

stage

'Twelfth Night' has an added twist

Audience may be a little confused, but that's the point

BY JENN MCKEE

News Arts Writer

We've all grown accustomed to seeing one actor portray twins in movies and television shows (where usually one is evil). But when the twins are different sexes, and the medium is theater — well, that's something new.

Yet that's precisely what the Brass Tacks Ensemble will do when it presents Shakespeare's comedy "Twelfth Night," featuring actress Elif Wisecup in the roles of both Viola and Sebastian.

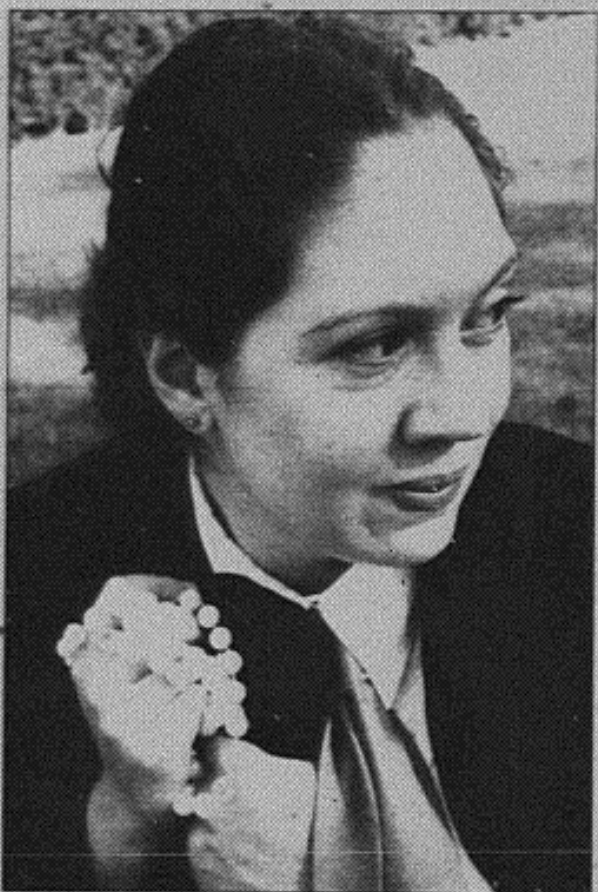
"In a way, it's putting the audience in the characters' perspective, and giving the audience a slight moment of confusion," said director James Ingagiola. "Often as audiences, I think, we get a sense of superiority over the characters because we're seeing things that they're not privy to. And all the sudden, if (audience members) are put in the same spot, even momentarily, it's interesting. It makes them think about their own role in the show."

The play's story begins after a shipwreck that separates Viola from her brother, leaving her stranded on the island of Ilyria. She assumes the dress and identity of a man to serve Orsino, the lord of the island, but she soon falls in love with him while working to advance his suit with an uninterested countess named Olivia.

The countess falls for Viola in the process, however, making things more complicated; and a practical joke makes Olivia's stuffy steward, Malvolio, believe himself to be the object of his ward's affections.

Not only is Malvolio fooled, however, he's temporarily imprisoned and verbally tortured for little more than being a puritanical fuddy-duddy. (Significantly, this play's writing just preceded the time in England when Puritans closed down all the theaters.)

"It's a fairly cruel scene," said



Elif Wisecup plays dual roles in the Brass Tacks Ensemble's "Twelfth Night."

Rob Sulewski, who plays Malvolio. "These people are really having their way with this fellow. And the mistake he makes, the faults in himself, really don't merit the kind of treatment he gets. ... There are some humorous elements there, but it tapers on being tragic."

In this way, "Twelfth Night" is a comedy with a dark lining — an idea that's particularly underscored at the play's conclusion, when Malvolio voices his plans for vengeance.

"I think certain characters, all the sudden, are allowed to see beyond themselves and see beyond their own obsessions — and I think it took that trick with Malvolio to wake him up to the situation," said Ingagiola. "All of the sudden, he has to evaluate

himself ...

"These characters' lives are going to go on after the show is over, and it's a question of whether they decide to go out into the world and live or stay in their own obsessions and self-absorptions and get stuck."

Ingagiola views the complexities of "Twelfth Night" as part of the continuum of Shakespeare's artistic evolution.

"This was his last comedy before he started writing the romances and problem plays," Ingagiola said. "I think he was already veering in that direction with a lot of the elements, such as a lost twin and the shipwreck and all these things. But also ... by mixing this dramatic poignancy with the comedy to make something a little

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deeper."

In addition to casting one person to play Viola and Sebastian, Ingagiola is considering additional innovations.

"We're playing around with the idea of having the fool, Feste, playing all the minor roles as well, so that the fool pervades every scene, if people could only recognize it — but they don't," said Ingagiola. "So the fool is constantly there, but they just see him as whatever function, whatever character he happens to be playing at the time."

Clearly, BTE values experimentation in performance, but the troupe's guiding philosophy — as hinted at by the name — involves getting down to theater basics.

"We say Brass Tacks, and it is Brass Tacks," said Sulewski. "What do you really need to have real theater? Do you need all the glitz and glitter, or do you need actors, a script, the audience — the bare essentials? We invite the audience to participate ... to use their imaginations."

Ingagiola, a founder of BTE, followed the point further: "I think the more stuff that you add, set-wise and costume-wise, and the more you particularize it and make it a specific location, ... (the more) you start to lose the universality," said Ingagiola. "It becomes about this one person."

And while you would think this stripped-down approach to theater might make changing venues — from Riverside to Kerrytown — an easier task, think again.

PREVIEW

'Twelfth Night'

Who: Brass Tacks Ensemble.

What: Shakespeare's comedy about a young woman who — after a shipwreck leaves her on an island's shore — thinks she's lost her brother to the sea. Viola assumes the identity and dress of a man in order to serve a lord named Orsino, but she soon falls in love with him while working to woo his beloved, Olivia (who only has eyes for Viola), in his name.

Where: The Riverside Arts Center (76 N. Huron, Ypsilanti) and the Kerrytown Concert House (415 N. Fourth Ave., Ann Arbor).

When: 8 p.m. Thursday-Saturday (Aug. 10-12 at Riverside, Aug. 17-19 at Kerrytown). Also 2 p.m. Sunday, Aug. 13, at Riverside.

How much: \$12; \$8 for students.

Information: Riverside performance tickets will be available at the door; call 734-330-4615 for information. Kerrytown — performance tickets may be reserved by calling 734-769-2999.

"We try to use the space that we have — that's also part of what we're about," said Sulewski.

"Theater space can be any variety of different things, and the idea is to make use of the space. (We ask) 'What opportunities does each unique architecture give us?' And then we try to make use of that."

How will everything turn out? Watch BTE's "Twelfth Night" and see for yourself.

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