

Twelfth night ??? shakespeare in performance assignment

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Twelfth Night ??? Shakespeare in Performance by VSS 11/21/08 Twelfth Night is a Shakespearian comedy about mistaken identity, gender confusion, love and suffering it causes and the foolishness of ambition. I will be comparing Shakespeare's text from Bevington's "The Complete Works of Shakespeare", to both the 2003 film version of Twelfth Night directed by Tim Supple and the 1996 film Twelfth Night directed by Trevor Nunn. Is it more important to follow the text in a Shakespeare film adaptation or the tone?

These are two very different adaptations of Shakespeare's Twelfth Night. Supple's version generally follows Shakespeare's text while Nunn's version is focuses more on the comedic elements than staying true to the text. Supple's fresh approach comes from the multi-ethnic casting choices. These choices add another element of tension and sensuality to the story. In Shakespeare's text we assume all characters are white and the only barriers are gender and class. The focus then is solely on the story at hand. Nunn's version does not mix race and all characters are Caucasian.

Supple however uses three racially segregated groups to tell the story. Orsino and his court are Black, Olivia and her court are White, and Viola/Sebastian are Indian As Supple takes liberties with race, Trevor Nunn takes his liberties in his interpretation of the play, adding and subtracting lines, helping the viewer more easily understand the play, regardless if they have read it before or know the story line. It is clear fairly early on that Nunn's focus is in the comedic elements of the play. Supple takes a more somber, serious approach.

Nunn uses every opportunity; facial expressions, inflections, gestures and inferences, to further the lighthearted and comedic feel throughout the film. Supple's use of the comedy fall awkwardly flat and is sometimes is such a stark contrast to the dark tone that it seems quite out of context. Even before the opening scenes you can already hear the stark differences in the feel of each film. The choice of music styles behind the narration sets the tone and the stage for two very different themes. Supple's music is melancholy and distinctly Middle Eastern. Nunn however uses a folk ballad complete with words, that even though they tell a somewhat sad tale, the lighthearted measure is not at all the melancholy feel that was Supple's choice. We cannot know of course what music type and feel Shakespeare might have chosen, if any, but I would assume that any music used would be of Shakespeare's time period. Shakespeare's direction for the opening scene in Act I scene is simply, "Enter Orsino Duke of Illyria, Curio, and other lords (with musicians)".

Supple's version sets the stage with Middle Eastern music and frequently flashes between scenes of a young Indian male and female (Viola and Sebastian), narrowly escaping some type of militia setting fire to their building and carting away their mother. He then flashing to a scene where a Black Orsino is listening to a performance at his estate. Orsino interjects his first lines "If music be the food of love, play on..." to what appears to be an Indian male playing piano with an Indian female singing opera.

The Indian performers are not unlike Viola and Sebastian in that in their appearance they could be brother and sister, are of Indian decent and are

also performers. I never quite put together the directors meaning of these similarities, to me it just seemed distracting. I did find it interesting how Supple choses specific words to flash and back and forth between his scene with the opera concert and Viola and Sebastians escape from danger. Orsino's line " Me thought she purged the air of pestilence", is followed immediately by a flash to Viola and Sebastian in the bowels of a ship very dirty, cramped.

We are then back to Orsino describing his feelings upon first seeing Lady Olivia, " That instant was I turned into a hart, and my desires, like fell and cruel hounds, E'er since pursue me". We are taken back again to the ship as the narrator explains the crash, then Viola on a small fishing boat with its Captain and small crew. I find it interesting that the director choose to cut on Orsino's word " pursue" to a scene where not only does Viola desire to pursue her brothers whereabouts but her nervousness gives you feeling she may herself be pursued in this new country of Illyria.

Viola proceeds to tell her tale of her lost brother and shows the Captain her brother's picture. The Captain uses lines from Shakespeare's text, " True Madam, to comfort you with chance, I saw your brother, after our ship did split, hold acquaintance with the waves, so long as I could see. " Supple has rearranged the text, omitting some and abbreviating others, while still rendering the same meaning in a more modern conversational way. Viola keeping to the text says to the Captain " For saying so there's gold" and presents the him with a number of gold bangles from her wrist.

Nunn's depiction of Act I is completely different. He opens with a lilting ballad and with narration about the twins Viola and Sebastian and their plight. He explains they are "orphans with only each other". The camera then pans the dining area of a ship where all are guests are white including what appears to be two female performers dressed like Indian maidens. Both are sporting long hair, one with a veil across her face. Both look very much alike and there is no doubt they are twins.

Once the veil is removed you see a moustache (on a girl, Viola) and you realize now, as do the audience on the ship, they are male and female twins. The mood is very light and there is much merriment and laughter. Very subtly during this scene you see a man in sailor attire (Antonio), clearly admiring the young male performer, Sebastian. The narration continues as you watch the ensuing mayhem as the ship is in peril. We witness the twin sister Viola falling from the ship, her brother Sebastian's attempts to rescue her and him being held back by the sailor Antonio.

