

"TWELFTH NIGHT" LIKE NON-STOP REVUE

By
L.J.D.

QUESTORS LEAVE RIVALS STONE COLD

SHAKESPEARE like a non-stop revue . . . that is what the Questors gave us when they presented "Twelfth Night" at their Mattock-lane Theatre last Friday and Saturday.

A programme note assured us that Shakespeare's plays were unquestionably written for a method of presentation embodying a swift flow of action from scene to scene. That represents the idealistic side of what the Questors attempted and did. More practically it obviated all those waits between scenes that spoil so many amateur attempts to give Shakespeare a worthy rendering.

If, in view of my original criticism of the selection of this particular play, you expect me to make this notice a scathing piece of work, you are going to be greatly disappointed. I stick to my point that the Questors could very well have delved into that Shakespearean wealth with which most of us are under-familiar but as an example of what can be done with Shakespeare this "Twelfth Night" was an outstanding example.

It had all the other West Middlesex "Twelfth Nights" I have seen, and a good many professional ones as well, stone cold.

INTIMATE TOUCH SECURED

Without taking any liberties with script either in spirit or letter it was spoken in a way that did not drag upon modern ears so much accustomed to speed. Yet nearly every word was given its full value in the important parts as were the majority in those smaller roles whose occupants were not used to this sort of thing.

It had eye-appeal, though the colouring was puzzling, while a more or less permanent setting, suitably adapted to the requirements of each scene, and a stage brought forward beyond the proscenium opening made for intimacy and partially broke down that feeling, which exists all too frequently in the theatre, that audience and players are unrelated to each other.

There was only one interval and only one wait between scenes—and that of no more than a minute. Triumph of back stage work as well as the visible side of presentation.

Again quoting that programme note, the aim was to shave away the whiskers of false tradition that have grown on "Twelfth Night" and to present it as nearly as possible with its original freshness. But with all the merits that the production possessed I cannot see that this ambition was achieved. Rather was "Twelfth Night" invested with one or two more traditions.

BLACK AND WHITE LIGHTLY COLOURED

I have said that the colouring was puzzling. It was as if Mr. Alfred Emmet, who produced, had been influenced by some of those "stunt" productions that presumably he wished his audience to be made to forget. The result I can only liken to a black and white drawing upon which a water colourist has lightly applied his brush. It was a very pleasing effect . . . but hardly Elizabethan. Then some had wigs . . . some had decidedly 1936 hairdressing styles.

And, Mr. Emmet, how on earth could Malvolio read from a blank piece of paper?

Fesk (Mr. Philip Allen) did not really sing . . . he intoned. I suppose it was against what was being attempted to use music that has been written long after "Twelfth Night", but we felt that a chance of combining

the beauty of music with its sister art had been rather ruthlessly thrown away.

ABOUT MALVOLIO

I have often heard it said that "Twelfth Night" stands or falls by Malvolio. Certainly a bad Malvolio would leave a void in the play that others might struggle in vain to cover up, but a good Malvolio does not make a good "Twelfth Night".

In this production Malvolio did not stand out all that much. In fact he did not quite make the most of the scene in which he appears yellow stockinged and cross gartered before Olivia. We did not get nearly the kick out of this scene that we did out of the one in which the plot was laid. Probably Mr. T. S. Saunders, who played the part, requires playing up to. In the latter scene with Sir Toby Belch (Clifford Foreman), Sir Andrew Aguecheek (Mr. Cyril Thomas), and Fabian (Mr. Dudley Clark), enjoying the joke, stage whispering, and clumsily hidden, he got this support—he was inspired to great heights. In the other scene he was fighting a lone battle in the sense that the comedy was on his shoulders and a scene that should have got as many laughs as the other was just a little flat.

The way he kept kissing his fingers to Olivia suggested intoxicated eroticism rather than the forced gestures of a man trying to make a match for position.

