

British Theatre Guide

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

Twelfth Night

William Shakespeare

ACT Contemporary Theatre and Seattle Shakespeare

Falls Theatre

7–22 June 2025

First, congratulations to both Seattle Shakespeare and to ACT Contemporary Theatre, who have apparently managed to put together what appears to be a very successful merger of those two companies. [Their first full season](#) will begin with Henrik Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* and include a new adaptation of *The Taming of the Shrew* (*Shrew*), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and other works. The synergy seems quite lively and certainly will be worth seeing over 2024–2025.

But to start things off, the merged company began with a joint production of *Twelfth Night*, one of Shakespeare's craziest gender-switching plays: here identical twins Sebastian (Rhys Daly, who also plays a Lady in Waiting) and Viola (Alegra Batara) get in a shipwreck, wonderfully presented via projections of an angry sea by Ahren Buhmann, beautiful, engaging work that gets things moving quickly.

Once separated, the two twins both go to the nearest country, Illyria, and start having adventures of their own. To survive, Viola dresses as Cesario, literally “little Caesar”, known to Elizabethan audiences as “every man's wife and every woman's husband”, a phrase that exactly describes Viola while dressed as Cesario. Orsino and the cross-dressed Viola soon begin, with horror, to fall in love, problematic for both gender-crossed lovers.

Meanwhile, her brother Sebastian—a name which would have had echoes of St. Sebastian for both medieval and Elizabethan audiences, a saint martyred for being a pretty boy who refused the amorous attentions of a handsome Roman soldier and was pierced with arrows for his refusal—is running around town with a lovesick Antonio, played by sweet-faced Benjamin Neil McCormack, adding to the sexual tension and gender confusion of the plot, very ably directed by Seattle familiar Annie Lareau.

Cesario goes to woo Olivia on Orsino's behalf, but Olivia, not knowing Cesario is really Viola, is having none of it and starts to fall in love instead with Cesario, thinking him a boy. (This is more than crazy of Olivia—she's high above the station of most folks in the play and especially of Cesario / Viola.) And Olivia's factotum, Malvolio, here played as a woman by Jasmine Jean Sim, is tricked into falling in love with Olivia—another inappropriate relationship—by the machinations of Olivia's uncle, Sir Toby Belch (Tim Hyland), and Olivia's servant, Maria (Sarah Harlett), while they're also draining a hapless knight, Sir Andrew Auguecheek, of his funds, pretending that he can marry Olivia. It's a plum role for an older actor, but here it's played a bit younger by Peter Dylan O'Connor.

But the highlight of the show is the two women of Olivia's household, Olivia herself and Malvolia (Amy Thone), as Sir Toby and Maria torment poor Andrew more and more by making him think he needs to duel Cesario, and turn Malvolia sick with love. Sometimes, these Shakespearean

comedies can become so involved and complex, it's almost impossible to keep track of who's doing what to whom. Think of the love potion in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for instance. But not here. Director Lareau keeps everything nice and straight—well, maybe not straight but certainly clear. And we perfectly understand Malvolia's threat to have revenge on all the folks in the play. She's right to be angry; she's been totally misused, just because Maria and Toby are bored.

It's all a mess, but here the period has been moved to the 1930s so that the music in the show (*Twelfth Night* includes the only direct quote of Elizabethan music in all of Shakespeare) could be represented as music from Duke Orsino's bar, with music provided by Pilar O'Connell (Fabian), Malex Reed (Valentine and music including sax), and Cassi Q Kohl (Feste) as well as others in the cast. What a treat that is with period numbers inserted in the show. They're all wonderfully played and sung by this talented cast.

It's a wonderful evening in the theatre, and I look forward to new adventures from the joint company as they move on together in years to come.

Reviewer: [Keith Dorwick](#)