SHIPWRECKED IN ILLYRIA, SHAKESPEARE’S TWELFTH NIGHT MAPS THE COASTLINES OF LOVE AND LAUGHTER

By Heather Helinsky, Dramaturg

The map of Shakespeare’s world was changing. Using the Mercator projection, the Wright-Molyneux Map of 1599 used mathematical calculations to draw the known world. Instead of filling in the rest with fanciful, mythical monsters, the unknown parts were left blank; some coastlines were unfinished. It was also the first time that the colony of Virginia in the New World was on the map. Perhaps in that blank space on the map, a creative imagination was stimulated. Was the unexplored world different, or were the people like England?

In Twelfth Night, Viola’s first line is “What country, friends, is this?” with which the Captain and country, friends, is this?” To which the Captain and

Shakespeare’s comedies, however, are often set in forests, as in A Midsummer Night’s Dream or As You Like It. In the forest, the rules of love and courtship can be broken and subverted, as Helena and Rosalind are quick to discover. In the forest of Arden, women can chase after men or dress like men. Outside of the city, the country life allows lovers to change their love. Love metamorphoses each couple. By the end of these comedies, whatever changes that have occurred lead the couples back to order and the court life and celebrating multiple happy marriages.

Love in Twelfth Night, however, is an uncharted coastline. While Viola must change her form and dress like a man, she is also separated from her twin brother Sebastian and left alone to navigate the space between the court of the Duke Orsino and Countess Olivia.

Viola is Shakespeare’s last cross-dressing role for many years; as well as the last time this character was written for the audience of Queen Elizabeth. As the course of stories later King James I would prefer.

When Viola disguises herself as a eunuch who serves Duke Orsino as a kind of court jester “to play the woman’s part” in acting our Orsino’s woes as a spurred lover, we see Shakespeare asking both the audience and the actor to believe in the Viola-Cesario hybrid creation. It’s a role that requires everyone in the theatre to use their imagination to create this unique performance.

Viola must navigate her grief for her brother Sebastian as she tries to revive the spirit of his memory by imitating him, as well as her clever performance for Orsino as she sent as a go-between with his beloved Olivia, and her own inward desires and passions, which she has to hide to commit this subterfuge. It’s a challenging role for any actor to play, and a potentially complicated story to weave—Shakespeare might be trying himself in the kind of sailors’ knots used to rig ships.

While England’s adventurous captains were off exploring new lands and trying to outmaneuver Spanish pirates for supremacy in the new world, on the south bank of the Thames River, another war was raging: a literary war. The years 1599-1602 have been termed “The Poet’s War” as Ben Jonson, William Shakespeare, John Marston, and Thomas Dekker competed for their status as England’s top Poet-Dramatist. Competition for audiences and approval was fierce and it was both personal and philosophical for each writer to dominate.

At the moment Shakespeare was writing Twelfth Night, he was on the defensive, as Ben Jonson’s satirical comedies sent slings and arrows at Shakespeare’s particular fondness for romantic comedy. Satire ridicules the idea of genuine romance and Jonson’s plays in particular criticized Shakespeare’s plots.

Meanwhile, Shakespeare’s company was down a man. Popular clown Will Kemp, who originated so many of Shakespeare’s characters: Bottom in A Midsummer Night’s Dream, Peter in Romeo & Juliet, Dogberry in Much Ado About Nothing, Constable in Love’s Labours Lost and Laurelcoet in Merchant of Venice had a huge falling out with the Lord Chamberlain’s Men.

Clowns were more than jokesters. They traced their lineage to older, popular festival entertainments as the Lord of Misrule and minstrelsy, and Will Kemp saw himself as a modern-day stand-up comedian.

According to an anecdotal tale, Armin was noticed to a goldsmith who had worked at the site of Kemp. Armin didn’t dance the jig, he sang. Music was his preferred medium, not prat-falls. Armin didn’t demand center stage attention; he preferred standing in the wings, observing the action, then was at the ready with the perfect barb.

While a modern audience couldn’t imagine a tragedy like Romeo & Juliet ending with a jibe, Elizabethans audiences demanded one from the company clown at the end of every performance. We do know the timing of Kemp’s departure coincided with the writing of Shakespeare’s Henry V. Falstaff was Will Kemp’s most famous character and just as Queen Elizabeth called on Shakespeare to write a play for Falstaff, Kemp left in a huff, and Shakespeare must have had to do backflips as a writer to find a way to appease his audience’s desire for ‘more Falstaff” while auditioning a new Clown.

Finding a new actor to take over for Will Kemp wasn’t as easy as moving someone up in the ranks. Kemp’s clowning drew audiences with his foolish portrayal of the lower-class Elizabethan man who related to the Groundlings; they needed some star power.

