

# *Twelfth Night: Digital Dramaturgy*

*Twelfth Night*  
By William Shakespeare  
Directed by Gavin Witt

**Mar 5–Apr 13**

Revelry, disguises, swashbuckling, and (of course) pining lovers abound in what some call Shakespeare's most perfect comedy. Twins Viola and Sebastian, separated in a shipwreck and presuming each other dead, wash ashore in the beautiful but mysterious land of Illyria. A tale of mistaken identity and mismatched ardor unfurls as lords and ladies, servants and masters wind a topsy-turvy path to happiness...

## **1. An Interview with Gavin Witt**

**Center Stage audiences are probably familiar with your work as a dramaturg, but they may not know that your life in the theater has been pretty comprehensive. You've been an actor, a director, and spent years as a scholar of Renaissance Drama.**

**In what ways does the constellation of these experiences inform your directing approach for *Twelfth Night*?**

Well, I suppose all of these experiences together inform my approach; you don't just turn one on or off. In terms of the particular journey with *Twelfth Night*, I'd say my process as director has certainly been informed by my experience in all those other capacities—but maybe dramaturg most of all.

I start by asking what story the play tells, and how it tells it; then I try to serve that, rather than putting something onto it. I try to consider the audience's encounter with the play, and explore ways to make the story legible and accessible—not just in terms of its action, but in terms of character relationships, of actions and consequences.

And finally, you have to think: there have been hundreds and hundreds of interpretations of this play over hundreds of years. So, the question inevitably arises, where do you put it? When and where is our version of what Shakespeare calls "Illyria"? And I couldn't not investigate that through a dramaturgical impulse.

The script says it's in Illyria: what does that mean? What does that mean in terms of a real place, and what does it mean in terms of a fantastical notion of the fiction of Illyria and what that might have meant for Shakespeare, or his audiences? Can we use that to establish the given circumstances for our characters in a way that's meaningful to them, to the actors, and discernible for audiences now?

# PEPÉ från Marseille



**JEAN GABIN**  
MIREILLE BALLIN \* LINE NORO  
LUCAS GRIDOUX \* CHARPIN.

ENSAMRÄTT: ANGLO FILM, STOCKHOLM

## **How did all that land you in a “Hollywood” version of the Balkans, circa 1938?**

Well, those previous questions raise others. What historical sense of place does it entail, to be in Illyria? Illyria has roots in a particular part of the world, the Adriatic coast of the Balkan Peninsula; but it also represents a fantastical place, an off-the-map land. It’s the furthest, easternmost extent of the West, of the known and familiar—for Shakespeare’s world—and the first encounter with the exotic, Ottoman East... Maybe it’s something like Maryland, where we’re the southernmost north and the northernmost south. A border, not really considered part of either side.

To some extent, then and now, Illyria means the in-between. It’s a crossroads of cultures and on the map, a borderland, a place of fluid boundaries—where boundaries are at once permeable and defined. It represents defined separation and also the possibility of crossing over, breaking through. After all, if a boundary is that which separates us, it is also that which we can cross to come together. And it seemed to me that was operating constantly in this play—in both directions.

Illyria represents this crossroads. I love that there are all these people passing by, passing through throughout the play, all taken out of the ordinary and taken to extraordinary circumstances...

But if audiences are to distinguish who the characters are in the world of the play, or against a milieu we understand, then I’d say we need to locate it more legibly than in the Renaissance or some purely imaginary world. Specific elements need to make sense—yellow stockings, duels, lyrical poetry, disguises, the clash of ideologies, rigid social structures—so we needed a world with a certain sentimental and romantic distance, but still close enough to our own.

Sticking with Shakespeare’s assertion of “Illyria” took us to the Balkans; once there, the particular pressures and stakes of 1938 made sense of so many elements—filtered through a version of this world as it might have been imagined in the Hollywood films of the period.

