Twelfth Night By William Shakespeare And The Rover By Aphra Behn: Critical Analysis

In this essay I will be writing about how theatre and performance can represent, critique and illuminate society. I will be focusing on the two plays “Twelfth Night” by William Shakespeare and “The Rover” by Aphra Behn.

Twelfth Night, written between 1600 and 1601 with Shakespeare having been writing plays regularly since 1590-1591, can illuminate us as to what audiences at the time wanted in plays and enjoyed seeing. At this point in his career, Shakespeare was not only a well-known play write but was a very popular one. Shakespeare had seen through his and other’s plays what was popular among audiences and so wrote a good number of his plays specifically to be the most popular at the time, leading Shakespeare to take inspiration from other plays that had already been written. The character of Malvolio “is a reincarnation of scapegoat figures victimized in previous comedies, most notably Falstaff… and Shylock “ . This shows us that the character of Shylock from The Merchant of Venice must have been so enjoyed by audiences, possibly through his comeuppance, that Shakespeare decided to use the character again in Twelfth Night for the audience to revel in his torment. Furthering this point; Shakespeare was writing for the Lord Chamberlain’s Men who were a group of actors under the Queen Elizabeth 1st up to 1603. At this point, the Lord Chamberlain’s Men consisted of a core group of actors who were the only group to perform Shakespeare’s plays. Audiences went to see Shakespeare’s plays partly to see the actors who play the characters, particularly as they hoped to see audience favourite Richard Burbage. Shakespeare specifically wrote characters for certain actors in the troupe, with Will Kemp commonly playing the fool, as Shakespeare knew which roles the actors were best at playing. The “theatrical tradition of having the same actor play Shylock and Malvolio in rep is a testament to the close kinship of the characters” illuminates for us what audiences wanted to see ion plays at the time as well as how Shakespeare wrote characters specifically as he knew the audience would enjoy them.

Another element of Twelfth Night which allows us to see into the society of its time of writing is in Shakespeare’s use of cross-dressing. We can see that characters pretending to be of other genders is of interest to Shakespeare, as he explores this in a few of his plays. Kiernan writes that “Twelfth Night emulates As You Like It in it’s multiplication of the ironies and misunderstandings the device entails” regarding the cross dressing in both plays. What this tells us about society at Twelfth Night’s inception is that audiences enjoy the narrative of a cross dressing hero and the comedic situations this creates, such as Olivia saying “Cesario… I love thee so that… Nor wit nor reason can my passion hide” when she has fallen in love with the lady Viola disguised as a male Cesario who does not exist. This cross-dressing comedy would have been even the more comedic for audiences at the time of the play’s first performances as women were not allowed to perform on stage, so all female roles were played by young boys.

Plays weren’t written with only content that was popular among audiences but also with playwrights critiquing the society they lived in through characters, situations or locations in their plays. At the time of Shakespeare’s life, playwrighting was considered an honourable occupation, as proven by his acting group being appointed and named after the Lord Chamberlain. Due to this, Shakespeare was slightly outside the law and could get away with

more critiquing of royalty, power and society than most of the population at the time. Twelfth Night, and most of Shakespeare's other plays, is not set in London or England even. This is partly done to allow audiences to experience what other countries may be like and add another level to the enjoyment of theatre, but also to allow Shakespeare to make more of a comment on the world and not be in trouble for it. Twelfth Night is set in Illyria, a country most of Shakespeare's audience would never visit,

Shakespeare isn't alone in using plays to convey issues or disproval of society, as Aphra Behn does the same thing in her play The Rover. Behn wrote her play during the restoration, after theatre had been banned under Oliver Cromwell's Puritan England. These restoration comedies, which The Rover is one, were created as a celebration of freedom in life with sexual liberation and drunken activities where judgement of the actions was not present.