



Theatre Reviews

***Twelfth Night or What You Will*. Adapted by Roman Pawłowski. Dir. Grzegorz Jarzyna. Zagreb Youth Theater, Croatia.**

Reviewed by *Maria Sławińska**

Love as a Chimera: Shakespeare in Modern Times

The performance of *Twelfth Night or What You Will* in the Zagreb Youth Theatre in co-production with the Dubrovnik Summer Festival is the first production by Grzegorz Jarzyna since he left TR Warsaw, after he decided to quit his position as director of the theatre due to the growing opposition of the acting team. Jarzyna had been an influential creator of the Warsaw stage for the last 25 years, and one wonders how he will pursue his creative career. Is the performance in Zagreb an escape from his hostile Polish environment, or is it just the realization of long-term plans?

One thing is certain: the performance of *Twelfth Night* directed by Jarzyna perfectly shows how to modernize Shakespeare's themes. In this process the director's collaboration with Roman Pawłowski, who created an innovative adaptation, was extremely important. The general shape of the stage events invented by Shakespeare was preserved, but the impishness of his comedies was doubled here, manifested in the change of the characters' identities. Pawłowski preserved only a few minor fragments of the original text, and the creators defined their production as only inspired by Shakespeare's play. As Juliusz Kydryński observes in his afterword to *Twelfth Night* in the 1983 edition of the play (in Maciej Słomczyński's translation), Shakespeare wrote this comedy right after *Hamlet*. In close temporal proximity, *Hamlet* and two "most excellent and merriest romantic comedies" were created [*Twelfth Night* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*] (159). This proves the genius of the author, resulting from the

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ability to juggle threads from funny to tragic. It is therefore not surprising that contemporary theatre creators are inspired by his plays, although not all of them are as inventive as Pawłowski.

In his version Pawłowski changed the gender of the characters. Olivio (Dado Ćosić) with his assistant Mario (Mateo Videk) and Orsina (Anđela Ramljak) with her aunt Tomassa (Doris Šarić Kukuljica), who took her wealthy acquaintance Andrea (Barbara Prpić) on the trip, arrive at the luxurious Hotel “Illyria.” The hotel manager Malvolia (Katarina Bistrović Darvaš) welcomes the characters with the words “One step closer to Paradise.” Olivio and Orsina are married; however it is shown in the first scene that Olivio is not too fond of his wife. Feste (Petra Svrtan), who in this adaptation is a woman—the master of ceremonies—, hatches a mysterious plan with Mario, the aim of which is for “Orsina to understand who she really is,” which will allow Mario to regain Olivio. For the plan to succeed, Feste will organize a masquerade ball, for the characters to regain their Shakespearean identities. In Feste’s masquerade, Olivia is a princess, courted by Prince Orsino. Thus, in Pawłowski’s version, the characters’ gender was changed, only for them to return to their original identity during the masquerade. Among the main characters is also Violix (Mia Melcher), the equivalent of Shakespeare’s Viola, who poses as a woman and a man in one. Violix appears at the costume party to make contact with Orsina. To serve this plan, the character takes the pseudonym “Cesario.”

In the visual representation of the characters in Jarzyna’s production, a kind of identity disturbance is noticeable. Aesthetically—but also mentally, as is manifested by the actors’ engaged performance—all the characters are somewhere between social identity constructs. Feste, though a woman, has a mustache. Violix—the character most deviating from these constructs—is dressed in a black suit and red high heels. Violix is also bald, with no eyebrows. The character’s appearance introduces a kind of mystery, which alludes to the ambiguous status of gender identity. By defining this status as “ambiguous,” I adopt a highly probable perspective of the audience, which, during post-premiere shows, was mostly middle-aged. For the characters, Violix’s status is not a surprise. Even though the character was not invited to the party, they accept it without hesitation. It even manages to win the love of two characters: Olivio and Orsina. Orsina is a character of a seductive woman, dressed in gold, who looks just as good in a man’s suit. She easily takes on a male form, and she does it naturally, efficiently—in a masculine way. This can be seen during one of the most important scenes, when the characters are sitting at theatre dressing tables, and dress up directly in front of the audience. Women put on men’s clothes, and men women’s. Olivio, unlike Orsina, puts on women’s tights and other items of the wardrobe almost ceremoniously. Among all the characters, it is he who is discovering his true identity at this moment. The exaltation he expresses while applying makeup in the company of Mario (already in the

form of Maria) is combined with irritation towards Orsina, whom he complains about to Maria.

