

the **Burbank Leader**

Theatre review: 'Two Gentlemen of Chicago'



'Proteus' (Matt Walker), 'Julia' (Christine Lakin), 'Silvia' (Monica Schneider) and 'Valentine' (Rob Nagle) in Troubadour Theater Company's 'Two Gentlemen of Chicago' at the Falcon Theatre. (Photo by Chelsea Sutton / April 13, 2012)

By Lynne Heffley

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Another season, another work of inspired musical lunacy from the Troubadour Theater Company. This time around, the gifted troupe known for signature mash-ups of theater classics and iconic pop music has nearly surpassed itself with “Two Gentlemen of Chicago,” an uproarious mix of Shakespeare’s

“Two Gentlemen of Verona” and the 1970s and ’80s hits of rock band Chicago.

In Shakespeare’s earliest romantic comedy, a love triangle derails the best buddy bromance between Valentine and Proteus of Verona. Proteus falls for Valentine’s lady, Silvia, after following his friend to Milan and leaving his sworn love Julia behind. He then thwarts Valentine and Sylvia’s elopement by betraying their plan to her father, the Duke.

Banished from Milan, Valentine joins a band of other outcasts in the forest; Julia, in male disguise, discovers Proteus’ perfidy, but Silvia remains faithful to Valentine, despite Proteus’ refusal to take no for an answer. Thurio, the Duke’s choice for Silvia, doesn’t stand a chance. Shakespeare’s hasty and implausible happy ending ensues.

With every performer contributing notable acting chops and deft comic timing, the Troubies take Shakespeare’s version on a zany rollercoaster ride through knowing send-ups and not-safe-for-family ribaldry and naughtiness (the show isn’t G-rated).

As always, there’s an abundance of pop-culture references, ranging this time from the recent Angelina Jolie “legging” meme to dialogue from “The Help.” A flubbed line earns a penalty flag for “unauthorized butchering of the text,” and audience latecomers arrive at their own risk: The show will stop, you will be addressed directly from the stage, and the entire cast will serenade you with a song appropriate to the event.

Visual humor is a good part of the fun. Costume designer Sharon McGunigle had a blast with feathers, lace and satins and time-hopping style elements. Rob Nagle’s hulking Valentine in long curly wig is a study in pink knee breeches, lacy waistcoat and coat, and painted eyebrows, beauty patches and cupid’s-bow mouth on powder-white makeup. In her pink satin gown and double-pronged white wig, lovely Monica Schneider’s Silvia is his sartorial match.

Faithless Proteus (comic genius Matt Walker, Troubadour’s artistic director and ringmaster of the show) provides a swashbuckling contrast in black doublet, hose and boots, although his dashing grease-paint beard and mustache prove to be of rather dubious durability.

Rick Batalla, who rocks bow-trimmed blue rompers as Thurio, plays Proteus’ father Antonio, too, attacking both roles with comic ferocity. Beth Kennedy earns multiple laughs as loopy servant Launce and as head of a band of forest-dwelling hippie pirate outlaws. Kennedy plays the latter role on stilts, reprising her goofy turn as the Winter Warlock from one of the company’s riotous holiday shows, “Santa Claus Is Coming to Motown.”

Real-life canine Roosevelt, a thespian pug with spit-take comedic instincts, plays Crab the Dog, Launce’s sidekick. At a recent performance, the football-sized pooch improvised toddling forays downstage, appeared to sigh at Kennedy’s adlibs and delivered eye-rolling, over-the-shoulder glances at the audience, as if to say, “look what I have to put up with.” Not even madcap Kennedy could compete.

If Roosevelt’s appearance also prompts a certain someone of “Dog Whisperer” fame to put in his two cents, well, this is a Troubie show, after all.

Throughout, the songs of Chicago are aptly woven into action and dialogue and delivered with pop star verve by the cast — whose many strong singers include Katie Nunez and Lisa Valenzuela as Julia’s sly handmaidens Lucetta and Bruschetta, respectively — and by the Troubadour’s top-flight band.

Situated behind the action, and occasionally taking a more active role in the play itself, the band is led by musical director and drummer Eric Heinly, with Kevin Stewart on bass, guitarist Jack Majdecki, Serafin Agular on trumpet, Denis Jiron on trombone, sax player Ed Pepper and Kevin McCourt at the keyboards. The Duke (Morgan Rusler), trombone in hand, punctuates the mix.

In addition to their notable musical skills and expertise as clowns, the Troubies can dance. That gives

choreographer Lakin, who earns high marks as spirited Julia, too, a broader creative palette than might be expected. Lakin not only crafts dynamic, shoulder-shaking, finger-snapping ensemble numbers, she also works in an airy pas de deux performed with balletic grace by Suzanne Jolie Narbonne and Joseph Keane.

There's one other vital element in the company's success. Walker and other accomplished troupe members are able to effectively deliver Shakespeare's lines as written. Amid all the hilarity and slapstick, that familiarity with text and form can add occasional notes of unexpected emotional resonance.

When Nagle's Valentine, chastened by loss and betrayal, slowly wipes off his foppish makeup while the band plays "Color My World," it is a moment of genuine pathos.

When will the Troubies' well of unique creativity run dry? Not any time soon, one hopes.

LYNNE HEFFLEY writes about theater and culture for Marquee.

"Two Gentlemen of Chicago," Falcon Theatre, 4252 Riverside Drive, Burbank. 8 p.m. Wednesday through Saturday, 4 p.m. Sunday. Ends April 22; \$34.50-\$42. (818) 955-8101, www.falcontheatre.com