

'Two Gentlemen of Chicago' mixes Shakespeare and Chicago's music

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The Troubadour Theater Company has melded "Two Gentlemen of Verona" with song/dance performed to music by Chicago.

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

"Two Gentlemen of Chicago" is an adaptation of Shakespeare's "Two Gentlemen of Verona"

Song and dance in the production is set to the music of the band Chicago

Burbank, California (CNN) -- Off the beaten path of the Los Angeles theater district, troubadours are resurrecting Shakespeare in an adaptation that would make the Bard smile.

The Troubadour Theater Company has melded "Two Gentlemen of Verona" with song and dance performed to music by the band Chicago and has rendered an energetic, comedic romp entitled "Two Gentlemen of Chicago."

Troupes and their adaptations of "Bardolatry," as George Bernard Shaw coined it, come and go, riffing endlessly on Shakespeare's tragedies and comedies, always searching for ways to breathe new life into the iambic pentameter of 500 years ago.

But the Troubadour Theater Company, performing at Hollywood producer Garry Marshall's Falcon Theatre in Burbank, has come upon an entertaining formula.

The performers use live music, choreography, improvisation, audience interaction, and no small measure of humor and farce to create an evening of engagement and laughter.

Much of the troupe's magic comes from its improv, and performers apparently play pranks on one another, such as in one scene when Matt Walker's Proteus toasts Rob Nagle's Valentine -- with real booze, not some liquid stage prop.

"Oh, got the real thing!" Walker says, nearly choking, during the March 17 performance. "On St. Patrick's Day, no less." (Walker, who trained at improv mecca Second City, also directs the show.)

Other improvisations are equally witty.

When Rick Batalla's Thurio flubs a line, Beth Kennedy's Launce jests him: "Thurio, you aren't sharp enough -- especially with your lines." (Kennedy is also the show's producing director.)

That may be a bit unfair to Batalla, whose talents include playing the guitar and singing.

The integration of Chicago's ballads, played lived by seven musicians, makes for a nice fit in the romantic comedy narrative. Add in the troupe's choreography, and the production is more than just a "free-wheeling, no holds barred...slapstick" that the stagebill touts.

The show opens when Proteus and Valentine have had enough of another "Saturday in the Park," a Chicago standard. Later, both men fight over Sylvia by serenading her as "You're the Inspiration," a popular Chicago ballad.

Among the show stealers are Kennedy's clownish Launce and his dog, Crab, which is a loveable pug.

It's always high risk to bring an animal into a live performance -- for who knows what could go wrong -- but Kennedy is happy to improvise and highlight the what-will-the-dog-do-next suspense.

Kennedy and Crab amaze the audience by exchanging between themselves a high-five -- and then a low-five.

When Crab turns his rump to the audience, with his tail high in the air center stage, Kennedy admonishes the animal with what everyone is looking at but is too polite to express: "Why, you're showing them your evil eye!

"I'm so sorry," Kennedy tells the gallery, all laughing.

The Troubadour Theater Company's "Two Gentlemen of Chicago" runs through April 22 at the Falcon Theatre in Burbank, California.