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ENG 306: Final Essay

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Committing to Queer Closure:

The Well-intended and Poorly Executed 'Queering' of Simon Godwin's *Twelfth Night*

National Theatre Live presents Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, directed by Simon Godwin, performed in 2017 with notable cast members Tasmin Greig as gender-bent Malvolia, Oliver Chris as Orsino and Tim McMullan as Sir Toby. Perhaps in the pursuit of maintaining and growing audience size, as well as recognizing the desires of 21st century theatergoers, the national theater looks for ways to change and improve the performance - this might look like casting a different gender than what is traditionally casted, a different race, or general reinterpretations of the text. Initially, one might think that these decisions appeal exclusively to younger audiences, but really it is safe to assume that any modern consumer of media is privy to these necessary updates in performance diversity, and is consequently drawn to them. These textual deviations are easier said than done. A tactful execution of these modern and progressive interpretations requires a certain delicacy and care as the newly represented identities should be made to reach the same resolutions as any other plot line. In an investigation of coherence and closure, *Twelfth Night* productions will inevitably fall under two distinct categories: a complete dramaturgy or an incomplete drama. In this case, the distinction "notes a failure to adapt and intervene in these plays at a structural level, and represents instead of taking a shortcut, heading on a marketing strategy, picking up on a 'trend,' or (with all the good intentions in the world) trying to cast marginalized performers in star making roles— but perhaps failing to think through

to the end of the decisions being made, and to consider how they will affect the play at a holistic level” (Williams 4). Simon Godwin’s production of *Twelfth Night* is an example of an incomplete dramaturgy, its poor execution demonstrated by music; although differentiating complete and incomplete dramaturgies is difficult and objective, music can help us reach the conclusion of incompleteness.

Scholarship regarding the interconnectivity of music and the queer experience have established the necessary traits of media that depicts this relationship. There are more straightforward, visual aspects—dialogue, historical references, and influences, as well as tone and voice: “One feature of the [*Queering the pitch: the new gay and lesbian musicology*] is its faithfulness and humor. What is the point of a queer musicology, writers seem to be saying, if it does not incorporate those aspects of lesbian and gay experience that have been so powerful encountering oppression – irony, wit, and camp humor” (Brett 373). This production takes this tone in stride, creating a story that is, in its best moments, lighthearted, riotous, and successfully demonstrating queer joy. However, the story requires equal parts, humor, and wit, as well as sensitivity and compassion; it’s nailing the comedy, tragedy, less so.

As far as the application of supplementary musical moments, there are perhaps unforeseen responsibilities of the production's execution, in recognition of the true poignancy of music on the stage. Voicing strong disapproval of the original musicality, historian and writer, Tiffany Stern remarks, “I do not therefore hesitate to call the nonsensical ditty before us, some buffoon actor’s composition, which was accidentally tacked to the prompter’s copy of *Twelfth-Night*, having been casually subjoined to it for the diversion” (Stern 171). Need there

be music at all? Is there any reason to give it stage-time? Even if the execution falls short and it is, in fact, an incomplete dramaturgy, I believe there are a variety of goals the production's music has set out to achieve. In Godwin's *Twelfth Night*, its 'queering' may not land perfectly, but there are a number of other areas where it absolutely shines. I believe the analyzed efficacy of a dramaturgy is always subjective, but through my own analysis, aided by collected scholarship and textual evidence, I will prove that the creative deployments are not working in Godwin's favor. Let's get into it.

Ridiculing Vulnerability via Cabaret

In Tasmin Greig's performance as Malvolia, she performs a shocking cabaret number with lyrics pulled from Shakespeare's Sonnet 135; as closed captions read [jaunty drumbeat], the opposite side of the staircase swings into view, revealing the actress in a clown collar-style white frock, her arms at a diagonal 'T,' the yellow stockings, of course, and a terrifying smile on her face. The original text both lacks the femininity and the musicality; Greig reports in multiple written and video sources that the production's music director had composed this song just for her and intended for it to be performed as a cabaret number. Appearing equal parts terrified and excited, she sings through the first lines and dramatically takes off the dress, a yellow leotard and skirt piece underneath – going one step further than a predictable feminized version of Malvolio's text-supported yellow stockings, the costume has spinning tassels jutting out from the breasts; Phoebe Fox's Olivia looks on in horror and embarrassment (for both Malvolia and herself), picking up the dress that Malvolia has thrown down the stairs. As always, this scene has been one of seduction and playfulness, supported alone by the character's drastic and amusing change in temperament as well as outfit. Godwin's production received a significant laugh from

its audience, the viewers behaving as if at a live cabaret show; yet this reaction speaks to the interpretation of the character's display of vulnerability.

