



An Interview with Olivia and Maria

From Mourning to Light, Tonya Beckman Plays Through Two *Twelfth Nights*

By Eric Minton

That Tonya Beckman devoted more than six months to acting in William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* is not in and of itself unusual. That she played two roles is not unusual, either, even though the two characters were Olivia and Maria. That this was in two different successive productions at two different theaters? That drew my attention, especially as it offered an opportunity for a single actress to give her insights into two characters from both the perspective of those characters and the perspective of their counterpart characters.

Beckman played Olivia in the Taffety Punk Theatre Company production at the Capitol Hill Arts Workshop in Washington, D.C. Shortly after that four-week run ended February 23, 2013, the Folger Theatre announced she would be playing Maria in its production, which began its run April 30 and had its press opening May 5. This was not a step up or down, it was a step over—literally, eight blocks north and six blocks west, or one stop on the Blue and Orange lines of Washington's Metro.



Tonya Beckman

Taffety Punk, of which Beckman is a company member, is a small, women-centric professional theater company playing in a studio theater and other fringe venues, but its reputation for avant-garde theater (including Shakespeare) has not only earned it great respect in the nation's capital but up the coast in New York

and across the pond. "Taffety Punk is one of the most exciting, innovative and—yes—coolest companies I've seen doing Shakespeare in the U.S. I wish we had something like it back in Britain," wrote Andrew Dickson, theater editor for *The Guardian* in London, author of *The Rough Guide to Shakespeare*, and contributor to the *New Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare*. The Folger is *the* Folger, and its small Elizabethan-style theater presents professional productions by top Shakespearean directors (some of whom have done pretty

avant-garde Shakespeare in this theater, too). After starting her career in Chicago, Beckman has played in a wide spectrum of plays across the D.C. theater landscape and elsewhere, and she has done film and TV work, too. Her love, she says, is Shakespeare and Restoration Comedy (she was in *The Gaming Table* at the Folger in the spring of 2012). She has played in almost 30 Shakespeare productions, including the narrator for *The Rape of Lucrece* at Taffety Punk. Among her female roles were Julia in *Two Gentlemen of Verona* and Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* at the Shakespeare Project of Chicago, Kate in *The Taming of the Shrew* twice, Ophelia in *Hamlet* in graduate school, Maria in *Love's Labour's Lost* at the Shakespeare Theatre Company in Washington, D.C., Phoebe in *As You Like It* at the Folger, and Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing*, Emilia in *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, Marianna in *Measure for Measure*, and Constance in *King John* at Taffety Punk.

But she had never intersected professionally with *Twelfth Night* until this year. "It's just one of those plays that I never even had auditioned for before the Taffety Punk production," she said, though she did do Viola's willow cabin speech in a class when she was earning her MFA at the Ohio University Professional Actor Training Program (she earned her BFA from the University of Wisconsin and has also been through training programs at Washington's Shakespeare Theatre Company and at Second City, Steppenwolf Theatre, Goodman Theatre, and Chicago Shakespeare, all in Chicago).

Both *Twelfth Night* productions opened with an extended focus on the shipwreck, including Viola and Sebastian drowning in metaphorical dances using sheets of long blue fabric. After that, the two shows departed significantly in context. The Taffety Punk production, directed by Michelle Shupe, was in modern dress and played as Viola's near-death experience. The entire play seemed to take place under water, with the characters wearing seashells and a giant fish occasionally floating across the stage. Despite its focus on fatality (Feste, in fact, was Death), it emphasized the play's comedy.



Top, Tonya Beckman as Maria in the Folger's production of *Twelfth Night* (photo by Scott Suchman). Bottom, Beckman as Olivia with Feste as Death, played by Kimberly Gilbert, in the Taffety Punk production of *Twelfth Night* (photo by Teresa Castracana).



Beckman's Olivia was a self-absorbed woman straight out of Kardashianville, where even her mourning for her brother was a show. Her second interview with Viola (Esther Williamson) was like a "Who's on first" routine as Viola tried to convince Olivia of the futility of loving her, but everything Viola said was shooting straight over Olivia's oblivious head.

"Viola could literally open up her blouse and say" — and Beckman whispered as if Viola is letting her in on a secret — "'I'm a girl,' and Olivia would say, 'Come again tomorrow.' She's just not ready to hear it."

