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Engl 365

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Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* as a 1980s Rom-Com

William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* has been set anywhere from the early 17th century Europe all the way up to the early 21st century America in *She's the Man*. This is largely due to the lack of stage directions and dialogue indicating a specific time period that the play is set in allowing directors to take lots of artistic liberties. In my own interpretation of the text, I am interested in setting *Twelfth Night* in a small town in southern California during the 1980s to better highlight the comedic aspects of the play and create more visual interest through costumes, hair, scenery, and music. With this new setting comes slight variations in each character's position, scene blocking, and vernacular which I will illustrate using the latter half of Act I Scene V when Olivia and Viola first meet.

When defining the overall setting of 1980s southern California through the scenery, costumes, and props I had a few ideas in mind. First, the scenery itself would be fairly simple but have key pieces that point to the time period, like, an older box television set, a sofa with a traditional beige and pink floral pattern, and huge floor to ceiling drapes. Attached to the right is a layout of what I imagined. As you can

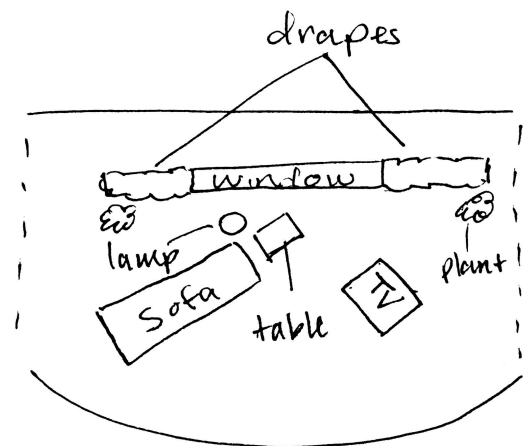


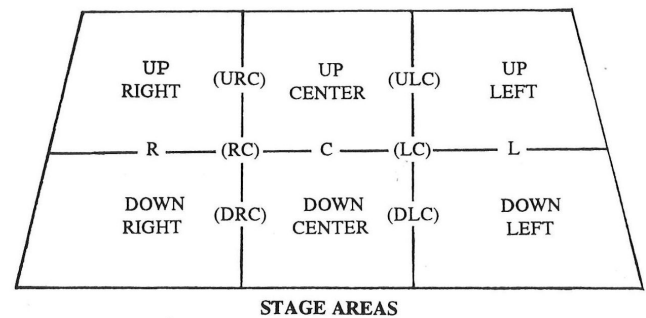
Figure 1

probably gather, the scene is placed in the living room of Olivia's home, likely while she is watching MTV and the audio from a music video or show is playing softly. As it is inferred in the play, Olivia and her family are fairly wealthy so I wanted their living room to reflect that specifically in the drapes. They serve to show how high their ceilings are and they surround a huge window. The scene will begin with the drapes closed but when Olivia begins to open up to Viola, at line 215, so will the drapes. The drapes will open up to a window which can be looking out into a painted scene of flora however it might be more useful if it is looking at a scrim that is backlit with colors that change with the tone of scenes. For this scene in particular, it would be backlit with the color pink as that symbolizes love but a more innocent, shallow love in comparison to a deep red which is reflective of Olivia's growing affection for Viola who she believes to be Cesario. The same color scheme will be true for Olivia's costume. She will be in a black dress with an a-line skirt and lace detailing around the collar, but have a neon pink cropped t-shirt over top of the dress with a black denim jacket covering it. The black is symbolic of her mourning the loss of her brother but, again, after she begins opening up to Viola she will remove the denim jacket to symbolize herself opening up to Viola and the shedding of the mourning period she previously committed to. The jacket would also be in place of the veil that is originally used in the text, so it would come off when Viola continues to ask her to take it off and Olivia obliges in line 215. A prop to reflect Olivia's mourning would be a cigarette, which she smokes indoors, and an ashtray which works to promote the 1980s setting before cigarettes were as stigmatized as they are now - in the 21st century. Viola, cross dressing as her masculine alias Cesario, will be dressed in light wash blue jeans, white sneakers, a plain white t-shirt, and a denim jacket to make her shoulders seem broader. Her hair will also be kept under a hat, but will

