

LA Review: 'Two Gentlemen of Chicago'

Troubadour Theater Company at the Falcon Theatre

Reviewed by David C. Nichols

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Photo by Chelsea Sutton

Who knew that William Shakespeare and the legendary "rock 'n' roll band with horns" would mix so well with current-day ribaldries, circus frivolities, vaudeville aplomb, and a scene-stealing canine? The latest Troubadour Theater Company lunacy folds Chicago's songbook into the Bard's romantic comedy about two Veronese chums turned rivals via the Troubies' signature commedia, musical comedy, standup, and carnival tactics, with results at once hilariously irreverent and classically disciplined.

Chief wacko Matt Walker directs with typical command of material and company. From the first sight of designer Jeffrey McLaughlin's spare, Vegas-flavored set—two lushly draped curtains frame the aptly brass-heavy band and ace musical director Eric Heinly—this isn't the Italy of yore. It's "25 or 6 to 4," retooled as establishing title song, and Walker's Renaissance-garbed Proteus, Rob Nagle's Restoration-clad Valentine, and their triple-threat colleagues nail Christine Lakin's witty choreography with giddy esprit de corps.

Walker's uncanny gift for turning asides, pratfalls, current events, and wardrobe malfunctions into character has never been richer. His goofy yet sinister Proteus is a portrayal to rival his celebrated Leontes in "A Wither's Tale." Nagle, a born farceur and then some, deftly corsets his natural bravado, building Valentine from droll whitefaced fop to a swain of heroic cupidity.

Lakin is wonderful as Proteus' adored but abandoned Julia-turned-Sebastian, her range perfectly attuned to Walker. She contrasts tellingly with Monica Schneider's daftly airy, amber-voiced Silvia and blends beautifully with Katie Nunez's and Lisa Valenzuela's Latina-centric servants Lucetta and Bruschetta.

Morgan Rusler has a trombone-wielding blast as Silvia's ducal father. Rick Batalla,

gonzo as ever, goes for the jugular, whether as an Antonio boasting an impenetrable fright wig or a Thurio brandishing unpredictable non sequiturs. Joseph Keane, as Panthino, and Suzanne Jolie Narbonne, as Ursula, approach their dance duets with secure technique and slapstick cheek, while Brandon Breault fearlessly devours multiple roles. When Matthew Morgan, as a possibly inbred Speed, spits out dislodged teeth like baseballs or the invaluable Beth Kennedy, as a genially lowbrow Launce, goes nose-to-nose with Roosevelt the Pug's prodigious Crab the Dog, sublime insanity ensues.

The designs are swank without overkill, notably Sharon McGunigle's superb costume parade and Jeremy Pivnick's stellar lighting. For all the left-field forays (an iconic Tolkien character is one of the Outlaws) and topical snaps (note to Mitt Romney: Skip this show), Shakespeare, Chicago, and the audience come out on top, making this improbably elegant mash-up the Troubies' finest effort to date.

Presented by Troubadour Theater Company at the Falcon Theatre, 4252 Riverside Dr., Burbank. March 23–April 22. Schedule varies. (818) 955-8101 or www.falcontheatre.com.