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Twelfth Night Or What You Will 1996

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A Modern Classic: Revisiting Twelfth Night Or What You Will 1996

When discussing cinematic adaptations of William Shakespeare's comedies, few films manage to capture the delicate balance of melancholy, mistaken identity, and pure joy quite like the 1996 release of **Twelfth Night Or What You Will** . Directed by the acclaimed Trevor Nunn, this film stands as a definitive interpretation of the Bard's most complex romantic comedy. For audiences and scholars alike, **Twelfth Night Or What You Will 1996**represents a high-water mark in Shakespearean cinema, offering a visual feast that is both faithful to the text and refreshingly accessible to modern viewers.

The film premiered at a time when the 1990s were experiencing a remarkable renaissance in Shakespeare adaptations. From Kenneth Branagh's sprawling *Hamlet* to Baz Luhrmann's radical *Romeo + Juliet*, the decade proved fertile ground for reinterpretation. Yet, Trevor Nunn's version of **Twelfth Night Or What You Will 1996** carved out a unique space for itself. It did not rely on gimmicks or modern settings. Instead, it trusted the timelessness of the story and the power of its performances, creating a lush, period-accurate production that feels both intimate and grand.

The Vision of Trevor Nunn

Trevor Nunn, a titan of British theatre and former artistic director of the Royal Shakespeare Company, brought an unparalleled depth of understanding to this project. His direction in **Twelfth Night Or What You Will 1996** is characterized by a clear-eyed focus on character motivation and emotional truth. Rather than playing the comedy broadly, Nunn allows the humor to emerge naturally from the pain and confusion of the characters. This is a film that understands that the best comedy is often rooted in genuine human sorrow.

Nunn's vision was to ground the fantastical elements of Illyria in a tangible reality. The coastal setting, filmed on location in Cornwall and at the Pinewood Studios, evokes a world that feels isolated and dreamlike, yet entirely credible. The production design by Timian Alsaker is sumptuous without being overwhelming, using natural light and earthy tones to create a sense of melancholy beauty that perfectly complements the play's shifting moods.

A Stellar Ensemble Cast

The success of any Shakespeare adaptation hinges on its cast, and **Twelfth Night Or What You Will 1996** boasts one of the most impressive ensembles ever assembled for a cinematic production of the play. Each actor brings a distinct energy to their role, creating a vibrant tapestry of human folly and longing.

Helena Bonham Carter delivers a performance of remarkable depth as the grieving Countess Olivia. Her Olivia is not merely a distant object of affection; she is a woman paralyzed by grief, who uses her mourning as a shield against the world. Bonham Carter captures the character's transition from icy detachment to overwhelming passion with subtlety and power. Her chemistry with the other actors, particularly Imogen Stubbs, is electric. In **Twelfth Night Or What You Will 1996** , Olivia's journey is not just about falling in love; it is about the terrifying vulnerability that comes with opening one's heart again.

At the heart of the film is Imogen Stubbs in the demanding dual role of Viola and her male persona, Cesario. Stubbs navigates this complex performance with astonishing grace. She captures Viola's intelligence, wit, and deep well of emotion. The audience feels her despair at being separated from her brother, her confusion at the tangled web of love she weaves, and her quiet hope. Stubbs's Viola is active and resourceful, not a passive victim of circumstance. Her scenes with Toby Stephens's Orsino are charged with an unspoken longing that makes the resolution all the more satisfying. Her performance is one of

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Toby Stephens brings a youthful arrogance and genuine passion to Duke Orsino. He avoids making the character merely a lovesick fool. Instead, his Orsino is a man who is in love with the idea of love, but who is ultimately humbled by the reality of it. Stephens's rich voice handles Shakespeare's poetry beautifully, and his gradual realization of his true feelings for Cesario is one of the film's most rewarding arcs.

Nigel Hawthorne's portrayal of Malvolio is a masterclass in tragicomedy. He plays the puritanical steward not as a simple buffoon, but as a deeply serious, lonely man whose pride is his only possession. The infamous yellow stockings scene is both hilarious and painful to watch. Hawthorne ensures that Malvolio's humiliation is not merely a source of cruel laughter. In **Twelfth Night Or What You Will 1996** , Malvolio's fall from grace carries a genuine sting, prompting the audience to question the morality of the trick played upon him. His final, bitter exit, vowing revenge, darkens the comedy in a way that feels profoundly earned.

Ben Kingsley brings a world-weary wisdom to the role of Feste, the fool. His Feste is not a jester for simple amusement; he is a philosopher who uses song and riddles to speak the truth to power. Kingsley's musical performances, including the haunting "O Mistress Mine," are highlights of the film. He acts as a chorus, observing the folly of his social superiors and offering gentle, often ignored, counsel. His presence grounds the film, reminding us that time and tide wait for no one.

Faithful Adaptation and Screenplay

One of the greatest strengths of **Twelfth Night Or What You Will 1996** is its commitment to the original text. Trevor Nunn adapted the screenplay himself, and he demonstrates a deep respect for Shakespeare's language. The dialogue is trimmed judiciously to fit the cinematic format, but never butchered. Key monologues and soliloquies are preserved, allowing the actors to shine. The film trusts that the audience is intelligent enough to follow the poetry, and it provides rich visual context to support the words.