The setting of the Folger production, directed by Robert Richmond, is pegged to the sinking of the *Lusitania* in 1915. It has a *Downton Abbey* feel to it, with social stratification very much on display. However, it, too, emphasizes comedy, even inserting Keystone Kops-like stage business and characters ball-dancing with mannequins as transitions between scenes. Beckman's Maria is a vivacious woman, flirtatious but totally doting on Sir Toby. "The secret to Maria is that she's always ready to have fun," Beckman said. "She's not complicated. She wants to have fun. She gets into lots of trouble. You know, she's completely irresponsible, along with Toby."

To get a notion of how different these productions are is to describe Beckman's counterparts in each: The Olivia at the Folger (Rachel Pickup) is a delicate, reserved woman, a total opposite to Beckman's portrayal; the Maria at Taffety Punk (Jennifer Hopkins) was a heavy metal, boozing groupie, much more the rebel than Beckman's Maria.

The common thread, of course, is Shakespeare. Beckman feels that the playwright approached his female characters with a great deal of sympathy. "I think he recognizes, at least in his day, what little power they have but sees them as every bit as human as the men. Their power is behind the scenes."

Such was Shakespeare's insights into the two genders that the rhythm of his verse differs when portraying each, Beckman said. "The women kind of save it up, and then when they have something to say, it's all really well thought out. It's almost like they've been thinking it for a long time, and now is their opportunity to speak and say what needs to be said. The men are figuring it out as they go because they're running the show, they're thinking on their feet, they're making decisions as they need to." This can be problematic for women playing male characters, she said. "If you grow used to, 'OK, here's my argument all laid out for me' and that's how you approach those roles and you go in and play a man's role and it's all jumbled and topsy-turvy, it can be really hard to learn the part."

Just as important to Beckman are those moments when the characters go silent, something she has noticed happens often and at key points in the women, including Olivia and especially Maria. The previously voluble waiting-gentlewoman suddenly has little to say after Toby determines to throw Malvolio in a dark cell.

In *Twelfth Night*, Shakespeare created not one, not two, but three incredible female characters. Viola gets most of the critical attention because it is her play, but she is really a culmination of the great comic heroines who have come before. Maria may be a waiting woman to Olivia, but she is unlike any other such role in other Shakespeare plays, such as *Two Gent's* Lucetta and

Merchant's Nerissa. "Maria is in the play much more to be there for Toby than she is to be there for Olivia," Beckman said. Meanwhile, Olivia is a singular character in the canon.

"If you're going to give Olivia a modern parallel, she'd be a celebrity, maybe like a TV celebrity who is hounded by the press," Beckman said. "Because, in this play, the only character who doesn't want something from her is Viola, which I think is why [Olivia] falls in love with her. And all these different people who all want something are pursuing her, and I think that makes you set yourself apart and away from people and is a very lonely thing."

One day before previews began for the Folger's *Twelfth Night*, Beckman and I met at a Starbucks in Washington's Chinatown. We sat down over coffee and chai latte to discuss these two remarkable roles, the possibility of her playing Viola, too, and Shakespeare's treatment of women across the entire canon.

Eric Minton
May 16, 2013

Have you ever played Viola?

No, I haven't. Actually, Olivia was my first time spending any time with this play. It's just one of those plays that I never even had auditioned for before the Taffety Punk production. I remember doing a scene in grad school acting class where I played Viola, and that was it. That was all the time I spent with this play.

What scene was it with Viola?

The willow cabin scene. That's always the acting class scene. [Laughs]

Did you know the play very well before you did it at Taffety Punk?

I'd seen it several times, I've read it, of course, but it wasn't one that I felt real close to. I definitely had to do a lot of prior research before the Taffety Punk show.

Why didn't you feel close to it? It didn't appeal to you?

No, I've always loved it. It's just one I never intersected with as much. I've done several *Much Ados*, a bunch of *Taming of the Shrews*.

So you've done Beatrice and Katherine.

Yep. I've done *As You Like It*. And for some reason, this one I've never had the opportunity.

Who did you play in *As You Like It*?

I played Phoebe a few years ago at the Folger. I had a great time. She's crazy.

I was going to say I could see you as Phoebe. So you've not played Rosalind or Celia. How about Portia?

I played Portia in a project with a company in Chicago called the Shakespeare Project, where you take the readings [of the play] to the library.

Yeah, we just saw them last week.

Did you really?

We saw *Edward III*.

Oh, cool, cool.

