

TWELFTH NIGHT

Director's notes

This is Shakespeare's comic masterpiece. Shakespeare himself acknowledges as much as after this play he wrote no more pure comedies, he had mastered the form and takes it to its logical conclusion: a type of chaos which reflects the human condition as faithfully as any tragedy. This play breaks the rules even of Shakespearian comedy let alone classical comedy: there is no central character, but a host of overlapping characters. There is no true happy ending, despite the central characters pairing off in marriage we never see Viola as woman, we never set off to the weddings, and above all the finale is compromised by Malvolio's cry for revenge and the long sad song of Feste. No other comedy ends with a song let alone one of deep melancholy.

So what lies at the heart of this spell binding play? Love is the answer. But Shakespeare offers us a very personal almost revolutionary view of this most powerful emotion: love lies within us, it searches for the object of its affection and that can be anyone, any gender, any social rank, any age. So love is something that has to be satisfied, and can strike "like the plague" as Olivia notes. To allow this force to shape our lives is seen by Shakespeare as positive, albeit dangerous. Olivia, Sebastian, Antonio and Viola are all in love within minutes of meeting the object of their love. Orsino realises the object of his love has shifted very swiftly despite obsessing for Olivia. Even Sir Toby marries Maria, a servant and beneath him. Malvolio is the exception, yes he is swept away by a type of love but in his corrupted love we see the warning that Shakespeare issues: love cannot be about status, about self; it must be open and giving. Malvolio is a wonderful comic creation, vain and self-centred, a puritan who hates all forms of expression and passion until he falls for the very thing he despises. Too often productions of TWELFTH NIGHT make Malvolio into a doddering pompous butler, foolish but not dangerous. But Shakespeare calls him a Puritan at least three times in the play, and the Puritans were the deadly enemies of theatre and laughter and all that Shakespeare promotes. They will close the theatres a few decades after his death and ban music and dancing and maypoles in the name of fundamentalist religion. So Shakespeare sets about dismantling a Puritan, and does so with great skill and at times harshly. If Malvolio is only a pompous butler this is too cruel and so the play often becomes confusing as we switch sympathy to the abused Malvolio just when Shakespeare wishes us to confront something larger – the perversion of love and the denial of life in all its glorious filth. It's useful to focus on the last few lines of this great play, often ignored in the desire of productions to offer a happy ending of united couples. Olivia and Orsino are deeply upset by Malvolio's entrance and calls for revenge. They postpone the weddings, they send Feste after Malvolio to reconcile their abused steward. Why is this so often ignored? Why is the last song of Feste not to Malvolio? Is not final unanswered question of Shakespeare: can Malvolio change or is he left for ever crying for revenge?

"If music be the food of love, play on!" is the most famous line in the play and music feeds love and love grows into a great force that no one can withstand, but all may corrupt. We must allow ourselves to be human and relish our humanity, which is itself a mix of the male and female, both around us and within us. To deny that is to deny our own nature. This is the fertile ground upon which

Shakespeare plants his greatest comedy and it presents a challenge to us all today.