The structure of the film follows the play closely. We open with Viola and Sebastian surviving a shipwreck, each believing the other to be dead. Viola, alone in the strange land of Illyria, decides to disguise herself as a young man named Cesario. She enters the service of Duke Orsino, who sends her to woo the Countess Olivia on his behalf. Olivia, however, falls in love with Cesario, while Viola herself has fallen in love with Orsino. This central love triangle is complicated by the arrival of Sebastian, Viola's twin brother, leading to a cascade of mistaken identities.

The film does not shy away from the darker undertones of the play. The subplot involving the humiliation of Malvolio is presented with full force. The trick played by Sir Toby Belch (Mel Smith), Sir Andrew Aguecheek (Richard E. Grant), Maria (Imelda Staunton), and Feste is cruel, and the film allows that cruelty to resonate. This balance between light and shadow is what elevates **Twelfth Night Or What You Will 1996** above mere frothy entertainment.

Cinematography and Visual Storytelling

The visual language of the film is a key component of its success. Cinematographer Clive Tickner uses natural light and a muted color palette to create a sense of authenticity. The interior scenes are often lit by candlelight, creating intimate, shadowy spaces that reflect the hidden desires of the characters. The exteriors, shot along the rugged Cornish coast, give Illyria a wild, untamed beauty. The sea is a constant presence, a reminder of the

forces of fate and fortune that have brought these characters together.

The costume design, by John Bright, is another standout element. The clothes are not simply historical reproductions; they are used to define character. Malvolio's severe black attire contrasts sharply with the flowing, romantic fabrics worn by Olivia and Orsino. Viola's boyish disguise is practical and well-worn, emphasizing her vulnerability and her will to survive. The yellow stockings worn by Malvolio are rendered in a garish, almost painful shade, perfectly capturing his deluded, gaudy fantasy of social ascension.

Themes That Resonate

At its core, **Twelfth Night Or What You Will 1996** is a play about the nature of love, identity, and the performance of self. The film explores these themes with nuance and intelligence.

- The Fluidity of Identity: Viola's disguise as Cesario is more than just a plot device. It forces the audience to question the boundaries of gender and identity. The film handles the homoerotic undertones with sensitivity, acknowledging the attraction that Olivia feels for Cesario and the deep bond that Orsino develops with his page. It is not played for cheap laughs, but as a genuine exploration of how love can transcend social and physical categories.
- The Folly of Self-Deception: Nearly every character in the play is guilty of some form of self-deception. Orsino believes he is a devoted lover, but he is actually in love with love itself. Olivia believes she can hide from the world in her grief, but she is quickly overwhelmed by passion. Malvolio is blinded by his own ambition. The film gently mocks these follies while remaining sympathetic to the human needs that drive them.
- The Importance of Festivity vs. Order: The title itself, "Twelfth Night," refers to the final night of the Christmas celebrations, a time of revelry and the topsy-turvy inversion of normal social order. Malvolio represents the forces of strict, joyless order. Sir Toby and his crew represent the chaotic spirit of festivity. The conflict between these forces is central to the play, and the film captures the uneasy truce that is reached by the end.
- Loss and Recovery: The play begins with a shipwreck and presumed death. It ends with miraculous reunions. The thread of loss runs deep. Viola mourns her brother. Olivia mourns her father and brother. Malvolio loses his dignity. The film allows these notes of sorrow to sound clearly, making the joy of the final reconciliations feel earned and precious.

Musical Score and Sound Design

Music plays an integral role in **Twelfth Night Or What You Will 1996** , as it does in the play. The original score by Shaun Davey is evocative and melancholic, blending period instruments with a modern sensibility. The songs performed by Ben Kingsley's Feste are not mere interludes; they are commentaries on the action. "O Mistress Mine," "Come Away, Come Away, Death," and "The Wind and the Rain" are woven seamlessly into the narrative, deepening the emotional resonance of key scenes. The sound design, too, is meticulous. The crash of waves, the rustle of wind, the quiet of a candlelit chamber—all serve to build a rich, immersive world.

Reception and Legacy

Upon its release, **Twelfth Night Or What You Will 1996** received widespread critical acclaim. Reviewers praised its intelligent direction, strong performances, and beautiful production values. While it did not achieve the blockbuster status of some other 1990s Shakespeare adaptations, it built a loyal following and has grown in stature over the years. Today, it is widely regarded as one of the finest Shakespeare films ever made. It is frequently used in classrooms as a definitive cinematic representation of the play, and it continues to be discovered by new generations of viewers.

The film's legacy is secure. It set a standard for period-appropriate Shakespeare adaptations that prioritizes character and emotion over spectacle. For those who love the play, **Twelfth Night Or What You Will 1996** offers a deeply satisfying realization of its potential. For newcomers, it serves as a perfect, welcoming introduction to one of Shakespeare's most beloved comedies.

Conclusion: Why This Adaptation Endures

Two decades after its release, **Twelfth Night Or What You Will 1996** remains a benchmark for Shakespeare on film. Its enduring appeal lies in

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