

Edinburgh Festival Fringe 2018 REVIEW : *Twelfth Night* or *The Ship of Fools****

In Livewire Theatre's *Twelfth Night or The Ship of Fools*, a shipwreck becomes a plane crash, a countess wields a hammer, and a duke's palace is a funfair – though it's not always very fun.

Shakespeare wrote *Twelfth Night* as an entertainment for the end of the Christmas season. It's a comedy based on mistaken identity and anarchic uproar; Mary Tate's production retains the play's far-fetched plot but adds Gothic elements and some darker undercurrents.



When Viola thinks she's the sole survivor of holiday flight 1212, she's out of her sundress and into androgynous clothing in no time, and is soon employed as Duke Orsino's manservant. The duke has convinced himself he's in love with Countess Olivia, but she's too busy grieving for her dead father and brother to countenance any romance. Instead she appears to be building a giant heart with the aid of a range of power tools. Yes, I think this could be a metaphor...

The count's palace is occupied by a group of party people, who

rush on and off the stage and all round the room causing mayhem. In Shakespeare's original, Fabian and the clown Feste are Olivia's servants; here they are joined by 'The Fools' Chorus' of Lord Carrion, Lady Flyblown, Crowbait and Scavenger, macabre symbols of the decadence and decay that blights Illyria. As Lady Flyblown, Ottilie Whitwell brings to mind Helena Bonham Carter in her maddest Bellatrix Lestrange phase, all black lace and scary nails – and her steampunky friends are pretty frightening too. You certainly wouldn't want to meet them in the Ghost Train, one of the rides set up in the palace theme park. James Hall, meanwhile, is a convincing Fabian, reincarnated as a wheeler dealer of the kind you might expect to meet in your local market – except this one's dealing in body parts.

Sir Toby Belch, Olivia's waster uncle, and his comrade-in-arms Sir Andrew Aguecheek, may hang about in the same bars, but in this production their characters are quite different. While Aguecheek is a rich buffoon, Belch is a sharp card, a black sheep who just can't be bothered to fit in with his niece's family. Giff Hogge brings real depth to this character; he may slob about in a tacky shell suit, have slightly-too-long-for-his-age hair and look permanently hungover, but he can flip from joker to psycho in moments. He's a manipulating schemer, and when he threatens Malvolio, Olivia's steward, ('You. Ain't. Nothing. But. A. Hound. Dog') he is quietly terrifying.

There were a few hiccups in this, the first show in a seven day run, but all of them were well recovered. Props are good, in particular the parasol that morphs into a merry-go-round with the aid of some horse glove-puppets. The scene in which Belch and co spy on poor Malvolio from the Punch & Judy booth is clever, but whilst some of the dance numbers are amusing, I felt that there were a few too many 80s pop songs. *Send in the Clowns*, sung with deep irony, is very effective, but at times the inclusion of so many other tunes felt superfluous and slightly irritating. There's also quite a lot of shouting,

especially towards the end of the play; a little less might perhaps be more powerful.

Fabia Tate's Viola is occasionally slightly wet, but her '*Make me a willow cabin*' speech is beautifully delivered, and well complemented by the delicate music that accompanies it.

If Giff Hogge is one star of this show, the other is Henry Weston Davies as Malvolio. Pompous, foppish and camp, when Davies rushes on stage in a fur-edged dressing gown and red turban to chase the fools away he is more Coward than Noel himself. At other times he brings to mind Kenneth Branagh's Gilderoy Lockhart or even Giles Brandreth (who has actually played Malvolio in a musical version of the play). His increasingly manic reading aloud of the letter he thinks Olivia has written to him is hilarious, but there's more to Malvolio than that, and when he realises he is the victim of a cruel practical joke, Weston Davies shows us real pain and bitterness. Locked up (in the Punch and Judy booth) and tormented by his captors he cries;

'This house is as dark as ignorance.....will no soul take pity on me?'

And even Belch realises he has gone too far.

The play relies, of course, on the fact that Viola and her (presumed drowned) brother Sebastian are identical twins. In order to differentiate between the characters, Tate has Sebastian dressed in a hoodie and shades, which does make one wonder how anyone could ever mistake him for Viola/Cesario. But *Twelfth Night* is a comedy and we're meant to suspend disbelief and go with the flow; after all, how else can we believe that Sebastian can't recognise his own sister, or that Count Orsino, who's been obsessed with Olivia, is suddenly completely OK with marrying Viola instead? The play's original title is *Twelfth Night, or What You Will*; when almost everyone has been successfully paired off the cast sings;

'But that's all one, our play is done...'

Because *Twelfth Night* is just that, a play, an entertainment. Make of it what you will.

One last point; the noise from the show on the floor above this room was annoying, intrusive and very unfair on the cast (all of whom managed, to their credit, to remain audible). C Venues need to re-examine their programming, and I hope they are able to rearrange things to give *Livewire* the venue they deserve.

Twelfth Night or The Ship of Fools is at C Venues – C 2+, Chambers Street (Venue 34) at 1.35pm every day until Saturday 18 August. Tickets are available from Fringe Box Offices or online [here](#).