

# British Theatre Guide

News, reviews, features and podcast on theatre across the UK

## Twelfth Night

William Shakespeare

Bristol Old Vic and Royal Lyceum Theatre Edinburgh

Bristol Old Vic

17 October–17 November 2018

Wils Wilson takes the gender confusion at the heart of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* to new levels in her direction of this flamboyant new co-production for Bristol Old Vic and The Royal Lyceum Theatre Edinburgh.

Ana Inés Jabares-Pita's flowing costumes of flowery kaftans, shimmering flares and platform shoes set us somewhere in the summer of love. Framed within a psychedelic house-party in a run-down country pile, casting is apparently spontaneous. Shipwrecked twins Viola and Sebastian are both played by women who look nothing alike. In Elizabethan times, Viola was a man pretending to be a woman pretending to be a man; now Jade Ogugua's androgynous incarnation becomes a woman disguised as a man, while Joanne Thomson's crisp Sebastian is a man played by a woman.

Sir Toby Belch becomes Lady Tobi and Duke Orsino a trouser role. Shakespeare's original conceit for a riotous Epiphany celebration is compounded, but it only adds to the enjoyment of this exuberantly entertaining interpretation. The additional layers bring even greater fluidity to the central love triangle between Viola, Colette Dalal Tchantcho's swaggeringly theatrical Orsino and Lisa Dwyer Hogg's lovelorn but fiery Olivia.

There's no shortage of bumptious physical comedy, particularly whenever Dawn Sieviewright as hard-drinking Lady Tobi and Guy Hughes as her ungainly sidekick Andrew Aguecheek crawl out of the stage's various orifices or descend from the balcony by way of a fireman's pole.

In a play that celebrates music as the food of love, Meilyr Jones's compositions infuse the play. With live performances melding old and new, they reset the mood in an instant, from Lady Tobi's strutting punk to nimble Feste's (Dylan Read) dreamy traditional melodies and the wistful longing that underlies Aguecheek's hilarious yet poignant ballad proclaiming the most fleeting of loves.

Spirits may be playful, involving the audience in high-jinks, but the pain and desperation of unrequited passion is still in evidence. Christopher Green portrays Malvolio as a bowler-hatted, tightly buttoned bureaucrat whose transformation into a yellow-stockinged rock icon takes the concept of cross-gartering to new extremes. Yet, for all his outrageous posturing, Malvolio's heartfelt suffering at the hands of those who trick him lends sympathy for a man who will always be out of step, casting his deceivers in a cruel light.

Some performances are inevitably bigger than others. Yet, there is such joy in the detailing: the pantomime ting of a bell every time a coin is slipped to Feste for his services, the over-the-top eavesdropping in the letter-reading scene and a wind machine fanning Malvolio's newly released golden locks to their full power ballad glory. On occasion, it's overworked but still gives the impression that Wilson has mined every aspect of the play's landscape for potential.

The set-piece ending is warmly appreciated in the auditorium, as Sebastian lands on the island of Illyria causing further consternation and double-takes before true identities are revealed. With [an alternative version currently running at London's Young Vic](#), other *Twelfth Nights* may be available, but this production more than holds its own, one sublime house-party you wouldn't want to miss.

**Reviewer:** [Claire Hayes](#)