

Society: Amateur Players of Sherborne  
Venue: Sherborne Studio Theatre  
Production: Twelfth Night  
Director: John Crabtree  
Date seen: 5 December 2023

This was, in a nutshell, the best amateur production of a Shakespeare play I have seen in the last thirty years and hearty congratulations to all on a superb achievement: a play brilliantly directed, staged and acted, filled with joy, humour, emotion, pathos and nuance, that delighted, entertained and provoked thought throughout. It's a complex play with so much going on, light and dark, a multitude of divergent tensions including that between outright comedy and the psychological torture of Malvolio; APS hit all the right notes in all the right places. To have staged it so well on the small stage of the theatre was all the more impressive.

In addition to a mastery of pace, flow and moving the actors around the stage (and moreover giving a very good performance himself as Valentine, a gentleman attending Orsino), the Director, John Crabtree, showed great flair, inventiveness and creativity. Setting the play in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century worked brilliantly; while respecting the original work the Director made it more accessible for today's audience, giving the adventures (romantic and otherwise) of the households of Olivia and Orsino something of the feel of an Edwardian country house party, with the goings-on of both upstairs and downstairs being explored. A touch of Downton Abbey, perhaps, but there was also a very clever indeterminacy in costume and set that meant it couldn't be tied down to a specific decade or context. There was a slight 'otherworldliness' created, appropriate perhaps for the strange new world – to Viola and Sebastian – of Illyria.

There were many delightful touches to evoke the period, from Sir Andrew, Sir Toby, Feste and the servants doing a conga dance and Cesario and Sir Andrew duelling with shooting stick and umbrella, to the simple device of having Feste read a 1920s newspaper. The language was occasionally updated, or at least some more modern interjections were added: a 'come on, quickly' from Maria to the servants as they're bringing in the tea things; 'I'm coming' from Feste instead of 'nay, I'll come', in response to Sir Toby's 'come thy ways'; and a pithy and slightly 'panto' 'it's a lady thing' from Sir Toby when Malvolio, reading the letter, comments on the Cs, Us, Ts and Ps. These modernisms gave an edge, a piquancy, enlivening the play even more and made it different from 'the norm'. Some judicious cuts had been made to the text, and the character of Fabian had been taken out seamlessly; Feste stood in for him in the letter scene, for example.

The costumes were superb and contributed greatly towards evoking the period and creating the atmosphere: for example, Sir Toby in deer-stalker and tweed jacket, later in black tie for his late-night return to the house, along with Sir Andrew; Cesario and Olivia in elegant dresses, and Malvolio in wing collar and bowler hat. The small stage gave it an intimate feel and the set was very clever. There was a simplicity which worked well. For example, the sea storm at the opening, created with bare stage and a blue drape being shaken by two stage hands, and an image of a ship projected onto a backdrop, and then Viola and the sailor crawl from under the drape.

The set had been exceptionally well-designed for the limited space available and scene-changes were all deftly handled. A Mediterranean classical-style villa was rolled smoothly and efficiently by stage-hands into place to represent Orsino's and Olivia's dwellings, with side pieces added. The dungeon setting was created neatly by putting a frame of prison bars within the entrance to the villa, in place of the double entrance doors. Lighting was used to great effect to enhance the set and the scenes. A yellowish wash over the villa gave it a sun-drenched, Mediterranean look, but while Feste sang Come Away Death a deeper yellow hue descended over it. As Sir Toby and Sebastian fought the light dimmed subtly, and the lighting for the dungeon scene was perfect.

Sound effects were used sparingly but worked really well when they were used; the thunder of the storm at the opening of the play was echoed by rolls of thunder towards the end of the play, as Sebastian and Olivia went into the house in their happy, summery mood, and a clap of thunder when Malvolio storms out, setting the mood up for Feste to sing *The Rain It Raineth Every Day*. The music used between scenes was well chosen to fit the mood and tone, Feste's songs blended in superbly and there were some lovely innovative touches such as a crackling gramophone record-style backing to *Mistress Mine*, *Where Are You Roaming?*, and Sir Toby and Sir Andrew doing their 'caper' dance to tango music, and later on singing *On the Trail of the Lonesome Pine* as they exited.

The acting was excellent, both individually and in the interactions between the characters. Orsino (Richard Jones) and Viola/Cesario (Poppy Vera) worked really well together as the budding lovers, displaying a strong chemistry between them, and Sir Toby Belch (Carl Davies) and Sir Andrew Aguecheek (Freddie Wopat) were also a great double act. The Sebastian/Cesario look-alike device really did work in this production, not just physically, but in demeanour, and that is by no means an easy thing to achieve. Lewis Willis gave Sebastian a soft side to his character but also gave a delightfully lustful grin as, in response to Olivia's exhortation 'come', he enthused 'madam, I will'. His diction was excellent with clear enunciation of his Ts and Ds and his delivery of the 'This is the air, that is the glorious sun' soliloquy was very good indeed.

