



An Intersectional Feminist *Two Gentlemen of Verona*: The Women Choose the Forest

by Jamie Paris. Written on 2017-09-28. 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 2017 PRODUCTION OF *TWO GENTLEMEN OF VERONA* FOR THE HOWARD FAMILY STAGE IN the Douglas Campbell Theatre at the Bard on the Beach Shakespeare festival in Vancouver was a fascinating take on an infrequently staged, problematic play. In his director's notes, Scott Bellis says that the play represents a young Shakespeare. The play has what Bellis calls the "seeds of brilliance that we see employed in later plays like *Othello*, *Twelfth Night*, and *Romeo and Juliet*," but there are "a couple of quirks that provide challenges for a modern director." One of the challenging "quirks" that Bellis needed to address is Proteus's obsession with, and attempted rape of, Silvia. When Silvia reasserts that she will not be wooed by Proteus, the young man claims that it is a "curse in love...When women cannot love where they're beloved!" (5.4.43-44). Shortly thereafter, he states that he will "force [her to] yield to [his] desires" (5.4.59), acting on the assumption that his desires trump hers. Proteus is not punished for his attempted rape of Silvia, and the play ends with Proteus being reconciled with his friend, who forgives him, and with Julia, who still loves him despite observing his obsession with Silvia. While many directors might try to minimize the attempted rape scene, or to stage the play in such a way that it implies that the scene was somewhat consensual, Bellis modernizes the "quirks" of the romantic plots, creating a space where the theater can address the complexities of the intersection of white privilege and rape culture.

The production's intersectional feminist politics was supported by its conceptual casting.¹ According to Ayanna Thompson, colorblind casting is "a meritocratic model in which actors are cast without regard to race" and it assumes that the audience "can and should be blind to race" (*Passing Strange: Shakespeare, Race, and Contemporary America*, 76). In contrast, conceptual casting is a "model in which actors of color are cast in roles to enhance the play's social resonance" (76). A conceptual casting model does not assume that an audience is completely blind to race in performance, and "an actor's race might be highlighted to draw parallels between the early

modern and (post) modern periods” (78). In Bellis’s production, Valentine (Nadeem Phillip) and his beloved, Silvia (Adele Noronha), were played by actors of South Asian heritage, and Proteus (Charlie Gallant) and his devoted Julia (Kate Besworth) were played by white actors. The initial pairing of the white actors and the actors of color does not seem “blind” to race. Moreover, due to the casting choices the attempted rape scene was racially charged and the lack of consequences Proteus faces became an example of white privilege. Indeed, much of the action of Bellis’s play consists of a white man, Proteus, demanding the time, attention, and affection of a woman of color. In this way, the 2017 play registers gendered and racialized inequities in a way that speaks to the contemporary Canadian context.

The intersectional feminist politics of the play evokes the recent push-back against the normalization of rape culture on college and university campuses, a movement that is often deeply engaged with anti-racist work. As Kimberlé Crenshaw argues in her TED talk, the term “intersectionality” allows us to see that many of the problems of racism and sexism are “overlapping, creating multiple injustice[s].” If Bellis’s *Two Gentlemen* shows potential overlapping injustices towards Silvia, it also suggests that rape culture can be resisted by interracial feminist communities coming together to reject it.

The play tips its hand as to what it is going to do with rejecting the idea that “boys will be boys” when the Outlaws come on stage. The Outlaws are all played by a diverse group of women of in non-passing men’s costumes, including some deliberately unconvincing mustaches. When the band of outlaws captures Valentine, and makes him their leader, they swear an oath not to harm women and children, as they are all former “gentlemen.” The play uses this queer energy to great effect when it stages the attempted rape scene. Proteus kidnaps and ties up Silvia when everyone is in the forest and, when she refuses his advances, he throws her to the ground and climbs on top of her, beginning to unbutton her top. The Outlaws come on stage just in time and, with the help of Julia and Valentine, they prevent the rape.

When Proteus sees his friend Valentine, he apologizes for what he has done to him, and Valentine accepts the apology without even looking at Silvia. Proteus says that he feels “shame and guilt” for what he has done, but he asks Valentine, and not Silvia or Julia, to forgive him (5.4.73). The apology is non-specific and it is between men. While Valentine is satisfied with his friend’s repentance, it is as if these young men think that the only transgression that matters in the play is the one between them and not the one committed against Silvia. Proteus does not apologize to Silvia or Julia for his transgressions, and the men on stage do not seem to see this as a problem. The last thing we see Valentine and Proteus do is walking off the stage smiling, holding each other around the arms, while the other men act as if everything is forgiven and forgotten. The production rejects the idea that boys in love will be boys without suffering any

social, legal, or political consequences when Julia and Silvia refuse to go off and marry the men at the end of the play.

While the women do not have any lines at the end of the play, in this production they “speak” dramatically by refusing to rejoin the men at the end of the play, thereby silently rejecting marriages that they both seemed to want before the forest scene. The Outlaws remove their mustaches and hats, revealing to the audience that they are now a band of women who are rejecting the way that the men have treated the women on stage. One of the Outlaws presents Silvia with a bedroll and a bow and arrow, gesturing that she can join the band of female Outlaws if she wants, an offer she quickly takes up. While Julia takes longer to agree to join the Outlaws, casting longing glances at the stage right ramp used for the exit of the men, she eventually takes Silvia’s hand and makes a choice to leave with her, rejecting the opportunity to marry a man who was not faithful to her and who she just saw attempt to rape another woman. The production ends with a racially diverse community of women going forward together.

I must admit that I wanted to see the production because I was unsure how the director would handle the rape scene at the end of the play. I was impressed that Bellis rejected the easy path of minimizing or explaining away the rape scene and, instead, used conceptual casting to allow the play to speak to intersectionality feminist critiques of rape culture and white privilege.

Works Cited

- Crenshaw, Kimberlé and Abby Dobson. “The Urgency of Intersectionality.” TEDWomen. October 2012. Lecture.
- Shakespeare, William. *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. Ed. Roger Warren. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008. Print.
- Thompson, Ayanna. *Passing Strange: Shakespeare, Race, and Contemporary America*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011. Print.

Notes

1. ^ Colorblind casting and conceptual casting are two of the types of “non-traditional” casting discussed by Thompson. The others are societal casting and cross-cultural casting (78-79).

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