Twelfth Night Essay, Research Paper

Comedic Conflict and Love in Trevor Nunn?s ?Twelfth Night?

Trevor Nunn’s direction of Shakespeare’s “Twelfth Night” takes away some of the confusion present in the reading of the text, which begins with the complicated love interests of the main characters. Having been the artistic director for the world famous Royal Shakespeare Company for eighteen years, Nunn is vastly familiar with adaptations of Shakespeare?s plays. Part of the comedy of this film develops from the first three acts of the play, which allow for a complex circle of interaction to develop within the film. Nunn?s use of the prologue at the beginning of the film presents crucial information in an easy to understand, witty way. The film?s prologue makes clear much of the play?s primary confusion, and establishes the foundation on which the rest of the film may balance upon.

Nunn?s adaptation of “Twelfth Night” begins with the founding relationship in the play, the designs that Orsino expresses for Olivia. It is clear that this first interaction is the basis for others that occur, and it is also clear that both Shakespeare and Nunn utilize this interaction to create the comedic effects that happen because of the subsequent love interests. Orsino is not just an average courtly love, he is the Duke, and has considerable stature and respectability in his community. It is expected that his love for the Countess Olivia will be reciprocated, even in the midst of her grieving the loss of her brother. However, Duke Orsino’s attempts at contact are met with disdain, but Olivia’s lack of interest does not dissuade Orsino from continuing his pursuit.

Duke Orsino is not a skilled romantic. His belief that he can compel Olivia into marriage through the expression of his feelings in messages demonstrates his lack of real passion in the situation and shows that he is of great stature, perhaps to belittle himself with courting. He is not Romeo hiding in the bushes for his Juliet, and this is one of the elements of separation that cause the comedic conflict to occur. If Orsino had taken it upon himself to persuade Olivia personally, instead of sending messengers, the outcome of the film would have been significantly altered.

Both Shakespeare and Nunn support the importance of Malvolio’s role through the love that he has for himself, as well as his love for Olivia. While Malvolio’s love for Olivia creates a sub plot, including the actions manipulated by Maria’s deception, this only builds on the comedic effect that is created by the other loves that develop. The comedic conflict is further developed in Malvolio?s ?Puritanesque? wardrobe of his suit and shoes. This comedy seen in Malvolio?s wardrobe is extended to the end of the film when Malvolio appears wearing bright yellow tights and cross belts.

Malvolio’s character is significant because he at first attempts to bring an air of respectability and chastity to the whole film, though his essential flaws and his inability to recognize the reality of people’s feelings, including Olivia’s, removes him from the position of moral overseer to a simple player in the game of love. Malvolio’s error is related to his self-perceptions and his consideration of his own self-importance, rather than his caring and compassion for his mistress Olivia.

The other character of significance is Viola, and she is important in the development of the comedic conflict that occurs. She is a noblewoman who disguises herself as a boy, and becomes a servant of Orsino. Orsino uses Viola as a messenger to persuade the steadfast Olivia to hear his pleas of love. The problem with this scenario is that in the process of winning a position with Orsino, Viola falls in love with him, thus her voice as a messenger for Orsino is complicated by her own feelings. The comedic conflict of love occurs primarily within this love triangle of Olivia, Orsino and Viola. Olivia falls in love with a girl pretending to be a boy, as Orsino subsequently falls for a ?boy?, who, fortunately for him, is in actuality a girl.

Instead of persuading Olivia on Orsino’s behalf, Viola, who is called Cesario as a boy, attacks the love of Olivia, complicating the film. Viola does not immediately recognize the affections of Olivia, but when she does she realizes that Olivia loves someone who does not exist. Cesario is a vision, an artificial character, and Olivia attaches her very determined sights on Cesario. This issue of ?disguise? is vital to the comedy that occurs since it is the principle in which the comedy stems from.

At the same time, Olivia uses Malvolio as a messenger to Viola (Cesario) and this adds to the complexity of these relationships, particularly that of Malvolio and Olivia. It appears that Maria’s trickery is directly related to the feelings that Malvolio expresses for Olivia, because it is implied that Maria once had these same feelings for Malvolio, suggesting that her deception is an act of jealousy.

Nunn?s adaptation of Viola’s character is compelling because it demonstrates that she can feel love on countless levels. Viola is intelligent, resourceful, witty, and charming. These are the qualities that help her to acquire the love of the Duke as well as the immediate love of Olivia. Viola demonstrates courtly love and romantic love for the Duke Orsino, and this fosters the complications that continue to mount. At the same time, Viola is also capable of feeling compassionate, brotherly love for Olivia, even after recognizing that Olivia loves her as Cesario. Viola deserves to be content with love since she is the only one who really knows what love is. She is the only one who experiences and suffers the true pain of unrequited love, rather than the distorted apparitions of those who are more fascinated with the torment of love, instead of love in it?s true fashion.