Roger Chadbourne played both the Sea Captain friend of Viola at the start and the arresting Officer at the end, as well as one of Olivia's servants. A strong actor, he showed the human emotion behind his relatively sparse lines and remained in character throughout the lengthy revelations at the end, responding to them with expressions of his face even though the character hadn't been given actual lines. So too did Robert Brydges as Antonio, having been arrested. A fine actor, he portrayed Antonio with great skill as 'rough but kind and charming' and his speech to the arresting Officer about his love for Sebastian and Sebastian's ingratitude was note-perfect.

Poppy Vera played Viola/Cesario with a broad and subtle range of emotion and expression. The character has a great deal of emotion to deliver and Poppy Vera had clearly put a lot of thought and work into realising this in her soliloquies and asides, and it paid off. Cesario's soliloquy after Malvolio has dropped the ring at her feet, for example, was expertly delivered, appearing as though the thoughts were coming to her as she spoke. hesitating as in natural speech. Her line as Cesario 'I know...too well what love women to men may owe' was delivered out to the audience rather than towards Orsino, perhaps partly for the clarity of projection but it also heightened the sense that she is still all at sea, in a world of her own, tossed in the tumult of her emotions.

Sheenu Das gave the character of Olivia great strength, composure and presence and delivered a powerful performance, for example in the scene in which Cesario pleaded the Orsino's case to her, both actors holding the audience rivetted with the intensity and tension of their exchange. Olivia showed both passion in her declaration love for Cesario and also a serenity; with the latter she was, in this scene as in others, a strong, still centre to the whirligig of passion going on around her.

There were other characters who subtly portrayed serenity and stillness, in different ways: Richard Jones gave Orsino a calm languidness in his early scenes but gradually let the emotion emerge, until finally it boiled over at Cesario's apparent betrayal. His projection and diction were impressive and really enhanced his performance, strengths shown also by two other 'still centres' (if the centre can be occupied by more than one person), Maria (Bev Taylor-Wade) and Feste (Mary Flanagan). All, with their clarity, made the Shakespearean language understandable even when most unfamiliar. Bev Taylor-Wade gave Maria a very good disdainful, schoolmarmish manner in her dealings with Sir Toby and Sir Andrew and Mary Flanagan gave Feste bags of 'attitude' with which, along with great clarity, she held the stage and the audience. Her singing was superb, and she really brought out the beauty and emotion of *Mistress Mine*, *Where Are You Roaming?* and *Come Away Death*, which had a simple and moving piano accompaniment.

Curio, the Duke's gentleman attendant, was a listener during the song and David Pileri showed his strength in the role by the way he reacted, without words but with clear emotion, to Feste's rendition. He also played one of Olivia's servants, coming on with a golf club. Members of the cast played the servants well, including a striking appearance by Sarah Webster. There were no weak links in this cast and all helped to create the world of Illyria.

As head of Olivia's servants, Malvolio was excellent. Patrick Knox gave him just the right degree of haughty and disdainful, he demonstrated a great eye and feel for the comedy inherent in the character, and his being caught out listening at a keyhole was a lovely touch. He was also totally convincing in his distress when imprisoned and tormented by Feste, and his scene in the yellow stockings was a high point.

Freddie Wopat and Carl Davies were brilliant as the troublesome house guests, Sir Andrew Aguecheek and Sir Toby Belch, working very well together both together and as their individual characters. Sir Andrew had an engaging wistfulness and Freddie Wopat brought both the comedy and sadness of his being rather confused and lost, as when he clumsily presented a bunch of flowers to Olivia, only to be waved away by her. His teddy bear was a nice touch and he delivered the line 'I was adored once too' very movingly. Like the others in the cast, his diction was faultless. Carl Davies gave a tour-de-force performance as Sir Toby, commanding the stage with energy and ebullience, producing farts rather than belches for the 'a plague o' these pickle-herring' (with the aid of technology?) and, like Freddie Wopat as Sir Andrew, playing drunk convincingly (not easy) in the night-time revelry scene.

The director and actors achieved just the right balance between the comic and the serious, and one of the things which made this production special were all the little touches which enhanced the comedy or the pathos. The play was never staid, there was always something interesting going on: Cesario reading Shakespeare's Sonnet 29 to the Duke; Malvolio coming on dramatically right at the end to deliver his 'I'll be revenged on the whole pack of you' instead of when he would normally have made his final exit; Sir Andrew's teddy bear falling out, along with his clothes, from his suitcase; Sir Toby in his deerstalker hat shooting a pigeon out of the sky; and Viola and Olivia touching hands briefly at the end, only to be drawn apart by a Orsino and Sebastian.

An absolute delight of a scene was the letter-finding-and-reading one. This had been prefaced by Feste and Olivia's servants setting out the laundry on a line from a basket, and the three conspirators who trick Malvolio proceeded to hide behind the clothes on the line, Sir Andrew amusingly behind a dress. Malvolio delivered his soliloquy imagining himself as a lord expertly, and when the laundry line was removed by the servants exposing Sir Andrew, Sir Toby and Feste to potential discovery by him, they resorted to pretending to be statues as they continued moving about, like a game of grandmother's footsteps. This gave the scene more movement than it usually has, when the conspirators hide behind trees or whatever, and the audience willingly suspended disbelief at the surreal nature of the device. They and Malvolio received a thoroughly merited round of applause from the audience at the end of that scene.

Thank you, APS, and congratulations on a great production.

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