Antonio eventually loses the battle as the Sebastian jumps overboard to follow Viola. You see a dramatic, Titanic-like scene, where Viola and Sebastian find each other under the water but then are separated, pulled in opposite directions, Viola by the Captain and Sebastian by Antonio. During all this you have the narrator giving background information on the twins and their desperate situation. Up to this point there has been no actual text from Shakespeare spoken. The scene changes to a beach where Viola, the Captain and others are washed upon a beach.

Viola, straight from the text says “ What country friends is this? ” the text follows word for word including Viola’s “ What shall I do in Illyria” line but all lines mentioning the Captain seeing her brother fighting the waves is omitted. Only the line “ Perchance that you yourself was saved” remains. “ Viola then tries to run back into the sea after her brother but the Captain holds her back. There is no mention of Shakespeare’s lines “ For saying so, there’s gold” since the Captain never says he’s seen Sebastian. In keeping with Viola’s established background we now that Viola and her brother Sebastian are not wealthy and would have no gold to bestow. And as Viola is not only destitute but now without her fellow performer and brother, the line “ What shall I do in Illyria” brings on new desperation. We skip to Viola saying Shakespeare’s lines, “ Thou knowest this country” and the Captains “ Ay, madam well”. We then depart from Shakespeare’s text and hear the director’s added lines spoken by the Captain to Viola, “ For merchants, Messaline and this country are at war...the war between their merchants and ours has turned bloody, we must not be discovered in this place”.

As soldiers approach on horseback, we next see them escape through some woods. Narrowly avoiding the soldiers they come upon a funeral and watch in hiding. The Captain explains that this is the funeral of the Lady Olivia’s brother and that she is much distraught. Here also the Captain interjections the story of Orsino the Duke and his pining for Olivia. After a few of Shakespeare’s lines spoken by Viola “ I heard my father speak of him...and he was a bachelor then..... ” the idea comes to Viola to dress as a man.

She's been lovingly carting her only rescued items from the wreck, her brother's clothes and a picture of the two of them, she will dress in his clothes with the Captain's help and vow of secrecy. The desperate, pursued and penniless Viola's decision to awe and entertain the melancholy Duke with her many talents seems to make sense. In Supple's version and Shakespeare's, it appears that Viola has perhaps some title and even gold. Supple shows scenes of the Captain taking Viola to a tailor and having a suit made specifically for her using her gold.

I wondered why, if Viola had gold she did not seek transportation back to her original destination? But then, I wondered the same thing when reading Shakespeare's text. Nunn has used a significant portion of the film to establish Viola's talents as a performer and that she has in performance at least, previously impersonated a man. Supple sticks closer to the text and does not give us any historical information on either Viola or her brother except later in the film where there is a flashback to her father portrayed as a diplomat slain in the street.

In Shakespeare's Act I Scene V we've already been introduced to Olivia's drunk Uncle, Sir Toby, but after Uncle Toby describes the "gentleman" at the gate there is direction for Toby to belch and say "A plague o' these pickled herring". In Supple's film the text is followed word for word but instead of a belch, Sir Toby passes wind, long and very loudly. Olivia and Feste laugh, but as this is such a departure from the previous scene depicting a Catholic-like church atmosphere and no real camaraderie shown between Olivia and any of her court, it falls untrue and like forced humor.

This same scene by Nunn is similar in that it's in a church but with no structured rituals like catholic communion depicted by Supple. Nunn has Sir Toby enter, say the same lines and belch and it is comical because you've already been exposed to his lighthearted albeit intoxicated demeanor earlier on. He is portrayed as a happy drunk as opposed to Supple's sad drunk. The scenes of confrontation and then revenge or trickery against Malvolio by Sir Toby, Sir Andrew, Maria and Feste, stick quite close to Shakespeare's text in both films but are worlds apart in the way they are portrayed.

Both Nunn and Supple's version has the serious Malvolio giving his famous speech " My Masters, are you mad? Or what are you? Have you no wit manners nor honesty but to gabble like tinkers at this time of night? " While both are quite believable it's the response by the other actors that vastly differs, not in words per se but in their delivery. Its not what they say but how they say it. In Supple's version the character's express such distaste and almost hate for Malvolio that you'd think they were plotting to kill him not simply embarrass or make fool of him.

In contrast, Nunn's version shows character's who although they are being chastised can barely contain their drunken laughter. And when devising their scheme against Malvolio it seems more good natured fun at his expense, nothing malicious to cause anything more serious than bringing Malvolio a bit down off of his high horse. As the play progresses Shakespeare's text as well as both films depict Cesario unwittingly winning the affections of the Lady Olivia, but when the marriage takes place Supple has Olivia and Cesario

(really Sebastian) consummate their union while Shakespeare and Nunn do not.

