

## STAGE REVIEW: 'Twelfth Night' by ActorsNET of Bucks County

By Stuart Duncan

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Ken Ammerman as Sir Andrew Aguecheek and George Hartpence as Sir Toby Belch in "Twelfth Night."

It has been suggested that William Shakespeare wrote "Twelfth Night," at the request of the Queen Elizabeth I to be part of the Jan. 6 celebration of the end of the Christmas season. The Bard was at the height of his writing powers (he had just finished "Hamlet") and he gave the show a title fitting of the occasion, adding a subtitle: "What You Will."

The famous diarist, Samuel Pepys grumbled that the title was meaningless since the comedy had nothing to do with the date or the function, but the play has become a favorite.

"Twelfth Night" is being presented by ActorsNET of Bucks County through March 26, this is one of the finest productions of any work in many years. It showcases a stunning veteran company, superb

direction, and the kind of confident presentation that comes from polished actors completely trusting each other on stage.

The play is hardly a simple one. The sense of comedy is complex and often missed, touched with real moments of passion and often very deep. For example, in an early scene in which Olivia first meets Viola, the latter is in a boy's clothing and disguise. She has been shipwrecked and believes her twin brother is dead. Olivia is much attracted to her (him) and as the scene turns slightly toward flirtation, Shakespeare switches from prose to blank verse. Subtle, but this cast grabs the moment quickly and easily — with distinct style.

Moreover, the comedy contains some of the Bard's best-loved characters: Sir Toby Belch; Sir Andrew Aguecheek; the sinister Malvolio, and Feste the clown. And there is a veteran actor in each of those roles. George Hartpence brings years of acting to the role of Sir Toby (he also co-directed and handled the set design). Dale Simon also co-directed, and these two have found small pieces of fun that are often missed.

Sir Andrew is superbly realized by Ken Ammerman who has been playing major roles for many years and here brings down the house as the weak-kneed wannabe hero. Feste is played by Mort Paterson, a veteran of TV and musicals, mostly in Philadelphia.

There are many others in the large company (18 actors) who stand out. Carol Thompson is exciting as Lady Olivia. Susan Fowler steals scenes as Maria, Olivia's servant. Cat Miller, who is in her 14th season with ActorsNET, plays Viola.

Barry Abramowitz, yet another veteran, has appeared in many local production with several companies in works as varied as "Hamlet" and "A Christmas Carol," and he is first-rate as the much abused Malvolio. Two additional stalwarts are Olivier Leroux, as Count Orsino and C. Jameson Bradley, as sea captain Antonio, of course, both veterans.

"Twelfth Night" is a great comedy, and this production has a superb cast, strong direction, and the kind of stage confidence that lets you know instantly that you're about to see something special.

*"Twelfth Night" continues at the Heritage Center, 635 Delmorr Ave., Morrisville, Pennsylvania, through March 26. Performances: Fri.-Sat. 8 p.m., Sun. 2 p.m. Tickets cost \$20, \$17 seniors, \$15 students, \$10 children; [www.actorsnetbucks.org](http://www.actorsnetbucks.org); 215-295-3694.*