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Los Angeles Theater Review: TWO GENTLEMEN OF CHICAGO (Falcon Theatre in Burbank)

by [Jason Rohrer](#) on March 28, 2012

in [Theater-Los Angeles](#)



COMICAL, HISTORICAL, WHIMSICAL, “POP”ICAL

If you like Shakespeare: go. If you hate Shakespeare: go. If you love or loathe Peter Cetera: go. If you dislike ecstatic, adorable, hard-working mega-talents willing to entertain you by all of a thousand means at their disposal: go anyway; this show might just find your pulse.

Two Gentlemen of Chicago is the Troubadours' latest mash-up of classic text (Shakespeare's worst play) and cheese-factor music (the Chicago songbook – not Kander and Ebb but the Top 40 band). This delightful

presentation invests the sacrosanct Bard of Avon, all-too-frequently kid-gloved (see recent offerings from [A Noise Within](#), [Sacred Fools](#), and [Porters of Hellsgate](#)) with the levity and irreverence of any 1590's performance by his hooligan theater company, The Lord Chamberlain's Men.



It's also probably the first time a Shakespeare comedy has been funny since the seventeenth century – not by eschewing the awful puns and absurd plot devices that normally kill Elizabethan comedies but by, ingeniously, embracing those elements to the exclusion of just about everything else, including 90% of the hallowed language. Identifying with commedia dell'arte, the modern improvisator's tradition-reference of choice, the Troubies may be described more accessibly as high-end improv actors. Many company members boast Second City credentials, and director/star Matt Walker was a Ringling Brothers clown for a while.



But if this were merely 15 people (and one pug) being really funny – and they are that – if, I say, it were no more than a bunch of big laughs, you could do a lateral trade, ditching the trip to Burbank to go take your chances at a comedy club on the Strip. Don't do that, though. The Troubies wear more fantastic costumes (by Sharon McGunigle) than a clubful of stand-ups could put together, and also offer a kick-ass live band (Eric Heinly, musical director) and a pair of ballet artists (Joseph Keane, who also choreographs a number, and Suzanne Jolie Narbonne) and some astounding singers (Monica Schneider, Katie Nunez, Lisa Valenzuela) and one of the most engaging choreographer-stars I've ever seen (Christine Lakin, who reduces me to hackneyed descriptions like “engaging.” That's terrible; “irresistible?” It's getting worse. It's just a crush; it'll pass).



And I hate a hooper! Can't stand belters! Have left more musicals in the middle than I have seen the curtain calls of! But this thing had me trying to do the steps in the parking lot.

And guess how many Chicago records I own? None! Yeah, I said records, which makes me old enough to have listened to Chicago when it was still charting, but I didn't. Don't like 'em. Loved this.



For those blessedly unfamiliar with the plot of *Two Gentlemen of Verona* – it matters not; the fully user-friendly show provides multiple set-ups and re-caps – it's the story of Proteus (Walker) and his love for Julia (Lakin); Valentine (Rob Nagle) and his love for Silvia (Schneider); and the foils that come between them (Morgan Rusler's Duke of Milan, Rick Batalla's Thurio). In such a brilliant cast, it would be silly to start naming the outstanding cast members; you'd have to mention even the principal characters' servants (Beth Kennedy and Matthew Morgan, neither of whom deserve to be listed last) and a guy who played Eglamour, a character in the original play but cut from this show (Brandon Breault, who also plays many swing parts and doesn't deserve to be listed last, either, but someone always is; wait: one more:), and Rob Nagle's dog Roosevelt, who is sufficiently charming to partly erase the memory of Nagle's vicious Nazi at Antaeus last year. No soldier of the Third Reich would have a dog so cool.



There are moments in the show that don't work. There might be four or five of them, including one whole song. In a show of a hundred moments, each specific and pointed and invested, I call that a big, big win. And remember: this show changes at every performance, relying as it does on the flexible spontaneity of its cast. Some of the moments that didn't work for me were buried before I left the theater, and some that did work will never be seen again.

It's live theater, with the emphasis on live *and* on theater: the particular brand of magic that happens at the Falcon cannot happen on your television. The same cannot be said for many shows currently running in Los Angeles, shows that look and feel like situation comedies in search of a show runner. As if to prove that point, this one (in Jeff McLaughlin's unobtrusively useful design) makes such brilliant use of that essentially theatrical commodity, curtains, that watching this show could serve as a primer for how to make a proscenium out of a thrust. A Noise Within? You listening?

photos by Chelsea Sutton

Two Gentlemen of Chicago

Troubadour Theater Company at the Falcon Theatre in Burbank (Los Angeles Theater)

scheduled to end on April 22, 2012

for tickets, visit www.FalconTheatre.com