

What You Will: a Twelfth Night Adaptation

by

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About *What You Will*: a *Twelfth Night* Adaptation

When people hear the word “Shakespeare”, they will have one of two reactions. Either they’re fascinated and in love with everything he’s written or they flashback to their high school days of being forced to read *Romeo and Juliet* and hating it. I’ve noticed there’s not really a middle ground with how people feel about William Shakespeare. For me, I’m in the first group of people. I’ve fallen in love with his work. But I say fallen in love, because I didn’t used to love it. I used to be in the second group of people, and hated anything to do with Shakespeare. That is until the summer before my senior year of high school. I was selected to go to North Carolina’s Governor’s School for Theatre and I couldn’t have been more excited to work on contemporary theatre and student-written plays. Little did I know the curriculum was centered around reading and performing Shakespeare. When I learned this on our first day of class, I thought, “I have made a horrible mistake. This is going to be the worst six weeks of my life.” We began working on a play of his called *Twelfth Night*, and to my surprise, I started to actually enjoy working on it. The more we studied, the easier it became to understand. Who knew Shakespeare plays could be so funny?

The play *Twelfth Night* is one of Shakespeare’s comedies. It revolves around a set of twins who don’t know they’re on the same island. The girl twin dresses up a boy and looks exactly like her twin brother, and as you can imagine, confusion and hilarity ensues.

For the final performance at Governor’s School, we did a gender-reversed version, and I was cast as a smaller character named Antonio, who is traditionally played by a man. Antonio falls in love with the boy twin named Sebastian, and in the end he watches Sebastian fall in love and marry another woman, and Antonio ends up being arrested and sent to his death. There was a moment during our final dress rehearsal where I was sitting on stage during the last scene,

handcuffed by two officers, watching the person I love get married, watching another couple get married, and watching all the other characters cheer and laugh, while I'm sitting in the background handcuffed about to be sent to my death. The lights dimmed to blackout and the play was over. It was at that moment I realized this small character was, by the end of the play, forgotten by the audience as well as the other characters, but he has the most tragic story in the whole play.

Shakespeare tends to do this thing where he wants to point out the harsh reality of life, even in his comedies. He places a character in all his comedies called the malcontent. This character is the one that doesn't get their happy ending. It's Shakespeare's way of giving audiences a show that will make them laugh and they will enjoy, but not allowing them to forget that life isn't all weddings and laughter.

The thing is, Antonio isn't considered the malcontent of this story. There is a character named Malvolio that is widely regarded as the malcontent because he's the butt of everyone's jokes and ends up alone in the end. Antonio doesn't even get the credit of being the most tragic character in the show, he is forgotten all together by audiences and literary scholars. And to be honest, the only reason I recognized his role in the show is because I was playing him.

The whole reason I started acting and studying theatre is because I wanted to tell stories.

Antonio's story is one I wanted to tell. It was a story of unrequited love that didn't have a happy ending. Which is a story I feel everyone has experienced at some point in their life.

This past year, I decided to finally tell that story on stage. The final performances of this show happened in the fall, and I titled it *What You Will*, which is actually Shakespeare's alternate title for *Twelfth Night*.

When beginning this process, the first thing I had to do was cut the original Twelfth Night script down so it was solely focused on the love story of Antonio and Sebastian. It was an interesting experience going through the play from Antonio's point of view, because this comedic play suddenly becomes a lot less funny. It is no longer about a set of twins who look exactly alike and confuse everyone in town but end up reconnected and married to two of the most powerful people in the land. No, the story now, is of a man who rescues another man from a shipwreck, spend three months isolated together on a ship, where one can only speculate what happened, but strong feelings developed between the two men. They finally arrive on land, but it's a place where Antonio has been banned from returning to. Nevertheless, he risks his life to follow Sebastian into town where he sets him up in a nice hotel and pays for everything. Sebastian then meets a woman who wants to marry him, and he agrees without telling Antonio. Antonio gets caught and captured when trying to defend Sebastian in a sword fight, then he has to watch as the love of his life marries another woman as he is carried off to be executed.

This story is a full play in itself, but in the original script, Antonio and Sebastian only have two scenes alone together. Cutting the script was the most difficult part of this process because I had to make those two scenes stand out as the main plot of the story. I ended up cutting most of the dialogue with the other characters, leaving in only the most necessary sections for the plot to make sense.