And perhaps, with tension between the playwright and Kemp, they needed to find someone quick who could handle Shakespeare’s vision because next up, the company was presenting two new plays: a little piece called Hamlet as well as the comedy Twelfth Night, a play requested for the winter holiday season of 1600-1601.

Exit Will Kemp, Enter Robert Armin to play the Gravedigger and Feste. Armin was the son of a tailor who then apprenticed to a goldsmith who had worked at the Royal Mint in the Tower of London. According to an anecdotal tale, Armin was discovered by the Queen’s favorite jester Richard Tarlton, who then took him on as an apprentice.

After Armin finished his apprenticeship in 1592, he bounced around with different companies of players as well as solo performances for aristocratic audiences. A cerebral comic, Armin was also a writer, performing and starring in his own play Two Masts of a Mer-Clark and publishing a popular book about the art of the clown: Fool upon Fool.

Armin’s style of comedy was the opposite of Kemp. Armin didn’t dance the jig, he sang. Music was his preferred medium, not prat-falls. Armin didn’t demand center stage attention; he preferred standing in the wings, observing the action, then was at the ready with the perfect barb. Armin would eventually grow into the role of the Fool in Shakespeare’s King Lear, embodying the aesthetic direction Shakespeare was evolving into.

For the moment, though, Shakespeare needed an actor with a gift of riddling who would stay on script in the world of the play, engaging his fellow actors in witty, heightened poetic dialogue, instead of attention-seeking pandering to the audience. With Robert Armin, Shakespeare found his man for Feste.
This is my favorite play,” says director Matt Pfeiffer. “I love it. I’ve never been more excited to direct it. It captures Shakespeare’s balance of light and dark. I think Hamlet is much funnier than people realize. And Twelfth Night is much darker than people realize. Death is a huge subject in the play. This play is about people trying to find their place in the world. From the beginning, a woman arrives shipwrecked on a beach, revealing her twin brother is dead. It’s a comic plot that runs very dark.”

According to Pfeiffer, “Viola’s journey in the play is entering an undiscovered country and putting on men’s clothes, Shakespeare uses disguise as a way for a young woman to try and find her voice again. In Viola’s case, it’s more severe. You’ve survived, how will you now find her voice again. In Viola’s case, it’s more profound than people realize. Death is a huge subject in the play. This play is about people exploring a lot of the themes informed the series of productions I’ve directed. “

In “plays that have no music, like my past productions of Two Gentlemen of Verona and Henry V, we added all that music in, but in this case, the songs in the play are not added by me, they’re written in. I like that Shakespeare’s songs in Twelfth Night can be as mournful sounding as it is, but then Feste seems it with a joke. The best actors are the ones that are able to capture beauty and brutality in the same breath. Their ability to touch profound truth, and then fart. I can’t think of another play of Shakespeare’s that does this better.” Pfeiffer finds that what makes the story as profound is how Shakespeare uses the music that clown Feste sings. “Illyria is an island that was once a beautiful place, but Olivia’s grief for the deaths in her family has made the whole island dormant; it’s become a quiet, mournful place. Duke Orsino has never heard ‘no’ in his life, he’s so depressed by Feste’s song, he’s so inflated by Olivia’s rejection. When you’re talking about an island, there’s nowhere else to go, it’s somewhere out there in the sea. Illyria is a shut down, tiny, secluded town that is down in the dumps, and these people have lived here their whole lives. Illyria is a once vibrant place that’s now worn over by loss. When Feste sings of the rain of everyday, his message to be happy while you can because the rain is going to come regardless. Ultimately, I feel the play is about if you have the opportunity to grab happiness and love, grab it.”

The world for Elizabethans certainly was changing. There were parts of the map still left blank, countries still to discover. After shipwrecked on this coastline, Shakespeare uses Viola, Feste, and Malvolio to speak back to his critics who had a more cynical, satirical view of the world. As the Captain of this ship, will Shakespeare’s Twelfth Night leave us stranded, too? Or is it a play that argues why we need romantic love and silly laughter, to warm us on even the coldest and darkest of nights.


20 This is director Matt Pfeiffer’s 20th season at PSF. Matt is a Philly born actor and director who is thrilled to be back at PSF for his 20th season. Some previous PSF directing credits include: A midsummer night’s dream, Romeo & Juliet, and The Two Gentlemen of Verona (2014). Matt is a 12-time Barrymore nominee, and two-time winner for his direction of The Whale and The Invisible Hand Theatre. He’s also a recipient of the F. Otto Haas Award. Other theatre credits include: Orlando Shakespeare Theatre, InterAct Theatre, Walnut Street Theatre, 1812 Productions, Lantern Theatre, and Delaware Theatre. Matt is a 1999 graduate of the theatre program at DeSales University (then Allentown College).