

T*welfth Night* is one of Shakespeare's best-loved comedies, with many of his standard comic elements: a girl dressed as a boy, a major practical joke on a foolish character, a fool who tells the truth, two cases of unrequited love, and everything coming up roses in the end. It is believed to have been written in late 1600, to be performed for Queen Elizabeth on Twelfth Night (January 6), a traditional night of merry-making.

The play opens with a petulant Orsino, Duke of Illyria, commanding his court musicians to "play on!" Just as quickly he decides he has had "enough!" Lady Olivia has rejected his love, and music cannot console him. In the next scene, we meet Viola, who has just landed on the island of Illyria when a boat carrying her and her twin brother Sebastian was wrecked. She thinks he is lost forever when she loses track of him in the raging sea. She makes the best of it by dressing herself as a young man, calling herself Cesario, and becoming Duke Orsino's page. Now the trouble starts.

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Children do a fantastic job with this play. They really enjoy portraying the comic characters—Sir Toby Belch, Sir Andrew Aguecheek, and Malvolio. But the straight characters are also rewarding roles. Duke Orsino has nothing to do but pine away for the lovely Lady Olivia. The feisty Maria loves scolding her friends Sir Toby and Sir Andrew and letting them in on her idea for tricking the pompous servant Malvolio. Viola is a plucky young girl who can scarcely maintain her composure—or her pretense of being the boy Cesario—when she finds herself falling in love with the duke. Viola's twin brother Sebastian is bewildered when he finds himself mistaken for Cesario, but he is only too happy to marry the lovely Lady Olivia when she asks him. Feste the Clown makes about as much sense as anyone when he dances alone on the stage at the end of the last act. He sings (or is accompanied by a recording of) the famous madrigal "When that I was and a little tiny boy/ With hey, ho, the wind and the rain/ A foolish thing was but a toy/ For the rain it raineth every day."

In this play, as in all these children's productions, costumes should not be elaborate. But do try to find some yellow tights, leggings, or pants for Malvolio and wind red ribbons around his legs for the crossed garters. The poor guy has been convinced by a forged letter that Olivia—the lady he serves—is in love with him and "bids him to come before her all smiling and cross-gartered, in yellow stockings." When Malvolio walks onstage in this garb, allow time for laughter to subside!

One last word on the comedy. *Twelfth Night* has plenty of silly scenes, which children love. However, it is not cruel and it is not stupid. Unlike many comedies by lesser playwrights, the real thing never dips down into bad taste or slapstick.

Suggested Music

Songs & Dances from Shakespeare (compact disc). The Broadside Band, Saydisc Records, 1994.

Twelfth Night

ACT 1

Scene 1

Duke's palace.

(ENTER NARRATOR, ORSINO, CURIO, and other LORDS or MUSICIANS [optional].)

(MUSIC.)

(Characters strike poses of thoughtful attention to the music or, if there are any, to the onstage musicians.)

NARRATOR:

Ladies and gentleman, kindred spirits, and all lovers of love attend! Welcome to our play *Twelfth Night*, a delightful comedy written by our friend Mr. William Shakespeare around the year 1601. You will see before you on the stage Duke Orsino, a sensitive and good duke of the country of Illyria, and his men. The duke is in love with the lady Olivia, but alas she does not love him. She has told him that because of her grief over the death of her brother, she will remain veiled and shut up in her house and will admit no one until seven years have passed.

DUKE ORSINO:

If music be the food of love, play on
Give me too much of it . . . oh
Enough! No more!
'Tis not so sweet now as it was before.

(ENTER VALENTINE.)

DUKE ORSINO:

How now? What news from her?

VALENTINE:

So please my lord, I was not admitted.
But from her handmaid do return this answer,
That no one shall behold her face
For seven long years. That's how long she would honor
Her dead brother's love,
And keep his memory fresh and lasting.

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DUKE ORSINO:

Oh, if she loves a brother so now,
How she will love when Cupid's arrow
Rids her of all other affections!
Away before me to sweet beds of flowers!
Love thoughts lie rich when canopied with bowers.

(EXIT DUKE, CURIO, and VALENTINE.)

(Sound of waves breaking on shore and/or actors can wave blue silky fabric to represent water.)

ACT I

Scene 2

Twelfth Night

Seacoast or beach.

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NARRATOR:

While Orsino tries to convince himself that one day Olivia will love him, another situation is unfolding in our play. A young woman named Viola and her twin brother Sebastian have been shipwrecked off the coast of Illyria.

Viola, the captain of the boat, and a few of the sailors are safe, but her brother Sebastian is gone, and Viola is afraid he has drowned. The captain comforts her by telling her that he last saw Sebastian clinging to a piece of the ship's mast, so there is a good chance he has survived.

(ENTER VIOLA and SEA CAPTAIN.)

VIOLA:

What country, friends, is this?

CAPTAIN:

This is Illyria, lady.

VIOLA:

And what should I do in Illyria?

Oh, sailors, do you think my brother Sebastian has drowned?

CAPTAIN:

Madam, after our ship split apart
I saw your brother bind himself
To a strong mast in the sea
Where, like Arion the poet, who rode upon the dolphin's back
He rode upon the waves as far as I could see.