



Theater: 'Twelfth Night' at Morrisville's Heritage Center



Cat Miller and Olivier Leroux in "Twelfth Night." (Courtesy photo)



By [Ted Otten](#) | For The Times of Trenton

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comments

There's a shocking error that's being promulgated by pale violet bumper stickers which proclaim, "If music be the food of love, play on," and has, beneath those famous words, in slightly smaller rococo lettering, HAMLET, the supposed source of that quotation, but if you attend "Twelfth Night," now running through March 26 at the Morrisville Heritage Center in a new Actors' NET of Bucks County production, you'll hear that line spoken by Duke Orsino and know the truth.

If the bumper sticker contained Orsino's full sentence, "If music be the food of love, play on, give me excess of it; that surfeiting, the appetite may sicken and so die," readers would know that the Duke is not as much beguiled by love as he seems initially. Using this self-indulgent nobleman's full quote shows that he thinks that he can be cured of love by overindulgence in it because, for him, love has and will create problems. The action of this charming comedy, a slightly shorter play than Shakespearean audiences are used to, finds him in love not once but twice.

Like the problematic lovers of "Much Ado about Nothing" and "As You Like It," Orsino (played by Olivier Leroux) is a fool for love. He is initially madly in love with Olivia (Carol Thompson), a wealthy countess who is mourning the recent deaths of her father and brother and who has decided to forgo romance for seven years, a decision Orsino refuses to honor. Orsino sends a young man named Cesario (Cat Miller) to plead

his case, but Olivia falls in love with Cesario instead of hearing Orsino's passionate entreaties of undying love and devotion.

Cesario isn't a young man at all but the female half of a pair of shipwrecked twins, Viola and Sebastian (M. A. Topoleski), and Viola falls in love with Cesario which later creates an interesting love triangle. In addition, comic confusions are enhanced by Sir Toby Belch (George Hartpence), his squire Sir Andrew Aguecheek (Ken Ammerman) and Olivia's jester Feste (Mort Paterson) who have used a love letter forged by Maria (Susan Fowler) but supposedly from Olivia to convince her devoted but pompous servant Malvolio (Barry Abramowitz) that Olivia is in love with him, much to his delight. The letter makes strange requests for certain uncharacteristic behaviors, like smiling, and lead to Malvolio's humiliation.

Since this is a comedy, almost all will end happily, but along the way, Shakespeare has the opportunity to ask and often answer questions about the pleasures, pains and mysteries of love which have existed throughout time, not just in 1602 when the play, written at the request of Queen Elizabeth I to celebrate the close of the holiday season, had its premier. Co-directors George Hartpence and Dale Simon have moved their kingdom of Illyria forward in time to 1912 when the world is edging towards the catastrophic First World War but where a wind-up gramophone can provide musical accompaniment and costumes reflect that Edwardian period.

Hartpence is also in the cast playing the obnoxious Sir Toby Belch whom he describes as "a drunkard and a scoundrel but an all-around likeable guy. He's Olivia's uncle and living as part of her household which seems subject to the lords of misrule in what I think is Shakespeare's funniest play."

Hartpence has also played Orsino, Feste, and Malvolio in other productions during his long career, and he sees Belch as "rounding out that rambunctious quartet" whose purpose seems to be vexing Malvolio. Following this production, he'll reprise his musical role in "Titanic" with Newtown Arts and then return to Actors' NET for "An Inspector Calls."

Another seasoned performer, Cat Miller, plays Viola/Cesario, and, like Rosalind in "As You Like It" which she lists among her favorite roles, who exchanges her female identity for a male one and gives Viola a sense of freedom and privilege that Miller finds tremendously liberating.

"As a man, Viola can say and do many more things than a woman of her time would be allowed to say and do. As a man she can really fly, and I enjoy playing her exchange with Olivia when she can say and do as a man so many things that would have been improper and unthinkable for a woman. She can act and react in ways that not every Shakespearean heroine gets to do. She can indulge in a kind of bravery that she can't do in her female identity, and that's fun for me to act.

"She gets to talk to the audience and to bring them along with her on this romantic adventure. She breaks the fourth wall and, while keeping her own perspective, she can point out things that some observers might have missed, and she's not only a part of the story as it unfolds but also its host.

"This show is special because it presents and investigates some really complicated themes in addition to its outright comedy," said Miller who just finished a run last month with PinnWorth Productions of the strenuous comedy "God of Carnage" which gave her another of her favorite roles.

"The audience gets to see only very narrow glimpses of her twin brother Sebastian, but they are similar in their approach to life, in their temperament and generosity and their ability to be very open to others, not closing other people off as so many of the other characters do, not relying on their rank or station to be the genuine people they are.

"Orsino is truly a fool for love, able to switch his emotions in a minute," said Miller, "and Viola isn't that superficial, but she is, like so many of us, a sucker for love."

IF YOU GO

"Twelfth Night"

When: Through March 26; Friday and Saturday at 8 p.m.; matinee on Sunday at 2 p.m.

Where: Morrisville Heritage Center, 635 North Delmorr Avenue (Route 32), Morrisville, Pa.

How much: Tickets are \$20 with senior tickets at \$17; WHY? card holders and students with ID at \$15 and \$10 for children under 12; group discounts also available.