'Midsummer madness' abounds in university's Shakespeare comedy

Written by
Tom Jones
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Shakespearean purists may look in disbelief, but avid theatergoers just may be delighted with directors Walt Jones' and Megan Guidarelli's take on William Shakespeare's classic comedy, "Twelfth Night," as presented by the Colorado State University's School of the Art.

Currently playing at the University Center for the Arts, the production is a delight from the first stormy ship-wrecking scene. While strong, the set, staging and lighting initially lulls the audience into believing that what is to come might be just another production of Shakespeare. Not so.

Characters - all women - soon fill the stage. In Shakespeare's time, all roles were traditionally played by men. The tables are now turned, with women playing all the roles in the gender-bending twist of theatrics.

The situation is doubly challenging, as the play itself is about a woman masquerading as a man.

Shipwrecked on the Adriatic coast of Illyria is Viola, who believes that her twin brother, Sebastian, has been killed in the storm. She pretends to be a man and takes the position of a young page under the name of Cesario, in the service of the Duke Orsino. Erin Fried is good as the woman pretending to be a man. Sarah Navratil has a more difficult role, as she is the macho Orsino. Navratil cleverly takes an overly manly stance, complete with crotch-scratching and self-importance.

Orsino is unsuccessful in gaining the affection of Lady Olivia, whose father and brother have recently died and who doesn't appear to be interested in the Duke or any other suitors. Alas, Olivia (skillfully played by Meghan Connor) believes Cesario to be a man, and is immediately smitten. And so it goes.

"Twelfth Night" is one of Shakespeare's most successful comedies. The title takes its name from the midwinter festivities of
Elizabethan England, just prior to Epiphany. Citizens are tired of winter and need a break for some revelry, including parties, robust singing, cross-dressing and generally making merry. Mistaken identities are rampant, and there isn't much care about who is really who we think they are. The subtitle for the play has long been "What You Will," leaving anything you desire to be acceptable.

While Orsino, Viola and Olivia are the leads, some supportive players steal the spotlight. Caty Pucci is very good as Sir Toby Belch, Olivia’s uncle. She takes on Toby’s characteristics as a short, squat drunk, quite worthy of his name, “Belch.” Elizabeth Nodich shines in the role of Malvolio, who is also enamored by Olivia. Nodich’s portrayal is a hoot as she allows her comedic talents to shine.

Whereas some of Shakespeare’s plays spew endless familiar quotes such as "O Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo," and "To be or not to be," "Twelfth Night" doesn’t contain such treasures. We do hear, "Then come kiss me, sweet and twenty," "Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon 'em." But the best is said in the midst of the midwinter revelry, "This is very midsummer madness."

Directors Jones and Guidarelli have made no effort to hold the play into Shakespeare’s time period. A musician is on stage throughout, playing the blues and jazz standards on a piano as if in a Las Vegas lounge. George Nelson usually takes that role, with Ryan Marvel playing Fridays in July. They are the only men on the stage.

It is somewhat disconcerting at first to accept the gender-bending transformation, but eventually it becomes completely acceptable, adding greatly to the madness of the entire production.

"TWELFTH NIGHT"
> When: 7 p.m. Thursdays through Sundays through Aug. 27, with a Wednesday evening performance Aug. 24.
> Where: University Theatre, University Center for the Arts, 1400 Remington Street, Fort Collins
> Cost: $8 for general admission. No charge for children ages 7 or younger.
> Information: www.CSUTheatre.com