FIRST BIG PART SUCCESS

The finest work came from Mr. Foreman whose Sir Toby Belch was substantial, hearty, and, in the rioting, as abandoned as Shakespeare intended. Thank you Mr. Clifford . . . first really big part with the Questors handsomely done.

Just as much in the native spirit of the play was the Aguecheek of Mr. Thomas. Example here of voice, both in tone and manner of delivering the words, being in complete tune with gesture.

Miss Gwendolen Thomas suggested the beauty with which the true rendering of Olivia must be endowed, but she was only the really finished actress when she was able to make use of dramatic pauses; she could not get quite the same feeling into the quick-to-normal speeches. And when she was able to take her time her movements told volumes.

I missed much of the subtlety required in the part of Viola, played by Miss Betty Gray. She was efficient, but there was lacking just that touch of feeling which means everything. And Mr. Fred Greenfield (Orsino) was more of a poetic dreamer than the part requires. Some sort of decision needed, surely, if he had any hope of winning his lady at all.

CARRYING THE AUDIENCE

You must not take all this criticism to mean that I go back one iota upon my earlier statement that this was an outstanding production. The faults that were there and to which I have tried to point, could be overlooked if you were not there to be critical because of the way the Questors made the play carry the audience.

To do this is not given to a great many amateurs. It is an attribute which professionals have and the great unpaid, very often, have not. What will surprise those whose theatre going is confined to farces and thrillers is that this quality could be brought out through a Shakespearean medium. But perhaps they have never realised that "Twelfth Night" has more pep—to use one of their own words—and more real humour than dozens of modern so-called comedies.

The Questors proved it so and that is why, despite an argument that I maintain is still water-tight, I cherish a secret joy that the Questors did choose this play. But don't tell them I have admitted so much!

L.J.D.



Sir Toby Belch (Clifford Forman), Sir Andrew Aguecheek (Cyril Thomas) in the Questors' production.

LAURELS FOR THE QUESTORS

Critics Confounded by
"Twelfth Night"

ENTIRE SUCCESS

The long awaited and much discussed performance of "Twelfth Night" by the Questors took place last Friday and Saturday in their theatre in Mattock-lane, Ealing. The original announcement of this play created considerable public interest and much discussion. There were apparently three schools of thought—those who feared that the alleged unorthodoxy of the Questors would result in Shakespeare distorted for the sake of being different; those who regretted that the Questors had not carried this same unorthodoxy to its logical conclusion and chosen one of the less popular of Shakespeare's plays, and those conservative theatre-goers who doubted the wisdom of amateurs tackling Shakespeare at all.

The performance on Friday revealed that, so far from resenting criticism, the Questors have benefited by it, and it provided an effective answer to each of the three schools. Those who came expecting unorthodoxy were thrown a few sops to keep them quiet; those who come fearing it soon had their fears put at rest, and those staunch Shakespeareans who came dreading the effect of inexperience upon their idol's strokes of genius were mollified long before the interval. Mr. Emmet's production sterred a skilful course between these three main rocks, and the result was a complete triumph for all those who had faith in him and in themselves.

THE MIDDLESEX COUNTY TIMES.

SATURDAY, MAY 16TH,
1936.

STRIKING DRESS DESIGNS.

I can find no suitable words of praise for the dress designs of Audrey Perkins, combining as they did the striking simplicity of the recent "black and white" presentation in the West End with the more elaborate decorativeness of the traditional period costumes. Each dress was an apt comment on the character that it clothed, and at no time were we conscious of any clash either of colour or theatrical effect. The settings of Messrs. Dudley Clark and Alfred Emmet also embodied this skilful compromise, combining a workman-like simplicity with a suggestion of luxury and a suitable background for each type of spectacle. Finally, by the use of spacious apron stage and drawn curtains Mr. Emmet achieved a successful compromise between the Elizabethan convention of no scenery at all and the modern convention of absolute realism. Incidentally, too, he avoided the wearisome waits for changes of scene which have characterised Shakespearean productions in the past, and facilitated a swift continuity of action which added greatly to the evening's success.

