

Vivid atmosphere, acting bring life to UAF's 'Gentlemen'

"She loves me, she loves me not; he loves me, he loves me not." Where would Shakespeare, not to mention country music, be without the fickle human heart?

Actually, all storytelling is indebted to our deeply flawed natures, and the University of Alaska Fairbanks' production of "The Two Gentlemen of Verona" joyfully mines this rich vein of folly and woe.

Experts reckon the play is one of the Bard's early works, and there is no hiding its rough edges. Especially puzzling for modern viewers is the behavior of the two "gentlemen." Valentine is thick headed and Proteus coniving. It's a credit to Craig Brookes as Valentine and Andrew Cassel as Proteus we retain a shred of sympathy for these privileged popinjays. Both actors are intelligent and emotionally flexible enough to suggest there is more to their characters than meets the eye or ear.

Equally polished are Anna Gagne-Hawes and Jey Johnson as the love interests. "The Two Gentlemen of Verona" may be the first work in which Shakespeare used the plot device of having a woman pose as a boy. Johnson does a splendid job of conveying both the slightly giddy Julia as well as adopting a more tempered mien and voice of an adolescent male. Gagne-



Robert
Hannon

Theater Review

Hawes adroitly displays both vivacity and gravity as Silvia; her character anticipates the great female roles in later comic plays.

These core actors are surrounded by a strong troupe of other players.

As is often the case in Shakespeare, the servants steal any scene they're in. Perhaps the most vivid character in the play is Launce, who schleps his dog from place to place. Ben Coffroth takes full advantage of the material. It is a testament to his comic powers that he manages to hold his own while sharing the stage with a huge and morose-looking hound played, by Madeline.

Other standout performances for me include Molly Wilson as the cheeky and charming servant Speed; Michael Shaeffer, who does a nice job depicting Ducal power as well as parental affection for his daughter Silvia; and Jonathan Roberts as an annoying gnat of a suitor for Silvia's hand.

Carrie Baker's direction is smart in several senses

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of the word. She keeps the story moving forwards at a brisk pace, and has also given obvious thought to the dialogue and speeches. Every exchange is marked by some schtick or touch that enlivens it. Even when actors have trouble with the language – rushing lines, for example – their actions convey the sense of the scene.

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There is also a jazzy sound design by Chris John George. If handled poorly, these elements might have distracted from the play, but here they nicely accentuate moods and themes.

In her director notes Baker says the spare set directs focus on the actors; it does that, but I would say on the splendid costumes as well. Theresa Reed has designed some supremely elegant suites and frocks for the actors.

Theatre UAF's "The Two Gentlemen of Verona" is a case where a strong cast and production elevate a minor work by Shakespeare into an enjoyable evening of theatre.