

Review Twelfth Night

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Even while Shakespeare at the Tobacco Factory are gearing up for 'Taming of the Shrew' in their BS3 'cockpit', RoughHouse Theatre - newcomers to Bristol but with a decent previous in Australia - get even more intimate with 'Twelfth Night' at the Alma. As Shakespeares go, it's good for a pub ('King Lear' might be more of a challenge): the action's manageably domestic and, thanks to the reliably pissed Toby Belch, there's some serious boozing going on. RoughHouse pick on this drinking-den theme and give their production a touch of 1930's Berlin (wine bottles, black waistcoats, bowler hats) but actually this is a red herring. The routinely misidentified Cesario looks like a golf caddy and there's no particular sense of decadence, impending war or, indeed, Nazism. In theory it's a concept with legs - 'Twelfth Night' is Shakespeare's entirely prescient stab at the kind of puritanism favoured by fruitcake dictators - but here it looks more like a wasted opportunity: Adrian Harris' Malvolio is simply too engaging for him to represent the evil new order. That said there's plenty to enjoy here. The Belch-centred sub-plot dominates - thanks largely to some snappy interaction between Rob Benson's Belch, Carrie-Anne Lewis' Maria, Anna Westlake's Feste and Gerard Cooke's long-wristed and inevitably 'Mr Bean' recalling Aguecheek - but Emily Lawrence's Viola/Cesario has a hands-in-pockets insouciance which contrasts nicely with both Tom Turner's stiff-upper-lipped Orsino and Moira Hunt's flappy Olivia, and explains why she/he seems such an attractive oddity in Illyria. The Options? Go see the play, ignore the setting.

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Tom Phillips