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## Something For Everyone in Cal Shakes' Comedy "Twelfth Night"

By Lou Fancher



The female cast of "Twelfth Night." From left: Rami Margron, Julie Eccles, Domenique Lozano, Stacy Ross, Catherine Castellanos, Lisa Ann Porter and Margo Hall. Other cast members not pictured: Ted Deasy. Photo Jay Yamada

Love and its denominators provide the ride of a lifetime in California Shakespeare Theater's season opener, "Twelfth Night," by William Shakespeare.

What other force but love could make a woman (let's call her Viola) with a twin brother (Sebastian) who she believes has died in a shipwreck, disguise herself as a man (Cesario) and fall for her employer (Duke Orsino)? Of course, Orsino is mad for a countess (Olivia) who has foresworn all pairing after losing her father and brother - until she tumbles head-over-heels for Viola/Cesario. Beyond that love triangle, Olivia's drunken uncle (Sir Toby Belch) and his clueless compadre (Sir Andrew Aguecheek) conspire with Olivia's maid (Maria) to commit class warfare - love's revenge becomes a dirty trick involving forged letters and yellow cross-gartered stockings on Olivia's smug steward (Malvolio). It's love, divided by hate, jealousy, lust, allegiance and more.

That's the scrambled egg that director Christopher Liam Moore serves up deliciously at Cal Shakes, with an all-but-one female cast featuring some of the Bay Area's top talent. There's

something for everyone to enjoy in the 413-year-old comedy. While marveling at love's democracy (we're all equally foolish under the human heart's rule), it's impossible to ignore Moore's clever braiding of timeless themes with contemporary culture and his noteworthy skill at exploiting the uniqueness of the cast.

In Shakespeare's time, all the roles would have been played by men and boys. Here, some of the women playing men play women - resulting in women kissing women - which multiplies the comedy or adds poignancy, depending on one's politics. Mistaken identity, misplaced affection, mistrust, mystery and magnificent bliss are love's aura during the two-hour, 40-minute production.

Without detailing the plot's every twist and turn, the gist of the well-known play involves the keeping of secrets, all of which the audience is allowed to be in on. The fun is in watching the inevitable miscues that we see coming so easily in a staged play, but often fail to recognize in our own lives.

Lisa Anne Porter is understated in the best possible way as she battles to suppress Viola's urges and actual gender. The subtlety makes for a terrific springboard for the zanier counterparts around her. Stacy Ross as the no-fun keeper of rules Malvolio is similarly adept; rigidly rectangular in her initial interactions - until going all gangly legs and terrifying pasted-on grin when she's tricked into believing she is the object of Olivia's love. There's something lethal in Ross's performance, even when playing comedy, and the mix is intoxicating.

Ted Deasy, the one male in the cast, zips up his jester role as Feste with expected aplomb. Seven seasons with Oregon Shakespeare Festival and numerous other regional theater credits underscore his solid performance. Margo Hall's tiptoe version of Sir Aguecheek is great physical comedy; Catherine Castellanos as Belch proves again there are no limits with this actor; Julie Eccles teases every frailty into frivolous fun as Olivia; Rami Margron's spin on Orsino is light, but not

lightweight; and Dominique Lozano's Maria strides perfectly along a balance beam of spiteful and silly spiritedness as the instigator of devilish pranks.

By design, a coffin is the metaphorical centerpiece to the action. Placed prominently by scenic designer Nina Ball, how else to explain the characters' mad dash to win love's lottery? Urgent mortality pushes the plot as much as love, the coffin suggests. If we die without having loved or having been loved by others, have we truly lived?

Sumptuous costumes by Meg Neville and Burke Brown's sensitive lighting add richness to the visual pleasures of the production - as did the rolling fog and the sunlight's golden glow on the outdoor venue's surrounding hills on opening night. For people who spend considerable time in Bay Area theaters - or for first-timers - the "Cal Shakes experience" is undeniably grand. "Twelfth Night" runs at the solar-powered Bruns Amphitheater through June 21.

Cal Shakes 2015 Season Productions

"Twelfth Night" - through June 21

"Life Is a Dream" - July 8 to Aug. 2

"Virgins To Villains: My Journey Through Shakespeare's Women" - One night show, July 20

"The Mystery of Irma Vep" - Aug. 12 to Sept. 6

"King Lear" - Sept. 16 to Oct. 11

Cal Shakes performances are held at Bruns Amphitheater, 100 California Shakespeare Theater Way (formerly 100 Gateway Blvd.), Orinda. For more information, visit [calshakes.org](http://calshakes.org)

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