

Illyria is transported to Stratford in more ways than one for the Royal Shakespeare Theatre's new production of *Twelfth Night*. The result is great comedy



Emma Fielding (Cesario) and Derek Griffiths (Feste) PHOTO: CLIVE BARDA

## Hits with myths

**Michael Billington**

“MOST wonderful!” cries Haydn Gwynne’s Olivia confronting the identically twinned Viola and Sebastian; and that phrase will do nicely to describe Ian Judge’s new version of *Twelfth Night*, which produces the kind of collective ecstasy you find only in great comedy.

But how exactly is it done? For a start Judge and designer John Gunter have had the bright, but essentially simple, idea of suggesting that Illyria is an echo of Stratford-upon-Avon itself: not the world of the Pizza Hut and McDonald’s but of the Guild Chapel, the gardens of New Place and the half-timbered High Street houses. Gunter once achieved a similar effect at Glyndebourne by using the sheep-filled Sussex Downs as a theatrical backdrop. The result is to make it seem as if life and art are perfect reflections of each other: an ideal metaphor for a play as full of mirror images as *Twelfth Night*.

But Judge also reminds us, like Jurgen Flymm in his Hamburg production a few years back, that

Illyria is a country where Eros capriciously rules. Clive Wood’s Orsino lingeringly kisses Emma Fielding’s androgynous boy Cesario. So, too, does Gwynne’s love-struck Olivia. And Antonio and Sebastian longingly embrace as if they have more on their mind than seeing the relics of the town. Even poor Malvolio misreads the sexual signals when Olivia lays an affectionate hand on his arm. As Jan Kott pointed out, in Illyria passion is one: it only has different faces.

The other necessary ingredient of *Twelfth Night* is an harmoniously balanced cast, which this production essentially has. Inevitably, Desmond Barrit’s Malvolio dominates the comic proceedings by the sheer weight of his presence. But Barrit creates a real character, visibly wincing when Sir Toby cruelly asks “Art any more than a steward?” and going for his afternoon walk with a dainty parasol with which he reluctantly harpoons the trick letter.

This is a Merthy: Tydfil Malvolio, ever conscious of his outsider status and yet desperate at the end to retrieve his shattered dignity: Barrit’s final gesture is to replace

with finicky precision the solitary wisp of black hair that crowns his eggshell dome.

Tony Britton’s aristocratically vindictive Sir Toby, Bille Brown’s manic Aguecheek and Derek Griffiths’s nimble-witted Feste all, however, fit neatly into the comic pattern. And the romantic roles are exceptionally well played. Emma Fielding’s Viola, not least in her great speech on unrequited love, has a tear-stained lyricism that puts one in mind of Judi Dench. And Gwynne’s Olivia, seeking endorsement of her beauty, and Wood’s Orsino, lolling on day-beds and petulantly flinging cushions around, suggest they are united in vanity as well as in their love for Cesario.

If I were to nit-pick it would be to say that, in the drinking scene, the music should come from the characters rather than the off-stage band, and that Feste’s melancholia is underplayed. But Judge orders the stage beautifully — even giving us unexpected glimpses of Sebastian’s storm-laden arrival and Olivia’s ostentatious mourning — and after his *Comedy Of Errors* and *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, has pulled off a notable Shakespearean comic hat-trick. His secret, particularly in *Twelfth Night* and *Love’s Labour’s*, is to have uncovered the essential Englishness that lies at the heart of these universal myths.

At the Royal Shakespeare Theatre (0789-295 623).

## Billington On *Twelfth Night*

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ianharris

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