

12th Night! Study Guide

“If Music be the Food of Love, Play On!” – *Twelfth Night*, Act I, scene i

INTRODUCTION

The Barn Arts' *12th Night!* reimagines Shakespeare's classic comedy for today's audience. The show has new pop music, modern costumes and references, and it's performed by four actors playing thirteen roles. *12th Night!* explores gender, celebrity, power and love by telling an old story in a fresh and exciting way.

THE PLAY

Twelfth Night was first performed around 1601 for a festival at the court of Queen Elizabeth in London, England. Most of Shakespeare's plays were drawn from other sources and *Twelfth Night* was based on an Italian play written in 1531. The comedy features clowning, worldplay and mistaken identity in a combination of the low-brow and the high-brow that has made it popular with audiences throughout the last four centuries.

THE CHARACTERS

ORSINO – The Duke of Illyria

VALENTINE – Orsino's servant – in this production, his DJ

VIOLA – The heroine of *Twelfth Night*, who washes up on the shores of Illyria and disguises herself as a boy named Cesario

THE SEA CAPTAIN – A friendly stranger that helps Viola

MARIA – Olivia's servant or chambermaid

SIR TOBY BELCH – Olivia's cousin

SIR ANDREW AGUECHEEK – Toby's rich friend

FESTE – A hired fool at the estate of Olivia – in this production, a pop star

OLIVIA – The Countess of Illyria

MALVOLIO – Olivia's servant

SEBASTIAN – Viola's twin brother, who washes up on a different part of the island

ANTONIO – Sebastian's friend, who saves him from the shipwreck

THE STORY

The plot revolves around a set of twins – Viola and Sebastian of Messaline – who are shipwrecked and land on an island kingdom called Illyria. Neither twin knows that the other is alive and each one meets a cast of characters in Illyria that eventually lead them to a happy reunion.

Sebastian makes friends with Antonio, who follows him to the court of Duke Orsino, where Viola has disguised herself as a boy named Cesario, in order to get a job as a servant to the powerful Duke, who is in love with the Countess Olivia. Orsino sends “Cesario” to woo Olivia on his behalf, but a love triangle is established when Olivia falls in love with Viola (in disguise as the boy Cesario) and Viola admits that she is in love with Orsino (who also thinks she's a boy).

On top of this come the clowns – Sir Toby Belch, Sir Andrew Aguecheek, Maria and Feste, the Fool, who stay up late partying until they're reprimanded by Olivia's servant Malvolio for making noise late at night. Maria hatches a plan to trick Malvolio into thinking that Olivia is in love with him and a final plot is set into motion.

The play begins its resolution when Sebastian and Antonio arrive at Olivia's estate, followed by Orsino. Sebastian falls in love with Olivia, who thinks he is Cesario and Viola reveals herself to be a woman, leading to a happy reunion with her brother. In the play's final moments, Sebastian and Olivia and Viola and Orsino prepare to get married and Malvolio humiliates himself in front of everyone.

THE SHOW

This production is unique in its use of casting as a theatrical device that explores thematic elements of the play. In the Barn Arts' *12th Night!*, each actor plays several different roles, with the exception of the performer playing Toby Belch. The casting decisions are not only entertaining, they illuminate the major themes of the play, in particular identity, gender and sexuality.

The production is also notable for the way it roots itself in the contemporary world. The characters dress and act like people in the modern world, even as they speak words that were written four hundred years ago. This interpretive choice is intended to highlight the timeless and universal elements of Shakespeare's masterpiece, which is as relevant today as at any time in the play's history.

To craft the production, the Barn Arts Collective cut down the three-hour play to eighty minutes and moved one major scene to the end of the show. The interpretation also employs music, dance, video and projection elements to make the story compelling and accessible.

THE QUESTIONS

On the Text and Characters:

Orsino's opening speech – "If Music be the Food of Love, Play On..." – is one of the most famous soliloquies in Shakespeare's canon and also one of the most dense and challenging to understand. Why do you think Shakespeare chose to begin the play with this speech?

Viola has a deep understanding and facility with language that she puts to use throughout the play. How do the words that she chooses to speak reveal her intelligence, her ambitions and her true emotions and how do they disguise them?

The part of Malvolio has been popular with great actors for hundreds of years, yet the complex character ends the play embarrassed and rejected, telling the performers and the audience, "I'll be revenged on the whole pack of you!" Why do you think actors have gravitated towards this role and what do you think he means with his last line?

Toby Belch is a character known for his comedy, but the part includes darker undertones, including his manipulation of other characters, in particular Sir Andrew. How does Toby's darkness feed his comedy and vice versa?

Antonio's character has been the focus of much debate, due to his strong feelings for Sebastian and his lack of a resolution – he essentially disappears at the end of the play. How is Antonio different than the other characters in *Twelfth Night* and how does his experience – feeling strongly for someone else and being left out at the end – resemble instances in your own life?

Feste is the Fool, yet speaks many of the most profound lines in the play and at times appears dejected or melancholy. In what ways do you defy the expectations that society puts on you and in what ways do you uphold them?

Andrew Aguecheek is often seen for his dim-witted comedy, but he says in the play, "I was adored once too" – indicating a deeper, sadder existence than he often presents to the world. How do the feelings that we conceal inform our outward personas and how is this connected to other themes in the play?

Olivia undergoes a greater transformation than perhaps any other character in the play, telling the audience, "I do I know not what..." as she tries to rationalize and understand her sudden feelings for Cesario. How have you dealt with new and surprising feelings for other people in your own life?

Viola takes on a disguise as a way to protect herself, but she is able to see and speak more truthfully when she's undercover. How have you used anonymity to find honesty in your own life?

On the Production:

Why does the production use so few actors to play so many roles?

Why does only one actor play Toby Belch the entire time?

Why do specific actors play specific roles? For example, why does the same actor play Orsino and Olivia, when they have a conversation with one another at the end of the play?

What do you think the costume designer had to consider in creating costumes that needed to be changed very quickly backstage?

Which famous people in the real world do the costumes and performances bring to mind?

What does the style of music and video design remind you of, in terms of real-life pop culture?