I find Supple's version awkward as there is no on-screen chemistry between them and it seems out of character for the not-so-aggressively played real Sebastian, who's only just met Lady Olivia. Shakespeare ends with the discovery of Malvolio's injustices as does Nunn's version and both end with Feste singing the ballad with the refrain, "For the rain it raineth every day". Nunn also used this song in the beginning of the film during the stormy scene where Viola and Sebastian are overboard and the ship's fate is grim. Supple chooses to insert this scene right after the Cesario character and Sebastian appear for the first time together. Once discovered by Olivia the Malvolio issue causes major weeping on her part but only once Malvolio exits, she doesn't appear to be all that moved when facing Malvolio himself. It is then that the film ends with Sebastian and Olivia reconciling as does Orsino and Viola. Supple's version of Twelfth Night is bold and certainly original. The undercurrent of race is subtle but it definitely permeates through out the film. This adds much more drama.

I think his multi-racial casting also adds unspoken racial bias on behalf of the viewer. Although there are never any verbal inferences to race, one has to wonder what the director expected to portray. Is he trying to say that society can accept a relationship between a White woman and an Indian more so than the broader jump of a relationship between a White woman and Black man? Perhaps he is eluding to fact that a Black man's relationship with

someone closer to his own color, like an Indian is more likely to be successful than a Black man to a White woman?

These may be considerations the director had but really were not a concern of mine while watching the film. Supple made a number of choices regarding film angles and scenery that I found just odd. His portrayal of the view from Orsino's substantial balcony looked like a cheaply painted backdrop of a sunset from a high school production. The large sparse rooms seemed void of any personality or time period. This in contrast to the much cluttered and decorated Olivia estate where at least she appeared to live in a real place with real things.

I hated that he chose to use nudity by having Orsino stand up naked away from the camera and that I swear it looked like Viola (as Cesario) almost snickered out of character when glancing at what would have been from her view, his manhood. My strongest criticism is that the film had a very serious tone throughout, appearing like Supple went out of his way to avoid Shakespeare's comedic element to this play. Not a single character, not even the fool, seems remotely jovial or upbeat and any tomfoolery or laughter seems to have a mean twist at someone else's expense.

I did not bond with any of the characters and consequently did not particularly care if in the end their lives were happy or reconciled. I felt some of the casting choices (race aside), were very poor. The choice of Viola, and her appearance as a male, was never in my minds eye convincing. The supposedly beautiful Olivia, I found lacking in beauty and found her rather unappealing all together as a character. The choices Supple makes, in my

opinion, have changed the play from a comedy to very dull romance. Nunn's choice to elaborate on the background of Viola and Sebastian was genius.

This choice allows him to tie together how close they are. Nunn shows them having fun performing, and integrates that Viola has some experience with disguising herself as a man while performing. I also liked the feeling that we were secretly privy to the adoring glances Antonio lovingly send toward Sebastian on the ship. This insight later makes his obsession with Sebastian make more sense. I like that Nunn chose to make Viola and Sebastian poor so that it is in desperation that Viola falls back on impersonating a male as her choice to survive.

The cast Nunn chooses is just spot on, although I had my doubts about Ben Kingsley playing the fool. Kingsley does a marvelous job continually weaving in and out between being a witty word-dueler and a comic. Even Malvolio's character was humorous. When he runs after Viola to give her Olivia's ring, he isn't catching up fast enough so he grabs someone's bike, and rides it comically wobbling to get to Olivia. Once he catches her he puts the kickstand up and of course the bike falls over.

Malvolio's character is believable and quite endearing in the scene where he is wooing Olivia in his yellow socks. You feel bad for him when his adorations are not returned. All the characters are likable and even when the trick is played out upon Malvolio, there is not the level of malice that you feel in Supple's version. I would not change anything in Nunn's version of the play as I enjoyed it very much from the character and music choices to the

comedy and narration. Supple's version may have stayed truer to the text but Nunn's version stayed truer to the comedic character of the play.

Nunn gave me enough Shakespeare to appreciate the words, but not so much that I struggled with the plot. I cannot say that for Supple's version. I feel the seriousness of the way the lines were expressed strayed far from the comedy that Shakespeare wrote. Supple never really engaged me in the film, I was never drawn in. You could have turned it off in the middle and I'd not have pondered where he went with the characters. I was turned off by the seriousness of all of the characters and with the mean spirited interpretation of the trick played on Malvolio.

I disliked that almost no emotion was exuded by Olivia upon her discovery of the injustice done to Malvolio. My directorial changes to Supple's version would be to use the comedic lines to lighten the mood and to have Orsino's character as well as Viola and Olivia, show more humor or at least less seriousness. Also, the fool, Feste was in no way entertaining or jovial nor did he do justice to the clever bantering of words penned by Shakespeare for that purpose. Supple's version I disliked in almost all respects although I do applaud him for his originality in his interpretation of race.

I believe his choice to make such a dark, serious, non-comedic version was unfortunate and ultimately was the basis for my overall displeasure with the film. I loved Nunn's version of the play, both for keeping it a comedy and for entertaining me. I got lost in the characters and was happy when they were all reconciled in the end. The story was told and laid out in such a way that I could relate to the characters and they seemed real to me. In the end I

believe Nunn's choice to follow the comedic tone was more successful than
Supple's extensive use of more of Shakespeare's text.