetheless proved the puppet master of this world, often watching the action from the roof of Olivia’s household), was a “wise fool” shrewd enough to dance circles, sometimes quite literally, around his “good Madonna” Olivia, his drunken companions, and the poor “gull” Malvolio (Tom Westall). The youthful spirit of Feste seemed to resonate with the Tolethorpe audience, his pranks proving more forgivable, perhaps, because they came from a teenage jester. Ably accompanied by a talented band hidden away in a nook at the back of the stage, Reid’s Feste infected the play with joyful anarchy. Even Feste’s closing song, “For the rain it raineth everyday,” seemed subversively appropriate in an open-air theatre that was the focal point of many a storm over the season, thus contributing to the sense of revelry and celebration at this production’s core.

Important for developing the spirit of misrule, revelry, and gender fluidity that defined this production were Miriam Spring Davies’s costume designs, which relocated the production to an Albanian-style nineteenth-century “Illyria” that encompassed what we now know as Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Albania. Spring Davies drew upon Shakespeare’s idealized version of this area, described in private interview with the author as an “unusual, fantastical, and unknown land,” to create her intricate costuming.

A main concern for Spring Davies, as well as for Cullum, was to create “completely unique styles” for the iconic characters, while drawing on a wide range of influences. Taking her inspiration from the 1830 “Portrait of Lord Byron”—in which he is pictured wearing a “Fustanella, a white kilt worn by men in Albania and Greece”—Spring Davies explained her visual source material for “the eccentric” Sir Andrew Aguecheek (Sandy Thompson), and Westall’s “stiff-lipped Malvolio, whose Fustanella went from calf-length to above the knee when he appeared in his yellow cross garters.” “More leg,” Spring Davies jovially remarked, “was definitely more for Malvolio!”

These male characters’ skirt-like Fustanellas, which allowed Thompson and Westall freedom to kick, thrust, and perform all manner of amusing movements, often to raucous laughter from the audience, were yet another hint towards gender fluidity in the play, linked likewise to the youthfulness of the company’s performers. In contrast, the costuming for the impish Feste was inspired by very different cultural origins. “I drew inspiration from sixteenth-century Sultans of the Ottoman Empire,” Spring Davies explained, “with their curling epaulettes to create the ‘Puck-ish’ quality required by the director.” Such precise research, which referenced portraits similar to the [Topkapi Palace Museum’s](#) collection of manuscript images of Osman I and Murad I, was a hallmark of Spring Davies’s costume choices. Several

actors confirmed the positive impact that these costuming choices made on their ability to envision their characters in new and unexpected ways.

Malvolio's Fustanella costume changes added to the visual humour of his role, as proven by the pure delight expressed by Maria (Ellie Dickinson), Olivia's servants (Cami Carter and Jane Sims), and Fabia at the unfortunate's absurd strutting, indeed thrusting, in his yellow stockings. Descending from the top balcony in a flurry of kicks, thrusts, and blown kisses, Malvolio's antics made it impossible for the audience not to join in the mixture of outrage and uproarious laughter that engulfed Olivia and her ladies. Malvolio's outrageous appearance and antics contrasted fittingly with the obsequiousness of his earlier behaviour, where he obviously viewed himself as above the foolish happiness of Feste and "the lighter people," and clearly wished to crawl into Olivia's favour with his near-permanent bow.



Figure 3. Tom Westall as Malvolio, stooping to read "Olivia's" letter. Photo credit: Paul Moth, Stamford Shakespeare Company.

Malvolio's downfall, of course, stemmed from his earlier gulling, whereby the misleading letter played upon his ambitions and led him to the ready conviction that the letter he found came from his employer, Olivia. This comic episode was staged simply, with Toby (Steve Cunningham), Andrew, and Fabia mocking Malvolio from the top of Olivia's house (after much humorous scrambling to get all three together without the poor victim noticing). Representing the traditional social inversion associated with this scene, the directorial choice to place these servants high above Malvolio, who stood on the main stage below, guaranteed maximum audience awareness of how far the pompous character was likely to fall.

The physical comedy of the scene was, it might seem, thwarted by certain twenty-first-century concerns for contemporary realism. Possibly mistrusting the early modern convention of actors not hearing the more absurd things that occur around them, the director took pains to ensure that the tormentors were heard by the audience, but not by Malvolio. While blocking might overcome this "problem" by situating the mockers downstage between the audience and Malvolio, the vastness of the open stage ensured there was nowhere for them to hide. Of course, in a production steeped in Balkan realism, it was impossible to believe that Malvolio would not have heard the shouts of Toby, Andrew, and Fabia as he stood directly

below them. The shouts, occasionally masked as the cooing of birds (complete with the throwing of an abundance of white feathers), nevertheless had to reach the back of the open-air theatre, with all the competing noises from the farms and roads surrounding the venue's real-life countryside setting.

For those overly concerned with realistic portrayal, the open-air rural setting provided yet another obstacle: the staging of Malvolio's dark-house, especially on sunny matinees when the entire audience was clearly visible. Four of the company's twenty-six shows were Saturday matinees—always popular, often warm, and usually blessed with bright sunshine. While evening performances accommodated a fourth-wall approach to realistic theatre, these matinees added an early modern “feel” to the production in line with recent experiments with audience interaction at [Shakespeare's Globe London](#).