look more so like a mullet style cut. Viola will also be wearing a fake mustache that on occasion will fall off but she will stick it back on right before others notice to add to the comedic effect of her crossdressing. At the end of the scene, when Olivia gives Viola a purse, the purse will be a few US dollars instead. Another major thing I plan on adding to the show is the use of 1980s popular music during scene transitions. For instance, when Olivia says, "... Unless, perchance, you come to me again..." at line 264, the song "I Want to Know What Love IS" by Foreigner would begin to softly play in the background to add to the romantic tone of the scene. Although the aesthetic pieces of a show, like costumes, set pieces, and props, play a major role in a play, character blocking does as well.

As you know, Shakespeare is notorious for not having many stage directions to indicate where a character should be placed on the stage.

Thus, directors have to make a lot of blocking decisions based on dialogue between characters. Keeping the scenery set up in mind based on my sketch above and the staging diagram to the right,



I would have Viola enter on the same line as the text indicates, at line 156 when Olivia says, "We'll once more hear Orsino's embassy," from stage right and shake Olivia's hand upon meeting her. However, Viola would then return to standing down right, in front of the sofa. Olivia would be sitting on the far stage left side of the sofa smoking with her legs crossed and slightly hunched. She would also be focused on watching the television instead of Viola because she is tired of receiving messages from Duke Orsino, as she says this is last time she will hear from him. However, Olivia would change her body language to be more inviting and proper

when she says, “Give us this place alone... “ (1.2.202). Here, Olivia will sit more upright and switch which legs she has crossed so she is facing Viola more. Once everyone has exited stage left, who some would be standing behind the sofa and others closer to the television in stage up left, Viola would move closer to Olivia to right center. Then, Olivia would get off the sofa and remove her black denim jacket at the beginning of her line, “Have you any commission...” (1.2.213) which, in the text, is followed by her removing the veil from her face but in my edition the jacket is in place of the veil. Olivia will toss her jacket across the arm of the sofa then move to open the drapes at the line, “O sir, I will not be so hardhearted...” (1.2.225). Olivia would then sit down and prompt Viola to also sit down next to her at the line “Why what would you?” (1.2.249) which is followed by what Olivia interprets as Viola and her falling in love. Thus, Olivia would have to look as though she is melting in Viola’s arms and Viola must try to brush it off because she is just trying to seem masculine, not make Olivia fall in love with her. In order to accomplish these opposing views on their relationship, there will be a pause between lines following the line “You might do much” (1.2.258) and Viola will jump from the sofa and run to down left stage where Olivia will follow her. After saying goodbye, Viola will exit stage right, the same way she entered, and Olivia will be left standing in down center stage speaking to herself and the audience. Of course, the text does not say much except for the edotorial’s suggestions on when a character would enter or exit a scene. In my interpretation I kept all of these as they fit the dialogue well. As you can see, I mainly added more details that work to strengthen the tension between the characters and define the love triangle Shakespeare creates through the text itself.

