



The audience begins to gather and get settled as show time approaches

The night opened with an effective technique. As Emily Slaughter sang, all the characters moved around in the background. In the two plays I have seen so far musicality has been much to the fore and both have had interval music. It is not unusual for music to play a big part in the CSF, but I do notice an increase this year already and my enquiring mind also notices a number of actors from the Birmingham School of Acting and so I ponder if music is a large part of that school of acting, “memo to self; investigate”.

As is so often the case, this production opens with the second scene rather than the first scene. The director, Dr Simon Bell, is far from the first to have done this. Indeed it is a very common practice. You may not be surprised to hear that I am not in favour, all things considered. Basically, I always feel there is a loss in not starting the play with the famous lines that were deliberately crafted to open it and which contain every image and theme that the play then explores:

*If music be the food of love, play on;
Give me excess of it, that, surfeiting,
The appetite may sicken, and so die.
That strain again! it had a dying fall:
O, it came o'er my ear like the sweet sound,
That breathes upon a bank of violets,
Stealing and giving odour! Enough; no more:
'Tis not so sweet now as it was before.
O spirit of love! how quick and fresh art thou,
That, notwithstanding thy capacity*

*Receiveth as the sea, nought enters there,
Of what validity and pitch soe'er,
But falls into abatement and low price,
Even in a minute: so full of shapes is fancy
That it alone is high fantastical.*

Unquestionably, though, the second scene is a dramatic opening and it is therefore used as the opening scene in many a film version by many an acclaimed director. This occurs even outwith stage and screen as it was the opening scene in a BBC Radio Three version - the one with David Tennant – where, obviously, the cinematic attraction to a shipwreck does not apply.

So, it is clearly something that one just has to put up with as so many directors invert the opening two scenes. Trust Shakespeare, in all his bounty, to not only provide the most perfect opening scene to this perfect comedy but to also offer a second scene that makes another splendid, though no longer perfect, opening.

At Downing College, in what is now the opening scene, they take the rather large risk of having the captain that Viola speaks to eat a banana as he delivers his famous post shipwreck lines.

I am writing this review amidst breaks at work so I will structure it rather unconventionally and now go through the characters, in no particular order, and give my thought on how each was portrayed. I start with someone who is usually a bit part player but who was central to the night's festivities in this production.

Sir Andrew Aguecheek is normally a pitiable creature, so open to abuse, that the laughter one has at his expense is brought to an abrupt halt with the realisation of the cruelty of such laughter when Sir Toby dismisses him with famously cutting, and usually devastating, lines.

Tonight we saw a different Sir Andrew Aguecheek. First of all he made a sensational entrance, but this is one of the times when to tell you would be too much of a spoiler for those going to see this (and everyone should go and see it). So, for now I will just say that the audience was partly stunned, partly erupting in laughter. The laughter quickly encompassed everyone and was there for the remainder of the show whenever Sir Andrew was on 'stage' because Fergus Rattigan provided us with an irrepressible character, and one who came to dominate parts of the play in a way I have never seen Aguecheek do before. He provided such an enchanting whirligig of non-stop action and humour that one could not have borne to have witnessed the customary cruel dismissal by Sir Toby breaking his spirit. One need not have worried, although Sir Toby declaimed the usual words, this Andrew merely said "shoosh, shoosh" at the end of each insult from Sir Toby as they left the stage area, making their departure through the crowd, as the lines were being uttered:

TB: Will you help? an ass-head and a coxcomb and a knave, a thin-faced knave, a gull!

Or, rather:

TB: *Will you help? an ass-head*

AA: *SHOOSH*

TB: *and a coxcomb and a knave,*

AA: *SHOOSH, SHOOSH*

TB: *a thin-faced knave, a gull!*

AA: *SHOOSH, SHOOSH*

That initial entrance of Sir Andrew was only one of many times that there was a spontaneous outbreak of laughter from most or all of the crowd. Its riotous continuation ended with its own ovation, even though we were mid-play. There were many other moments of physical action or verbal delivery that brought gales of laughter, however I do not want to spoil these for anyone reading this and still to go, and so I will forbear from describing them in detail. Make sure you look out, though, for a most wonderful touch when Sir Andrew first drinks with Sir Toby.

Also, in this scene Fergus Rattigan began a theme that ran through the night and was always delivered with great skill and humour, though never more so than in this introduction of it. I am referring here to male actors showing off their legs and displaying their galliard skills. The male thigh is such a key component of what made a male attractive to a female in Shakespeare's time that references to this runs through the plays. Another CSF director, David Rowan, when giving Shakespeare workshops that I have attended, always points this out while training people in basic approaches to acting Shakespeare and drawing attention to what the text is telling the actors to stress.

There are times when one cannot say too much without giving away 'spoilers' so I will just have to point out that Emily Slaughter is visually very striking in a very Bellian way, familiar to those who have seen other of his productions. She is an angry, sardonic, scornful **Feste** – praise be. In addition to this, Emily covers a number of other smaller parts in the play and even as Feste himself, must also play Sir Topas who in this version turns out to have an extra duty (a fine move this, and an inspired manipulation of a small cast).

