



Theater review: 'Two Gentlemen of Chicago' at the Falcon Theatre

March 29, 2012



In "Two Gentlemen of Chicago" at the Falcon Theatre, the Troubadour Theater Company sets Shakespeare's lesser comedy "Two Gentlemen of Verona" to the greatest hits of the band Chicago, irreverently mixing the incongruous sources to create a theatrical hybrid that, despite being possibly more entertaining than either, manages to honor both.

"Two Gentlemen," believed to be Shakespeare's first play, is most interesting for its inclusion of themes he would develop in later masterpieces: betrayal, cross-dressing, noblemen running wild in the forest. In the Troubadour version, each plot development is a springboard for an adapted Chicago song, from "If You Leave Me Now" to "Saturday in the Woods" to "Hard to Say I'm Sorry." That last one is the perfect way for the repentant cad Proteus (Matt Walker, who also directs) to make amends, except that, as he explains in an uneasy falsetto, "Everybody knows this song is way too high."

The Troubies, as fans call them, have been around since 1995, building a cult following with their Shakespeare/pop crossbreeds ("Fleetwood MacBeth," "As U2 Like It," "OthE.L.O.").

Whatever play they're doing, as I gathered from this visit (my first), they have certain rituals, like embarrassing late audience members. I was baffled by Troubie producing director Beth Kennedy's turn on stilts as the Winter Warlock (she is also delightful as the clown Launce) -- it's evidently a recurring Troubie character I was not cool enough (yet) to love.

But the in-jokes aren't estranging for long, because they're usually laugh-out-loud funny. And although the Troubies don't follow Shakespeare to the letter, they may get closer to the Elizabethan spirit than more respectful productions. They shamelessly pratfall and ad-lib, but they're also proficient, mesmerizing performers in a commedia dell'arte mode.

Christine Lakin's crack choreography (she also plays Proteus' forsaken love Julia) is energetic, sharp and witty. The improvisational bits sometimes verge on self-indulgence, but when Walker and his players do the text straight, they really sell it. I left filled with new appreciation for both the youthful Shakespeare's comic plotting and Peter Cetera's vocal range, and looking forward to the Troubies' next show. I can already tell they'll be (forgive me) a hard habit to break.

-- Margaret Gray

"Two Gentlemen of Chicago." Falcon Theatre, 4252 Riverside Drive, Burbank. 8 p.m. Wednesdays through Saturdays, 4 p.m. Sundays. Ends April 22. \$34-\$42. (818) 955-8101 or www.FalconTheatre.com. Running time: 2 hours.

Photo: Matt Walker, from left, Rob Nagle and Monica Schneider in Troubadour Theater Company's "Two Gentlemen of Chicago" at the Falcon Theatre. Credit: Chelsea Sutton.