The acting provided the finest example of team work that the Questors have yet given us. There was no weakness in any part, and if some stood out more than others it was only because the dramatist had given them greater scope. Gwendolen Thomas contributed an excellent study of Olivia—dignified and graceful when the occasion demanded it, but throwing all restraint to the winds in her artless wooing of Cesario, becoming instead a lovely but lonely young girl, desperate for affection. Shakespeare has put many beautiful words into the mouth of Olivia, and this actress was quick to realise both her opportunities and her responsibilities. The poetry was exquisitely spoken, and the prose was delivered with spirit and point.

Betty Gray's Viola was another carefully studied and beautifully articulated characterisation. All the youthful impetuosity of a rash boy was in her movements, but the love-sick woman was never completely concealed, for all her masculine independence. Her occasional passionate outbursts contrasted excellently with the cold, almost brutal, disdain with which she treated the unfortunate Olivier's advances, and in the duel scene she revealed unmistakable gifts for comedy.

Betty Mercy's Maria bubbled over with vivacity and mischievousness, and fitted exactly into the gay buffoonery of her fellow conspirators. The scene in which the famous plot is laid against Malvolio went with tremendous gusto that owed much of its success to her spirited acting.

MR. T. S. SAUNDERS' TRIUMPH.

I never hope to see a better Malvolio on the amateur stage than that of Mr. T. S. Saunders. He might well have been created by nature to play the part, so completely did he fill it. Every gesture was studied and perfectly timed, every word breathed conceit and comic pomposity. He is the possessor of a rich and colourful voice, which he displayed to its fullest advantage, and his Mephistophelian make up, twisted into a sickly forced smile, did more even than his yellow stockings and cross gartering to convulse the audience during the famous scene. The garden scene was so delightfully handled that I grew impatient with the laughter it provoked lest I should miss one word of it. Surely these two scenes must be the funniest Shakespeare ever wrote.

Sir Toby Belch was played by Clifford Foreman with a fine suggestion of Elizabethan heartiness. Here was the merry, harmless wastrel, beloved throughout the ages, idle and ineffective, loveable, and the best of all companions. He tended to become indistinct in his cups, as well he might, but his buffoonery was masterly. He was ably supported by Cyril Thomas as Sir Andrew Aguecheek—though a more ill-assorted pair it would be difficult to imagine. Mr. Thomas played the part more along the lines of an overdressed stage yokel, punctuating his remarks with a high pitched inane giggle, and acting throughout as if he were rather less than half-witted. This interpretation fitted perfectly into the pattern of the comedy—contrasting well with the nimble wit of Feste and the slow-moving good humour of Sir Toby, and Mr. Thomas never faltered for one moment in his execution of it. Feste was played by Philip Allen with infectious enthusiasm. His physical agility was matched by the verbal dexterity with which he pointed the rather wordy Shakespearean witticisms, and he imparted an impish glee to everything which he did that was completely in character. It was a pity his singing voice was not quite equal to the lovely songs he had to sing; but Mr. Allen can scarcely be blamed for that, and in every other respect his characterisation was faultless.

Compared with the other parts, Orsino's is colourless stuff, but Mr. Fred Greenfield looked and acted every inch a gracious duke, and gave full value to the exquisite verse which it falls to him to speak. Dudley Clarke added a spirited fourth to the conspiratorial trio. Lionel Locke drew a firm sketch of the faithful Antonio, and Laurie Rivers stepped neatly into the shoes of Viola—betraying the same characteristics of fine spirit and meticulous diction. The smaller parts were all competently filled.

As for the play, well, if Shakespeare is to be chosen, surely it is better that we should be given of his best—and this, "Twelfth Night," is universally admitted to be—than to choose an inferior work merely because it is less popular. Performances of Shakespeare have been all too rare in this district in the past; let us be thankful that in the Questors we have a society that can be trusted to make a thoroughly sound job of the few that we are given.

P.B.W.