

A fun twist on 'Twelfth Night'

Brass Tacks Ensemble's gimmick adds new dimension to a classic

STAGE REVIEW

BY JENN MCKEE
News Arts Writer

The Brass Tacks Ensemble lives up to its name even in its program design, for the cover simply reads — in plain type on white paper — “Twelfth Night,” by William Shakespeare,” setting the tone for BTE’s no-frills production.

And indeed, the stage is sparsely littered with objects like a bookshelf, two coat trees, a trunk, a small bench, an up-holstered chair and a desk, while a white sheet hangs up-stage center to provide the actors a mini-stage for shadow plays. Costumes, meanwhile, are simple, era-ambiguous, and nearly all black and white.

What’s not so black and white,

of course, are the issues of love and gender in “Twelfth Night.” Viola (Elif Wisecup), dressed as a man, serves Orsino (Rob McFadyen), whom she loves. But Orsino begs Viola to woo his love, Olivia (Melanie Wilson), on his behalf, though Olivia only has eyes for Viola. Meanwhile, Olivia’s servant, Maria (Annie Rhoades), and uncle, Toby Belch (James Ingagiola), play a trick on Olivia’s stuffy steward, Malvolio (Rob Sulewski), leading him to believe that his charge loves him.

Perhaps the most compelling aspect of BTE’s production is the double-casting of Wisecup as both Viola and Viola’s brother, Sebastian, whom she believes to have been lost in a shipwreck. The actress does nothing vocally or visually to discern the one from the other, but the context always quickly

clarifies which sibling we are watching in each scene.

This striking innovation places the audience in the same confused perspective as Shakespeare’s characters, and it provides the play with a whole new source of suspense — that is, how will the troupe pull off the eventual meeting of this brother and sister? (I’ll never tell.)

Also intriguing was the placement of Feste (Patrick Morgan) behind a scrim throughout much of the play, as well as his assumption of several minor roles. Though some of his lines were difficult to hear on opening night, the visual effect of the fool looming over the amorous proceedings seems wholly fitting.

Less successful is the too-familiar vaudevillian slapstick that pervades a few scenes, particularly between Belch and

Sir Artrew Aguecheek (Isaac Ellis); yet these two skilled, charismatic actors do absolutely all they can to sell it. And in general, the show’s cast is solid, with standout performances by Wisecup and Wilson.

Ultimately, director James Ingagiola’s “Twelfth Night” takes admirable risks. Not every one pays off, of course, but the ones that do feel exhilarating.

“Twelfth Night” continues through Sunday at Riverside Arts Center in Ypsilanti, and Thursday through Aug. 19 at Kerrytown Concert House in Ann Arbor. 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. Reach theater critic Jenn McKee at jmckee@annarbornews.com.

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