We actually trained up there to see that and Babes with Blades' *Julius Caesar*—

Oh, they're very cool.

—and we saw the *Othello Remix* at Chicago Shakespeare, a new rap version of *Othello*. And loved it. Loved it. But that was the first time I'd seen [The Project]; I didn't know you had worked with them.

When I was living there, right before I left, actually, I got hooked up with them. I played Portia in *Merchant* for them and I also played Julia in *Two Gents* with them. I'm a big admirer of their work.

So you've got pretty good Shakespeare cred.

Yeah, well, I hope so. [Laughs] It's what I've focused on in my career and I love doing it. That and Restoration comedy are my two favorite things to do.

Olivia has wonderful extremes that Viola doesn't have. Viola is very centered and down-to-earth. Olivia is much more like Orsino in her wild back-and-forthness, which for an actor is really fun to play.

So, my take on *Twelfth Night* is that Shakespeare, who wrote great women in a lot of the plays, really seemed to nail it big time with the three women in *Twelfth Night*.

Yeah.

He comes through with these three very distinct—

Yeah, they are all so different.

Viola maybe is the culmination of all the heroines leading up to that, but does Olivia have anybody comparable in the canon?

You know, I'm not sure. I think there are some similarities between Portia and Olivia in the grace that they have. I think of them both as very graceful people. But I don't really see a strong parallel between Olivia and any other character.

Expound on that inner grace. I never thought of Olivia in that way. Where do you get that?

So hard to explain. It might just be an instinctual thing for me; I can't pull something out of the text to explain it. Maybe it's resolve. If you're going to give Olivia a modern parallel, she'd be a celebrity, maybe like a TV celebrity who is hounded by the press. Because, in this play, the only character who doesn't want something from her is Viola, which I think is why [Olivia] falls in love with her. And all these different people who all want something are pursuing her, and I think that makes you set yourself apart and away from people and is a very lonely thing. That's where I think her self-centeredness can come from. That's how I saw it when I started with the part.



Two Olivias: Above, Tonya Beckman in the Taffety Punk production of *Twelfth Night* (photo by Teresa Castracana); right, Rachel Pickup in the Folger production (photo by Scott Suchman)



Did you like her?

I did like her. I did.

Do you still like her?

I do. It's very interesting to watch someone else playing it right now so soon after I just played it. It's completely different, and Rachel Pickup, who plays Olivia in the Folger production, is so much more vulnerable than I played her. And it's really beautiful. It's lovely to see a completely different interpretation that makes me like her even more.

Do you think Viola—I'm sorry, Olivia gets short shrift when we all talk about the great Shakespeare women?

Yes. She has beautiful poetry that everyone forgets about. So, yeah, absolutely I think that people tend to forget about her.

Why do you think that is? Is it because of Viola? I mean, Viola's got the willow cabin speech.

Viola does have the willow cabin.

She's also got patience on a monument.

Yes, a beautiful scene. Olivia has

wonderful extremes that Viola doesn't have. Viola is very centered and down-to-earth. Olivia is much more like Orsino in her wild back-and-forthness, which for an actor is really fun to play. But it's not her story, really; it's Viola's story and I guess that's why we tend to put so much of the focus on Viola.

And then Maria. There are several waiting women in Shakespeare. The others tend to be close friends with the mistress, but except for the one scene where Viola first shows up and then when Maria brings in Malvolio, there's not a lot of interaction between you and your mistress.

Not a lot of talking. We're together a lot. I follow her around constantly. But it's not like a companion in the way Lucetta and Julia are or Portia and Nerrisa. It's a different relationship. Our costume designer gave me the way to think of her when she was talking about the rendering one day and they decided she wasn't a housekeeper but maybe she's a lady's maid, and then the costume designer said, "I think of her as like her social secretary." You know, a little higher up on the food chain, but it's still a boss-employee kind of relationship. Because there isn't a lot of—Olivia censors herself when Maria's in the room. There's one scene where she's talking about Cesario and realizes that Maria's there and stops herself, so there isn't the "I'm going to tell you all my secrets because you're my confidante" kind of relationship.

Which is kind of unusual among those relationships in the other comedies.

Yeah, it is unusual.

But, then, Maria has her own story.

She does. Maria is in the play much more to be there for Toby than she is to be there for Olivia, yeah.

Now, is that Maria's story, is that Toby's story, is that Aguecheek's story?

Wow.

