

# THE INDEPENDENT

## Who needs women anyway?

By Kate Bassett  
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Fifteen years ago, Cheek By Jowl staged an unforgettable all-male *As You Like It* with the young Adrian Lester as Rosalind and the Forest of Arden evoked by just strips of green silk streaming down into a bare space. Now on tour, the company's boys-only Twelfth Night beautifully echoes that earlier Shakespearean romcom of sexual confusions, though this time the cast is additionally all-Russian (with English surtitles) - a world-class product of director Declan Donnellan and designer Nick Ormerod's years abroad.

At first, when Olivia is still in mourning, black banners hang in a near-empty space. Her home is a dark house where her maid, Maria, whispers anxiously to keep the noise down. In the second half, when new loves supplant grief, everything becomes creamy with hints of a Chekhovian orchard (linen suits, panama hats), albeit Illyria has a dreamy quality of any time (1920s, 1930s, post-Communist) and anywhere you fancy. Donnellan's ensemble make some characters amusingly Russian: a terrific slurring Sir Toby tussling with a bulk-buy of vodka bottles. At the same time, Feste has a very English-going-on-early Hollywood look about him, like an extremely camp Buster Keaton who also sings jazz.

This is a production imbued with charm, a gentle intensity, delightful flurries of farce (including judo) and fresh interpretations. To take a few examples, when Viola (disguised as the manservant Cesario) comes to woo on Duke Orsino's behalf, Olivia and Maria and Feste (all veiled) truly confound this suitor by circling around and actually sharing Olivia's replies: an extraordinary image of multiple identities dancing before your eyes.



Donnellan's interspliced scenes also create a haunting sense of simultaneous lives and paths soon destined to meet. At the close, while light question marks hang over the twins' marriages, new-forged out of previous confusions, there's a wonderfully droll happy ending for the problematically jilted Antonio. He hooks up with Feste on the wedding-party dance floor. Olivia's steward, Malvolio - having fallen in love with far more desperate eagerness than pomposity - is also reintegrated after his humiliations. He is back in his tail coat impeccably serving champagne but then steps forward, right at the end, to snarl, "I'll be revenged on the whole pack of you." Donnellan's reshuffling of speeches is cheeky but also sensitive, actually bringing out how the play lives in your mind (where Malvolio does, surely, have the last memorable word).

As for the all-male issue, I've seen actresses bring more subtle complexities to Viola/ Cesario's pained love scenes with Olivia and Orsino. I suspect it might be very different again - though potentially near-taboo? - if the women were played in authentic Elizabethan style by pre-pubescent boys rather than grown men. That said, an intricate weave of gay male desires springs into focus here. Ilia Ilyin's sturdy, sweetly nervous Maria does seem intrinsically female and adorable, and the twins are such look-alikes that you think you're in a hall of mirrors. This should also make a fascinating comparison with Edward Hall's all-male company, Propeller, who will tackle the same play at the Old Vic next year.