



Jonathan Moscone

A NOTE FROM THE DIRECTOR

I love *Twelfth Night*. And I don't love all of Shakespeare. This may come as a shock to anyone who knows that I was the artistic director of the California Shakespeare Theater for 15 years. But some of those plays are just really dense, and some are more silly than substantive, while others are just so much about the politics of the time that it's hard for me to feel their present day relevance.

But *Twelfth Night* is my jam. It's categorized as a comedy, which in classical terminology means it has a happy ending for society, usually through the means of marital union. And that does happen in this play. But it's not a happy ending for everyone. And it's not a comedy all of the time.

The premise of *Twelfth Night* is by no means the makings of comedy. A young woman is washed upon the shores of a Mediterranean island after a shipwreck has most certainly killed her only living relative, her twin brother. Not so funny. And within moments of our meeting her, she decides to dress like a boy and make her way through this foreign land with nothing but her gumption and a sea captain by her side.

Her name is Viola. And I love her, for I get her. That's because I get death, and more importantly, I get grief. The only way I can figure out why Viola dresses like a man is because that's her unknowing way of bringing her twin brother back to life. It's a fantastical response to an unimaginable situation, and I feel such empathy for her brazen attempt to revive her brother, Sebastian, from the dead.

On the island lives Olivia, a countess whose brother and father died within the last year. Locked in loss, she walks around her manor in mourning as she renounces the sight of men and the possibility of love.

She's the flip side of Viola (it has to be purposeful that their names are near anagrams of each other); instead of going into drag to bring death back to life, Olivia goes into drag to keep her life from going on.

Perhaps Viola is not that different from Olivia. By 'becoming' her dead brother, she denies her own self. And so our two leading women find each other, one grieving fantastically and one mourning elegantly.

One of the great scenes in the play occurs right in the middle. Viola in male drag comes to Olivia's manor and Olivia, starting to see the possibilities of love in the guise of the man Viola plays (Cesario), declares her love. The two share an exchange that startles me still. Rejected by Cesario, Olivia begs him to stay and give her some feedback, for lack of a better word:

Olivia: I prithee, tell me what thou think'st of me.

Viola: That you do think you are not what you are.

Viola's response is tricky in its construction, and it says something profound here: that Viola thinks Olivia is not what she is, or, that she is the "not" of herself. Viola sees that Olivia is denying her self by living in mourning. And Olivia sees the same in Viola, for she responds:

If I think so, I think the same of you.

This small moment takes my breath away for it holds the key to my connection to *Twelfth Night*. I think this is a play about how to mourn, how to move forward, how to go from death to life. And that is why I think this is a comedy. Not because it's funny, though it is a lot of the time, but because it comes down squarely on the side of life.

It gathers all the dark feelings that make up our existence – the loss of life and the loss of love – and finds its way, through will, determination, and a lot of humor, to lightness.

We all feel dark feelings at times, and we often need light. I hope our *Twelfth Night* provides some light for you.

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