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The Two Gentlemen of Verona

by Winnie McCroy
EDGE Editor
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Theatre for a New Audience at the Polonsky Shakespeare Center in Brooklyn stages "**The Two Gentlemen of Verona**," a look at love and betrayal (and love again) for two men moving between Milan and Verona.

Considered the original 'rom-com,' this play was one of Shakespeare's first, and it is a relatively straightforward situation of two men in love with two women -- at least until it isn't.

Noah Brody is lovesick Proteus and Zachary Fine is his no-nonsense friend Valentine. Proteus moons over fair-haired

Julia (Jessie Austrian, who co-directs). Valentine scoffs at the whole thing, saying, "Love is your master for he masters you" -- at least until he falls for the beautiful, raven-haired Sylvia (Emily Young). Valentine may court her, but her father wants Sylvia wed to the wealthy, preening Thurio (Paul L. Coffey).

This is when the mood turns foul. When Proteus spies the love Valentine has for Sylvia, he lets it eclipse the love he holds for Julia. Jealousy spurs him to alert the Duke (Andy Grotelueschen) to the lovers' plans to elope that evening, and Valentine is caught out and banished from the land.

Proteus tries to court Sylvia, noting that "a man is no man, if by his tongue he cannot win a woman," a lovely double entendre that could be funny, if only Proteus didn't later try and force Sylvia into sex. It's still mind-boggling that with a simple apology to Valentine (not even to Sylvia!) Proteus manages to make things right with his old friend and his woman.

The Bard is known for his clever wordplay, but "**The Two Gentlemen of Verona**" is an extreme example of this. It seems to have been written entirely in simile and metaphor, with each example a proverb or adage. In one case, a man lists the virtues and vices of his true love. As another reads the vices aloud, he cleverly contrives each into virtue.

Similarly, much of the play deals with the cycle of creation and destruction, with the betrothed Sylvia and Valentine split apart, to be rejoined later, and the bemused Proteus creating and destroying and creating again the ideal of love. Even his moniker hearkens to the protean, changing frequently, shifting and varied. Proteus is as two-faced as his name would imply.

The physical comedy in this production is superb. From facial expressions to pratfalls to slapstick, the players use their bodies to carry the action. This is successful at every turn, from Julia mashing the tiniest scrap of a shredded love letter into the ground to the interplay between the dog, Crab (Fine) and Launce

(Grotelueschen) when he messily retrieves a ball from Proteus' lap.

Also excellent are the musical interludes that the players perform between scenes. Instruments included mandolin, ukulele, triangle, cello, guitar and the very rare acoustic bass. The songs and music made for nice diversions.

The set, though plain, served its purpose, more so in Act Two, which is set in a forest. Two large pillars morph at the top into a canopy of whitewashed trees. Crumpled love poems and origami flowers are fastened to a net that compasses the entire backstage and top.

Correspondingly, the cast makes do with a scant amount of props, among them some wicker laundry baskets, a ring, a few love letters, a rope that serves as both clothesline and ladder, and an extra set of clothes for when Julia transforms herself into a young man to spy on her unfaithful lover Proteus.

Costumes by Whitney Locher are very apropos for spring, with the men wearing pastel button-downs and khakis and suede saddle shoes that correspond in color to the shoes and pastel dress of their woman.

With a cast of six playing multiple roles, the play is trim and fast moving. Although I can't imagine a real-life situation that would allow for such a speedy forgiveness of a faithless friend who is such a total cad he would have one exiled just to steal his girl, theater is not real life. So for an evening, "The Two Gentlemen of Verona" is a very fine diversion.

"The Two Gentlemen of Verona" runs through May 24 at Theatre for a New Audience, Polonsky Shakespeare Center, 262 Ashland Place in Brooklyn. For tickets or information, call 866-811-4111 or visit www.tfana.org.

Winnie McCroy is the Women on the EDGE Editor, HIV/Health Editor, and Assistant Entertainment Editor for EDGE Media Network, handling all women's news, HIV health stories and theater reviews throughout the U.S. She has contributed to other publications, including The Village Voice, Gay City News, Chelsea Now and The Advocate, and lives in Brooklyn, New York, where she writes about local restaurants in her food blog, <http://brooklyniscookin.blogspot.com/>

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