Or is it Malvolio's story?

That's a good question. It's hard to know sometimes when you're in it because you feel like it's yours. [Laughs] Well, certainly Malvolio's story. Who are you meant to identify with in that plotline and walk away feeling for? Certainly it's, I think, Malvolio. I think. [Pause] I would say that's Malvolio's story.

I ask that because the very first Shakespeare I ever saw was *Twelfth Night* in the American Shakespeare Theatre up in Stratford, Connecticut, and Fred Gwynn played Toby Belch.

Oh, wow.

And I was a *Munster's* fan, so, for me, that was Hermann Munster up there. I fell in love with the play. Toby was always the key to that play for me, but then I have seen great Aguecheeks who totally dominate the comedy, I've seen Malvolios who totally dominate, I've seen Festes who totally dominate, I've seen Marias

who totally dominate. So it's, whose play is this?

Yeah, it's a wonderful game of tennis between them. It can be very even, like I'll toss the ball to you and this will be your moment, because everybody in that plotline is given wonderful opportunities to do some really fun stuff.

You've got an extended scene with Feste.

I do.

You meet Aguecheek.

Yes.

So, as an actress, do you enjoy having all these different interactions with all these different people, and they're all pretty significant interactions?

I do. One of the things that happens when you're playing a supporting character in a Shakespeare play, especially in the comedies, is they get broken down into these little groups based on the subplots, and you can do an entire play without ever being on stage with half the cast. This one's not so much like that. The vast majority of my stuff is with Toby and Andrew and Olivia, but I get a few little moments with Viola and I have things with Feste, and I like that about this play, a lot. You're not just telling your tiny little story but you do string through the larger play.

Not many other Shakespeares that do that.

No, I think it's unusual in that way, especially in the comedies that characters are all so integrated with each other. I think the only person that I'm never on stage with is Antonio—the last scene, Antonio's actually on stage for that, so I guess that counts, too.

What about Orsino?

Well, I don't speak but I watch, I watch him a lot in act five.

So everybody's together for the last scene. And that's the way it should be.

Right. You can't have a nice dance if everybody's not on stage.

Going from Olivia to Maria, did you bring any perceptions of that—the Maria you had at Taffety Punk was a crazy lady?

Yes, she was.

Not at all somebody who'd be sailing on the *Lusitania*.

No, very different. It was a lot more about letting go any idea I had left over from the old

show and unlearning everything I thought I knew about the play because the setting, the style, the time period are all completely different, so they are completely different people in a completely different society.

And the Olivia is completely different from your Olivia.

Completely. My Olivia was very broad, and the play itself was much broader than this version. This Olivia is, like I was saying, much more vulnerable and real and elegant.

This is going to be a comedy, isn't it?

It is going to be a comedy.

My biggest complaint with all the comedies, even *Comedy of Errors*, is some directors make them dark.

Yeah.

"There's a dark streak in there," they say, well fine, it's a streak.

It's a streak. Yeah, I hope it's just a streak. I agree with you. *Twelfth Night* can be really dark and I'm not sure I agree with that.

That's what I liked about Taffety Punk. It was so much fun, even though it was about death, even though it was a near-death experience, or she may have been dead: I didn't know through the play to the very end. But it was still funny.

I think that was something Michelle Shupe, who directed that, really wanted it to be. If it's her vision before death, what might that vision be? Is that vision going to be about death? Or is it going to be about life so can we



Two pairings of Maria and Toby: above, Jennifer Hopkins with Ian Armstrong in the Taffety Punk production of *Twelfth Night* (photo by Teresa Castracana); below, Tonya Beckman with Craig Wallace in the Folger production (photo by Scott Suchman).



make this as vibrant as we can?

Wish I thought about that before I wrote my review.

These things come to you later. They come to me later, too. After closing I go, “Oh, that’s what that was about.” [Laughs]

So nothing from the Punk production informed your Maria at all.

No. I would say there are choices I’ve made, some of which are similar to what Jennifer did, some of which are different, but they came from watching her. Whenever I’m playing a female character in a Shakespeare play, I get very curious about when they go silent—and they always do—and what that means. There’s always some point in the play, and sometimes it’s due to the cutting, but at some point they stop talking. Or it takes them a long time before they talk. And I’m always really curious about that, and that really informed Maria for me.

In what way? Where does she go silent?

