

True Love, True Friendship, and Being True to Oneself

By Heather Helinsky, Dramaturg

Two gentleman, two servants, two cities, and two lovely ladies provide unparalleled comic possibilities in this play written by the twenty-something William Shakespeare. Yet, audiences should not expect apprentice work. The rawness and openness of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* excites veteran Pennsylvania Shakespeare Festival director Matt Pfeiffer. “The play contains some of Shakespeare’s best ideas. He really starts to find his voice with this play. The play is about the loss of innocence as Valentine and Proteus grow up and discover that they didn’t know anything about life. Emotionally, it explores how a young person feels when he leave home and become part of a more sophisticated world.”

Under Pfeiffer’s direction, audiences will enter the theatre with a live band already on stage to give the sense of celebration and summer revels. The musical style will be developed with the cast and PSF sound designer Matt Given.

The music both unites and underscores the relationship between Valentine and Proteus. “These two guys know each other better than they know themselves. However, they’re at a critical point where they both want different things: one guy wants love, the other wants education,” says Pfeiffer. “It’s dramatically exciting to see how much they change over the course of the play as they begin to question the value of friendship. And yet, when the truth is on the line, they are able to look deep and recognize each other. It’s an unspoken connection, it’s something spiritual, like music can be.”

Shakespeare immediately creates a symmetrical relationship in Valentine and Proteus, introducing them in a pair of speeches of almost exactly the same number of lines, playfully sparring in a witty exchange. Yet this perfect friendship is disrupted by the need for the friends to part. Valentine plans “to see the wonders of the world abroad” and travel by ship to

the Duke of Milan’s court, while Proteus is going to stay at home and woo his beloved Julia. But Proteus’ father sends his beloved son to Milan as well, where Proteus promptly falls in love with the object of Valentine’s desire: the Duke of Milan’s daughter Silvia. Proteus then decides to follow his changeable heart.



In Elizabethan times, the idea of male friendship was a higher state of unity than even our contemporary understanding of brotherhood. Young Elizabethan schoolboys like Shakespeare were well-versed in Cicero’s *Di Amicitia* which stated the ideal friend was an “alter ego” or “another I or self.” The French Renaissance essayist Michel de Montaigne, whose essay “Of Friendship” was well-known by Englishman in the 1580s, builds on Cicero with his assertion:

For the rest, what we commonly call friends and friendships, are nothing but acquaintances and familiarities.... by means of which there happens some little intercourse betwixt our souls. But in the friendship I speak

of, they mix and work themselves into one piece, with so universal a mixture, that there is no more sign of the seam by which they were first conjoined. If a man should importune me to give a reason why I loved him, I find it could no otherwise be expressed, than by making answer: because it was he, because it was I.”

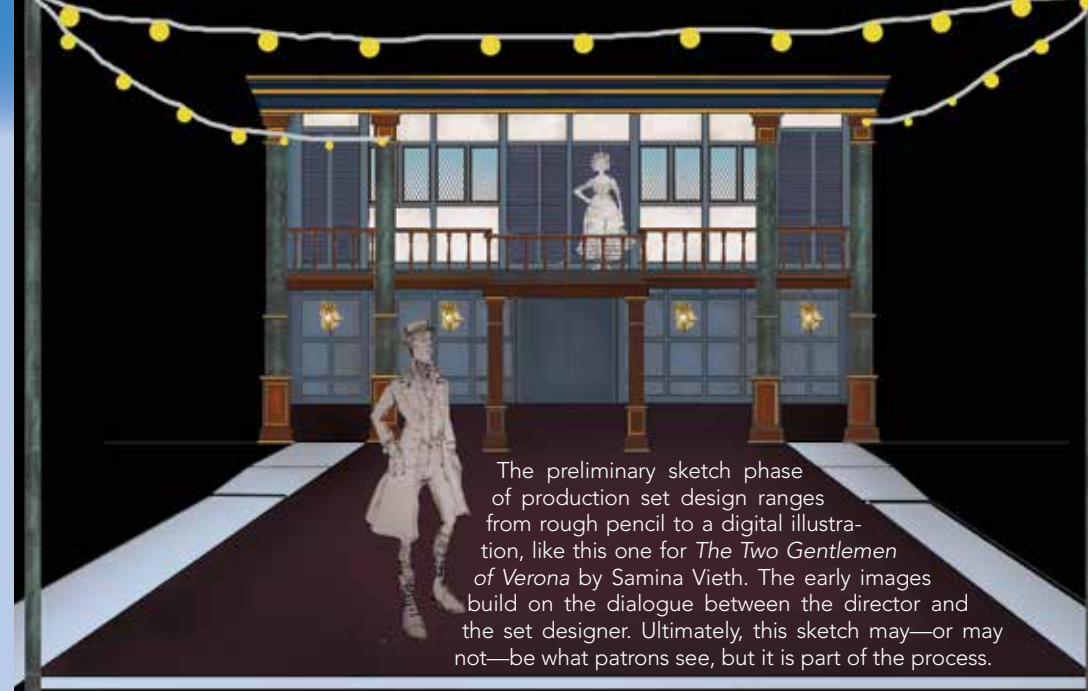
For the Renaissance audience, the friendship of Valentine and Proteus exemplified the classical deep friendships of Orestes and Pylades, Theseus and Piritheus, Achilles and Patroclus. The male friendship bond was higher than marriage, as women were seen as inferior beings and therefore not capable of the kind of friendship men had.

