

The unkindest cut of all

Twelfth Night is full of cross-dressing gags. John Roth talks to *Nancy Groves* about giving hero Sebastian the snip in his play at Hampton Hill Playhouse.

TWELFTH
NIGHT
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Some people are scared of Shakespeare. Not John Roth.

The Teddington Theatre Club veteran goes back a long way with the bard, first as an actor, with tragic turns in *King Lear* and *Macbeth*, and later directing the Shakespearian comedies like *As You Like It*.

So Roth feels he knows the great man well enough by now to give him the odd tweak. Certainly, there are cuts and changes aplenty in his *Twelfth Night*, the first TTC show of 2008 at the Hampton Hill Playhouse.

"I have been in *Twelfth Night* four times," admits Roth, 65. "We'll forget the first one, cringe – I was still at school. But then I played Fabian in my 20s and Sir Andrew Ague-Cheek on a tour of Germany and the Duke as well. That was 32 years ago, which is as long as I've been a member of TTC.

"It is a fairly timeless play," he continues. "I don't like Shakespeare done with gimmicks so I have set it in the 18th century, cutting any of the obvious Elizabethan references."

And they are not the only bits Roth has cut. Shakespeare's romantic comedy is the story of Sebastian and Viola, identical twins separated in a shipwreck off the coast of Ilyria.

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Posing as a man, Viola is hired as a page by Duke Orsino, whose sweetheart, Olivia, falls in love with the new recruit. Viola, for her part, has fallen for the Duke and, when Sebastian finally arrives on the scene, Olivia thinks him the object of her affection and proposes to him.

The play's central joke (and tension) depends on cross-dressing and mistaken identities. Only, in Roth's version, the twins are both played by female actors, Julie Davis and Louise Galton. Sebastian has, quite literally, had the

snip.

"I have managed to get two actresses who look and sound remarkably alike," explains Roth, "and, in my view, they make the mistaken identity more persuasive. I have also cut parts of Feste's *Come Away Death* song and given them to Viola instead.

"Feste's intrusion on what is a very intimate scene has always jarred with me. He appears when he has no reason to."

Except, of course, that Shakespeare put him there. But Roth insists: "Feste is very much the clown of the piece. By the end of the show, he is out of a job."

There will be one final innovation in Roth's production and it sounds like a good one. As the Hampton Hill audience take to their seats, they will be serenaded softly by guitarist Chris Burton until the house lights dim and the stage lights brighten on the Duke and his entourage.

"That way, the play sort of happens, rather than starts," says Roth. "You can't open with the line, 'If music be the food of love, play on' if all you have is a blackout and the Berlin Phil on the tannoy!"

Twelfth Night, Hampton Hill Playhouse, Sunday, January 27 to Saturday, February 2, 2pm & 7.45pm, £8-£10, call 0845 838 7529, visit ttc-boxoffice.org.uk



On guard: John Roth fine tunes a fight scene in rehearsals for Twelfth Night