

Shakespeare with a touch of Salsa

Cottage Theatre sets
'12th Night' in 1950s
Cuba

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The Cottage Grove Sentinel

Cuba instead of Illyria; rum and salsa instead of wine and galliards — these are but a few of the modifications that the Cottage Theatre made to adapt the 17th-century Shakespearean comedy "12th Night" for a 1950s Havana night club.

"It's common practice to stage Shakespeare in a different time and place because it has a universal quality," said Executive Director Susan Goes. "But we decided on Cuba years ago. So, while we are very fortunate that Cuba has been in the news, it was merely a coincidence."

The Cottage Theatre hit the current-events jackpot when President Barack Obama announced significantly relaxed restrictions on travel by Americans to Cuba just weeks before the opening of "12th Night."

However, even if the news has teed up a successful run for the Cottage Theatre, director Tony Rust said that he and his team felt no added pressure to hit it out of the park.

"Ultimately, we're just silly — regardless of what's going on," he said.

And they are silly indeed. The cast, which also includes Rust in the role of Feste, leads the audience through a farce of mistaken identities and cultural faux pas, and ultimately to a resolution that leaves all but a few characters happily paired up.

Rust — who has staged "12th Night" in a variety of different settings during his career — said there was higher degree of difficulty in developing the range of accents than bringing the unique setting to life.

"We started with just the Cuban accent and the Don's, but soon realized that we needed Viola and Sebastian to be from somewhere else because there weren't enough outsiders," he said.

In this production, Tracy Nygard and Randall Brous play Viola and Sebastian — two shipwrecked and separated siblings from Charleston. Nygard and Brous demonstrate expert fluencies in Southern Shakespeare — a feat that betrays the already-challenging task of articulating Elizabethan English.

"With or without an accent, enunciation and volume are very important," Rust said. "On the other hand though, the language flows really nicely with an accent — better than it would with an American non-accent."

While it can be difficult for an audience to follow the lines of Shakespeare, the cast transcends the language with pinpoint inflection and expressive body language. Dale Flynn and Mark Anderson, in their respective roles of Uncle Toby and Andrew, certainly let the audience know when an innuendo or double entendre is in play.

"We work really hard to make what we're thinking clear," Rust said.

Another unique twist on this play is the live band of Jim Reinking on drums and Chris King on piano. And while a nightclub vibe may not be synonymous with Shakespeare, Rust believes that music is an essential element.

"Most of his comedies are almost proto-musicals. The plot of this play — not necessarily of mistaken identity but as a romantic comedy — is the kind that we end up with in musical comedies. So, having good music is something that we started with."

The band impresses with three original songs, and the salsa-style music drives the transition between scenes, creating a breathless pace that reflects



courtesy photo

Tracy Nygard and Randall Brous — as Viola and Sebastian, respectively — laed an ensamble cast in Cottage Theatre's production of '12th Night.'

the disorder among the characters.

In addition to acting and directing, Rust also designed the set. He has at times worn multiple hats during a production, but while Rust said that it limited his opportunities to observe through the director's lens, it had no impact on his style.

"I make my actors be independent, so that didn't change. I want the char-

acters to come from their hearts and their ideas," he said.

"12th Night" continues for two more weeks. Thursday, Friday and Saturday shows begin at 8 p.m.; Sunday matinees start at 2:30 p.m. The Thursday evening performances are new for the 2015 season.