

Twelfth Night breathes modern fun into ancient script

theatre review

Twelfth Night

Runs 27 March–5 April
Directed by Mary Vingoe
Starring Ava Jane Markus, Richard Lee, Jenny McKillop, and Scott Shpeley
Timms Centre for the Arts

ELIZABETH VAIL
Arts and Entertainment Staff

At first glance, this Studio Theatre production of *Twelfth Night* offers nothing new about William Shakespeare’s early-17th-century play. There’s no attempt to put a particular “spin” on the story, such as transplanting the script to a more recent era in order to demonstrate how the pratfalls, double entendres, agony, and angst of Shakespeare’s work still remain relevant today—something the Citadel’s recent version of *Macbeth* did with the Second World War. Similarly, the costumes and sets, designed by April Viczko, retain the visuals of the 17th century, with high ruffled collars, puffy shirts, and tights all around.

Though the set and costumes appear to be traditional, however, they have a few added tweaks that give them a deeper nuance, much like the performances themselves. While the set is bare but for a few pillars, they all lean slightly to the right, giving the play part of its skewed, off-kilter tone. The costumes play on exaggerated notions of gender with their brightly coloured, protruding codpieces. One particularly creative outfit is Olivia’s gown, which starts out as an all-black mourning garment and is slightly

modified scene by scene to reveal happier colours underneath as she regains her belief in love.

The delightfully off-centre eccentricity of the staging is perfect for the chaotic romance that unfolds in *Twelfth Night*. Viola, played by Ava Jane Markus (a dead ringer for Bryce Dallas Howard) washes up on the shores of Illyria after a terrible shipwreck. Alone in a strange land, she disguises herself as a boy named Cesario and hires herself out as a page to Duke Orsino (Richard Lee), whom she proceeds to fall in love with. The Duke, on the other hand, falls for Olivia (Jenny McKillop), who in turn loves Cesario. This incurs the wrath of Olivia’s drunken uncle Sir Toby (Ryan Parker), who was hoping to hook Olivia up with his companion, Aguecheek (Jennifer Fader).

Part of the reason *Twelfth Night* succeeds is because the elegance and tradition in the set and costume design leaves the play’s tongue-in-cheek vitality and whimsical exuberance entirely up to the actors to deliver, which they do in abundance.

The performances are, for the most part, flawlessly acted. Shakespeare’s words are recited with the speed and enthusiasm of a ’30s screwball comedy with a mixture of ancient wit and modern interpretation, such as a blink-or-you’ll-miss-it *Brokeback Mountain* reference. Particular attention must be paid to Parker, with his grandstanding portrayal of perpetual lush Sir Toby Belch; Scott Shpeley, who, besides his portrayal of the agile-tongued fool Feste, acts as the production’s music arranger and composer; and especially Markus, who injects folly and ridiculousness into a role



KYLER ZELENY

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often played as a straight foil.

The only hitch in the casting is the odd choice of women in roles intended for men. I’m not sure whether this was intended to be ironic—especially in the case of casting Elena Porter as the sexually ambiguous Antonio—or was simply due to a lack of male graduates

in the BFA acting class of ’08. Porter as Antonio and Kirsten Rasmussen as Fabian do as well as they can with lowered voices and egregiously fake facial hair, but Jennifer Fader as Aguecheek falls flat. The only truly weak link in the acting chain, she acts not so much like a man (even a dim-witted, meek

one like Aguecheek) as a dumpy child pretending to be one.

However, this is merely a tiny flaw in this otherwise spectacular rendition of Shakespeare’s work. The setting may be 17th-century, but the actors inject the story with vitality, humour, and enthusiasm that’s entirely modern.

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