

ASC: Twelfth Night 2008



"If music be the food of love, play on."

Twelfth Night is frequently performed, so the story is familiar. But that hardly matters because the pleasure is in the performance, especially at the **American Shakespeare Center**. The production I saw last night was probably the best I've seen. Certainly it was the funniest. The packed house was in stitches by the antics of Toby Belch, Sir Andrew, Malvolio, and the Fool, as well as the entire **cast**.

This is one of the mistaken-identity plays, which often requires a stretch of the imagination, but here Alyssa Wilmoth and Chaney Tullos as Viola and Sebastian look sufficiently alike (thanks to costumes and hair adjustments) that the confusion is almost believable. Both arrive at court, Viola in disguise as Cesario, and Duke Orsino and Countess Olivia are charmed, but for the wrong reasons. It all works out in the end, of course. See the **Director's Notes**

One scene stands out as particularly uproarious, partly because of the acting and partly the staging. Malvolio, played brilliantly by John Harrell, is in the garden pondering his duties and his run-in with Sir Toby Belch, played with much drunken enthusiasm by James Keegan. He discovers the letter forged by Maria, and puzzles over its meaning. Meanwhile, Sir Toby, and Sir Andrew (Gregory John Phelps), along with Fabian (Thomas Keegan), are hiding in the boxwoods, which in the production are plastic branches that the actors have instructed audience members to hold. This leads to some very funny business with the branches and with Malvolio nearly catching sight of his tormenters. Hilarious stuff.

Other standout performances here are Alyssa Wilmoth as Viola/Cesario and John Pasha as Antonio. Like the King Lear production, this one will merit a second viewing

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ASC: More Twelfth Night 2008



Because the current **American Shakespeare Center** season (Twelfth Night, King Lear, Richard II, and Measure for Measure) is coming to a close and next week will be a busy one for me, I took the opportunity last night to return to the Blackfriars Playhouse to see **Twelfth Night** a second time. (I've already seen the other three shows twice each.)

It was a good crowd for a Wednesday night, since it was Thanksgiving Eve. Last week I was told that they had scheduled this comedy for holiday performances (the company is also doing a matinee of it on Friday) in order to appeal to families, and it did seem to me that there were a number of kids in the audience. In fact, there was a large family group seated right in front of me that appeared to be three generations. The youngest generation went up to occupy the gallant stools on one side of the stage: three little girls ranging in age from about three to six (although I'm not good judging ages). They were as cute as could be and they were equipped with snacks and drinks, and I wondered how they would handle the play once it got going. The pre-show entertainment was a good test, and they passed with flying colors. (James Keegan, who plays Toby Belch in the play, pretends to be drunk during the pre-show, and he had a brilliant ad lib. He pointed to the girls and said, "Is anyone else seeing triple?" Hah!). At some point fairly early in the play the youngest girl gave up and went to sit on various family laps, but the other two stayed the whole time and were frequently pulled into the action. That's pretty normal for this theater, but it seemed funnier and cuter because the girls were so small and adorable. At one point, Thomas Keegan

was hiding behind one of the girls and did so by holding her on his lap. Thomas is a big guy, so that was funny enough, but then when it was his cue to move he got up and carried the girl with him, as if he'd forgotten she was there, only returning her to her seat as an "afterthought." Funny stuff, and of course the girls' family was eating it up. Too bad there's no photography allowed in the theater, but they'll remember this play for a long time.

Oh, right, the play. It was great. I loved it **the first time**, and loved it again. The staging is masterful and the performances are universally on target. John Harrell makes a great Malvolio, Alyssa Wilmoth is wonderful as Viola/Cesario, and the trio of Sir Toby Belch (James Keegan), Sir Andrew Aguecheek (Gregory Jon Phelps), and Fabian (Thomas Keegan) are all terrific, as is Sarah Fallon as Olivia, around whom the story really revolves

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