On the one hand, the use of a cabaret style musical number could be considered empowering in that it appears to embrace a queer culture of 'campiness,' an art form that has been used historically to demonstrate sexual liberation, bodily autonomy, and queer joy. Yet, when the patterns of Malvolia's joy and the accompanying music are tracked, we can find that more often than not, music, especially performed by or to women, can be acquainted with clownery and lose any and all respect for the character or even the art form. I believe that the choices made by Godwin to both gender bend Malvolio and allow her a song, allow us to view the character as someone to laugh at, and to humor, so to speak. Are we laughing with her, or at her in this music number? There are other thoughtful moments in the production, where we are bearing witness to Malvolia's thought process, and are in brief cahoots with her plotting. However, in this moment, the music only aids the idea that this character is purely a spectacle; even prior to her 'gay awakening,' the character plays directly to the trope of an uptight and humor-less drag, Greig receiving equal amounts of applause for both versions of her character. This may indicate that we are a knowing audience, and are fully aware of our active roles in Malvolia's descent into madness: "I'll be revenged on the whole pack of you" (5.1.401). At the end of the cabaret performance, the character looks victorious, proud of her song and her bravery in expressing her affection to Olivia; tit tassels still spinning, having had Olivia activate them mid performance, she places her hands on her hips as a dramatic instrumental flourish plays beyond, a true showgirl. This stylistic showmanship solidifies the cabaret inspiration and also

connects to my next point of analysis, which is the choice of gender-bending the roles of Feste and Malvolio.

Gender Bends and Breaks

In favor of this production earning the title of complete dramaturgy, the gender-bending qualities can be interpreted as progressive political resistance. Although this is the very first female Malvolio in the production's history (in England (as far as we know (this production is already self-aggrandizing in its claim to a historical first, so, really... as far as we know))), gender-bending the 21st-century casts of Shakespeare productions is not as revolutionary as it was the first couple times; and because it is not a recent dramaturgical invention, there is the need for the choice to be not only a surprising deviation from the original text, but well-intentioned and carefully followed through. Most Shakespeare consumers approach these productions and performances as something to be critiqued and held to a very high standard, and as such, it is simply not enough to make these two characters women - there needs to be genuine enhancement for these choices to have been worth our attention and praise. By changing Malvolio from male to female, the tale of an unguided and largely comical seduction becomes one of tragic and unrequited lesbian desire. If the character were male, the final unraveling and abandonment would've been a moving but mostly unimpactful ending in terms of individual and collective introspection; whereas with the female version of the character, this lack of closure or resolution and consequential abandonment of narrative, is completely aligned with the nature of historic and modern queer tragedies, a genre that all too often, queer representation falls under. This role gave Tasmin Grieg great acclaim, further proving the production as an incomplete

dramaturgy that, among other things, serves as a vehicle for celebrating Grieg, a talented and (anticipated) marketable success.

On the surface, the interpretation is illuminating and representative and heartbreaking. And yet, most, if not all productions of *Twelfth Night*, suffer from a unique affliction: no follow through. This applies directly to queer representation in Shakespearean literature, in regard to the plot lines of queer desire throughout, an idea that is well established and never resolved, to the disappointment of its viewers who may feel as though they've been led on. Similar to other forms of literature and scholarship, there is an unsaid intimacy contract between author and reader – the author is expected to guide the reader through emotional and vulnerable experiences and commit to the plans that they have laid out. *Twelfth Night* breaks this contract: the evidence-backed queer bread crumbs are resolved via heteronormative couplings that negate the entire play. I feel that nine out of ten times, there is little to be interpreted: these character dynamics are written as queer, if not in the reference to identities of gender and sexuality, then in the raunchy 'otherness.' This unfounded deviation indicates that at the finish of all Shakespearean plays, however chaotic (codeword: queer) and uncontrolled, order must be returned (code word: unqueer'd), an unfortunate, but expected finale: "The various characters have come to wisdom through their sufferings and are at last reconciled. There is once again political, social, and personal order. [...] When [the world] is in tune, there is 'the harmony of this peace'" (Dunn 399). This indicates that music (both in a traditional and nontraditional sense) has the power to reinforce and/or reinstate the heteronormativity of *Twelfth Night*.

In this way, the text and the director lack the courage to fulfill their original creative intentions, and have failed in the execution of their so-called progressive ideas, rendering Simon Godwin's *Twelfth Night* an incomplete dramaturgy. The decision to have Feste played by a female actor does nothing for the production: the resulting dynamics between her and other characters fail to change drastically if at all, her prophetic line delivery middling and all of this is diminished by a ridiculous outfit that I feel at the worst of times completely misses one of the most important aspects of this text, which is irony. Although the play can be easily read as a comedy and does have comic notes throughout, it is a tragedy, and each song and scene can be read as such - equal parts biting honest and melancholic, as well as heartwarming and joyful. *Twelfth Night* perhaps demonstrates this Shakespearean duality the best among other productions, especially as pertaining to the representation and interpretation of queer desire in classical text.

A Witty Fool or A Foolish Wit?