She goes silent, at least in our cut this time—and I was looking at it this morning to see if she says much more, and she really doesn’t say much more than what we’re doing—when Toby says we’re going to put Malvolio in a dark house, she has two more lines in the entire play. And I wondered what that was about. Because before that, with all the other plotting against Malvolio, it’s like huge speeches of really relishing this punishment she’s going to help mete out on him, and when Toby says that, she shuts up almost completely. So I had to make a decision about what that meant.

When does Olivia go silent?

She’s silent more in the beginning. And she wasn’t completely silent, she was terse and her lines were short at the beginning. And then when she meets Cesario, you can’t shut her up. Then she has these huge passages.

So it could be just as informative that she doesn’t go silent. That’s a good point.

Yeah.

And you think about this woman. She’s fallen in love with a guy, and this guy has not wanted her, and suddenly he’s willing to marry her. Then she finds out he’s a better guy than she thought he was—a real guy.

Yeah, he’s actually a guy. [Laughs] There’s a scene at the top of act five, and it’s really just a

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matter of Shakespeare trying to get everybody on stage again, where Orsino's getting ready to leave and Cesario's chasing after him and then Andrew comes in and Toby comes in and Feste is there, and Olivia is responding to all of it in really short lines, like, "This is..." "What is..." "Why are you here?" "What's going on?" And I remember getting so frustrated with it because I was like, "I want everyone to leave and clear this stuff up with Cesario!" That is what I really wanted. But it's the end of the play and we have to wrap things up.

And actually she finds out she has the guy and the one she fell in love with in the first place is going to be her sister-in-law. Talk about a lucky break, she got it.

Yeah. She really escapes unharmed. [Laughs]

Let's talk more about the silence, because—as you played Julia—the most notorious silence of all time is Sylvia. Care to weigh in?

What do you do with that, right? I don't know if I have anything intelligent to say about that. It's tricky. She chooses not to speak. That's the trouble with trying to do *Two Gents* is no one accepts that ending. It's just really hard to stomach. I saw one production that I really liked when it all resolved, the first thing Julia did was slap Proteus and then kiss him and all is forgiven. And it worked for me because it was sort of like, "I could kill you but, oh, I still love you," you know? And just the acknowledgement of the betrayal instead of just sort of sweeping it all under the rug because it's the end of the play, I like. But it's still really hard to accept. It's really unsatisfying.

Well, I can see a contrite Proteus, and I've seen a contrite Proteus, but Valentine, he's inexcusable.

Yeah. Which I guess is why Sylvia doesn't say anything. [Laughs]

What about some other female characters you've played? You said you were curious about the silences Shakespeare brings in. What are some of the others?

I always found Kate really interesting when she stops talking. It's been a while since I played her or looked at the play, but there was always something really interesting to me in the tailor scene. After he takes the clothes away, there's a section where she stops arguing with him and he talks about appearances. I was in a production of it once several years ago and the director wanted to cut a big chunk out of that scene, and she whittled down the appearances speech to, like, three or four lines. I fought to have it put back in. She asked me why I cared because those weren't my lines, and I was like, "This is where Kate falls in love, so we need that." I guess she hadn't caught that that's where that might happen. But that's where I've always thought that she realizes, "Oh, here's the man who really understands me." But she doesn't say it.

That's one example I can think of. I played Ophelia years ago, and it was kind of the opposite. She was quiet until she went mad, then she can speak.

What other Shakespeare women have you played?

I've played Beatrice. I have played—

Beatrice never shuts up.

No. That was the one play where I didn't get struck by this weird silence, because she always talks.

Who else have I played?

Phoebe doesn't shut up.

No, Phoebe never shuts up, until the very end when she realizes that she loves Silvius.

You think she does love Silvius?

I think so. I think she decides to.

You need the happy ending.

Yes. I think Shakespeare wants her to love him.

And you think Shakespeare wants Katherine to love Petruchio? Which I agree with.

Yeah.

I did a whole commentary that I don't think it's a misogynist play. I think we haven't gotten totally past the postfeminist backlash.

That makes a lot of sense. I've played her twice, and both times people have come up to me after the show and asked, "How do you say that last speech without just wanting to throw up?" And it's really easy. It's really easy if you believe at some point they fall in love with each other. It's a huge gift that Petruchio gives her. He allows her to show her sister and her father and everyone else in the room that she's the ideal woman. And she's never gotten to be the ideal woman before.

