



Shakespeare

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The Dark Pleasures of Trevor Nunn's *Twelfth Night*

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Why don't filmmakers like Shakespeare's comedies? Look for an interesting version of any of the best-known tragedies, and you are spoiled for choice. Try doing the same for any of the best-known comedies, and you will still be searching weeks later. The astonishing 1935 Warner Brothers *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, with James Cagney as Bottom and Mickey Rooney as Puck, is available again on video, but there is not much else. Perhaps that explains the huge success of Kenneth Branagh's *Much Ado About Nothing*: it

had little competition.

Branagh's film has much in its favor, of course, but for those of us who find Shakespeare's comedies dark and troubling, Branagh's glossy confection of spun sugar, with its relentlessly feel-good style, left us feeling more than a little cheated. Perhaps filmmakers really do like Shakespeare's comedies and, because they like them, know that it is going to be frighteningly difficult to get that strange blend of tones onto film and so abandon the uphill struggle. Adrian Noble's disappointing new film, a version of his successful stage production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, suggests that when the going gets tough, it might sometimes be better simply to give up.

But Trevor Nunn's *Twelfth Night* is cause for hope. Surprisingly, Nunn has never directed *Twelfth Night* in the theatre. His fascinating introduction to the published screenplay for the film is a story of disappointments: of stage productions that never quite happened and of the endless compromises that making the film necessitated. That introduction explains much, not least why the pre-credit sequence showing the shipwreck that divides Viola from Sebastian is accompanied by a curious commentary in fake Shakespearean verse; like the problems with the movie *Blade Runner*, the studio's money-men decided, after a test screening in Orange County, that audiences could not be expected to follow the plot and needed a voiceover

to tell us what we were watching. Like *Blade Runner*, one day we may get the "director's cut," the version Nunn would have liked us to see.

In the meantime, Nunn's *Twelfth Night* will give us plenty of thought to be going on with. Nunn has chosen to set the film in a 19th-century Illyria (actually mostly filmed in Cornwall) because it is a world where the gender gap is strongly seen both in the extreme contrast of clothing (Nunn calls it "the dress silhouettes") and in social attitudes. It is a society where the class structures of the play's world are immediately comprehensible, where it is genuinely transgressive for Maria, Olivia's servant, to marry Sir Toby, Olivia's kinsman, and where Malvolio's final public humiliation is all the more painful for being witnessed by the servants over whom he would normally have had authority. But, above all, the choice of period makes clear and powerful the journey Viola has to make. Nunn shows Viola changing her silhouette into Cesario's: cutting her hair, binding her breasts, putting on men's clothing. But she then has to negotiate the world of male activity: she must relearn how to walk or how to yawn and learn new skills like fencing or, most awkwardly for her, how to have a conversation with her master while Orsino is in the bath. The distance she travels to make that transformation is clear, and the profundity of its effects on her and on all who come into contact with her is equally striking.

The darkness of the play is palpable on screen. It is there not just in the gloomy autumnal landscape of the film's world but also in the oppressive interiors of the buildings. Viola transforms Olivia's house from a house of mourning by the simple expedient of opening the curtains to let light flood in. It is also there in the militarism of Orsino's kingdom, where soldiers chase Antonio when he is recognized, and where the shipwrecked Viola and sailors scurry for cover when a troop of Orsino's horsemen investigate the debris of the wreck on the seashore. There is, in this continual reminder of the war where Orsino's "young nephew Titus lost his leg" (5.1.59), a threat of mortality in which "youth's a stuff will not endure" because of death in war as well as the risk of growing up.

One figure who would not make sense in a 19th-century environment is a jester or fool. Nunn, rightly, believes that Feste is the "cement" that binds "the contrasting ingredients together." In Ben Kingsley's moving performance, Feste becomes an outsider, a man who lives alone away from Olivia's house but who sees everything and understands it as well. When he shows Olivia why "take away the fool" could mean take away the lady," he argues not only-perhaps not even-to save his job but also out of a deep compassion for Olivia's grief over her brother's death, and a desire to show why she need not commit herself so absolutely to mourning. It is Feste who speaks the voiceover prologue written by Nunn, just as it is Feste who

sings the voiceover epilogue written by Shakespeare. Feste's humanity is consoling even if it also allows him to seek full vengeance on Malvolio.

Not everything in the film is equally successful. Helena Bonham Carter's Olivia is a trivial performance, and every time the camera dwells on her, I yearn for it to cut back to Imogen Stubbs's subtle and thrilling work as Viola. Toby Stephens's Orsino is shallower than the character deserves. And the film's final moments, with Malvolio (Nigel Hawthorne) leaving Olivia's employ with his dignity (and toupee) restored and Sir Toby and Maria riding away by carriage as newlyweds, again fails to resist the lure of the upbeat ending. But the film is nearly as satisfyingly unsatisfying as the play could demand, more than adequately alive to the text's awareness of the fragility and vulnerability of the possibilities of happiness.

Nunn's film has nothing of the dazzling allure of Baz Luhrmann's brilliant *Romeo and Juliet*. But



then, unlike *Romeo*, *Twelfth Night* would not make much of a teen flick. Its pleasures are more hard-won; it demands--dare I say it?--a maturer response. Unobtrusively effective (unlike the exhilarating ostentation of Luhrmann's film or the dulling ostentation of Branagh's *Hamlet*), Nunn's *Twelfth Night* is soberly achieved while still capable, especially in Mel Smith's excellent Sir Toby and Richard E. Grant's endearing Sir Andrew, of being very funny.

Nunn's introduction pays tribute to Branagh as the man who has enabled people to think again of filming Shakespeare. But his film has a modesty towards the play it is working with that none of Branagh's films have managed. In its consistent intelligence *Twelfth Night* seems to me to be the model future filmmakers looking towards Shakespearean comedy would be best advised to follow. ▶

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