

# Saint Mary's Students Offer Fresh and Poetic 'Twelfth Night'

By Sophie Braccini



The cast warms up before the final rehearsal of Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night."

It is a rarity to be able to see Shakespeare at Saint Mary's College. According to professor and director Daniel Larlham, it might only be the second time ever, the reason being that the text requires such work that it is hard to put it together within the seven weeks given to an SMC production.

But leave it to the bold young director and his passionate students to take up the challenge. With a lot of hard work, much creativity and talent, they are offering a modern and meaningful "Twelfth Night" that will speak to all audiences.

Cal Shakes recently showed with a masterful modern production of "Othello" that transfiguring Shakespeare to the modern era speaks to today's audience, when done by inspired director and cast. It all started for SMC "Twelfth Night" with Larlham's choice of a play that evokes deep emotions. He feels that the central sentiment of the play is a kind of anguished yearning of unrequited love. He also acknowledges that he was always moved by the theme of the separation of the twin brother and sister.

What helped him creating this complex play within a very short period was that in the spring of this year Larlham conducted an acting class that was focused on Shakespeare, where students studied a scene of "Twelfth Night." The professor says that at first the students gave a very formal rendering of the text, but he asked them to imagine that the characters were in a Hollywood hills mansion in the 1950s, and use their own sensibility.

"They thought it was funny at first, but then they were able to bring such powerful life force to it, by thinking of it as closer to themselves," the director recalls.

This inspired Larlham and his

students to set the whole play in a loosely defined golden period of Hollywood, taking inspiration from film director Baz Luhrmann ("Moulin Rouge," "The Great Gatsby") and his irreverent anachronistic take on a period.

Larlham says that he spent a lot of "table work" time with the students so they would define for themselves what the actual meanings of the lines are, so they could make a character choice about it.

Most students who decided to take on this challenge had studied the 17th century playwright in high school, but not necessarily performed him. Angelo Chukwudebe, who plays Duke Orsino, may be one of the most experienced Shakespearean actors; he participated in the English Speaking Union National Shakespeare competition and was one of the finalists.

The students say that they have put a lot of work in developing their characters and memorizing the lines, but feel that the work is well worth it. Amanda Ramos, playing Maria, found so much current relevance in the old text, "the themes of gender and sexuality are very prevalent in the show and very relevant to us today," she says. Her friend Nakia Gibbs, who plays Feste, adds that many TV series are inspired by Shakespeare's work and recalls the 2006 movie "She's the Man" that is a very modern take on "Twelfth Night." She adds that the most fun and interesting part for her as an actress has been to find a way to embody the language with its comical aspects for audiences that might have difficulty understanding the words.

The result is convincing and very pleasurable. Like in the SMC production of Aristophanes' "Lysistrata," some students definitely dominate the performance with

their ease with the language and perfect embodiment of their character. There are also some spectacular moments, such as the shipwreck that actually happens on stage, the fights, the comic moments and the songs that could surprise some. There is enough there to satisfy any Shakespeare amateur, and entice those who could be intimidated by the old language.

The play will open on Thursday, Nov. 3, at 8 p.m. at the LeFevre Theatre, 1928 St. Mary's Road, Moraga. It will also run at 4 p.m. and 8 p.m. on Friday, Nov. 4 and at 8 p.m. on Saturday, Nov. 5. Tickets can be purchased online at [stmarys-ca.edu/twelfth-night](http://stmarys-ca.edu/twelfth-night), or at the box office, one hour prior to curtain.

Photo Sophie Braccini

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