When you talk about Shakespeare's women and silence, I've noticed that twice you've said when women go silent that's when they fall in love.

Oh, I didn't even realize that. I didn't know I said that.

Maria may be the other way.

I think Maria is in love with Toby when the play begins. I think they have an existing relationship. That may be a secret, but it's already there.

Is that a proper relationship? Given—in your setting it doesn't matter, maybe, but I was wondering that because he's a knight—I guess he can have anybody he wants, he's not noble.

It's definitely an upstairs-downstairs sort of, you know.

It depends on how you treat her, too.

Yeah. I've seen productions where she's definitely a scullery maid and very much a servant. I think in our production I am higher up in the pecking order of servants, although I'm still a servant. So, I guess no matter what, there's a bit of scandal there. But being a knight isn't the same as being a countess.

No, it isn't, but is there a counter parallel to Malvolio who believes he can have Olivia? Maria's got Toby.

Oh, definitely. But he has to be punished because it's a stepping stone for him. He wants Olivia in order to better himself. Maria and Toby love each other.

You don't like Malvolio, do you?

No, I don't. I mean, it's a wonderful role but he's a terrible person. When I'm not playing Maria, I don't always feel that way. [Laughs]

Malvolio wants Olivia in order to better himself. Maria and Toby love each other.

Do you remember how you felt toward him in Taffety Punk?

I do. I remember thinking that he was full of himself and, "Oh, I should do something about that some day" you know, like, "Whatever, I don't care." I didn't care as much. And then I felt very sorry at the end after he came forward with the letter, very regretful that I had not been paying attention. But in that cut, my last line to him was, "Poor fool, how have they baffled thee"; I didn't get to say, "you're going to get your revenge." I didn't have those lines, so I had to go back to, "well, I don't care about that."

Well, your Olivia was kind of full of herself anyway.

Yes. She was very self-centered.

I don't think I've ever seen it that way, either, and it made the scene with Viola where they're going back and forth, Viola saying, "I'm not what I am."

And [Olivia] doesn't hear it.

She has no idea; it's all going over her head.

Yeah.

And Esther was just like—

"I'm trying to tell you something." Yeah.

That was just so funny.

That scene has always reminded me of when someone refuses to hear the truth, you can point blank say, “Here is the situation,” and they go “Lalalalalala.” And in that scene, that’s exactly what’s happening; she doesn’t get it. Viola could literally open up her blouse and say [she whispers here as Viola], “I’m a girl,” and Olivia would say, “Come again tomorrow.” [Laughs] She’s just not ready to hear it. That was a really fun scene to do.

And it came across as fun, too.

So, what’s your take on Shakespeare’s take on women?

I think he recognizes, at least in his day, what little power they have but sees them as every bit as human as the men. Their power is behind the scenes. I think he’s very sympathetic toward women in his time.

Do you think he’s sympathetic for our time?

Yeah, I think some of the choices that the women in his plays have to make are hard for us to understand.

Like Isabella.

Like Isabella, like the women in *Two Gents*. Like poor Helena in *All’s Well*, and Mariana. They make choices that just don’t sit with us in our postfeminist feminist society. It’s uncomfortable. But they’re written with a great deal of sympathy.

When we do the all-girl Shakespeare at Taffety Punk, one of the things that is always really striking, the women who are playing some of the larger men’s roles—and I still tend to play women in the all-girl Taffety Punk shows—they’ll talk about how the men’s lines are structured so differently. The way they’re written are really different, and if you’re used to playing women, it can be really hard to learn those parts. The women kind of save it up, and then when they have something to say, it’s all really well thought out. It’s almost like they’ve been thinking it for a long time and now is their opportunity to speak and say what needs to be said. The men are figuring it out as they go because they’re running the show, they’re thinking on their feet, they’re making decisions as they need to. The women are standing back and stepping in when they must. So the way the women think is very different from the way the men think.

Olivia, I had to figure out. I understand Maria more.

And if you grow used to, “OK, here’s my argument all laid out for me,” and that’s how you approach those roles and you go in and play a man’s role and it’s all jumbled and topsy-turvy, it can be really hard to learn the part.

That leads into the next question I was going to ask. You mentioned that Shakespeare was very sympathetic toward women. Do you think he had insights into women?

I think he had insights into people, including women.

And men.