Olivia’s love for Viola (Cesario) is derived from her need to make an excuse to ward off Orsino, though Viola’s characterization of a boy is both compelling and attractive. Olivia is less capable of understanding the compassion of brotherly love and more compelled to express romance as a means of escape. Olivia is in love with love, and uses Viola as a means of expressing this love, without accepting the attentions of Orsino.

Although these love interests as well as the complicated web of relationships, represent romantic love, Nunn attempts to provide for another type of love within the story. Viola and her brother Sebastian share a familial love that is very powerful. Both Viola and Sebastian are distraught by the thought of the loss of the other, and it is only through their realization that the other might still be living that these two siblings are able to go one with their actions.

Furthermore, Viola is capable of expressing brotherly love for Olivia, though Viola recognizes that this type of love is not what Olivia feels for her. Olivia’s love for her brother and father are expressed through her continued mourning, as Viola’s love for Sebastian is expressed by her long-standing concern for his welfare. Their abilities to share in familial love are elements that these two women share, even in the midst of the comedic conflict.

This illustration of brotherly love is also substantial in the relationship between Sebastian and Antonio. Antonio, the man who saved Sebastian, recognizes their commonality and shares in a love of brotherhood that is demonstrated by their concern for each other as well as Antonio’s decision to return with Sebastian to Illyria, regardless of the dangerous it poses for himself. Their acts of protection and their concern for one another’s welfare represents the magnitude of their brotherly love, correspondingly to the love that Viola expresses for her brother.

Nunn?s adaptation of Feste’s is persuasive because the fool presents wise insights into the actions that occur and the complicated web of love that all of characters become entwined with. His ability to suggest that love is a game, that lovers often love to love, and that love can be almost blind, are important themes to the attraction and comedy of this performance. It is Feste’s recognition of the humor in the conflict that makes the comedy stand out. In other words, Feste’s songs are used to enhance the comedic impacts of these ironic situations, allowing the audience to perceive the effects of the conflict, rather than considering the conflict itself.

Malvolio is the underlying driving force of the love relationships, and is considerably responsible for the outcome of these affairs. Malvolio has a hidden hope through some mystical action, that Olivia will establish her love for him and protest it to him. However, Maria plots to shake-up Malvolio, and allows him to misinterpret information about Olivia that suggests her love for Malvolio. As a result, Malvolio is stirred into believing that there is an existing love between he and Olivia, even though it is a falsified creation of Maria.

Malvolio?s function in this film is to serve as a comedic contrast to the merry-makers, as well as a vital reminder to Feste that life is serious, and not all fun and games. Malvolio expresses the dark side of comedy and love. He emphasizes demureness, yet, when he thinks he has the chance to move forward with Olivia, he abandons all that he stands for and acts like an absolute fool. This action is the first imperative step that leads to the undoing of several characters, primarily Malvolio. It is essentially Malvolio?s ultimate narcissism that allows the other characters to easily plot his demise. This destruction of fortune is the fundamental expression of irony within the film.

Feste and Malvolio are essential in understanding the two types of love that are expressed within the film, and the need to delineate these types in order to understand their impact on the comedic conflict that occurs. Feste demonstrates that life creates cruel jokes and that it is the way in which one can understand these situations that determines whether man is a fool or not a fool. At the same time, Malvolio not only shows his love for Olivia, but also his obsessive self-love, and Nunn?s interpretive message throughout the film is that this type of self-importance cannot be the basis for romantic love. The great lovers in this film are those individuals who are able to express love that is unselfish, and without concern for personal intentions.

Viola and Sebastian represent the purest of the love demonstrated, with their concern for each other as well as the unselfish nature of their interactions, including Viola’s representation of the messages of Orsino to Olivia. Even though Viola is in love with Orsino, she represents the purity of love that conquers all in spite of the comedic conflict.

Feste serves an essential role in ?Twelfth Night?, since he is the only character who has witnessed and heard more than any of the other characters in the film. Ben Kingsley?s performance of Feste is charismatic and clever. He serves as a device to drive the storyline along, and his ?songs? add the comedic aspect of the love relationships.

The breakdown of Malvolio in the foyer of Olivia?s home brings to an end, for a brief moment, the comedic conflict that was present throughout the film. The comedy turns to sadness, as Olivia states that Malvolio has been ?most notoriously abused?. This sadness turns to anger in Malvolio as he exits and vows, ?I?ll be revenged on the whole pack of you?! However, the comedic conflict and love returns quickly, as everyone is paired with someone to love and enjoying their fortunes. Nunn?s addition of the wedding scene provides an ending with closure, something Shakespeare?s play was lacking. Feste closes the film with a song of the various stages of life, putting all of the profound meanings of life into this ?comedy?.

Bibliography

?Twelfth Night?. Directed by Trevor Nunn, Screenplay by Trevor Nunn. Produced by Stephen Evans and David Parfitt. Based on the play by William Shakespeare. First Line Films.

Bibliography

Twelfth night