

Review | Traditional Shakespeare opens Institute series

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Twelfth Night actors, from left, are Elena Sanchez, Ryan Rodriguez and Joshua Ritter.

Shakespeare's work has been modernized and analyzed so many different ways, we forget the pleasure of his words played simply as they are written. The inaugural production of SoBe Institute of the Arts' Music & Shakespeare series brings it back home in *Twelfth Night*.

Director Carson Kievman, who himself created an opera version of *Hamlet* for New York's Public Theater, wanted to do the play as it was in the 17th century, so he incorporated singing accompanied by live harpsichord and guitar, played by Adam Chefitz and Carl Ferrari, respectively.

The period music does add something special, even if Andres Lefevre, a talented singer who plays Feste the fool, has trouble with the high notes early on.

The play gets off to a bumpy start, as twins Viola and Sebastian (Elena Sanchez and Michael Joseph) are pulled apart after their ship capsizes in rough seas. It's dark, and the impressionistic acting could be anything if you're unfamiliar with the story.

After Viola washes up on the shores of Illyria sans brother, she tucks her tresses under a hat, transforms herself into Cesario and is taken into the employ of the Duke Orsino (Joshua Ritter). Presumably he doesn't notice his young page's feminine qualities, distracted as he is over the unattainable Olivia (Amy McKenna) -- who becomes smitten on sight with Cesario, sent by his boss to woo her.

As Olivia says in wonder, "Even so quickly may one catch the plague?"

Fun as all that sounds, the action is jump-started when Olivia's uncle, Sir Toby Belch, and his merry pranksters enter. Charismatic local theater veteran Ken Clement plays Sir Toby to the bawdy, drunken hilt, and it suddenly feels like they're getting at the original Shakespeare, who wrote for the people. Clement has great chemistry with perpetually tipsy Sir Andrew (Glen Lawrence) and meets his match in Merry Jo Cortada as Maria, Olivia's servant, who brings her infectious laugh and has no problem playing with the boys -- or playing them.

She engages Sirs Toby and Andrew in what seems like a mean trick to make Malvolio, Olivia's steward, believe his mistress is in love with him. He's a stuffed shirt, it's true, but

comes across more gently befuddled as played by Jody Owen, who captures the character best in the comic parts; he's not obnoxious enough to warrant real dislike.

It's not easy competing with the delightful scenery-chewing of that trio, but McKenna acquits herself best as an Olivia who's more likeable than needy, followed by Sanchez's sweetly heartfelt Viola. Sebastian and Orsino are essentially straight men, and the latter seems especially like a cipher; when the sparks fly between he and a disguised Viola, they don't generate much heat.

Although I wished for more force from some characters, the cast is ultimately winning in the classic play on mistaken identity that turned the social order on its head, allegedly echoing the medieval festival for which it's named. When Viola and Sebastian are reunited and all is revealed, it is a genuinely moving moment.

Being a Shakespeare comedy, it all ends well -- except for Malvolio, who gets not the girl but the great line, perhaps a sign of the Bard's truest affection: ``And thus the whirligig of time brings in his revenges."''

Not, hopefully, for the fledgling SoBe Institute, whose debut bodes well for the future of South Florida theater.