

theater review

Double Trouble

'*Twelfth Night*'
Harlen Adams Theater, CSUC

A common complaint of drama students is that they get little opportunity to perform classic theater. The problem, of course, is that few colleges have enough students capable of performing Shakespeare to the satisfaction of an audience who has likely seen a professional production of the same show.

The solution? Create a new play.

Chico State director Donna Breed's entertaining version of *Twelfth Night*, which ran last weekend in the Harlen Adams Theater, combined the conventional with '80s humor and strangeness, with mixed success.

Martha Acuna's costumes—a bizarre amalgam of traditional Elizabethan garb, khaki uniforms and Day-Glo modern—set the tone for the production. Sometimes it seemed as though two plays were competing on one stage, and in that sense the flashy characters won.

Only the facts that the actors were largely up to the show's demands and that *Twelfth Night* cleanly integrates the classically portrayed main characters with loosely depicted comic roles held the Chico State show together. Further, no character attempts an English accent, a good decision.

The play opens with twins being separated during a storm at sea; Sebastian (Tony Bridgers) and Viola (Chris Williams) each believe the other has drowned. For reasons quickly mentioned and passed over, Viola disguises herself as a man in appearance similar to Sebastian. To Shakespeare's credit, the expected mistaken-identity twist does not appear until the play's conclusion.

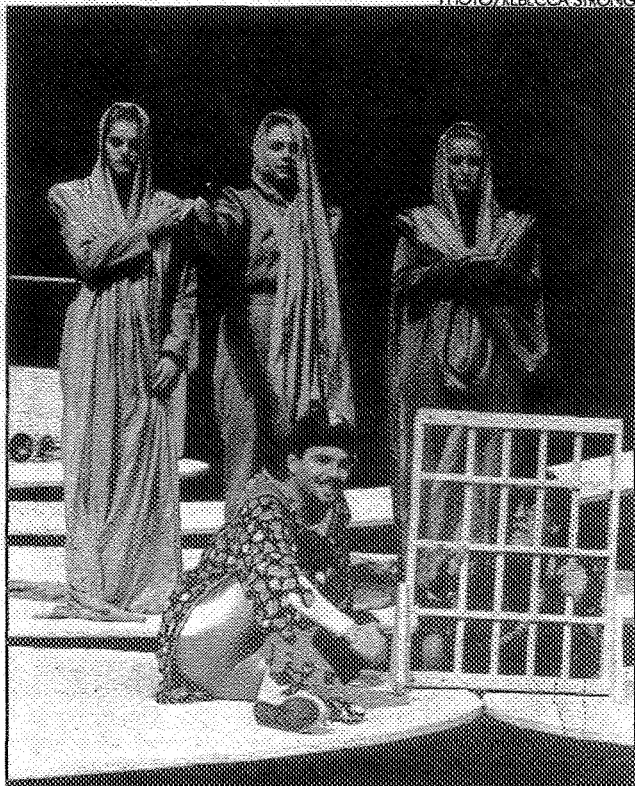
Sebastian disappears for most of *Twelfth Night*, and Viola, calling herself Cesario, remains as the focus, becoming entangled in a love triangle with Count Orsino (James Stuart) and Lady Olivia (Diane McGee).

Williams and McGee were standouts, delivering controlled, sincere performances in roles that could potentially slip into bathos. In more limited roles, Stuart and Bridgers were straightforward and solid.

As usual, Steve Wiecking led the troupe of crowd-pleasing comic characters with a show-stopping portrayal of Lady Olivia's nerdish confidant and would-be lover Malvolio.

A trio of plot-complicating cohorts—clad in high-top sneakers, football jerseys, knickers and Batman regalia—provided slapstick comic relief: The boorish Sir Toby Belch was a catalyst, though Joel Avalos' John Belushi act grew old by the second act; David Baskin was calmly delightful as deadpan stumbler Sir Andrew Aguecheek; Carrie Stroud, unfortunately, was unable to bring much life to the role of playful Maria.

Breed had a minor character, Olivia's fool Feste (Thomas La Mere), act as something of a narrator, orchestrating lighting and music from the rear of the stage with the assistance of uniformed sidekicks Jamie Gandola, Alice Moss and Laura Smith. Utilizing a variety of modern and disposable props and drifting in and out of scenes, the foursome became a serious distraction as the play continued, with



TWO PLAYS IN ONE Steve Wiecking (in cage), Tom La Mere and, left to right, Jamie Gandola, Alice Moss and Laura Barton in a scene from *Twelfth Night*.

a great deal of movement drawing focus and attention. The clowning Feste was onstage the entire show, though he didn't speak directly to the audience until the very end.

James Gilbert's stage was intriguing—an otherworldly set of white bulges and loops on a black background, treated as a traditional Elizabethan stage, with minimal lighting and few effects.

Despite what may not have worked particularly well, the production was an exercise well worth attempting. Let's hope we see more Chico State attempts at material this challenging.

—MATTHEW BUDMAN