In rehearsal, however, concern was expressed about how difficult it would be to make the audience believe that *Malvolio* believed that the world was dark. To have him describe darkness on a hot afternoon in August was, it was suggested, a potential invitation for laughter, and counter to the deadly seriousness of the play in these moments. The “difficulty,” if difficulty it truly was, was overcome with the use of a blindfold, a simple though efficient technique that added a layer of cruelty to Malvolio's torment, especially on sunny matinee afternoons. The physicality of Malvolio's torture was deeply moving and confirmed Malvolio's transformation from gull to victim, with the audience recognising, at exactly the right moment, that they too were guilty of doing Malvolio “notorious wrong.”

Malvolio was not the first choice of character for Westall, whose previous credits with the SSC include Charles Surface (*School for Scandal*, 2018), Claudio (*Much Ado About Nothing*, 2017), and Orlando (*As You Like It*, 2014). Having originally auditioned for the part of Count Orsino, Westall joked that when the director phoned him to offer the role of Malvolio, he knew his days of playing the lover were behind him. Playing the part, however, proved a positive experience. Explaining that Malvolio “presented new challenges,” Westall said that playing a “character that is so hated immediately [gave] it appeal.”

From the personal perspective of an actor present onstage for most of the comedy scenes with Malvolio, it became obvious that this character's final transformation from gull to victim came at the very end of the play. After Fabia's somewhat weak attempts to excuse the tricks she and other characters had played upon him, the quiet anguish of Malvolio's “I'll be revenged on the whole pack of you” shocked the onstage assembly into stunned silence. Storming off to a high vantage point stage left, Westall repeated the line, adding an emphatic pause between “revenged” and “on,” whilst unceremoniously throwing “Olivia's” letter to the “pack” of tormentors below.

The forceful discarding of the letter left us in no doubt how Malvolio viewed the assembled group as a “pack” of dogs, or even wolves. Even those audience members who laughed with



Figure 4. Stephanie Collins as Fabia. Photo credit: Paul Moth, Stamford Shakespeare Company.

the onstage “pack” inevitably proved themselves complicit in his wronging. Malvolio might rush offstage in a flurry of disdain, but, as Cullum insisted, my Fabia had to wait, to hold the hushed silence that fell over actors and audience alike. The uncomfortable implications of this abusive moment were clear—we all *laughed* and were all confronted with the guilty consequences of that laughter. By the time I did rush offstage after Malvolio, you could have heard one of the white feathers from the earlier gulling drop.

Cullum’s mostly traditional reading of *Twelfth Night* conformed to the gentle, old-world setting of Rutland’s Tolethorpe Hall, with its country house and seemingly endless fields. The Balkanisation of the setting, intended as a tribute to Shakespeare’s original Illyria, both conformed to the company’s usual traditional productions but also accommodated something a bit more unusual in its gender-bending performances and costuming. The toying with gender suggested a dash of rebellion from Cullum, at least for the traditionally “conservative” open-air audiences of middle England, and hinted at Feste’s misrule extending out to the

rest of the production. There is little doubt, after all, that this is Feste’s world, since he is given both the beginning and the end of the play. The Stamford Shakespeare Company has a rule of never giving a curtain call, a tradition extending back to the founder of the company, Jean Harley, who believed it broke the magic of the theatre, placing too much emphasis on the actor over the character. Yet as Feste sang the final words of the play—“that’s all one, our play is done”—and gave a flourishing bow to the audience, there was a suggestion that traditions, like rules, are sometimes made to be broken.

Links

Stamford Shakespeare Company. <https://stamfordshakespeare.co.uk/>

Tolethorpe Hall. <https://stamfordshakespeare.co.uk/tolethorpe-history/>

Topkapi Palace Museum. <https://www.ktb.gov.tr/EN-113953/istanbul---topkapi-palace-museum.html>

Shakespeare's Globe London. <https://www.shakespearesglobe.com/>

Production Details

General

<i>Title</i>	<i>Twelfth Night</i>
<i>Year</i>	2019
<i>Theatre Company</i>	Stamford Shakespeare Company
<i>Theatre</i>	Rutland Open Air Theatre, Tolethorpe Hall
<i>Start Date</i>	2019-06-04
<i>End Date</i>	2019-08-03

Cast

VIOLA	ELLEN FRASER
CAPTAIN	DAVE BANNISTER
SEBASTIAN	JAKE TAYLOR
ANTONIO	ALISON FOX
ORSINO	SIMON HIX LITTON
CURIO	JOSHUA STONE
VALENTINE	JACK STEVENS
OFFICERS	DAN STAMP, MARTIN LANGFREY
OLIVIA	LUCY THORNTON-REID
MARIA	ELLIE DICKINSON
SIR TOBY BELCH	STEVE CUNNINGHAM
SIR ANDREW AGUECHEEK	SANDY THOMPSON
MALVOLIO	TOM WESTALL
FESTE	KIERAN REID
FABIA	STEPHANIE COLLINS
PRIEST	PETER SAUNSTON
SERVANTS	JANE SIMS, CAMI CARTER

Creatives

DIRECTOR	LIZ CULLUM
LIGHTING	ALAN DAVIES
SOUND	ERIC CULLUM
STAGE MANAGEMENT AND PROPS	SANDIE PARSONS
ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGER AND PROMPT	SARAH GOODINGS
MUSIC	ANDREW FORBES
COSTUME	MIRIAM SPRING DAVIES