Elements' 'Twelfth Night' is uncommonly good

THEATER Review

By Ellen Petry Whalen

Shakespeare's work is commonly performed, but it takes an uncommon theater to perform it to its fullest, with the subtle nuances, elaborate costuming and spectacular sets. Elements Theatre Company is a hidden theatrical treasure on the shores of Rock Harbor and one of its specialties is Shakespeare. Its summer offering this year is Shakespeare's comedy "Twelfth Night or What You Will."

As if an impressive production of the Bard's work isn't tempting enough, there is also a nouvelle-cuisine, pre-show dining option on a beautiful stoned terrace.

"Twelfth Night" refers to the common carnival-like merry-making that marked the end of the twelve days of Christmas. The amusing play mirrors this topsy-turvy merriment. Written in 1601, it is one of Shakespeare's earliest works and contains his common theme of mistaken identity.

The two-and-half-hour comedy opens in Illyria, on the Adriatic Sea. The noblewoman Viola (Rachel McKendree) is shipwrecked and fears her twin brother Sebastian (Peter Haig) is dead. Taking the disguise of a page named Cesario, she quickly becomes a servant and confidant to Duke Orsino (Luke Norman), who is in love with the mourning Lady Olivia (Ellen Ortolani). Believing Viola to be a man, Lady Olivia falls for her, while Viola has her heart set on the Duke. Meanwhile, there is a fun sub-plot with Olivia's servants, who are up to their own shenanigans. Wanting to get back at the arrogant head steward, Malvolio (Sr. Danielle Dwyer), they convince him through a letter written by the Lady's servant Maria (Kate Shannon), that Olivia is in love with him, but there are some silly tests he must first perform, like wearing yellow stockings. Also in on the rouse are Olivia's uncle, Sir Toby (Brad Lussier), the fool Feste (Chris Kanaga) and the servant Fabian (Sr. Phoenix Catlin).

Malvolio (Danielle Dwyer) is duped by Sir Andrew Aguecheek (Kyle Norman), Sir Tody Belch (Brad Lussier), Feste (Chirs Kanaga) and Fabian (Sr. Phoenix Marcella Catlin) in "Twelfth Night" at Paraclete House in Orleans.
Courtesy photo

Under the consistent direction of Sr. Danielle Dwyer, the first-rate cast of 17 is no stranger to Shakespeare's old English. The troupe has trained extensively with teachers from institutions like Shakespeare's Globe, the Royal Shakespeare Company and London's National Theatre, to name a few. Their superb performance is enhanced by the luxurious and detailed handmade costumes, along with the elaborate set. The large Mediterranean stucco facade has wooden beams holding up the terra-cotta-tiled roof with grand arched doors that open up to an expansive hand-painted, seaside mural. The highly detailed scene changes took about ten people to arrange repeatedly throughout the show.

The optional al fresco dinner at 6 p.m. makes the evening a night to remember. With many of the vegetables and herbs coming from The Community of Jesus' extensive gardens, the artistically presented, finely prepared and bountiful three-course meal starts with a stacked tomato salad, layered with feta, asparagus and green beans with an herb dressing. The main course consists of a succulent beef tenderloin accompanied by a blue cheese and vegetable couscous risotto, a fresh tomato jam and a light pinot noir sauce. The final culinary act is a refreshing, lime-mousse napoleon with mixed berries.

Elements' show might be entitled "Twelfth Night or What You Will," but unfortunately, this Sunday is the theatre's sixth and last night of planned performances and then the memorable comedy is over, so I strongly suggest you see it, if, "you will."

If you go...

What: "Twelfth Night or What You Will"
Where: Elements Theatre Company, Paraclete House, Rock Harbor, Orleans
When: Friday thru Sunday at 7:30 p.m., until July 17, with a dinner option at 6 p.m. on Fri. and Sat.
Tickets: $30 adults, $25 seniors; free, 18 and under; dinner theatre $50. Call 508-240-2400

CAPE COD TIMES

ELEMENTS THEATRE SHINES IN 'TWELFTH NIGHT'

By Cindy Nickerson, *Cape Cod Times*

Illyria rhymes with "deliria." Was Shakespeare possibly thinking just that when he set his early comedy "Twelfth Night" (usually dated from 1601 or 1602) in this quasi mythical Mediterranean land? According to Webster's, the word "delirium" has been around since 1590-1600, when it meant "out of one's mind."

Delusions of love and grandeur fuel this perennial favorite, which – under the direction of Danielle Dwyer – careens along merrily in a production by Elements Theatre Company.

Duke Orsino (Luke Norman) sets off a spinning circle of love as he obsessively pines away for the beautiful Countess Olivia (Ellen Ortolani). She, in mourning for her brother, will have no suitors. Meanwhile, a young woman named Viola (Rachel McKendree), shipwrecked off the Illyrian coast, disguises herself as a man and finds a position as a page in the duke's household. He, knowing her as Cesario, quickly embraces her as his confidant and sends her to woo Olivia on his behalf. Eloquent in her cause – though she's fallen in love with the duke herself – Viola only succeeds in kindling the misguided lady's passion for her alter ego.