And men. Yeah, I guess it's as simple as that; he was insightful into how people work. He took people for what they were. There's not a lot of judgment on many of his characters. Even characters like Malvolio who are easy to dislike for some of the things they do, Shakespeare makes you care about them by the end.

Any other insights you've gotten on *Twelfth Night*? You've kind of put Olivia behind you.

Yeah, I had to sort of let that go, as much as I didn't want to. I really loved playing Olivia. There are roles that I'm really excited to play and then when you do, you realize it's not as fun as you thought it would be.

Like what?

Like Ophelia.

I've only seen one really good Ophelia. It's a hard role.

It's a hard role and it can't all be about the mad scene.

That's the problem: Is she strong or is she not?

Yeah. Hero's another one like that.

Yes, but I've seen a couple of good Heroes.

I've seen some great Heroes, but it's the same thing. And Olivia was one—I was excited to play her, I had wanted to play her—but on the surface, I thought, "Well, she could end up being sort of boring," and she wasn't at all. She fascinated me.

What about Maria? Do you find her as fascinating?

I understand her a little better. Olivia, I had to figure out. I understand Maria more.

What does that say about you?

I have no idea, I don't want to know.

The secret to Maria is that she's always ready to have fun. She's not complicated. She wants to have fun. She loves this guy for better or for worse. Well, he is what he is. And she does her job. She gets caught up in this revenge plot, but even that is to have fun, you know: "It would be really fun if we could totally humiliate him, because he deserves it. If we can make him think his mistress loves him, it will be hilarious. And then we're going to act like he's possessed of the devil, because it will be hilarious."

But she doesn't stay in the gulling scene.

No.

That's what I find interesting. I guess we shouldn't speculate on why.

I don't know. Somebody's costume change probably had something to do with it. I'm playing it this time where I'm right outside the door, waiting for [Malvolio] to leave so I can come in and find out what happened. Because it is a little odd that she's not observing her own handiwork for whatever reason.

Would you ever want to play Viola?

Yeah. Why not play all three? I would. I've never—I don't know if it's a physicality thing or energy thing—but I've never ever been considered for Rosalind or Viola. I've always been auditioning for the other parts. Of the two, between Rosalind and Viola, I'd rather play Viola, if I had to choose between them. Viola is more interesting to me. Her relationship with her brother and the sadness about losing him that is sort of woven throughout the play is really beautiful, and it makes the reunion resonate so well. I've never gotten through a production of *Twelfth Night* where that doesn't make me cry. Even on stage when I'm not supposed to. [Laughs] I just think it's one of the most beautiful scenes in Shakespeare. I love it.

If you're playing any other kind of Olivia, you could have cried.

Yeah. That Olivia was thinking, "How does this affect me? Does this mean I'm not married anymore?"

I think the idea of wooing on behalf of the person you would be married to yourself if you had your choice is interesting. How do you make yourself do a good job? That would be interesting to explore.

Will you be able to cry as Maria?

I'm not on stage for it, so I can do it. I can listen and cry back stage.

One of the things that was interesting to me as I was going in to play Maria: When I got cast in the show, so many people said, "You're way too young to play Maria," and I thought, that's a really strange comment. But people kept saying it to me. So I started looking at past productions, and at some point in history, people started feeling that Maria was a lot like the nurse in *Romeo and Juliet*, so she needed to be older, I guess. I was reading about it and somewhere in the '50s and '60s, Olivia became an ingénue

and she never had been before, so they made Maria like her nurse and that was the style for a really long time. Which explained to me why people thought I was too young to play Maria, because there's nothing, nothing in the text that suggest she's old. The only descriptions of her are that she's little. They talk about how little she is all the time. All of Toby's nicknames for her are about little birds or being the runt of the litter and things like that. Except when he calls her Penthesilea, all of his nicknames are about her being small. That's the only description about what she might be like physically. So it was curious to me that people think of her as old.

If you think about that timeframe, especially with the comedies, Shakespeare had two amazing boys to do Viola and Olivia, Rosalind and Celia, because Celia is a great role, too.

Yeah, it is.

And Nerissa and Portia. But each one of those also has another boy in it: Phoebe, Jessica, and Maria.

Yep.

So he obviously had three boys.

Yeah. He had the people to play it, clearly.

So Maria would be young.

And she doesn't behave like an older woman. She gets into lots of trouble. You know, she's completely irresponsible, along with Toby. She's exuberant, which feels youthful to me.