## **You and I have spoken about the endless debate about whether or not Shakespeare should be transposed or updated. Can we revisit that?**

Well, it’s a question that comes up with Shakespeare certainly, but also classical theater in general. For this particular play, I wouldn’t call what we are doing a “transposition.” Putting Julius Caesar in a contemporary business office, that’s a transposition—of time and place both. That play supposes a specific historical place, in a specific historical moment. But *Twelfth Night*’s is a fantastical world, based on theatrical and fictional versions of a real world. It is informed by topical elements: it features the tabloid elements of the day; characters lampoon recognized figures of the time; people could laugh and recognize pieces of their daily life. It came into existence as a living, breathing, vital piece of performance, not representing an antique time under museum glass. Audiences experienced it as their own familiar, recognizable world with a fantastical twist to it, adding the excitement of the exotic. It’s not set in a literal Venice or England, but rather a slightly invented place—seen and heard in the voice and clothing of the

audience's own reality.

### **How did all that land you in a “Hollywood” version of the Balkans, circa 1938?**

I find that the notion of what Illyria meant for Shakespeare and his audience parallels quite closely that of the Hollywood studio film with an exotic “Orient” and its fictional renditions of the Balkans. As Shakespeare theatricalized Illyria, Hollywood created Ruritania. Rather than a transposition, I see it as finding a more contemporary equivalent for the very same gesture or fictional filter. But I understand the impulse for original practices Shakespeare, the scholarly attempt to try to recreate “authentic” costumes and performance elements. But that always feels to me like something for museums—to celebrate something from another time and place that we admire for the sake of that distance and only for that sake, not because of its proximity to us or to our lives. It is an incredibly mediated experience, for me. It can be wonderful, I’m not discounting the value of it, but the dramaturg in me insists you can never recreate that experience; you can never bring an audience from the 21st-century America and make it Jacobean...

Fundamentally, what Shakespeare’s audiences encountered was incredibly modern, so I see nothing actually “authentic” in shrouding these plays in the clothes and performance style of a bygone age. We can only see that as antiquated. Globe audiences didn’t see actors in 500 year-old clothing pretending—they saw their world come to life on stage.

### **This production of *Twelfth Night* is filtered through a cinematic lens—in particular through the genres of Film Noir and Screwball Comedy; I’m wondering if there were any specific films, of either genre, that served as inspiration for you?**

When I was musing on an exotic, enticing borderland full of expatriates in a romantic thriller atmosphere, of people disappointed in love or ennobled by love, on the run, dwarfed by the pressures of time and history, Casablanca immediately came to mind. Then the more I pushed on that idea, I found an incredible commonality in many films from that period: witty, romantic adventures like *The Lady Vanishes*, *The 39 Steps*, *Night Train to Munich*, *Pepe le Moko*, or even the *Thin Man* series; stylish screwball comedies like *It Happened One Night*, *The Palm Beach Story*, *Sullivan’s Travels*, or *Bringing Up Baby*; and wonderful noir classics like *The Maltese Falcon* and *Port of Shadows*. Probably as many others too, honestly.



They share a sense of atmosphere and often a fascination with this part of the world; they celebrate the elegant and glamorous and witty; they boldly explore the nature of love and relationships; they a kind of heightened encounter with the world, a heightened sense of consequence. Preston Sturges, Howard Hawks, and Hitchcock—they share a comfortable embrace of the absurd, invested with a genuine sense of emotional truth that to me feels absolutely in sync with this play. Same for the characters' capacity to speak their minds so brilliantly and fluently at the top of their being, shaping what is so obviously artificial speech but making it so true, so real.

**Is there a central through-line for you when you think about this play and what it communicates?**

A sense of fluidity and how it operates in the play—the fluidity of identity, place, relationships, boundaries; the rhythms of the play and its musicality—informs how I think about it. But, above all else, I'd say for me the story is a story of love. We meet and watch a group of people who, sometimes despite themselves, are learning to love, learning to love better, accepting love, trying

to love and failing, being disappointed in love, the whole range. This play accepts, with incredible empathy, a notion of love across a far wider spectrum than we often allow ourselves to think about. The many types of love—parental love, filial love, love of friends, sacrificial love, love of self, the love of oneself in love—it’s constantly rehearsing these. In it, we see characters encounter the world through someone else’s experience and that brings forth profound humanity and empathy, and we undergo the same journey. For me, *Twelfth Night* is a love story—not only in the conventional sense, but as a story of the act and art of loving.