Olivia's uncle, Sir Toby (Brad Lussier), exemplifies the play's slightly off-kilter spirit. Although perpetually tipsy, he's the mastermind behind a zany subplot or two, including a ruse to deflate Olivia's self-important steward, Malvolio. His gleeful co-conspirators are Olivia's gentlewoman Maria (Kate Shannon); his dim-witted comrade, Sir Andrew Aguecheek (Kyle Norman); and Feste (Chris Kanaga), Olivia's not-so-foolish fool. They're a rowdy, irreverent bunch with a most engaging chemistry – ignited, in large measure, by Lussier. He so completely inhabits Sir Toby – or perhaps it's vice versa – that it's impossible to tell where one begins and the other ends. (He clearly also played a helpful role as dramaturge. This classically trained company delivers lines with ease, taking mastery of the archaic language as if it's second nature.)

But the entire cast is exceptional, with those playing secondary or even tertiary characters maintaining a lively presence. Particularly outstanding is Dwyer, who – in an unusual gender-

bender – boldly takes on the role of Malvolio. She endows him with a pomposity equal only to the silliness that ensues when – thanks to a forged love letter, presumably from Olivia – he begins going about wearing a forced smile and yellow stockings. After reading the letter he pronounces, “I am happy” with a fierce determination, as if to say, “even if it kills me.” This casting is a nice touch in a play where the script already calls for a woman to play a man (although in Shakespeare’s day, it would have been a man playing a woman playing a man). McKendree conveys great sincerity and spirit as Viola/Cesario, never losing sight of her double role. Ortolani is especially wonderful – absolutely effervescent as Olivia, who quickly trades in her black mourning weeds for shimmering dresses after meeting Cesario.

Today, we might bill “Twelfth Night” as a sunny romantic comedy. The production is very “now,” tapping into the timelessness of Shakespeare’s humor and humanity as it moves along at a breezy pace.

One of the famous lines from “Twelfth Night” is: “Some are born great, some achieve greatness and some have greatness thrust upon them.” At the very least, Elements Theatre Company’s production flirts with greatness. And it definitely delivers on the promise of great entertainment.

The Barnstable Patriot

ELEGANT TWELFTH NIGHT WASHES ASHORE AT ROCK HARBOR

Written by John Watters, *Barnstable Patriot*

Mirthful mischief is fine entertainment

Some people are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them, Shakespeare's Malvolio reads in a letter written to him (he thinks) by Olivia, the object of his affections. Those words provide apt descriptions of the actors of the Elements Theatre Company performing the Bard's Twelfth Night in Orleans.

Sophisticated theater is Elements' forte, and staging Shakespeare is truly its element. With a regal set and lush costumes the various actors of the Community of Jesus repertory company easily capture the essence of the comedy and revel in the fast-paced farce of mistaken identity and gender-bending tomfoolery.

A simple synopsis of Twelfth Night has Viola being shipwrecked on the shoreline of an unfamiliar land called Illyria. Her twin brother Sebastian was also aboard the ill-fated ship and she fears that he has drowned. Viola meets the area's duke, Orsino, who connives her to disguise herself as a man, Cesario, and become a servant to Olivia, with whom Orsino is smitten. He hopes Cesario, can convince Olivia that he's the man for her and everyone can live happily ever after. That would be simple, but that's not quite what Shakespeare had in mind, as he adds layers of ancillary characters such as Malvolio, Olivia's steward; Sir Toby Belch, her rummy uncle; Sir Andrew, a drinking buddy of Belch; and Feste, a very wise court jester. Combining these ingredients, along with a cadre of other supporting personae, Shakespeare creates a complex labyrinth of a tale which of course gets sorted out in the end.

The director, Sr. Danielle Dwyer, who also plays Malvolio, has things well in hand, keeping the comedy moving swiftly under full sail. Although the spectacle she creates is admirable, one drawback might be the expanse of the stage, which sometimes has the audience's heads moving back and forth as if watching volleys of a tennis match. Her performance of Malvolio is extremely amusing, as her character finds himself the foil of Toby and his bunch of mirth makers.

Olivia is exquisitely fleshed out by Ellen Ortolani, who easily becomes the much sought after romantic desire of men of every station. Rachel McKendree is delightful as Viola/Cesario. McKendree is a sprite in her mustached identity and alluring as the lovely Viola.

Sir Toby Belch is robustly played by Brad Lussier who with tussled hair has way too much fun as he carouses with his band of merry makers Sir Andrew, nicely done by Kyle Norman, and Chris Kanaga, who is perfect as the all too wise jester Feste.

Like most Element productions all those on stage, which includes a cast of 19, are well-trained and well-rehearsed, which makes this tapestry of a play a beautiful vision to behold.