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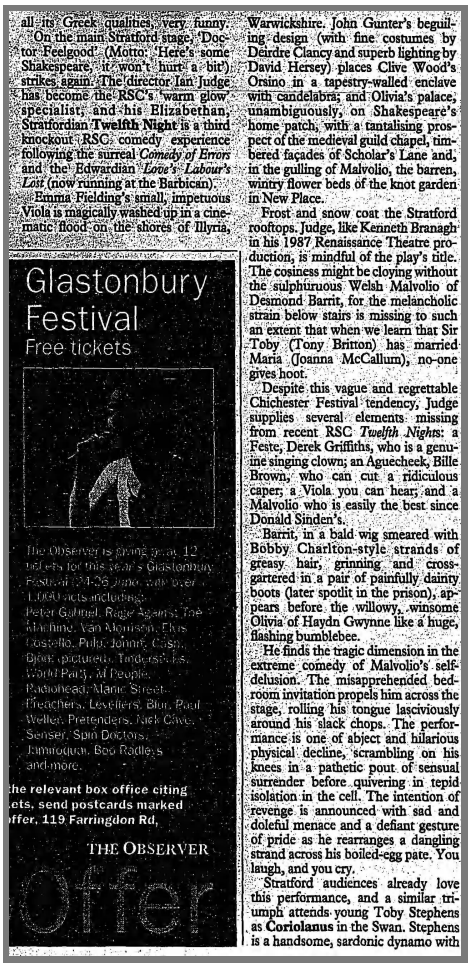

all its Greek qualities, very funny. On the main Stratford stage, 'Doctor Feelgood' (Motto: 'Here's some Shakespeare, it won't hurt a bit') strikes again. The director Ian Judge has become the RSC's warm glow specialist, and his Elizabethan, Stratfordian **Twelfth Night** is a third knockout RSC comedy experience following the surreal *Comedy of Errors* and the Edwardian *Love's Labour's Lost* (now running at the Barbican).

Emma Fielding's small, impetuous Viola is magically washed up in a cinematic flood on the shores of Illyria, Warwickshire. John Gunter's beguiling design (with fine costumes by Deirdre Clancy and superb lighting by David Hersey) places Clive Wood's Orsino in a tapestry-walled enclave with candelabra, and Olivia's palace, unambiguously, on Shakespeare's home patch, with a tantalising prospect of the medieval guild chapel, timbered façades of Scholar's Lane and, in the gulling of Malvolio, the barren, wintry flower beds of the knot garden in New Place.

Frost and snow coat the Stratford rooftops. Judge, like Kenneth Branagh in his 1987 Renaissance Theatre production, is mindful of the play's title. The cosiness might be cloying without the sulphurous Welsh Malvolio of Desmond Barrit, for the melancholic strain below stairs is missing to such an extent that when we learn that Sir Toby (Tony Britton) has married Maria (Joanna McCallum), no-one gives hoot.

Despite this vague and regrettable Chichester Festival tendency, Judge supplies several elements missing from recent RSC *Twelfth Nights*: a Feste, Derek Griffiths, who is a genuine singing clown; an Aguecheek, Bille Brown, who can cut a ridiculous caper; a Viola you can hear; and a Malvolio who is easily the best since Donald Sinden's.

Barrit, in a bald wig smeared with Bobby Charlton-style strands of greasy hair, grinning and cross-gartered in a pair of painfully dainty boots (later spotlit in the prison), appears before the willowy, winsome Olivia of Haydn Gwynne like a huge, flashing bumblebee.

He finds the tragic dimension in the extreme comedy of Malvolio's self-delusion. The misapprehended bedroom invitation propels him across the stage, rolling his tongue lasciviously around his slack chops. The performance is one of abject and hilarious physical decline, scrambling on his knees in a pathetic pout of sensual surrender before quivering in tepid isolation in the cell. The intention of revenge is announced with sad and doleful menace and a defiant gesture of pride as he rearranges a dangling strand across his boiled-egg pate. You laugh, and you cry.

Stratford audiences already love this performance, and a similar triumph attends young Toby Stephens as **Coriolanus** in the Swan. Stephens is a handsome, sardonic dynamo with

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Offer

Coveney On Twelfth Night

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