## II. Characteristics of Screwball Comedy

“The screwball comedy is a principally American genre of comedy film that became popular during the Great Depression, originating in the early 1930s and thriving until the early 1940s. Many secondary characteristics of this genre are similar to the film noir, but it distinguishes itself for being characterized by a female that dominates the relationship with the male central character, whose masculinity is challenged. The two engage in a humorous battle of the sexes, which was a new theme for Hollywood and audiences at the time. Other elements are fast-pace repartee, farcical situations, escapist themes, and plot lines involving courtship and marriage. Screwball comedies often depict social classes in conflict. Some comic plays are also described as screwball comedies.”

—“Screwball Comedy Film,” [Wikipedia](#)

“The loss of credibility in former values, the breakdown of the smugness and self-confidence of the jazz era, the growing bewilderment and dissatisfaction in a "crazy" world that does not make sense, has been reflected in the revival of comedies of satire and self-ridicule. ‘Daffy’ comedies became the fashion. Here the genteel tradition is "knocked for a loop": heroes and heroines are neither ladylike and gentlemanly. They hit each other, throw each other down, mock each other, play with each other....

[Screwball comedy films] lampooned the dignified and accepted. These films were all sophisticated, mature, full of violence—hitting, falling, throwing, acrobatic—bright dialogue, slapstick action—all imbued with terrific energy. In these films the rebel, the individualist, is once more respected. The artist, the eccentric, the unaccountable, who was once a poor and lazy good-for-nothing in films, now is the sane person in a chaotic world [...]"

—Lewis Jacobs, *The Rise of the American Film: A Critical History*

### III. Characteristics of Film Noir

#### Excerpt from *What is Film Noir?* by Via William Park:

“Film noir...can define a subject, a locale, and a character. It consists of all three. Its subject is crime, almost always a murder but sometimes a theft. Its locale is the contemporary world, usually a city at night. Its character is a fallible or tarnished man or woman. From these givens, from this situation, an investigation almost always ensues which further involves the protagonist as it unravels the web of misadventures [...]

Whether it leads to punishment and doom or redemption is not as important to the genre as there being an investigation. Such then are the components which make up the genre of film noir: a crime, a fallible protagonist, a contemporary setting, and, usually, an investigation by someone or some agency, not necessarily the protagonist. In the classic period, this situation gives rise to a typical cast, no one type of character being absolutely essential to the genre. In addition to the fallible protagonist and the investigator, one is likely to find a femme fatale, a conventional girlfriend or wife, a psychopath, numerous police (good and bad) corrupt politicians, gangsters or criminals, not as protagonists but as villains or obstacles, returning G.I.s, and a psychiatrist.



There is nothing new in this combination. It occurs in *Oedipus Rex*, *Hamlet*, and *Crime and Punishment*, three of the most outstanding examples. Two of course are plays, tragedies in fact, and the other is a novel. But film noir applies to the movies, quite a different means of presentation. It also applies to a group of films, a large and distinguished group. And it also applies to the milieu of the crime, the fallen world of the dark city which like the social environment of the naturalist novel envelopes the protagonist and contributes to his fate. It is at this point that the genre of film noir and the style of film noir merge [...]

Thus, when these characteristics—crime, [a] faulty and morally confused protagonist living in the contemporary world, and an investigation—are complemented by chiaroscuro, expressionistic camera work, dark city and night settings, and narrative devices such as the voice over and flashback, all elements of the noir style, we know that, unlike the characters, we are safe within this NEW genre. If no single element of noir is new, what is new is the concentration of such elements in crime films and the shift in Hollywood conventions which they represent. In the 1930s, Hollywood gave us heroes and heroines who were resourceful, energetic, and interesting, but, on the whole, innocent. If they fell, as in the gangster films, one could usually blame society and the class system.”