Rachel Olivier burst onto the scene as **Maria** and I had one of those immediate and strange flashes of recognition before she even spoke. This was the Maria I had always imagined. I say 'strange' because I had not been aware I was carrying around an imagined Maria in my head. When she spoke, she confirmed that 'this really was Maria' ever more firmly. A Maria to stand no nonsense; a Maria firmer with Sir Toby than we often see, a Maria who for all her rage and plotting against Malvolio seemed to sense that they had gone too far, just as she realises during the famous late night drinking episode that 'her' Sir Toby has gone too far.

Olivia was portrayed with proper control and authority in her opening scene. She seemed almost regal which made her descent into a giggling, infatuated girl Cesario all the more amusing. These two Olivias both have to exist in the one play and Zoë Lambrakis switched from the lust driven Olivia to the Olivia of control and grace as though it were the most natural thing in the world.

I was absolutely delighted to have an **Orsino** who was not too languorous, too over the top *faux*-Romantic. Now, obviously, part of his opening speech – the real opening to the play ☺ - is that he is wallowing in self-indulgence but if this is overdone to the extent that it becomes his entire character, as it so often is, the play is reduced. In those cases one finds it totally unbelievable that the witty, resilient and inventive Viola would ever fall for him, far less fall for him as completely as she does. It is very much like watching an Othello where Iago is nothing but a cartoon villain that anyone could spot from a thousand paces away. In those instances, it is just unbelievable that Othello, and everyone else, is tricked by him. In both, very disparate, cases the characters (Orsino and Iago) must have more to them than self-indulgence or cartoon villainy for their effect on others to be credible.

Andrew Lancaster captures this more fully rounded Orsino. Yes, he wallows in the idea of being a lover and, yes, he is a silly fellow – these traits are unavoidable. Yet at the same time there's much more to him and so you can see why **Viola** (Lindsey Heubner) falls for him. Again music and singing contribute well here.

Viola, echoing Olivia, is very much a reliable, controlled character until she falls madly in love. Her eyes shine when she talks to Orsino and all the scenes together are very moving and funny. Lindsey performed one of Shakespeare's most unforgettable female characters with considerable style. The transformation from female to male was much more convincing than I have often seen.

Gareth Llewellyn must have been born to play **Sir Toby Belch**. He did not seem to be acting at all, though one had to think he was as no-one who was so constantly drunk, sometimes with a simultaneous hangover, could possibly remember his lines. Gareth's face always looked like he was fortunate enough to be living Sir Toby's life.

Malvolio is a similarly 'born to play this' role *vis-a-vis* Charles McGuire. After successive years losing his rag as Shylock and Master Ford (both in unforgettable style for vastly differing reasons) he now got to rage as the harshly put upon steward. **Sebastian** (David Bourne) was a totally bemused, but happily so, addition to an uproarious conclusion.

I've not mentioned **Antonio**, yet. That's apt as he does not really fit in the play, he is a left-over at the end, being left out of the happy couplings at the conclusion. We already have Malvolio as an unaccommodated figure at the end and, therefore, to have another one in Antonio presents a number of problems for directors imagining how they will put on this play. In recent decades I have mostly seen Antonio and Sebastian's relationship as an explicitly, fully blown, homosexual love affair. While the text allows this, even suggests it, it very far from insists upon it. The Antonio we got here is very different from any I have seen before. The costume and mannerisms seem to suggest something out of a boy's fiction story of a cheery British military personage with ruddy cheeks and a ready smile. He seemed to have stepped out from the pages of a *Biggles* book. I am not suggesting that it didn't work, and certainly the actor (James David Shears) was clearly portraying the part he was told play with consistency and aplomb. I'm just not sure about it, his pipe I found very off-putting first but more than once it provided appropriate humour and another brilliantly staged, laugh out loud moment of non-verbal action. Well, it would not be a production from the CSF's *enfant terrible* if there wasn't something that had me scratching my head the next day.

The 'set scenes' of legendary and much loved humour were delivered in a manner befitting them. The difficult last scene – with its frankly implausible, long drawn out reunion of the identical twins

when read - can only work when staged with imagination and verve. I mean by that, that the reunion would be just as impossible if staged 'straight'. The director and cast triumphantly overcome this difficulty. The last scene also features a marvellously funny tableau of action as the tormented Malvolio's letter is being read aloud. You are torn, as you should be, between the uplifting, life affirming, humorous ending and the haunting, nagging disquiet over the extent of Malvolio's punishment and suffering even despite Feste underlining his particular reason for taking revenge on the sad steward with a scream of rage when recounting earlier slights.

I was very glad that in the final scene Viola's name was pronounced so emphatically, it was a reminder of the difference of reading and seeing this play. Were you to see the play with no foreknowledge, you would not know her name before witnessing that closing scene. When you read the play, you know her name from the beginning but this was very much not the case for the first audiences, the ones for whom Shakespeare wrote.

Duty commands that I have to report that there were a few fluffed lines, not surprisingly given that Monday's opening to the CSF was followed by Tuesday's downpours. (That rain must have been so hard to take for everyone who had prepared so assiduously for the opening nights of their plays). However, these were quickly recovered and although they probably annoyed the actors I can assure them that not only were they very few in number but also that they had minimal or no effect on the performance. Indeed, I would go as far as to say that Orsino's capturing of himself making an uncharacteristic stumble and correcting it within nanoseconds actually added something personal and fitting to the moment.

The ovation at the end and the audience demanding an extra bow from the cast testified to the success of the production and the night. It is certainly not to be missed.

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