I realized after being left with only half an hour worth of material, I was going to have to add stuff of my own in as well in order to further highlight the plot of Antonio and Sebastian. There were a few things I ended up adding in order to do this. One of those things was adding in a narrator that I wrote dialogue for to help fill in plot holes in between scenes. Another thing was adding a movement based prologue before the actual dialogue started to help develop the

relationships between these characters and who they are. After this prologue, the dialogue can begin because the characters and relationships between them were well-established for the audience.

The thing that was still missing though was the heart behind Antonio. Shakespeare never really gives us a chance to know what Antonio is thinking during the most pivotal moments of his story. I decided he needed more words to express himself to truly put the focus on the show of him. The only thing is That I don't write like Shakespeare. I couldn't even pretend to write like Shakespeare. It was okay to write in dialogue for the narrator because I made that character up myself and that character was commenting on the action of the play, not in it. My own words wouldn't cut it with Antonio. Luckily, Shakespeare has written over 150 sonnets, which are short speeches, mostly about love, that aren't a part of any specific plays. I went through and found a couple about unrequited love that fit with different scenes. These gave the audience a glimpse into Antonio's psyche, to help understand the pain he was going through. I think this was the main thing that was missing from Antonio's character in the original play, which is why the character was easily overlooked.

Now that the whole adapted script was pieced together and written out, it was time for the more logistical details. The first thing was to solidify a date and time for this event, and the space we would hold rehearsals and performances in. We used Rm. 205 in the Messick Theatre Arts building, which is a small black box theatre with seating for about 40 people. We solidified the performance date on Nov. 20th with two separate performances, one at 4pm and one at 7pm. I then got my cast together which ended up being 12 people that I sought out instead of holding auditions. Then there was the matter of getting a set together. Since Antonio and Sebastian met because of a shipwreck I wanted the set to have the feeling of an old dock where things in the sea

would wash up and rot. Luckily there was a local business, Carolina Seasons Nursery, that was getting rid of a bunch of old wood pallets and other various scraps. With this, I was able to construct a simplistic set for the actors to use that stayed true to my concept.

I got lucky with costumes because ECU's costume shop was giving away a bunch of pieces for the start of year clean-out, so I was able to dress my whole cast with those pieces. Now all that was left was to rehearse and perform.

The experience of watching the show in real time is something I find hard to put into words. I will describe the final scene of the show because this part was created specifically for this adaptation and encompasses the entire reason for producing this show. The final scene is when everyone is onstage figuring out that there are twins on the island and they are straightening out all the mix-ups. It ends with both twins getting married and everyone singing and dancing. Everyone is coupled off and as they dance, they slowly begin to exit the stage. As they are exiting, the audience begins to see Antonio, who has been in the back with the officers the whole time, but hasn't spoken for almost the whole scene. Once everyone else is off stage, it falls silent and Antonio is brought to kneel in front of the audience. He begins a speech with a metaphor about a man who goes to war and is wounded. The physical wound will heal, but the memory of the pain will always be with him. Antonio's final line and the ending of the play is, "The heartaches and tears are all I keep."

I wanted to end the show like this because although *Twelfth night* is a comedy, and even my adaptation of it had comedic moments, this specific story, Antonio's story, was a love story that did not have a happy ending. And most love stories in real life don't have happy endings. It's a universal story, whether it is felt as drastically as Antonio or it's just a faint memory of a middle school crush not reciprocating feelings, we've all been there. This show was about telling

an audience that we hear you. We've all been there and you're not alone. Sometimes just hearing that you aren't alone can make things just a little bit easier, can heal things just a little bit faster. As a theatre artist, if a piece of art can give even an ounce of comfort to another person, or make their day just a little bit easier to get through because they know they're not alone, then its all worth it.

Production Stills



Antonio and Sebastian during Prologue



Final Scene in *What You Will*

Program

WHAT YOU WILL

a *Twelfth Night* adaptation
by Brooke Benson

"Love sought is good, but given unsought better."
(*Twelfth Night* III.I)

CAST

Narrator	Casey Scarboro
Antonio	Nick Lease
Sebastian	Michael Eubanks
Viola	Aubrey Moya-Mendez
Sea Captain	Kole McKinley
Orsino	Allen Williams
Olivia	Sarah Howard
Maria	Olivia Manlove
Toby Belch	Grant Vandervoort
1 st Officer	Pierce Williams
2 nd Officer	Joe Webster
Priest	Tyler Smith

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