Twelve Nights or WTF? at Three Minute Theatre

By Manchester Shakespeare Company

Reviewed by Paul Thompson December 2014

Two characters are leafing through DVDs, deciding which movie to watch. “Ten Things I Hate About You,” suggests one of them.

“Nah”, dismisses the other. “It's based on Shakespeare. It's bound to be shit.”

And if the prolific, nodding-and-winking in-jokes of the night are plays by The Bard, that zinger is King Lear. It's a taste of the sort of snappy and uncomplicated gag on offer for anyone who, like me, has no idea what to expect from Twelve Nights (or WTF) – by Three Minute Theatre's in-house team Manchester Shakespeare Company. They've given birth to a knockabout latter-day spin on Twelfth Night (or What You Will) by Stratford-Upon-Avon's most famous offspring. A farcical, panto-flavoured spoof reimagines the tale in FUK – the former United Kingdom – where UKIP are all-powerful, and zero immigration prevails.

Interesting, yes? Has the NHS fallen to its knees? Is the skills gap at an all-time high? Has employment creation suffered at all? Don't expect to find out any of that. The theme is the meat and two veg of the crisis: Lazy-arsed Brits don't do menial work, rendering the nation's hotel rooms undusted and their toilets unclean. Also: I think there was a mention about not being able to get a decent curry.

But who cares about the issues with such a dollop of brandy-butter fun before the festive audience of its muse? So let's focus on the story. Okay. Well, if you know Twelfth Night: it's much like that with the immigrant boy-girl twins **Viola** (***Sophie Toland***) and **Sebastian** (***Daniel Brotherton***
), separated by an accident and both thinking the other is dead. But here, it's Sebastian that takes centre stage and with a hilarious lack of explanation, disguises himself via the gift of

gender swap.

Sebastian lands a job skivvying for brassy, swish-hotel boss **Horsina Pilton** (***Sophie Anne Ellicott***).
Sebastian's in love with Horsina who in turn lusts after an unsettlingly smarmy guest inspired by Hugh Grant called
Oliver De Tabloids
(
Charlie Colquhoun
). Oliver though, believing Sebastian to be a woman, falls for him. Also bunking down in Oliver's penthouse suite are two hard-drinking harpies: Oliver's aunt
Tia Maria
(
Louise Wilson
) and
Andrea Palemuscht
(also
Toland
), an American import slash would-be romantic match for Oliver.

Tia struggles with her mission to make this pairing happen, so reverts to scheming against obnoxious and sub-John-Inman gay stereotype **Malcom** (***Tony Charnock***) – Oliver's PA. A fake missive causes Malcolm to think Oliver is in love with him – and this gives rise to some really nice self-reference: Tia explains to Andrea they can talk behind the screen without Malcolm hearing because it's a “theatrical convention” – and prays to the God Of Comedy that Malcolm reads the letter out loud.

There's also something else about Viola having a lesbian affair with a fugitive former employee

of Horsina's gaff, **Antonia** (also ***Wilson***). And, eventually, the twins – who share not one similar physical attribute bar the ownership of long hair – will be mistaken for each other, right? You get the idea. In the grand tradition of the Shakespearian comedy, it's unhinged and sub-plotty – and you'll be scratching your head during the interval, no doubt. But it's all resolved nicely in a second act that flash-fries – less prone than the slow-burning first instalment to the odd lull and flat joke. All is professional on the directorial and thespian front – especially Brotherton's shy and deadpan Sebastian as a nice foil to Ellicott's gobby and garish Horsina.

We can sweep under the rug a couple of technical gremlins: a speaker on the blink, hissing, spitting and stealing the occasional scene; and the recorded Star-Wars-parodying prologue firing up again soon after it finished; oh and, script-wise, possible over-use of the word “faggot”.

A feeling of satisfaction washes over what has been a responsive auditorium as the players take a bow. This went down well. And the headline is: It works.