

'Twelfth Night' as a wild frat party

By **Toby Zinman**
FOR THE INQUIRER

The whirligig of time” brings surprises. Among them is Britain’s avant-garde Filter Theatre’s production of Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*, commissioned by the august Royal Shakespeare Company.

It turns out to be a frat party. And, like wild, loud parties, it’s fun, although there are definite dips into the stupid and the self-consciously cute. Whether you’ll quite follow the plot (radically trimmed) if you don’t already know the play is anybody’s guess, especially as the lines are often delivered in flat, contemporary London accents. But here’s what we know:

Viola (Amy Merchant) has washed up on the shores of Illyria. For self-protection, she disguises herself as a man (borrowing a jacket and hat from audience members) and then, in an inspired moment, removes her socks, rolls them up, and stuffs them into her pants. She hires on as a ser-

vant to Duke Orsino (Harry Jardine), who is in love with Olivia (Ronke Adekoluejo), who falls in love with the handsome young messenger (Viola in disguise) the duke keeps sending to her. But since Viola is a twin and her brother turns up at the end, there’s enough of her/him to go around.

Meanwhile, comic relief gets most of the stage time. Malvolio (the excellent Fergus O’Donnell), the puritanical ruler of Olivia’s household, is transformed into an idiot in love, stripping down to his golden briefs and, yes, of course, his yellow stockings, having been cruelly pranked by the Fool (Sandy Foster), who bestows her red nose on her mistress, Olivia, when she becomes a fool for love. Sir Toby Belch (Dan Poole) is drunk much of the time and is the only one wearing Elizabethan clothes. Although the low comedy is well served in this production, the tenderness and Shakespeare’s subtlety are not.

The main event, taking up more time than the language, is

the rollicking band, making literal the famous opening line, “If music be the food of love, play on.” And we are given “surfeit of it” by the composers, Tom Haines and Ross Hughes, who have musicians onstage: Alan Pagan on drums and Fred Thomas on keyboard. The whole shindig is directed by Sean Holmes.

Oliver Dimsdale and Poppy Miller in Filter Theatre’s “*Twelfth Night*” at the Annenberg Center.

ROBERT DAY

THEATER REVIEW

► *Twelfth Night*

Presented by Filter Theatre Productions at the Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts, 3680 Walnut St., through Saturday.

Tickets: \$20-\$35.

Information: 215-898-3900 or www.AnnenbergCenter.org