As far as the actual *Twelfth Night* text is interpreted, I did not change too much in the scene. However, to better emphasize Viola's lack of interest in Olivia, I would cut a few lines out which are further detailed below. As an example, the lines about Viola's family wealth (1.2.259 - 261) may seem appropriate for Olivia to ask because she wants to maintain her lavish lifestyle, but I do not think that they are completely necessary and might sound odd for the 1980s setting. As a result, when Olivia recalls her asking Viola about it (1.2.271-273) would also need to be cut. With my own interpretation of the text, I hope to better emphasize how Viola is not interested in Olivia romantically but that she is simply trying to portray a man to the best of her ability. Similar to the *She's the Man* 2006 film adaptation of *Twelfth Night*, I want Viola's motivations of portraying a man to be clearer than the text on its own is able to achieve. In fact, I think the text itself does a terrible job of explaining Viola's motivation to cross dress. Thus, in my own interpretation of *Twelfth Night* I would like Viola's motivation to be connected to the feminist agenda of equal pay and equal opportunity as I see a lot of potential to use this plot to illustrate how a woman can do anything a man can do. The scene I chose specifically is a great example of how Viola, as a woman, knows a great deal about what women want to hear from men. She was able to swoon Olivia in a matter of minutes whereas Duke Orsino had been sending Olivia love letters and proposals for an indefinite amount of time prior to Viola's arrival. Although Viola's feminist motivation may greatly change how her character is perceived, the rest of the plot will remain the same as Duke Orsino and Violas together at the resolution make Viola a model, or admirable, character. Attached below is an excerpt from Act I Scene 2 containing edits where I removed lines and added my own stage directions in italics.

William Shakespeare does an excellent, poetic job with *Twelfth Night* but with the help of my own directorial and style choices, I believe I can enhance the rhetoric of the show to be much more powerful comically with added social commentary. The 1980s small town in southern California setting contrasting Shakespeare's Elizabethan English verse will only add to the already comedic situations the plot presents and the clarifying added feminist motivation that sparks Viola's cross dressing journey will heighten the overall power of the rhetorical arguments made.

Enter VIOLA, and Attendants

VIOLA The honourable lady of the house, which is she?

OLIVIA Speak to me; I shall answer for her.

Your will?

VIOLA Most radiant, exquisite and unmatchable beauty,--I pray you, tell me if this be the lady of the house, for I never saw her: I would be loath to cast away my speech, for besides that it is excellently well penned, I have taken great pains to con it. Good beauties, let me sustain no scorn; I am very comptible, even to the least sinister usage.

OLIVIA Whence came you, sir?

VIOLA I can say little more than I have studied, and that question's out of my part. Good gentle one, give me modest assurance if you be the lady of the house, that I may proceed in my speech.

OLIVIA Are you a comedian?

VIOLA No, my profound heart: and yet, by the very fangs of malice I swear, I am not that I play. Are you the lady of the house?

OLIVIA If I do not usurp myself, I am.

VIOLA Most certain, if you are she, you do usurp yourself; for what is yours to bestow is not yours to reserve. But this is from my commission: I will on with my speech in your praise, and then show you the heart of my message.

OLIVIA Come to what is important in't: I forgive you the praise.

VIOLA Alas, I took great pains to study it, and 'tis poetical.

OLIVIA It is the more like to be feigned: I pray you, keep it in. I heard you were saucy at my gates, and allowed your approach rather to wonder at you than to hear you. If you be not mad, be gone; if you have reason, be brief: 'tis not that time of moon with me to make one in so skipping a dialogue.

MARIA Will you hoist sail, sir? here lies your way.

VIOLA No, good swabber; I am to hull here a little longer. Some mollification for your giant, sweet lady. Tell me your mind: I am a messenger.

OLIVIA Sure, you have some hideous matter to deliver, when the courtesy of it is so fearful. Speak your office.

VIOLA It alone concerns your ear. I bring no overture of war, no taxation of homage: I hold the olive in my hand; my words are as full of peace as matter.

OLIVIA Yet you began rudely. What are you? what would you?

VIOLA The rudeness that hath appeared in me have I learned from my entertainment. What I am, and what I would, are as secret as maidenhead; to your ears, divinity, to any other's, profanation.

OLIVIA Give us the place alone: ~~we will hear this divinity.~~

Exeunt MARIA stage left and Attendants stage right.

Now, sir, what is your text?

VIOLA Most sweet lady,--

OLIVIA A comfortable doctrine, and much may be said of it. Where lies your text?

VIOLA In Orsino's bosom.