The next area of my analysis is the music sung by Feste, the production's comedic plant. During the production's second act, the character sings a slow and mournful song, titled "O Mistress Mine": like all other songs of hers, I found this performance to be soulful, and melancholic, yet lacking in clear substance—another showgirl. In this instance, she is prompted to sing by Sir Toby and Sir Andrew, who request a song of love; she stands on top of a chair in a silly get up (a green boa, a snake headpiece, and an outfit underneath that says "I know what today's youth dress like and it is this.") Feste proceeds to sing both to the audience, and to the two men, gesturing to them; the ridiculing and clownish nature of these musical queer spaces is reaffirmed as Andrew embraces Toby from behind, inciting a huge bout of laughter from the

audience condemning this supposedly bittersweet moment to one of less importance and a mockery of vulnerability and (performed) tragedy. If aligned in succession, the three main songs sung by Feste collate into a potential single narrative: “as one single narrative, the songs link a man’s decline in life with his relationship to a woman’s; as separate narratives, the songs connect love with frustration and despair. Creating the play emotionally, the songs, with their bleak outlook, undercut the drama's comedy” (Stern 172). With creative license, the director is given the opportunity to ironize the situation, and the play as a whole, and this performance is simply an extension of that poorly wielded power.

The second instance of this characters performances is titled, “Come Away,” sung at the 40th birthday party of Orsino, who asks for the fool to come and sing a “silly sooth” that he had heard recently; Feste appears and again, assumes a position standing on the top the table (perhaps this elevation creates a visual inversion of class stratification, as Shakespeare would’ve wanted). Now among a proper audience, and not her household peers, the actress performs to Viola/Cesario and Orsino, the two of them standing directly in front of her, with their backs to the viewers. This second musical round seems to be painting the picture of a man who has suffered rejection, and is now asking for his own funeral; who this directly applies to asks for a more objective conclusion, and leaves the audience with perhaps an oblivious enjoyment of the song, but without a true comprehension and appreciation for the inherent ironies. On the Shakespearean nuances going over the audience’s head via the director’s interpretation, Tiffany Stern writes, “The substance of these *Twelfth Night* songs is not acknowledged in the play. Their narratives stand aside from the text they are in, suggesting that they may be in the play through—or because of—circumstance as well as design” (Stern 170). Godwin should be given a

moderate level of praise for his ability to recognize very clear queer intricacies in the text and interpreting them in the most surface level of ways: throughout the song, the two 'men' stand side-by-side, glance towards the other, make both knowing and uncomfortable eye contact, then split to opposite ends of the stage. Pretty straightforward.

The final song delivered by Feste, "When That I Was and A Little Boy" is undoubtedly evocative and epilogic as the set's revolutions display each character's 'ending' (now, that's a well-intentioned and well-executed idea!) and Feste's temperament is one of defeat and melancholy. As mentioned previously, the tonal dichotomy of the play as both comedy and tragedy is not easily displayed, so I'll give credit where credit's due. Even so, I feel that the audience is owed more than Feste only singing with a melancholic affect and Malvolia jumping from uptight servant to the greatest queer victim in Shakespeare history - there are greater ways to acknowledge the balanced pathos of it all; granted her song is melodic and enacts the production's leitmotif which is widely applicable as an acoustic signal (Gavin). Alternatively, the tonal ambiguity repeatedly served as indications of deviation in courtship: heteronormative rejection resulting in disorientation and self-questioning, shame and anxiety. In a final act of ambiguity, Feste leaves the audience in an atmosphere of despair and defeat, "For the rain it raineth every day" (5.1.415), the last of which is accompanied by haunting ensemble vocals. Viewers may feel as though they're watching a funeral - recognizing the metaphorical deaths of Malvolia, of queer desire, and of true love. In recognition of this ambiguity, Perraino views these circumstances as a "creative response to cultural circumstances that place music, sexuality, and women in an ambiguous and ambivalent relationship to constructions of moral behavior" (Perraino 448).

Those Who Dance, And Those Who Don't

Outside of individual musical performances delivered by specific characters, I believe there are musical intentions throughout, in regards to who participates in this culture and exchange of music. At different moments, we see some characters indulging in musicality: Olivia dances on the staircase, Andrew and Toby are silly dancers throughout, Feste who both insights eloquence and chaos, and eventually Malvolia. In these moments there seems to be a direct correlation between musical participation with queerness and a resistance to a controlled and heteronormative structure; similar to the point of music being acquainted with foolery and clowning, indulging in the productions music is a way of collectivizing the characters and giving each individual the opportunity to become fully realized and join the choir, so to speak: “The nymphs are summoned to perform the dance because they are ‘in tune’, i.e. their souls and bodies are in harmony” (Dunn 402). While certain players are able to gain some musical literacy, they inevitably are pulled back to their assumed roles of gender and sexuality at the finale.

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