

# Everything's coming up roses!

***Twelfth Night, or What You Will*, directed by Rebecca Bayla Taichman at the Sidney Harmon Hall**

Four things strike one about the Shakespeare Theatre's production of *Twelfth Night*: the extremes of color, the excellence of the Ted van Griethuysen's interpretation of Malvolio and Floyd King's Feste, the image of Cupid and Psyche hovering over the events, and roses.

Roses are everywhere. They are the scenery. Red petals fall from the heavens whenever someone's emotions turn toward the euphoric, festive, joyous, or romantic; black when more lachrymously focused. Roses represent love, both lost and gained – and also *Twelfth Night* itself.

*Twelfth Night, or What You Will* is considered by many critics as William Shakespeare's most perfect comedy. It is based on a tale called "Of Apollonius and Silla" originally crafted by Matteo Bandello, from whom Shakespeare also derived the story of his most famous tragedy of love gone wrong, *Romeo and Juliet*. Set in an imagined and allegorical Illyria, it is a land where the impossible might be true, and where twain might meet. It is a land where confusion reigns and forbidden love, as Psyche's love was for the immortal Cupid, runs rampant, as described by Wikipedia.

This allegorical setting should not be confused with historical Illyria, the Roman Illyricum. In Shakespeare's day, Illyria was known for piracy and in part ruled by the Venetian Republic, the Ottoman Empire, and the Habsburgs. Today Dalmatia comprises the greater part of Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina.



The colorful mural interpretation of John Singer Sargent's *El Jaleo* at the Jaleo Restaurant (7th St, NW, Washington, DC).

Christmas was marked by feasting and merrymaking. Each day during the 12 days of Christmas commemorates either a saint or a specific action affecting the life of Christ. In Christian iconography, the rose represents St. Mary as the Mother of God (Theotokos) and the Queen of Heaven (Regina Coeli). The rose is considered the "queen of flowers" and represents the universal symbol of perfect love according to the book "Mary's Flowers, Women for Faith and Family."

As a subtle bit of humor, the scenery roses were as a nod at the local Washingtonian audiences in that the roses in question tie directly to the rose depicted in the mural of the theatre's neighboring watering hole, Jaleo's. The mural is a copy of artist John Singer Sargent's famous painting *El Jaleo*, which depicts the Spanish dance of passion, the flamenco. The linkage with Sargent's *El Jaleo* was further emphasized at several points during the play when the actors danced the flamenco and all of the women held roses between their teeth as they danced across the stage.

The play opened quite dramatically as Viola and Sebastian are torn asunder and tossed away during a violent sea storm, Olivia in full mourning crosses (black dress and veil) in front of the scrim from stage left to right. The train of her dress extended a full six feet behind her. Interestingly, while the style of Olivia's dress does not change during the play, the color changes from black through purple to bright red over the course of the play – reflecting her evolving moods.

As Act II opens with the arrival of Viola (in her Cesario impersonation), an image of Antonio Canova's Cupid and Psyche descended from the heavens and hovered above all action for the play's remainder, as a reminder of unrequited and forbidden love. While the ancient story of Cupid/Eros and Psyche involved forbidden love, it more importantly involved the impossible love between an immortal and a mortal. Cupid fell for Psycho as Viola does for Orsino, and Olivia for Viola's alter-ego Cesario.

The play truly began, however, only with the arrival of Feste, Olivia's (Veanne Cox) fool, well-acted by the irrepressible Floyd King. Feste is to light in this play what Olivia's steward Malvolio (Ted van Griethuysen) is to darkness. Griethuysen, in a form-fitting cutaway and an air of utter disdain for mere mortals, plays the martinet Malvolio for all the pomposity and self-righteousness that the role allows. Of course, the martinet suffers as the butt of probably the cruelest and most elaborate joke ever drafted by Shakespeare when Feste and Olivia's poisonous uncle Tony Belch (Rick Foucheux) convinces Malvolio to appear before his mistress cross-gartered and in yellow stockings, spouting idiocies of love. Olivia thinks him mad and orders her uncle to imprison him.

After Viola's/Cesario's (Samantha Soule) performance at Olivia's home at the behest of the Duke Orsino (Christopher Innvar), Sebastian (Peter Katona) arrives on the scene accompanied by his rescuer Antonio (Michael Sharon) who wishes to protect him, but has a price on his head within Orsino's lands. They separate and Sebastian meets Olivia. Although Viola/

## Plot Synopsis

In the play, the Duke Orsino of Illyria courts the Countess Olivia, who has sworn off all love to mourn the death of her brother. Meanwhile, a shipwreck occurs on the coast that separates the young Viola from her twin brother Sebastian. In fear of her safety and alone in a foreign land, Viola disguises herself as the youth Cesario and secures a position within the household of the duke, who soon sends her/him as emissary to Olivia.

In a twisted subplot, Olivia's uncle, the foul Tony Belch, disrupts her mourning despite the best efforts of her servant Maria. To finance his excesses, the uncle has recruited the excessively wealthy, but dim-witted Sir Andrew Aguecheek to woo his niece, in hopes of splitting the fortune. Feste, Olivia's fool, has also returned to her home and disrupts her mourning – much to the disapproval of her faithful steward, Malvolio. Malvolio himself would like to win Olivia – and her fortune. After Malvolio threatens to expel Belch and Aguecheek; they, with the connivance of Maria, plot to embarrass him in the eyes of his mistress by convincing him to dress and act in ways that cause Olivia to think him mad. The plot twist is probably the most wicked in all of Shakespeare's plays. Malvolio does not forgive them.

