

LA STAGE WATCH

DON SHIRLEY

TROUSER ROLES, JUKEBOX MUSICALS: Don't ask me to go into all the details about the two new musicals I saw over the weekend – the plots are, uh, complicated. But both of them involve the familiar Shakespearean convention of young heroines dressed as young men – at least in part to achieve greater proximity to the real young men they're pursuing.



Matt Walker, Christine Lakin, Monica Schneider and Rob Nagle in "Two Gentlemen of Chicago"

They're also jukebox musicals of a sort, in that they use other people's familiar tunes. But the music is from very different eras, and rights and royalties aren't involved in either show, for different reasons.

Troubadour Theater's *The Two Gentlemen of Chicago* uses the music of, duh, Chicago (the group, as opposed to the city), mostly from 1969 and the '70s. The Troubies don't have to pay royalties because they're satirists who do parodies, which are allowed according to the experts at the University of Troubie Law School.

Hello! My Baby, at the Rubicon in Ventura, is set about a century ago, give or take a few years, and uses music from that pre-jukebox era — in other words, songs that are now in the public domain.

In *Hello! My Baby*, the protagonists are song pluggers, who hit the streets of New York performing the latest ditties, trying to sell the sheet music in order to create a wave of popular appeal. I was reminded of fledgling artists today who make a video, slap it on YouTube and do what they can to make it go viral.



The cast of "Hello! My Baby"; Photo by Daniel P. Lam

Cheri Steinkellner has devised an ingenious plot – much of it tongue in cheek — around the songs, adding new lyrics to help point some of them in the direction of her characters. The whole thing “steams like a locomotive” – which, she says in a program note, was part of her goal. It’s a very lively, albeit very retro entertainment.

I hope it goes far, in part because it marks Rubicon’s return to a much bigger show — with 22 actors (including George Wendt, one of the stars of Steinkellner’s old series *Cheers*) and a four-piece band — after a period of smaller productions, dictated by the necessity to pay off debts during the economic crisis. Director Brian McDonald keeps the production at Rubicon’s usual high standards.

Troubie standards are always up there, too, and they remain so in Matt Walker’s staging of this mash-up of Shakespeare’s *Two Gentlemen of Verona* with Chicago hits. Chicago is known for its brassy sound, and the Troubies band, led by Eric Heinly is up to the challenge, supplemented by trombone blasts from actor Morgan Rusler, playing the father of one of the two gentlemen.

What I’ll remember the most from this Troubie production is the participation of Rob Nagle, who doubles as



one of the artistic directors of the Antaeus classical company. Not only is it fun to see the classical guy treating Shakespeare with such inspired irreverence, but it's even more fun to see him in the evening's most ridiculous costume, designed by Sharon McGunigle. And, if you read the bios in the program you'll see that Nagle and his wife provided the services of Roosevelt the Pug, playing Crab the Dog. I hope I'm not forgetting some inspired four-legged performance in another Troubie show, but Roosevelt's performance makes any other animal actors in Troubie shows easy to forget.

***Two Gentlemen of Chicago*, Falcon Theatre, 4252 Riverside Drive, Burbank. Wed-Sat 8 pm, Sun 4 pm. Closes April 22. www.FalconTheatre.com. 818-955-8101.**