OLIVIA In his bosom! In what chapter of his bosom?

VIOLA To answer by the method, in the first of his heart.

OLIVIA O, I have read it: it is heresy. Have you no more to say?

VIOLA Good madam, let me see your face.

OLIVIA Have you any commission from your lord to negotiate with my face? You are now out of your text: but we will draw the curtain and show you the picture.

Look you, sir, such a one I was this present: is't not well done?

Removing black denim jacket and tossing it onto the back of the sofa to reveal a tight fitting, neon pink, cropped shirt over top of a black, lacy dress which shows off Olivia's figure.

VIOLA *shocked*. Excellently done, if God did all.

OLIVIA 'Tis in grain, sir; 'twill endure wind and weather.

VIOLA *stumbling over what to say next as though she is wondering what a man should say to a beautiful woman*. 'Tis beauty truly blent, whose red and white

Nature's own sweet and cunning hand laid on:

Lady, you are the cruell'st she alive,

If you will lead these graces to the grave

And leave the world no copy.

OLIVIA *blushing*. O, sir, I will not be so hard-hearted; I will give

out divers schedules of my beauty: it shall be

inventoried, and every particle and utensil

labelled to my will: as, item, two lips,

indifferent red; item, two grey eyes, with lids to

them; item, one neck, one chin, and so forth. Were

you sent hither to praise me?

VIOLA I see you what you are, you are too proud;

But, if you were the devil, you are fair.

My lord and master loves you: O, such love
 Could be but recompensed, though you were crown'd
 The nonpareil of beauty!

OLIVIA *tired of Duke Orsino's messages.* How does he love me?

VIOLA With adorations, fertile tears,
 With groans that thunder love, with sighs of fire.

OLIVIA Your lord does know my mind; I cannot love him:

~~Yet I suppose him virtuous, know him noble,
 Of great estate, of fresh and stainless youth;
 In voices well-divulged, free, learn'd and valiant;
 And in dimension and the shape of nature
 A gracious person: but yet I cannot love him;~~
 He might have took his answer long ago.

VIOLA *looking off into the distance as though she is imagining another world where she loves Olivia.* If I did love you in my master's flame,
 With such a suffering, such a deadly life,
 In your denial I would find no sense;
 I would not understand it.

OLIVIA Why, what would you?

VIOLA *dramatically gesturing as if she is building the cabin.*

Make me a willow cabin at your gate,
 And call upon my soul within the house;
 Write loyal cantons of contemned love
 And sing them loud even in the dead of night;
 Halloo your name to the reverberate hills
 And make the babbling gossip of the air
 Cry out 'Olivia!' O, You should not rest
 Between the elements of air and earth,
 But you should pity me!

OLIVIA You might do much.

~~What is your parentage?~~

VIOLA

~~Above my fortunes, yet my state is well:~~

~~I am a gentleman.~~

“I Want to Know What Love Is” by Foreigner begins to play softly.

OLIVIA Get you to your lord;

I cannot love him: let him send no more;

Unless, perchance, you come to me again,

To tell me how he takes it. Fare you well:

I thank you for your pains: spend this for me.

VIOLA I am no fee'd post, lady; keep your purse:

My master, not myself, lacks recompense.

Love make his heart of flint that you shall love;

And let your fervor, like my master's, be

Placed in contempt! Farewell, fair cruelty.

Exit Viola. “I Want to Know What Love Is” is played at a slightly higher volume as Olivia is alone with her thoughts.

OLIVIA ~~What is your parentage?!~~

~~'Above my fortunes, yet my state is well:~~

~~I am a gentleman.' I'll be sworn thou art;~~

Thy tongue, thy face, thy limbs, actions and spirit,

Do give thee five-fold blazon: not too fast:

soft, soft!

Unless the master were the man. How now!

Even so quickly may one catch the plague?

Methinks I feel this youth's perfections...

Olivia makes her way to the sofa and collapses onto it with a day dreamy look.

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