In later plays, however, Shakespeare gives similar weight to female friendships, such as the bond between Helena and Hermia in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* or Celia’s declaration about her cousin Rosalind in *As You Like It*: “If she be a traitor,/Why, so am I....And wheresoe’er we went, like Juno’s swans/Still we went coupled and inseparable.”

Pfeiffer sees Proteus’ dilemma around betraying his best friend in pursuit of Silvia as “one of the play’s best

features—the fact that your lead romantic character is both Orlando from *As You Like It* and Iago from *Othello* all wrapped up in one. My goal is the audience both loathes him and loves him, but that in the ultimate climax of the play, they have an understanding that Proteus recognizes his own folly and will change for the better. The journey of the character matches Shakespeare’s own journey as a young writer. He hasn’t quite mastered his craft. He’s impulsive and the play is messy at times. But in the end, like Proteus, he discovers truth in a way that resonates with me and I hope the audience.”

Male friendship at a dramatically explosive crossroads is familiar terrain for Pfeiffer as a director. From his recent Theatre Exile production of Sam Shepard’s



True West to Annie Baker’s new play *The Aliens*, Pfeiffer says he “gravitates towards these stories because I value the vulnerability of growing up. Friends are the family you make for yourself and come to appreciate through adulthood. Men fundamentally push against vulnerability, so I’m always interested in stories that address this and feature characters compelled to find the courage to deal with oneself. At the end of the play, the characters know who they are as adults—which can be a scary thing. But we all have to go through it.”

With such themes, perhaps it’s not surprising that some of the most popular productions of *The Two Gentleman of Verona* include adaptations into musicals. In 1821, an operatic version with a libretto by Frederick Reynolds and music by Henry Bishop opened at Covent Garden. Popularity followed thanks to the featured song “Who is Sylvia?,” an overture, and 11 elaborately arranged vocal pieces—solos, duets, glees, choruses, and a grand finale. The words for the music were derived mostly from Shakespeare’s sonnets and passages from other plays.

The 1971 Broadway musical *The Two Gentleman of Verona* was adapted into a rock opera for the New York Shakespeare Festival’s Shakespeare in the

Park by John Guare and Mel Shapiro with music by Galt MacDermot. As playwright John Guare remarked, “The play itself was freewheeling enough that it didn’t have the sacred textual holiness of *Lear* or *Hamlet*. It’s shot through with beautiful poetry, and it’s a good, funny little story.”

PSF director Matt Pfeiffer will neither turn his production into a musical nor update it to a contemporary time period. Pfeiffer’s instincts are to use the same kind of scenic architecture that Shakespeare would have used. Since the play includes scenes in a rural area, a city, and a forest, it will not be set in a specific time period or place, but will evoke an environment that is at once progressive and country to celebrate the follies of young love.

Part of the play’s charm is the confusion created by letters that get destroyed, misdelivered, or misread. “We’re trying to evoke a fable that’s not our world,” states Pfeiffer. “The space between our time and these characters gives the audience some distance to enjoy the comic misunderstandings. Words and communication are not simple things. The stakes are higher when communication happens through letters delivered by people rather than text messages conveyed instantly. Besides, if these characters had cellphones, half the plot would disintegrate!”

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Two Clowns and a Dog Named Crab

Servants often serve as clowns in Shakespeare’s works, and the two servants for the gentlemen of Verona “are young, full of humor, and fond of mischief,” according to Frederick Ward in *The Fools of Shakespeare*. “Both are shrewd and keenly observant, particularly of the foibles and weaknesses of their masters.”

While their masters claim to be the best of friends, Proteus, who has already promised himself to Julia, falls instantly in love with Valentine’s beloved Silvia. Then Proteus sets out to betray Valentine, claiming: “At first I did adore a twinkling star,/But now I worship a celestial sun...”

Speed, servant to Valentine, does not always live up to his name in action but is often quick-witted in understanding things his master does not. Launce, servant to Proteus, is forced to leave home to accompany Proteus in his travels.

With loyalty to his betrothed and his best friend cast aside, Proteus is outclassed by Launce, who was so torn at leaving home he brings along his beloved pet dog, Crab. Although Launce lavishes attention and affection on Crab, the dog hardly seems to notice.

Throughout theatre history, many actors who played the role of Launce in *The Two Gentleman of Verona* have had to prove their acting chops to play against the role of Crab the dog—while a dog only has to lie there and be a dog to throw the audience into fits of laughter.

Even in Shakespeare’s time, every dog had its day.

While all Shakespeare’s comedies are a mixture of darkness and light, *The Two Gentleman of Verona* is rich with laughter and merriment as passionate, impulsive teenagers experience the transformative power of love through the double funhouse mirror of comedy. ■

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