



The Two Nice Guys™ of Verona

by Erin Kelly. Written on 2017-08-12. Published in 2017 Issue 2.

For the production: *Two Gentlemen of Verona* (2017, Bard on the Beach, Canada). See production details at the end of the review.

THE TWO GENTLEMEN OF VERONA, PART OF BARD ON THE BEACH'S 2017 SEASON, OFFERED audiences a series of charming moments. Director Scott Bellis has long performed as an actor with Bard, and he coaxed interestingly theatrical performances out of the young cast members. Until the very end, audiences were lulled into enjoying a merry comedy prettily produced.

Although limited to a minimalist set because the same space needed to be used in repertory as a venue for the much darker *Merchant of Venice*, the designer managed to build considerable appeal into visual elements and set changes. Windows in towers became frames for tableaux. Benches that could be easily moved on and offstage, stacked and rearranged offered levels for the energetic action of Proteus and Valentine. A few potted plants not only suggested a garden but made Milan visually distinct from Verona. And the forest – a few leafy trees on wheeled platforms – made the woods a dreamlike space.

As best friends, Valentine (the dashing and upright Nadeem Phillip) and Proteus (the handsome and physically agile Charlie Gallant) filled the opening scene with sort of energetic leaping, dancing, and embracing, one, associates with puppies. Their jokes were genuinely funny, their teasing of each other good-natured, and their regret at having to part from one another touching. Such performance choices seemed to justify the play's title as these two gentlemen established themselves as likable and entertaining from the production's outset.

Equally appealing was Julia (as played by Kate Besworth) who delivered a hilariously clumsy version of the letter scene. Beautiful, warm, and forthright, this character seemed worthy of the devotion of Proteus or any other suitor from her first moments onstage. Silvia (Adele Noronha) first appeared in the context of a masquerade party, immediately becoming linked to the beauties of a sophisticated court culture. The costumes for her and other central characters added to their attractions as romantic-era gowns for the women and cutaway coats for the gentlemen suggested the elegant wooing, as well as the lighthearted comedy, one, would expect to find in a Jane Austen-themed BBC miniseries.

Round-faced Andrew Cownden (who played Launce) embodied the spirit of Shakespeare's rustic clowns not only by making some scenes-as-written hilarious but also by inserting (perhaps improvising?) new jokes. (After the audience groaned at a pun, he noted, "If you didn't like that, you should know that Shakespeare has a long string of jokes here about Jews and Christians that isn't funny at all.") Even so, Cownden couldn't help being upstaged at moments by Lance's dog Crab. Billed in the program as Gertie the Basset Hound, the dog had turned into a local celebrity by the time I saw this production, in part because of media stories and in part because Bard on the Beach was wise enough to feature her in a hilarious video "[Diary of Gertie the Actor](#)." The hound's laconic non-responses to Cownden's emotionally and physically exaggerated performance literally stopped the show as performers had to wait for laughter to die down in order to have their lines be heard.

Other strong performances included Edward Foy as a beneficent Duke of Milan (Sylvia's father), who seemed aware of trouble even before Proteus told him of Valentine's devotion to his daughter and then gave Valentine every opportunity to confess his intentions before banishing him. Julia in male disguise and in the role of Proteus's servant not only made the barely sketched scene in which she sojourns to woo Sylvia on behalf of her master heartbreakingly sympathetic but also a moment of genuine empathy between the two women.

In sum, much of this production found ways to make *Two Gentlemen* as delightful and lovely one could hope for in a Shakespearean comedy performed in an outdoor summer venue. Yet I congratulate Bellis for also finding an entertaining but thought-provoking way to recognize how disturbing this play's resolution is to anyone who recognizes Julia and Sylvia as fully human.

When the banished Valentine enters the woods, he finds himself confronted with a band of outlaws who to even the most oblivious audience member are female performers in male costume. Small bits of stage business suggest at this point that these might be women even in the world of the play – as one of the outlaws indicates they would like Valentine to become their captain, he (she?) strokes Valentine's chest and seems distracted by his physical appeal. At the end of this scene, however, it is not clear how seriously we should ponder the peculiar gender dynamics of these woodland thieves.

The final scene answers all such questions. Sylvia has suffered a brief but physically brutal attempt at rape by Proteus that is thwarted only by the fortuitous arrival of Valentine. Valentine's readiness to forgive his friend garners a silent look of shock from Sylvia, and his offer to turn over Sylvia to Valentine causes his betrothed to recoil and the disguised Julia faint. After she has revealed her true identity and been once again acknowledged as beloved by Proteus, Julia stands mute and stiff. The reconciled men, oblivious to anyone but each other,

celebrate what to them is a satisfying resolution and bound offstage with their arms entwined much as they did in the play's opening scene.

For several moments of uncomfortable stillness, Julia and Sylvia remain onstage with only the outlaws as company. One by one, these bandits remove false facial hair and hats, revealing themselves to be women. Seeming to bond quietly over the perfidy of men, all exchange glances. One outlaw hands Sylvia a weapon, and another gives Julia a bundle of supplies. The all-female band slowly but deliberately gathers up gear and progresses offstage – in the opposite direction from the exit through which men departed. Will the Proteus and Valentine ever notice the women's absence? It is not clear when they might realize who and what they have left behind. As the band of women heads into the woods together, they will presumably continue life as "outlaws" who refuse to subjugate themselves to male caprices.

After this silent action, the audience seemed stunned into silence itself for a few seconds before beginning to applaud. As I left the theater, several people I overheard commented on how shocked they were by the conclusion – and this seemed to me as it should be. While retaining and even emphasizing the beautiful language and well-crafted comic scenes of *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, the production found a way to make the play's ending neither safely contained nor arbitrarily disturbing but rather a radical challenge to the ways in Shakespeare's plays and other "classic" texts get packaged as inoffensive entertainment even when they promote highly problematic messages about gender roles. I can't help wondering suspecting that Jane Austen, whose often satirical explorations of problematic social tensions have been similarly prettified for mass consumption as romantic comedies, would approve.

Production Details

General

<i>Title</i>	Two Gentlemen of Verona
<i>Year</i>	2017
<i>Theater Company</i>	Bard on the Beach
<i>Theaters</i>	Howard Family Stage, Douglas Campbell Theater (Canada)
<i>Start Date</i>	2017-06-29
<i>End Date</i>	2017-09-20

Cast

DUKE OF MILAN	EDWARD FOY
VALENTINE	NADEEM PHILLIP

PROTEUS	CHARLIE GALLANT
ANTONIO	PAUL MONIZ DE SÀ
THURIO	KAMYAR PAZANDEH
HOSTESS	OLIVIA HUTT
LAUNCE	ANDREW COWNDEN
PANTINA	LUSIA JOJIC
JULIA	KATE BESWORTH
SILVIA	ADELE NORONHA
LUCETTA	CARMELA SISON
SERVANT	CHIRAG NAIK
CRAB	GERTIE THE BASSET HOUND
UNDERSTUDY	LEBOWSKI

Creatives

DIRECTOR	SCOTT BELLIS
ARTISTIC ASSOCIATE	MS. MARA GOTTLER
SET DESIGNER	MARSHALL MCMAHEN
LIGHTING DESIGNER	ADRIAN MUIR
SOUND DESIGNER	JULIE CASSELMAN
CHOREOGRAPHY	TARA CHEYENNE FRIEDENBERG
FIGHT CHOREOGRAPHY	JOSHUA REYNOLDS