

***Twelfth Night* by William Shakespeare**

The Court Theatre

9 August – 6 September 2025

Review by Robyn Peers

Twelfth Night, Shakespeare's tale of mistaken identity, mischief and mayhem is one of the Bard's most popular comedies - a brilliant choice for the first Elizabethan play in the new Court Theatre.

Twins, Viola and Sebastian are shipwrecked and washed up, far apart in a neighbouring country, unaware of the other's survival. Viola, aware of her vulnerability, disguises herself as a young man, Cesario, and seeks a job with the local Duke, Orsino. The Duke tasks Cesario with courting the unresponsive Lady Olivia on his behalf. Olivia falls for the beautiful Cesario, Viola falls for the Duke and all is complicated. Meanwhile Sebastian, saved by the sailor Antonio, is living in a nearby city.

This somewhat unlikely combination of love triangles is relieved by the knockabout comedy provided by the denizens of Lady Olivia's household, her maid Maria, her uncle, the well named Sir Toby Belch and his mate, Sir Andrew Aguecheek. Trying in vain to keep the miscreants in order is her steward Malvolio.

The physicality of the performances that director Alison Walls has encouraged provide huge amusement. The beautifully choreographed knockabout scenes kept the audience chortling. Kathleen Burns, Dan Bain and William Burns are to be commended for the energy, vigour and belief they bring to these roles. Jonathan Hendry as Malvolio is superb as the disapproving steward trying, without success, to keep control.

The comedy achieved by this trio as Malvolio is deceived is a total delight, with special mention to Maria hiding behind an umbrella pole.

Hendry brings huge poignancy to his role as he follows the rogues' instructions to his ultimate downfall. He elicits our sympathy as we realise that despite the comedy, bullying is an age-old phenomenon.

Feste, the fool, is the all-round court entertainer of the show. Hester Ulllyart brings a welcome contemporary touch to this character with her original interpretations of Shakespeare's songs. Her delivery of these was relished by the audience.

Victoria Abbot is a pleasing Viola, fresh, youthful and vibrant as she steers the story forward, glancing longingly at James Kupa, her Duke, and fighting off the advances of Emma Katene, Lady Olivia. It is a big role which she accomplishes seamlessly, while Nic Kyle as her twin has less stage time to prove his worth. The denouement allows Kyle to showcase his ability as we see him grappling to comprehend the events which have unfolded.

Mark McEntyre's minimalist set keeps action to the fore. Curved sofas, long opaque drapery and a beach umbrella transform simply to provide the spaces and places to tell the story effectively. I believe Shakespeare would approve.

Jenny Ritchie's costumes are a triumph, a true rainbow confection. She uses solid colour to distinguish each character, relieved by Feste's sparkling nightclub attire and harlequin motley for the effete Sir Andrew. The design compliments each character from Orsino's lordly flowing drapery to Sir Toby's rough and ready bloke's apparel. The twins, despite the height differential, with their identical attire and matching caps, make the fun (if unlikely) mistaken identity sequences work well. Maria is stunning in her tight fitting electric blue but the gasp moment came with the transformation of Olivia from her mourning garb into the stunning vivid red gown clearly designed to accentuate her beauty and stun Sebastian.

The opening night audience were loud in their enjoyment of this entertaining interpretation of the classic play. This production, directed with aplomb by Alison Walls, is setting a great precedent for Shakespearean drama in The Court Theatre's future.