

Burbage Theatre Strikes Comic Gold with Twelfth Night



Burbage Theatre truly knocks it out of the park with their current production of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night (or What You Will)*. Over the years, I have come to the conclusion that this particular Shakespearean confection should come with a warning label - or at least some sort of a cautionary clause that it only be tackled by professionals who are well versed in how to land a line or set up a pratfall but most importantly also get to the root of the laughter, which is, as we have all learned the hard way, almost always pain.

Much of Shakespeare's beloved comedy hinges on the audience fully buying into the idea that love at first sight can happen. Oh, and random shipwrecks, love notes that are taken at complete face value and fraternal twins who are completely interchangeable. While many of these tropes have become staples of movies and sitcom plots, no one does it better than Shakespeare. And no one does Shakespeare better than Burbage's *Twelfth Night*. Under the expert hand of director Jeff Church, the 12 -person cast delivers on all counts, creating fully realized characters in ridiculously funny situations, examples of inspired physical comedy and moments of true pathos.

While the play is an unrequited love story for most of its many characters, the first act of this production more than succeeds in the sendup of courtships, mixed messages, missed connections and - most importantly - everyone just having a helluva good time.

Our heroine Viola (Alison Russo) finds herself alone in a strange country after a shipwreck kills her brother and the rest of the crew. What's a girl to do? Instead of wallowing in grief, she disguises herself as a man, gets a job with the local Duke (played by a convincing Leo Castro with an emphasis on darkly brooding hotness) and becomes his go-to-guy for wooing the object of his desire, Olivia. Unfortunately, Olivia (a perfectly balanced Allison Crews) is actually the one wallowing in grief after the death of her father and brother. Her raucous uncle, Sir Tony Belch (the always hilarious Tom Gleadow) has other plans, however, egged on by his partner in crime Sir Andrew Aguecheek (a very funny Richard Whitehead). The duo is joined by Olivia's household servants Fabian (deftly played by Gabrielle McCauley) and Maria (played with maniac giggly finesse by Margaret Melozzi) in their quest for shenanigans.

The foil standing solidly in the way of their fun is head of household Malvolio (a star turn by Dillon Medina). Things turn a bit darker when the boozy and fun-loving crew trick Malvolio into dressing and acting like a complete fool in order to impress Olivia. In what is tantamount to the Shakespearean

version of cyber-bullying, they succeed in shaming him to such an extent that Olivia believes him to be mad and banishes him (literally) down a dark hole. They even get the house jester Feste in on the act, further torturing Malvolio with faux tests of his sanity and more.

It is during this second act where the romances proceed accordingly, people presumed dead miraculously reappear, love triumphs into a marriage and yet, there is a change to the tone of the proceedings. While still fun (and funny), the further the group tortures Malvolio, the less Sir Toby enjoys the proceeding, even to the point of uncharacteristically saying, "I would we were well rid of this knavery." It is a testament to the group's desire to find the truth in the script they can portray the darker tones in the proceedings and still mine the script for laughter.

I highly recommend catching this run before it closes; it's a fast, funny free-for-all that also tugs at the heart.

*Remaining performances for Twelfth Night are Friday, March 16 at 8pm, Saturday March 17 at 8pm, Sunday, March 18 at 2pm **with a new added performance Sunday, March 17 at 7pm.** Burbage Theatre is performing at their new space at TEN31 Productions, 249 Roosevelt Avenue, Pawtucket. Discounted tickets available for students. burbagetheatre.org*