



A Twelfth Night to Remember: Royal Shakespeare Company

by Hugh M. Richmond. Written on 2010-02-18. First published in the *ISE Chronicle*.

For the production: Twelfth Night (2009, Royal Shakespeare Company, UK).

THE KEY CONCEPT OF THIS PRODUCTION BY THE RSC IN 2009 (DUKE OF YORK'S THEATRE, London) appears in the program notes about the play's setting in Illyria: "a place of lyrical delirium" but also "in Shakespeare's day a very real country. Illyria was a wild corner of the Ottoman Empire, on the shores of the Adriatic, notable for its pirates and for the frequent shipwrecks along its rugged coastline. . . . It roughly equates with modern day Albania. Shakespeare exploits the country's unruly, dangerous and exotic reputation." Moreover, "Shakespeare peppers the play with references, not only to pirates and renegades, but to the eunuchs and mutes employed at the Ottoman court, and the Sophy (or Shah) of neighbouring Persia." The set, costuming, social structure, and manners throughout the performance reflected this cultural context with an even more specific dating determined by the region's relationship to the eighteenth century's delight in the Grand Tour: "Sebastian seems the very epitome of a young man on the Grand Tour: 'I pray you, let us satisfy our eyes with the memorials and things of fame that do renown this city.'" One last touch of contextualization appeared in the program's stress on the swashbuckling revolutionary career of the poet Byron in the region, which transposed neatly into a view of Orsino as a kind of hectic Byronic hero. The permanent set reflected that transitional period also: a semi-ruined neoclassical vestige of the Venetian empire in the Levant, with a rear wall in warm stone, with a broken pillar at stage-right. The frequent music echoed Middle Eastern pitch, rhythms, and orchestration.

The effect of this carefully-thought-out contextualization was surprisingly impressive, and plausibly validated the multicultural casting obligatory on the current stage: for not only were many of the supporting cast (servants, standers-by) Levantine in costume, complexion, and ethnic derivation, but so too were parts as important as Maria's, which added a fascinating tension to her relationships with Sir Toby Belch and Malvolio. Interestingly enough, Toby was presented by Richard McCabe quite severely (as often nowadays) not merely as a drunkard but as actively malevolent to most of his associates, while Malvolio (again fashionably) became a

figure of some overt sympathy in Richard Wilson's interpretation, to the extent that the audience murmured sympathetically at his misapprehensions in the face of the gloating of Toby and his allies. In the end there was general satisfaction that Toby got his deserved beating at the hands of Sebastian, and at the sight of the final flight of the humiliated Aguecheek. Both Feste and Fabian were also presented as sympathetic Levantines, the former in particular, enacted by Milros Yerolemou, appeared less as a conventional clown than a complex personality, for example, in his increasing anxiety over the maltreatment of Malvolio, and by his exquisite and moving performance of his songs .

None of these factors bore directly on the crucial impact of the two principal roles of Viola and Olivia, which must be the decisive elements in any production's success. In this case both were distinctive and memorable. Many recent productions of Shakespeare have shown a decline in rhetorical skills and mastery of verse-cadencing. With both these roles the phrasing was definitive: clear, well-nuanced, and plausible. Viola was presented by Nancy Carroll with a remarkable poise and lucidity. She had a unique naturalness and authority of interpretation which made her complex role not merely intelligible but irresistibly attractive. While she was delightfully convincing while playing a boy, there was none of the overacting of adolescent awkwardness which the part often evokes, and she achieved the final transition to an openly feminine temperament in a compelling manner. As Olivia Alexandra Gilbreath was remarkably dynamic in a role which often sinks to mere volatility. The portrayal of her self-conscious surrender to sexual attraction lent an element of humor to a role too often merely sentimental, not to say pathetic. Like all the other performers neither of these actors sank to shrillness or overplaying. Indeed, this production was hardly ever farcical - except, perhaps inevitably, in the scene of Malvolio's overhearing, which balanced three actors precariously in a treetop. If anything the director avoided even open comedy in a performance often verging on Chekhovian irony.

At many moments this thoughtful naturalism freshly illuminated the script, perhaps most with the role of Maria, whose relationship with Toby gained from the added interracial factor, as well as stressing Malvolio's domineering attitude. It was interesting to see that she was not present at the deception of Malvolio, which detached her from its uproarious male chorus. Another role which gained in authenticity was Sebastian's companion Antonio, whose compulsive commitment to his young friend greatly enriched the sense of his tension as an enemy alien in Illyria. Sebastian, for once, really looked like Viola, who appeared to be consciously copying her brother in exact costume and manner as a kind of compulsive attempt at his reincarnation. Perhaps the program note that the director himself has a twin sister explained this thoughtful exploration of the nature of twinship.

In conclusion one can only say that for once in a Shakespearean production one did not feel the intrusion of irrelevant directorial concepts, but that one was given access to the essential nature of the script. The setting and costumes matched details in the text, and the interpretations throughout reflected a trust that Shakespeare knew exactly what he was doing at all times for staging, and did not need directorial intrusions to be made accessible to a modern audience, which in this case earned the production the intense attention it deserves. This was one of the best productions of the play I have seen in sixty years of viewing Shakespeare.