This intriguingly written stage adaptation was the basis for a modest staging. The actors' movements were planned with particular precision. The set (by AAFGJAP) is mostly a square on the stage, highlighted by light (the lighting design is by Aleksandr Prowalinski), which becomes all the places mentioned in the play; hence the characters' paths cross, just as their fates mix. The whole play deals with a kind of mixture, which is also related to the characters who, by adopting different identities, also provide a mixture of personalities. This, in turn, corresponds to the diversity of identity, gender, personality, which is a lively discussion in social life. The performance sends a direct message that everything in the world can and should be acceptable, and we—observers and participants in the project of life—should be open to this diversity, behind which freedom and liberty are hidden.

The second act is characterized by greater chaos. The characters are confused by the events of the previous night. Their costumes, designed by Anna Axer Fijałkowska, are shabby and sloppy. Their attitude and appearance make it unclear in which version of themselves—male or female—they are. Andrea and Tomassa, for example, still show a masculine attitude, which can be seen in the duel scene. Andrea and Tomassa are two mature women who, just like their Shakespearean counterparts [Sir Andrew Aguecheek and Sir Toby Belch], do not shy away from alcohol. They are having a great time in a luxury hotel, where champagne is always at hand. They comment ironically on the other characters' behaviour, and they feel comfortable assuming male roles at the party. These heroines are a charming backdrop for the other characters. The most comical scene in the play is the duel between Andrea and Cesario, in which the reluctant to fight Cesario easily, but also surprised by his own strength, defeats Andrea.

Appropriately composed melodies (by Marko Levanić and Ivana Starčević) provide a fantastic backdrop for the stage events. A backdrop that, along with the raw acting, creates a kind of mysterious tension. On the right side of the almost bare stage is Ivana Starčević's DJ station. Music is also important in the show because it is Feste's element. The mistress of ceremonies has many characteristics typical of a jester: she is cunning, often uses jibes against others, schemes how to earn the easiest way, keeps a distance from what is happening, is an unfulfilled singer, needs to shine. In the final scenes, she pairs up with Zoran (Toma Medvešek), a silent bartender—so opposites do attract after all. Feste has several musical moments, between events—she sings Sonnet VIII and Sonnet XXIII. Both poems are an apostrophe to a partner and are connected by themes of expressing feelings and loneliness. The show also includes a fragment of Sonnet XX about female nature, performed by Ivana Starčević. Olivia is listening to this music when Cesario appears at her place.

The set design is limited to a few pieces of furniture and a table in the second act, where the characters meet at night, after the party, already in their own character, not the adopted one. However, the fun, as planned by Feste and Mario, has given way to a different mood. In the finale, Orsina and Violix become a couple, and Olivio stops hiding his relationship with Mario. Malvolia, disgraced by the characters, decides to leave. The production ends with her emotional confession, motivated by a man's indifference to the feelings of another—something she has observed in recent events. In her speech, there is a motif of life as a theatre. This motif can be understood metaphorically, but also literally as a comment on various loud events from theatre life. Theatre as an institution is often a place where personalities and identities collide with each other, which was confirmed recently by various events. Malvolia leaves to look for true love—even if this looks like a chimera.

The entire story about possible personality variants, and consequent love stories, unfolds in dim light. The dominant color illuminating the world on the stage is blue. The appropriately designed lighting of the production is the final element that reveals Jarzyna's typical aesthetics. The spectacle seems to be consistent with the director's earlier, smaller productions, even though the stage is teeming with chimeric vibe.



Photograph by Marko Ercegović



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WORKS CITED

Kydryński, Juliusz. "Posłowie" [Afterword]. William Shakespeare. *Dziela*. Trans. Maciej Słomczyński. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1983. 159-180.