She's supposed to be helping Olivia and she doesn't, she actually—

Works against her, yeah. But not in important ways. She doesn't interfere with Cesario, I don't think. I think Maria thinks Cesario is the most exciting thing to happen in the house in a long time.

You don't think that "here lies your way"—

Oh, I think she's prompted by Olivia. Like, "Get him out of here." But she doesn't go behind Olivia's back and—

Wait, Cesario calls her a giant.

Yeah, but that's a reference to fairy tales. In the old romances, giants were the obstacles to get through in order to get to the princess.

That's true. She could have called you a dragon, I guess.

She could have. So I guess maybe there's a little pun there because everybody else is calling her a little wee thing.

But otherwise Maria's not really working with Olivia at all.

No. I think Malvolio is the one who keeps the house running. At least in our production right now, Maria's the one who makes sure Olivia looks good. She does her hair, puts her dresses on her, you know? I'm very proud of that work. [Laughs]

You do it well, huh?

Yeah. “Look at you! You look wonderful.” But I don’t think it’s her responsibility to make sure the estate is running. That’s Malvolio’s job. So she’s just completely distracted by the other people in the house when she’s not, like, preparing a bath or whatever it is she does for Olivia. She’s not working as a go-between to Cesario. Olivia sends Malvolio to do that.

We talked about how you interact with all the other characters. How does Maria feel about Aguecheek?

He’s a fool. I find myself, as the play goes on, sort of doting on him, and I have to put a wall there because I don’t know if it’s James Konicek’s performance that tickles me so much or what, but before she meets him, she talks about what a complete fool he is and then they get all wrapped up together, and I think she sort of dotes on him by the end. But, you know, there’s nothing you can do for him.

What about Feste?

Ah, good friends. Good friends.

At Taffety Punk, Feste was Death, but they still had the Good Madonna scene.

None of the other characters have a recognition that Feste is Death.

So, either in this production or what you can remember as Olivia—but Olivia doesn’t even notice Aguecheek.

Oh, no, he’s, pffft. He’s not on her radar at all.

He’s not even a piece of furniture.

No, barely. Barely.

But Feste has a very special place for Olivia.

The way I thought of it was that Feste is somebody that Olivia grew up with. They’ve been friends, her father’s fool, he’s been in her household her entire life. And so his going away when her brother died was a huge betrayal. He has to be important enough to her that it hurts that he’s gone, and so she wants to punish him.

It’s a play about people who go to extremes, isn’t it? Extremes in mourning, extremes in following the rules, extremes in playing a trick.

That’s true.

Everyone goes too far.

But we don’t think of *Twelfth Night* in that way. And that Viola seems to be the only one who has a level head, and what’s she doing? She’s running around being a boy.

Yeah, and that's like the most reasonable thing to be done in the whole play.

So what is it about Viola that you like so much that you'd like to play her.

I think the idea of wooing on behalf of the person you would be married to yourself if you had your choice is interesting. How do you make yourself do a good job? That would be interesting to explore. It's got to hurt a lot. Everything that Viola goes through has to hurt a lot, I would assume. Having not played it I don't really know. She's in mourning that she can't express. She's in love with someone who's in love with someone else, which hurts, but then, on top of that, she has to be the one who does all the wooing.

And she does a pretty good job of it.

She does an excellent job with it. And then all of a sudden these people want to fight her, and she doesn't understand what's going on. She's definitely the straight man in the show. Things happen to her. Which is not to say she's inactive, because she's not.

That's what I pointed out in my review of the Taffety Punk production was how much that came out, where she's just confused, other than the big fish going by—which confused me, too.

It's funny, all through rehearsals I was going "I hate that fish. I hate that fish." And then opening night, the fish got a huge laugh, so it's like, "I guess we're keeping the fish." [Laughs]

What you're talking about Viola is that she's one of the best portrayals of unconditional love.

Oh, yeah. Yeah, she's a great example of unconditional love. I hadn't thought about that.

Well, there's Helena in *All's Well*, but sometimes I think Helena is just a fool, or Bertram's really got to be good looking.

Yeah, he's got to be really good looking, otherwise, whew! What is there?

Any other characters in *Twelfth Night* you want to do?

I want to play Andrew now. [Laughs] No, I've been joking that Center Stage is doing *Twelfth Night* next year and I just need to call them up and say, "Look, you got to help me out here, I need to make it a trifecta."

And if you do, we'll do this again.

OK. It's a deal.