

TWELFTH NIGHT: GIRLS WHO
LIKE BOYS WHO LIKE BOYS
WHO LIKE GIRLS.

ONE OF THOSE NIGHTS!

CROSS-DRESSING, GENDER CONFUSION AND HOMOEROTIC SUBTEXTS. NO WONDER *TWELFTH NIGHT* IS ONE OF SHAKESPEARE'S MOST POPULAR PLAYS.

OF THE MULTIPLE Shakespeare productions currently taking place, Queensland Theatre is staging what many argue is his greatest comedy, *Twelfth Night*.

Set in the fictitious land of Illyria, the play centres around twins, each assumed dead by the other, in a plot pickled in mistaken identities. If all that sounds a bit familiar, take note; *Twelfth Night* and Shakespeare's other twins caper, *Comedy Of Errors* are the blueprints for this much-copied concept.

Viola and Sebastian are twins separated in a shipwreck. To survive, Viola disguises herself as a young male servant, Cesario. But she falls in love with her employer, the Duke Orsino. The Duke is in love with the Countess Olivia, who subsequently falls for Viola (who she thinks is the male servant, Cesario). But the plot and subplots deepen when Viola's brother Sebastian reappears, looking identical to his cross-dressed sister. It's no coincidence that the play is sometimes known as *Or What You Will*.

Modern audiences will see a play brimming with ideas about gender roles, same-sex attraction and bullying; and while it is funny, playful and sexual, it has a dark side.

Director Sam Strong (*Jasper Jones*) will also draw out the musical component, aided largely by Tim Finn (formerly of Split Enz and Crowded House). Finn also created the musical score to the successful *Ladies In Black*, another work from Queensland Theatre.

The cast includes Jessica Tovey (*Wolf Creek*) as Viola, Kevin Spink as Sebastian, and Jason Klarwein (*Devil's Playground*) as the Duke. Liz Buchanan (*The 39 Steps*) is the Countess and Sandro Colarelli (*The Odyssey*) is Feste. Christen O'Leary plays the cross-gendered Malvolia, traditionally the male role, Malvolio.

Kurt Phelan takes on the complexities of Antonio, the rescuing sea captain. "Antonio is one of Shakespeare's

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most talked-about characters within the play," says Phelan. "There's much talk about whether he's expressing homosexual feelings for Sebastian, who he saves from certain death after the shipwreck. As a seasoned seafarer, he feels an allegiance to this life he has saved, but there is a strong undercurrent of confusion about how much he cares.

"It's a bit like Ennis in *Brokeback Mountain*. It's a relationship full of delight and confusion. It's also about friendship and love against the odds. However, given when the play was written, I'm sure it was intended to be about the camaraderie between two men who've been through an ordeal together."

Of all Shakespeare's popular plays *Twelfth Night*, in particular, seems a constant favourite. Last year it played at Sydney's Royal Botanical Gardens and later this year Geoffrey Rush features in a Melbourne Theatre Company production. To many, it is special.

"It's one of Shakespeare's most concise comedies," says Phelan. "There's something in there for everyone: far-off places, daring sword fights, mistaken identities and beautiful poetry that's usually interpreted into song. It gives each production a unique take, but most of all it has stood the test of time. *Twelfth Night* doesn't need any explanation to a contemporary audience because it feels like it was written yesterday.

"I think we are about to create a new classic," say Phelan. "The songs that Tim Finn has written are exciting and truly magical. With Sam Strong's vision, and the team he has assembled, I'm sure it will be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity."

MORE: *Twelfth Night* plays April 28 to May 19 at the Queensland Performing Arts Centre. Go to queenslandtheatre.com.au