#### IV. Filmic Inspiration



### **Romantic Adventures/Thrillers**

- *Casablanca*
- *The Lady Vanishes*
- *Pepe Le Moko (remade as Algiers in English)*
- *The 39 Steps*
- *The Thin Man*
- *Night Train to Munich*
- *The Prisoner of Zenda*
- *The Lady from Shanghai*

### **Film Noir**

- *The Maltese Falcon*
- *To Have and Have Not*
- *The Big Sleep*
- *The Glass Key*
- *Port of Shadows (Quai des Brumes)*
- *Grand Illusion*
- *Now, Voyager*
- *Suspicion*

### **Screwball Comedies/Rom Coms**



- *The Palm Beach Story*
- *My Man Godfrey*
- *Sullivan's Travels*
- *It Happened One Night*
- *The Lady Eve*
- *The Philadelphia Story*
- *His Girl Friday*
- *Bringing Up Baby*
- *Holiday*
- *Modern Times*

## **V. Six Types of Love**

There are a variety of relationship types presented in *Twelfth Night* that can make us question what it means to love and connect with other humans. The following text from "Six Types of

Love,” *Psychology: An Introduction* by Dr. Russ Dewey provides further context for understanding those relationships (also accessible via [this link](#)):

In a classic book titled *Colors of Love* (1973), J. A. Lee defined six varieties of relationship that might be labeled *love*. What six different types of love did J. A. Lee define?

*EROS* is romantic, passionate, love—what Tennov labeled limerence. In this type of relationship, love is life's most important thing. Lee said a search for physical beauty or an ideal type also typifies this type of love.

*LUDUS* is a game-playing or uncommitted love. Lying is part of the game. A person who pursues ludic love may have many conquests but remains uncommitted.

*STORGE* (STORE-gay) is a slow developing, friendship-based love. People with this type of relationship like to participate in activities together. Often storge results in a long-term relationship in which sex might not be very intense or passionate.

*PRAGMA* is a pragmatic, practical, mutually beneficial relationship. It may be somewhat unromantic. A person who leans toward this type of relationship may look for a partner at work or where the person is spending time. Sex is likely to be seen as a technical matter needed for producing children, if they are desired.

*MANIA* is an obsessive or possessive love, jealous and extreme. A person in love this way is likely to do something crazy or silly, such as stalking. The movie *Fatal Attraction* was about this type.

*AGAPE* (a-GOP-aye) is a gentle, caring, giving type of love, brotherly love, not concerned with the self. It is relatively rare. Mother Theresa showed this kind of love for impoverished people.

What have researchers found, in studying Lee's six types of love?

Hendrick, Hendrick, Slapion-Foote, and Foote (1985) found that men were more likely to show the ludic type of love, while women were more likely to be storgic or pragmatic.

Studies of couples happily married for over 30 years showed that couples who rated their marriages as highly satisfactory described their relationship in terms which resembled erotic love more than the other five types. This might be surprising; in view of the earlier-mentioned finding that limerence type relationships tend to flare out quickly among college students. However, it might be the case that long-term relationships that contain both friendship and a passionate spark are more likely to endure and provide satisfaction to both parties than relationships that are low-key and pragmatic.

## VI. The Balkans of Our Popular Imagination

The following excerpts are adapted from “Preface” and “And What Shall I do in Illyria?” by Vesna Goldsworthy, *Inventing Ruritania: The Imperialism of the Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

### PREFACE

The Balkan Peninsula is undoubtedly part of the European mainland, yet the adjective 'Balkan' can imply the opposite of European. In the region itself the Balkans are always thought to be elsewhere, to the south-east of wherever one is, until, on the shores of the Bosphorus, one catches sight of Asia across the water.

The Balkan worlds of popular imagination are peopled by British creations. Bram Stoker's *Transylvania* and Anthony Hope's *Ruritania* are arguably the best-known brand names produced in this imaginative takeover of the Balkans, which was as important for the booming publishing industry at the turn of the century, and later for the film industry, as the diamond and gold fields of South Africa were for imperial trade.

Historically, British (and later American) economic interests in the Balkans tended to be comparatively small. British imports from the five Balkan states (Albania, Bulgaria, Greece, Romania, and Yugoslavia) amounted, for example, to only 0.66% of total UK imports in 1929 and 1.22% in 1938; while exports were 1.45% of the total in 1929 and 1.51% in 1938. Yet it was in the same period that the most abiding images of the region were created through the indirect colonisation and exploitation of Balkan settings by the British and American entertainment industries. This process has much more to do with the needs and the power of these industries than with any real interest in the area. Indeed, the Balkans could continue to supply the raw resources—to act as an exotic backdrop in travelogues and tales of romance, adventure, and political intrigue—for so long precisely because, until the 1990s, direct involvement in the region by the English-speaking countries was so slight. While British, and later American, rivalry with Russia meant that the Balkans, as an area of potential Russian expansionism, could not be ignored, there were few economic concerns and no expatriate communities at stake.

