



ROSE BOWL ADJUDICATION

Name of Company: Amateur Players of Sherborne
Name of Production: Twelfth Night
Venue: Sherborne Studio Theatre, Sherborne
Date: 5th December 2023
Adjudicator: Chris Howland-Harris

THE LORDS OF MISRULE WOULD BE MOST PLEASED WITH THIS

What better way to be put into the Christmas spirit than to visit the Sherborne Studio Theatre and see Twelfth Night, traditionally associated with Michaelmas. The audience had an early Christmas present in the form of an uproarious evening of love affairs, mistaken identities, and fools both witty and pompous.

STAGING AND DIRECTION

The absence of curtain or thrust beyond any proscenium is constantly a challenge for the Amateur Players of Sherborne (APS) and I always look forward to seeing the ever-ingenious way that they have overcome this. I was not disappointed on the night, being greeted by a stolid looking faux marble set with a large curtain sea in the centre. Shortly after the house lights dimmed came the storm with very high seas jiggled by stagehands, lightning, and the projection of a floundering ship. This all served well to set the stage and bring the audience into the storm, and then the sea gave up two souls who appeared most effectively from within the waves as Viola and the Captain portrayed

being swept ashore. Thus, John Crabtree gave us a very strong start, setting the scene and the tempo for a rattling bit of Shakespearean comedy.

As soon as we left the coast of Illyria for the Duke's palace, we saw the ingenuity with which the staging and set design has been realised. Mark Lambert, Adrian Hole and John had produced an extremely clever and adaptable set that was the theatrical equivalent of fitting a quart into a pint pot. The palace portico advanced towards the audience from out of what meagre backstage space there is at the Studio Theatre, decorated in the same classic marble effect as the surround and complete with easily movable plinths. This flexible construct portrayed not only the palace but also a garden, and later in the play this same portico was ingeniously transformed into Malvolio's prison.

There was little other need for props or set dressing, and what little there was came on swiftly underneath the suitable music or was aptly brought on by servants of the Duke and the Countess. The pigeon drop was an excellent device and I particularly liked the addition of a few loose feathers to add to the illusion, which was a nice touch as was the teddy bear in Sir Andrew's suitcase.

Helen Smith, Jessica Colson and Olivia Godfrey are to be complimented on the costumes. With the exception of the Sea Captain's belt, which if I was picky looked a bit too modern, the costume of all was excellent. Particularly effective were the simple cream linen suits for Viola and her brother Sebastian which allowed us to believe they were indeed mistaken for one another.

Sound was affective, clear yet subtle, helping to further paint the set as we were presented with storms or seagulls. The lighting and lightening effects showed up the ability of the lighting design of the Studio Theatre and of Adrian Hole and Nick Baker, more so than other performances I have seen that have not required the same degree of variation in effect.

During the scene where Sir Toby, Sir Andrew and Feste observe Malvolio reading the letter, John Crabtree's use of the washing line and the device of statues and then three wise monkeys to obscure the observers was original, very clever, and most amusing. However, I did notice an aberrant line thrown in, when in response to Sir Andrew's question "*Her c's, her u's, and her t's. Why that?*", Sir Toby replied "*It's her lady garden*". While I'm still in two minds as to whether this was appropriate since it stood out to me, the audience laughed as it was fitting to the pun Shakespeare was making, and perhaps

emphasised the joke in case they hadn't twigged the crude allusion. The only other critique I might have is that the fight scene didn't work for me, feeling a bit awkward and staged, the strikes too quiet perhaps owing to the absence of a knap.

However, I was left with an impression of a performance that felt fresh, flowed well, and while delivering a crowd-pleaser it is a nod to John Crabtree's courage as a director that he retained the waspish sting at the end of the play, as the cruelty heaped upon Malvolio is acknowledged by Olivia not simply as a comment that would leave the audience all at ease, but sharply and with acid in her voice that left the room in a slightly awkward silence. Overall, John should feel proud of how he has directed his third Shakespeare play for APS and very pleased with the company's performance.

VIOLA

This was a great start for Poppy Vera's first role with APS. Poppy played Viola with a seemingly natural innocence and naivety that was endearing and this juxtaposed well, the conflicting role of go-between for Duke Orsino and Countess Olivia, with her growing love for the Duke. Appearing confident with her portrayal, Poppy did well to imbue the character of Viola with a gamine countenance that allowed us to believe that she could be mistaken for the boy Cesario. It was pleasingly apparent also, from Poppy's delivery, that she understood the meaning and significance of the lines Shakespeare wrote for Viola/Cesario, which allowed her to speak then rather than simply repeat them, and so gave them the proper resonance.

SEA CAPTAIN/OFFICER

Although neither of these were large parts, Roger Chadbourne made a sterling start to his first Shakespeare play. In both roles, Roger's timing and pace of delivery were very good, measured, and gave an appropriate air of authority to the characters.

