'Twelfth Night' production explores Shakespeare's dark side

By Neil Shurley
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THEATER REVIEW

The most surprising thing about Distracted Globe's new production of Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night" is not the steampunk setting, but the seriousness underlying much of the proceedings.

Rather than a straight-out farce, director Jerrold Scott chooses to explore some of the darker, more introspective aspects of one of Shakespeare's most well-known comedies.

The story begins with a shipwreck that deposits a young woman, Viola (Heidi Fortune), into the land of Illyria, where she disguises herself as a man named Cesario and becomes an attendant to the powerful Orsino (Andy Croston).

Of course, Viola soon falls in love with Orsino, even as her twin brother Sebastian (Joseph Bogs), presumed dead, arrives in Illyria, causing plenty of confusion as he falls in love with Olivia (Miranda Notus).

Orsino has a thing for Olivia, and Olivia has a thing for Cesario (who you'll recall is Viola in disguise), and even Orsino finds himself strangely attracted to Cesario and — well, it all works out in the end.

Much of the comedy comes from Olivia's relatives, especially Sir Toby Belch (expertly played by Jayce Tromsness), Belch's companion Sir Andrew (the cartoonishly funny Rick Connor), and Olivia's steward, Malvolio, well played by Matt Reece, who will now always come to mind when I hear that quintessentially Shakespearean phrase "But soft!"

Other standout performers include the striking Miranda Notus as Olivia, Phyllis Jackson as a surprisingly serene Feste, Andy Croston as the lovestruck Orsino and the always great Anne Kelly Tromsness as Maria.

But the big star is the steampunk setting.

Defined by the director as "an idealized version of the Victorian industrial revolution," the set is covered with gears and protrusions, while the costumes feature goggle-festooned hats, lengthy scarves, and layered coats that all combine to create an otherworldly atmosphere.

Elizabeth Gray deserves extra credit for these wonderful costumes, as do musicians Valentine Wolfe for their effectively moody original score. Kevin Frazier's light and sound design also stands out, accentuating the feeling of entering a strange and vivid dream.

Director Scott sometimes goes for the easy laugh — are pelvic thrusts really all that funny anymore? — but more frequently underplays the laughs altogether, opting instead for an exploration of the undercurrents in the play.

This is a production that is more poetically melancholy than sidesplittingly hilarious, seeking to illuminate the split natures of the characters and their illusions. It's an unexpected approach that makes for a unique "Twelfth Night."

Those who arrive early will be rewarded: 30 minutes before curtain time of each performance, the Distracted Globe will present readings of 10-minute plays, newly commissioned from five local playwrights, based on themes found in "Twelfth Night."

The production runs through Aug. 4 at Warehouse Theatre. Call 864-235-6948 for tickets.