When not a theatre of war, the area seemed to inhabit the misty edges of perception. 'Trieste, Sarajevo, Montenegro, Sofia ...names which conjure up a part of Europe still exotic, relatively untraveled, a melting pot of East and West, of old and new,' proclaimed a dust-jacket of a British travel book published in 1990. 'This was a time-capsule world: a dim stage upon which people raged, spilled blood, experienced visions and ecstasies. Yet their expressions remained fixed and distant, like dusty statuary,' wrote an American traveler in 1993.

### “AND WHAT SHALL I DO IN ILLYRIA?": ENGLISH LITERATURE AND THE BALKANS":

In the field of literature and its by-products in film and television, however, Britain's impact on the way the Balkans are seen and imagined throughout the world far outweighs the achievements of its rivals. Accounts of British experiences of the Balkan world (from those of Byron to those

of Rebecca West and Lawrence Durrell) and, in particular, British imaginings of it (from those of Shakespeare to Anthony Hope's *The Prisoner of Zenda*, Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, and John Buchan's and Graham Greene's adventure stories) helped shape the imaginary geography of the peninsula to the extent that images created by British writers represent for many people the best known 'faces' of the Balkans. As shared points of reference, these images continue to be evoked by politicians, journalists, historians, lobbyists, and advertisers.

While volumes of Orientalist and subaltern studies explore representations of areas of Western domination over the Eastern world, the Balkan Peninsula provides a unique instance in modern times of Eastern colonisation of an area of Europe. Instead of descriptions of an 'exotic' Other, we encounter perceptions of Balkan identity in an ambivalent oscillation between 'European ness' and 'Oriental difference'. Historically, it also coincides with the emergence of the first popular newspapers, the development of a vast market for the popular novels demanded by an increasingly literate and affluent nation, the consequent growth of genre fiction, and the origins and development of the film industry. All of these imposed strains on the sources of raw materials available to the entertainment industry as a whole.

The process of literary colonization, in its stages and its consequences, is not unlike real colonization. It begins with travel writers, explorers and adventurers undertaking reconnaissance missions into an unknown area. They are gradually followed by novelists, playwrights and poets who, in their quest for new plots and settings, rely just as frequently on research through atlases and timetables as on direct experience. By this stage the capacity of the new land to feed the ever hungry mother country—and to make nabobs of those with the wits and ruthlessness to exploit it—is well established. Once 'mapped,' new territories are further appropriated by the writers of popular fiction, who delineate the final shape of the imaginary map and secure their stakes as surely as European colonists secured newly surveyed parcels of land in America, Australia, or New Zealand. Their need to visit or know the area they describe is, at this stage, relatively remote, and the 'authenticity' they aim to achieve is one which fulfills the desires and fantasies of the reader. At this point they and their collaborators in the film industry can begin the full commercial exploitation of the appropriated territory.

Except for British reinterpretations of Greek myths and classical literature, Balkan settings make their first, rare appearances in British literature to signify all-purpose semi-mythical remoteness, an imaginative 'end of the known world,' an area distant but still recognizable in many respects, as in Shakespeare's use of Illyria in *Twelfth Night*. The Balkan settings became more firmly delineated and moved into an imaginative focus when poets such as Byron and Shelley rediscovered the Balkans for Romanticism. From the time when, as Marilyn Butler argues, 'the favorite location of English poetry in the second decade of the nineteenth century becomes the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East,' British writing about the Balkans exerted considerable influence on the perceptions of the area not only in Britain but throughout the world.

The most indelible images of the Balkans were disseminated through popular literature, the burgeoning of which represented a late but powerful addition to the Industrial Revolution in which Britain led the world. The authors of such novels frequently stressed their lack of any direct experience of or even interest in the area. The impact of popular genres was spread in the

twentieth century by the film and television industries, with their insatiable requirements for exotic settings. Such moving pictures, with the baton increasingly being passed to the United States, reproduced and transmitted British-made images of Balkanness through dozens of Ruritanian romances, vampire stories and Orient Express murder mysteries, familiar even to those who would not be able to find any of the locations on the map of Europe.