

At the King's Theatre: Shakespeare in Love

Marc Norman and Tom Stoppard's *Shakespeare in Love* is loud, funny and occasionally heartbreaking – but how does it translate from screen to stage? Lee Hall's adaptation, showing at the King's Theatre this week, gives us great entertainment but cannot quite live up to the stunning visual experience of the 1988 film.

Will Shakespeare is stuck; he can't even think of the ending for his sonnet, never mind a proper plot for his latest magnum opus, *Romeo and Ethel, the Pirate's Daughter*. From the very opening scene the play, just like the film, is stuffed with theatrical in-jokes and word play, and it is to the cast's credit that the audience can hear every word. **Pierro Nielmee's** Will is as earnest and immature as his friend Christopher Marlowe (an excellent **Edmund Kingsley**) is charming and confident. Already a successful playwright, Kit is at ease with the world and happy to help Shakespeare out.

When Shakespeare finally gets a few words on paper, Philp Henslow, beleaguered owner of the Rose Theatre, needs to get the play on stage as soon as possible to placate his moneylender Fennyman – but his usual actors are on tour, so he has to start auditions. Enter Thomas Kent, aka Viola de Lesseps, the daughter of a wealthy merchant. She's destined to become the wife of an impoverished nobleman, but really she'd much rather be an actor. Unsurprisingly, for the Shakespearean parallels come thick and fast, Will and Viola soon become the star-crossed lovers of the very play they are performing, and cross-dressing, mistaken identity, courtly dances and slapstick humour make a riot of Act One.

There are many cameo parts in this play. **Rob Edwards** as Fennyman is particularly good; he's your typical wheeler-dealer – nowadays he's probably be a property developer – but when he's offered a part in the play he's over the moon, throwing himself into it and even rushing home to find his special blue 'apothecary' hat. **Ian Hughes** also excels as Henslowe, the impresario who's always living on the edge, careering from one near-disaster to the next but always convinced that things will work out somehow. **Rowan Polonski** is outstanding as Ned Alleyn, famous actor and Al luvvie; his strutting about the stage is hilarious, and he certainly makes full use of those skin-tight red trousers. Indeed **Sydney Florence** and **Emma Cains** are to be congratulated for all of the costumes in this production; the wedding outfits of Wessex and Viola are especially magnificent. The music throughout the play (composed by **Paddy Cunneen**) is also most effective, complementing the action without overwhelming it and greatly adding to the atmosphere of both joyful and more sombre scenes.

As Viola's future husband Lord Wessex, **Bill Ward** manages to create a nuanced character out of what could have remained a swaggering buffoon. His sharp gestures and measured, creepy delivery bring the role to life. Wessex wants Viola's dowry, but he also wants her, and in the context of the times this is understandable. In its more serious moments the play looks at the role of women in Elizabethan England. Viola is to be married off to someone with the title her new money father so desperately wants; the Queen only has her way because no-one dares question her, and even she has to buy into the pretence that Viola/Thomas is really a boy, as this is the only way she can keep going to the theatre without a scandal ('It cannot be lewdness or the Queen would not go to it.')

In Act Two the play takes on a more serious tone. When Marlowe is killed by Wessex's men, who think he is Will, Will, knowing that this is his fault, is devastated ('A great light has gone

out.’). In some ways I found Will’s friendship with Kit more convincing than his passion for Viola – because much as Viola enjoys her romp with him, **Imogen Daines’** interesting interpretation of the role seems to me to be more about self-discovery than love. Yes, she wants Will – but what she really wants is adventure and fun. Once she works out a way to taste life’s baser pleasures, she doesn’t want a permanent relationship with Will any more than she wants to marry Wessex. Sex, acting, drinking and generally partying on down – she’s like a student at Freshers’ Week. When she tells Will that she cannot stay with him because she would hamper his work, she might as well be saying ‘It’s me not you’. When Will first sees Viola he cries ‘Oh brave new world!’ And although Viola is now off to Virginia with a bit of a boor, she is going to another new world, not sitting at home in Southwark.

Despite a clever and effective use of the revolving stage, which becomes everything from tavern to theatre, palace and even ship, a stage production can never deliver the spectacular scenery and panoramic beauty of a film set. The original film of *Shakespeare in Love* was so colourful, its scenes so dazzling, that it is hard not to feel slightly disappointed with this production. This is not the fault of the actors, all of whom are first-rate, nor of the production crew, but more a casualty of our digitally-enhanced modern experience, our expectations of more and more sensation.

Shakespeare in Love is an enjoyable and very well-acted play; take it on its own merits and you’ll love it.

Shakespeare in Love is at the King’s Theatre, Leven Street at 7.30pm every day until Saturday 17 November, with an additional matinee performance at 2.30pm on Saturday. Tickets are available from the theatre box office on 0131 529 6000 or online [here](#).