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'The Two Gentlemen of Verona'

September 19, 2000

By Hedy Weiss, theater critic

It begins with a couple of musicians noodling around, as a pianist notates his latest ragtime tune. And for the next three hours the delicious music and irrepressible energy of that era never let up.

It's not that Chicago Shakespeare Theater's guest director, Penny Metropulos (associate artistic director of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival), has literally transformed Shakespeare's early romantic comedy, "The Two Gentlemen of Verona," into a full-fledged musical. (Galt MacDermont, of "Hair" fame, did that in a 1971 rock version for New York's Public Theatre.)

But for every exit and entrance, every interaction of man, woman and dog, every piquant moment involving an unexpected turn-of-heart or treacherous twist of love, Metropulos and her sparkling, bravura cast have found a corresponding and wholly inspired touch of vaudeville, of breathless Keystone Cops comedy and of virtuosic musicality in both word and action.

The production, with lovely work by movement coach Robin McFarquhar, unspools like a high-pressure vortex--a perfect swirl of storytelling in which nothing ever seems forced or cheap or gimmicky or arbitrary, although a slight second act trim might have worked wonders. And a play that often runs the risk of seeming hopelessly slight takes on a surprising sophistication, with a comic spirit even contemporary Hollywood could love.

The story, set in Verona and Milan (despite the ragtime rhythms and other bits of Americana) focuses on two couples and the temporarily triangular affair that threatens the happiness and balance that surround them.

When we first meet the two gents of the title, they are twentysomething friends with different priorities. Valentine (a sharp, clear portrayal by Brian Vaughn) is heading off to see the world, unconcerned with women and the ties that bind, while Proteus (Timothy Gregory, all polish and amoral ease) has chosen to remain at home, in thrall to his smart and lively girlfriend, Julia (the very likable Kate Fry as the model of finishing school finesse).

It's not long, however, before Valentine is smitten with the enticing golden girl and Milanese aristocrat Silvia (Laura Lamson, a shimmering little beauty who moves like a dream). And when Proteus finally hits the road and shows up in Milan, he too quickly comes under Silvia's spell and vows to make her his own, whatever subterfuge and betrayal might be required. It's a scenario with which any writer for "Sex and the City" would feel perfectly at home, although Shakespeare's characters also assume a certain maturity and self-knowledge in the end.

This being Shakespeare, the gents invariably travel with manservants. And it is here that Metropulos' production scales the heights of pure comic delirium. As Valentine's fleet and tireless wisecracker of a companion, Speed, Scott Parkinson is a dizzying delight--a high-wired messenger type who zips around on roller skates, chews gum and spews breathless Brooklyn-ese straight out of Damon Runyon--all with the greatest of ease. He is matched beat for beat by Eddie Jemison as Proteus' remarkably rubber-faced and earthy philosopher-clown, Launce, who, in a series of priceless scenes, gleefully plays second banana to his dog, Crab (played by a brilliant four-legged thespian by the name of Zoro).

But every role in this "Two Gents" has been shaped with impeccable style and individuality: from Larry Yando's primping and pumping Duke, and James Harms' sweet-voiced godfatherly Eglamour to Oksana Fedunysyzn's romance-besotted confidante Lucetta and Timothy Hendrickson's Thurio, the tone-deaf, flatly rejected suitor who manages to toss a final stinging dart. Roderick Peeples and Brad Armacost add moments of zest, as do the harmonious vocalists (Kevin Asselin, Will Dickerson, Brian J. Gill and Kymberly Mellen) and the trio of onstage musicians (Michael Doyle, Marc Burls



'The Two Gentlemen of Verona'

Chicago Shakespeare Theater
Through Nov. 11
Navy Pier, 800 E. Grand
Tickets, \$35-\$45.
(312) 595-5600

Highly recommended

PROBLEMS?

and composer-pianist Alaric Jans, who created the floating score and engaging settings for Shakespeare's lyrics that often underscore the spoken words).

In this show, banners unfurl to expose excerpts from love notes, a wrought-iron staircase spirals high into space, a gilded cage wheels among bicycles and everybody dines on strawberries dipped in sugar. And the production's visual splendor--William Bloodgood's minimalist set with its gorgeous garden backdrop magically lit by Anne Militello, Deborah Dryden's exquisite Edwardian era frocks and traveling clothes, and the flawless sound design of Jeremy Lee--merits a long discussion all its own.

But meanwhile, just give that dog a Jeff Award!

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