

Two Gentlemen of Chicago: Theatre of the Populace

March 27, 2012

Theater Review by Dale Reynolds



Katie Nunez and Lisa Valenzuela as the maids

Falcon Theater – Runs through April 22nd

Shakespeare's early jaunt, *Two Gentlemen of Verona* (1590/1), a story of two faithless men and their wretchedness against the women in their lives, knows no historical boundaries: love relationships between adults has been great fodder for the arts, especially when it turns messy. And in the right hands, it can be entertaining.

This new version – fun, but not for the ages – by the successful improvisational

troupe, Troubadour Theatre Company, has given us a production clearly improv'd from day one, in which a group of actors – some trained in the classical arts, some more at home in commedia dell'arte – has taken Shakespeare's comedy and done it up in a wide variety of styles.

Whether or not you allow yourself to see adaptations – bastardized or not – of the Bard's work, will determine how much you get out of this brazen and oft-funny show. Using contemporary songs (with some changes in lyrics) to illustrate what the hard-to-follow plot is, such as "You're So Vain," "You Are My Inspiration," "Color My World," and "I Don't Want to Live Without Your Love," etc, keeps it lively and well-gearred for a younger audience.

What works well is the de-coupling of Shakespeare's tale from its academic roots and put it back into Theatre of the Populace, which means mangling the text, ad-libbing to current events (Mitt Romney and other politicians), same-gender sexual fears, taking a wig and making references to cultural works and stars (the StarWars connections were very funny, indeed) and allowing actors to break loose with whatever talents they are actually gifted.

Beginning with the show's director **Matt Walker** as Proteus and the ever-talented **Rob Nagle** as Valentine (dressed and made-up in a classic mid-17th Century style – for no apparent, but delightful anyway, reason); **Katie Nunez** and **Lisa Valenzuela** as maids; the terrific **Christine Lakin** (as Julia and as dancer/choreographer); **Monica Schneider** as Silvia; **Joseph Keane** (a remarkable dancer who plays Panthino); and Morgan Rusler (Duke of Milan). But, pray, let us not leave out Roosevelt the Pug as Crab the Dog, a very important part in the original play, alongside his master, Launce (here it be **Beth Kennedy**), who made Queen Elizabeth I of England laugh. Hey, give credit where credit is due, okay?

Aside from some dreadful English accents, the cast gets the comedy style and delivers. The audience opening night were largely great fans of the Troubies (as they call themselves) and gave it a standing ovation. So it must be working. Clearly, the more one brings to the table in both Shakespearean understanding and modern cultural references, the more one will take away.

It's cute, sweet at times, really dumb at other moments, but delivers what it needs to, and by anchoring the material with actors such as Walker and Nagle who have lived the styles, it comes off as goofy and loopy and a great deal of fun.

Two Gentlemen of Chicago plays through April 22nd at the Falcon Theatre, 4252 Riverside Drive (opposite Bob's Big Boy Restaurant), in Burbank, CA. Tickets: 818.955.8101.