Viola/Cesario arrives at the home of Olivia, who is immediately love struck. Olivia gives "Cesario" a ring as a ploy to get him to return the next day. Viola realizes that Olivia has fallen for her alter-ego "Cesario"; while Viola has fallen for the duke. Of course the duke is confused because he thinks "she" is a "he". Meanwhile, Sebastian has surfaced in Illyria – thinking that his twin sister is dead. As the play develops, Olivia marries Sebastian (thinking Sebastian is 'Cesario'). "Cesario" is mistaken for Sebastian, and vice versa. Eventually all ends well as Olivia marries Sebastian and Viola likewise wins Orsino.

*Twelfth Night's* plot involves many thematic elements present in other Shakespearean plays: mistaken identity, twins, confused noblemen, a wealthy heiress plagued by unsuitable suitors, conniving relatives, and pompous fools and righteous jesters. However, the plot also indirectly involves references to an element less common in his plays – religion. Shakespeare's mother was a member of the recusant Arden family, which clung to the old faith, namely Roman Catholicism, for several generations after the break between the Anglican Church and Rome.

The play was commissioned in 1601 for the royal Twelfth Night festivities that marked the end of the Christmas holidays with the arrival of the Magi, namely the night of January 5; receiving its first public viewing on Candlemas on February 2, 1602. In the Elizabethan era, the festival of



"El Jaleo", a painting by John Singer Sargent

The John Singer Sargent original of *El Jaleo* at the Gardner Museum, Boston, Massachusetts.

Cesario has wooed Olivia, she pines for Orsino and has tried to discourage Olivia's advances to her. Consequently when Sebastian (who fell in love with Olivia on sight) agrees to marry her, Olivia is happily overwhelmed.

Unfortunately Belch, who wants to have his "friend" Aguecheek marry his niece for financial reasons, realizes that his niece loves Cesario. Therefore while Sebastian is actually marrying Olivia, Belch orchestrates a duel between "Cesario" and Aguecheek; which goes haywire when Antonio thinks "Cesario" is Sebastian. "Cesario," who does not know Antonio, thanks him for his aid, but does not help him when he is arrested and hauled before Orsino. Olivia arrives and states that "Cesario" is her husband (when in fact Sebastian is). "Cesario" denies the marriage, because of course Cesario is actually Viola. Then Sebastian arrives and everyone realizes that they are twins.



Antonio Canova's sculpture depicting Cupid's revival kiss of Psyche at the Louvre, Paris.

A peculiar subtext within this play, which this writer believes was overemphasized by the director Rebecca Taichman, is Viola's professions of love for Orsino (while impersonating Cesario), which the duke receives in a confused state, and Antonio's professions of love for Sebastian – which definitely cross the forbidden line. As some words have changed meaning between the time when they were written and today, the overtness of Antonio's expressed feelings may not be what Shakespeare intended, but the feeling of homoeroticism was latent in the air. The director played that latency for all it was worth; both in how they related to each other and how they were attired. Overall the play was beautifully done, a fine way to spend *Twelfth Night*.

## Conclusions / Recommendations / Tips:

- A solo trip to a strange new land isn't for everyone. It all depends on your level of comfort getting around in an environment where the culture, food, and customs are foreign, as well as your ability to speak the language, especially in the rural areas where the locals may not speak a word of English. Some people would hate it, others would revel in it. You **MUST** be able to function outside your comfort zone, be open to new experiences while at the same being respectful of the local people.
- If you need one, cell phones can be rented on arrival at the Lima airport. I didn't get one so I can't tell you the rates, but you'll be able to get a signal almost anywhere except in the remote areas such as at the ruins.
- Since the Inca Trail is a network of interconnecting trails all over South America, a 10-day hike from Cachora through Choquequirao to Macchu Picchu is available, taking you at times up to 14,000 feet altitude. You'll have to be in good shape to recover quickly from any altitude sickness you may experience.
- Drink lots of water! I can't emphasize this enough, as you dehydrate quickly at the higher altitudes where the air is drier, the sun is stronger and you're physically exerting yourself more than you're accustomed to. Proper hydration is also key to delaying the onset of any altitude sickness and to the recovery afterwards.
- Mules are pretty ornery animals. Be sure not to startle one from behind or you risk a swift kick that can cause serious injury. Trust me -- I found out the hard way, although I got off easy.
- When hiking, keep in mind that you're in remote areas and medical help can be far away if you get into trouble. As such, always exercise care and watch where you put your hands and feet as you make your way along the trails, while at the same time remaining aware of the overall surroundings. During the four days on the trail we encountered bears twice, poisonous spiders four times (Peruvian tarantulas), and a venomous snake once – and our first aid kit was with the mule pack way ahead of us!
- Hiking stick highly recommended, especially going down the steep slopes.
- For all its charm and the huge responsibility as the guardian of some of the world's most fascinating and appealing archaeological treasures, Peru is still a desperately poor country and the citizens have virtually no opportunities for making their way out of the abject poverty into which most of them are born. It breaks your heart when little kids approach and ask you (in relatively good English) to buy rag dolls or finger puppets that their mothers made by hand and you find it very hard to resist.
- With Peru stamped into my passport, I thought I could look forward to finding other exotic areas of the world to explore. However, I wonder if I was being too impulsive, as just a few days ago I heard of a newly discovered site above the clouds (and above 14,000 feet), that of the mysterious "Cloud People". So now maybe I'll be back in Peru sooner than I initially thought. Stay tuned!

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