ORSINO

Richard Jones presented a most suave and sophisticated Duke Orsino, and one for whom Viola could genuinely fall for. He captured the repressed and somewhat aloof nature of the Duke that was not winning the flamboyant Countess but slowly drew Viola to love him. Richard played well the hesitant reaction of Orsino towards Cesario and the conflict of feelings before the reveal that his page is, in fact, the beautiful Viola.

SIR TOBY BELCH

From the allegedly oldest Sumerian joke of 1,900BC to the infamous campfire sketch in *Blazing Saddles* all the world loves a fart joke, and Carl Davies delivered perfectly, farting subtly to great amusement of all the audience. I was as impressed by his comic timing and larger than life personality on stage as I was by his eructation, and the theatre studio filled with energy as he alternately roistered and sparred with Sir Andrew Aguecheek and flirted with Maria. Carl appeared supremely confident on the boards, almost as if he had lived this role on many an occasion, and his relationship with Sir Andrew and with Feste brought great humour and laughter to the evening.

MARIA

I loved Bev Taylor-Wade in this role of Maria. She brought the stayed, matronly formality appropriate to maid of a Countess along with a mischievous streak to play a cantrip on the pompous Malvolio after he disturbs her revels with Sir Toby. From such formality it meant that her delight of misrule, perfect for the traditional Twelfth Night revels, contrasted beautifully with Feste's foolishness. It was also Bev's playing as the perfect foil to Sir Toby, which made his character all the more comical, enhanced by her ability to speak so much through her eyes and her expression.

SIR ANDREW AGUECHEEK

Freddie Wopat may not have previously trodden the boards in Sherborne, but he looked too comfortable in Sir Andrew's discomfort and too much at ease in Sir Andrew's agitation to have not acted previously. Performing the part as a

big schoolboy, demonstrating great expression, great anxiety, and genuine childish glee, Sir Andrew Aguecheek was a classic comic role played to perfection. From breaking the fourth wall in a cleverly subtle manner, to bringing pathos with the line “I was adored once, too” accompanied by a thousand-yard stare, showed Freddie bringing a real depth to what could otherwise have been a cartoonish buffoon.

FESTE

“Better a witty Fool than a foolish wit.” And so Feste is no fool with a pig’s bladder but is cut from the mould of those Oxbridge graduates that turn their learning and talent to comedy. Appropriately then, Mary Flanagan bestrode the stage with the Access-All-Areas pass that Shakespeare gives to Feste, allowing her to fool about in all scenes and with all characters. Mary turned in sharp observation to the lovers, held her own carousing with the knights by matching their comic performance, and brought spiteful mockery to the imprisoned Malvolio with a devilish delight. Quite a skilled breadth of emotion and personality. After all of that, Mary demonstrated that she has a beautiful singing voice, and brought us lyrical guidance that sweetened the cynical verses as she sang about the passing of youth into disillusionment and death.

OLIVIA

Every comedy needs a grounding to prevent it descending into farce, and so it was in the strength of character that Sheenu Das brought to the Countess. Her Olivia exuded a calmness and confidence that stood out from those around her to give her an air of authority that was perfect for her character. Sheenu delivered her lines with a natural inflection that underscored her dialogue and helped us to understand the desires and intentions of the Countess.

MALVOLIO

Patrick Knox gave us a wonderfully Pythonesque version of Malvolio that suited this setting. His large chain of office added perfectly to the pompous and supercilious steward that Patrick played so well, and even his wayward moustache brought a piquancy to his appearance. Patrick made us believe that Malvolio thought himself amusing at the expense of others, when the reverse

was true, but was not such a vile character that the audience was without sympathy for him. This meant that despite the laughter that met his excellent physical and emotional appearance in the prison cells, we believed his heartfelt final threat that *"I'll be revenged on the whole pack of you!"*

ANTONIO

Robert Bridges looked and sounded the part of a man who had been a long time at sea, and he tells a great tale. Playing the role with a strength and confidence of one used to dealing with hardship, Robert's Antonio was a friend that anyone would want in times of adversity.

SEBASTIAN

I'm so pleased that Lewis Willis listened to his family members and stepped up to play the role of Sebastian. It was an excellent casting call by his family, and Lewis impressed from his first appearance with Antonio which felt like natural companionship, to his dramatic look to the audience upon his love-at-first-sight meeting of Olivia. Whilst obviously meant to be a young man, Lewis played this role with a confidence and maturity that belied his years and gave credence to his menacing over Sir Toby and Sir Andrew.

CONCLUSION

I am never disappointed coming to the Sherbourne Studio Theatre and neither, so it seems, are their audience. Speaking to those attending, they universally loved the play, had laughed uproariously, and thoroughly enjoyed the evening. It is a credit to the whole company that this comedy, within which there are also some tense and awkward cruelties, was a roaring success.

CHH