

# Superb performances overcome 'Night's' long length

By Allan Swafford  
Special to the Advertiser

Among Shakespeare's plays, "Twelfth Night, Or, What You Will" is a prime candidate for a production that aims at the time frame the playwright suggested in "Romeo and Juliet," that is, the "two hours' traffic of our stage." Unfortunately the just-opened ASF production seems more a traffic jam. In spite of several fine-to-brilliant performances, the production snails along for almost three hours.

Why? In part it is simply pacing which needs acceleration. But the more serious problem is a 1930s production concept which is the narcissistically demanding center of

attention and master shaper of the play. The intrinsic pace of the work is interrupted by the demands of the concept.

Thus, the production, arranged in two acts, precedes each act with a period dance sequence, lovely to watch in itself but adding nothing to the play except a good 15 minutes running time, a time further extended by interspersed songs. More damaging is the concept's effects on character and action. In a notable instance of concept skewing character for instance, Maria (Quincy Tyler Bernstein), herself a noblewoman and the Countess Olivia's lady-in-waiting, becomes a perky, sassy, sitcom parlor-

## REVIEW

## WANT TO GO?

- **What:** "Twelfth Night" by William Shakespeare
- **When:** Repertory productions run through July 21 at varying times
- **Where:** Alabama Shakespeare Festival
- **Admission:** \$20-\$30 based on date
- **Information:** 271-5353

In its favor the production effectively solves some typical and traditional "Twelfth Night" problems. While Viola and Sebastian are somewhat younger than the Duke and Countess, we have no embarrassing sense of disparity in ages, no May/December lasciviousness.

Defying recent trends, this production's Malvolio is not made a symbolic victim of sadistic maleficence; rather, the wonderfully funny subplot is played for the laughs it should generate. However, the troubling problem of Antonio's probable execution is simply ignored.

Several arresting performances stud this production. James Yaegashi's Sir Andrew is a fetchingly comic

'Night' Page 8D

## 'Night': Performances brighten lengthy play

From Page 1D

portrayal. Pilar Witherspoon is an unusually convincing Viola/Cesario. Jennifer Tucker's Olivia is a charming enchantress. John Woodson's Sir Toby, in spite of being snared at times in the net of this concept, is monumentally funny.

The unknowing, however, could easily leave this production with the feeling that the whole play is about Feste the Fool and Malvolio because they dominate their scenes.

In the most successful choice of the production, Monica Bell is cast as Feste. Hers is a simply radiant performance. Wearing a succession of outrageous costumes she matches their vibrant colors in a scintillating portrayal.

John Preston, as Malvolio, subtly manifests the facets of this curiously complex character. He is funny even when momentarily acknowledging the Malvolio-as-victim possibility, the wounded soul facet. These two shake off the production's general lethargy.

Director Kent Gash has given us a mixed "Twelfth Night," but it is a production that invites thought even in opposition. On the whole it is more blessed with assets than marred with liabilities.

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