The Two Gentlemen of Verona, and: Henry V (review)

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brimmed black hat, also played the scene for laughs and there was accordingly little sense to Malvolio’s final desire to be revenged. As the play drew to its expected closure of heterosexual coupling, the additional lack of any sense of challenge to the conservative values of the upper classes (social interrogation that this production consistently avoided) was most evident: Orsino came to the final scene wearing a casual beige pinstripe suit and white leather shoes. Olivia matched him, tonally, in a spotless white jacket. The production thus chose sartorially to confirm that this very posh Illyria was a place in which nothing could be contaminated by dirt or malice. Yet despite its deft cleanliness and some very competent acting, the production left me cold.

In a review of December 12th 2008, *Daily Telegraph* critic Charles Spencer claimed that: “the Donmar has produced a *Night* close to perfection.” Quite so, but I for one did not want the near-perfect Romantic Comedy it offered; not least because this play at its best should show audiences quite clearly that the world is a place not only of love, but also of misunderstanding, manipulation, and misery; a place in which fathers and brothers are lost, in which normative social order crushes individuality, and in which personal histories can and do transpire as blanks. In short, a really good production of *Twelfth Night* should show us that nothing and nobody is perfect and that love does not conquer all, nor can it always be attained. Unfortunately, Grandage’s production did none of this.

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The Two Gentlemen of Verona
Presented by the Guthrie Theatre, Minneapolis, Minnesota. January 24–March 29, 2009. Directed by Joe Dowling. Scenic design by Riccardo Hernández. Costume design by Ann Hould-Ward. With Sam Bardwell (Valentine), Jonas Goslow (Proteus), Sun Mee Chomet (Julia), Valeri Mudek (Silvia), Jim Lichtscheidl (Lance), Randy Reyes (Speed), Lee Mark Nelson (Duke of Milan), John Skelly (Turio), Kris L. Nelson (Eglamour), and others.

Henry V
Presented by The Acting Company/Guthrie Theatre at the Guthrie Theatre, Minneapolis, Minnesota. January 10–February 1, 2009. Directed by Davis McCallum. Scenic design by Neil Patel. Costume design by Anita Yavich. With Matthew Amendt (King Henry), Freddy Arsenault (Chorus #1, Scroop, Dauphin, MacMorris, Bedford, Williams), Carie Kawa (Chorus #2, French Ambassador, Grey, Alice, Warwick), William Sturdivant (Chorus #3, West-
morland, Bourbon, Fluellen), Georgia Cohen (Chorus #4, Hostess, French Mayor, Herald, Queen), Robert Michael McClure (Chorus #5, Canterbury, Gower, Le Fer, Burgundy); Kelley Curran (Chorus #6, Boy, Katherine), Samuel Taylor (Chorus #7, Nym, Mountjoy, Court, Salisbury), Sonny Valicenti (Chorus #8, Gloucester, Constable, Jamy), Rick Ford (Chorus #9, Cambridge, French King, Erpingham), Chris Thorn (Chorus #10, Exeter, Pistol), and Andy Groteluschen (Chorus #11, Ely, Bardolph, Orleans, Bates, York).

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How does one sell a production of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, one of the lesser-known plays in the canon, with a notoriously problematic ending? How about setting it in a 1950s television studio and remaking it as a live sitcom, with the tag line, “What’s a girl between friends”? This was Guthrie Theatre director Joe Dowling’s solution for his annual Shakespeare production in the Jean Nouvel-designed theatre on the banks of the Mississippi.

Theatregoers were immediately confronted with the innovative setting before the show began. The three video screens mounted on either side and at the back of the stage were impossible to miss, as was the stage deck, refashioned to resemble the marked floor of a television or film studio. Period commercials and promotions for television shows (Swanson TV dinners, Pepsodent toothpaste, E-Z Pop popcorn, *Leave it to Beaver*, etc.) offered a sort of visual mood music. The absence of side curtains and the use of the side stage area as a waiting space for actors before they came on set urged the spectators to forget they were in a theatre. Vintage lighting and microphones hanging from a steel grid above the stage intruded on the production throughout, as did the two cameras and booms filming the entire production. Before the start of the play, the onstage TV director bellowed, “Who wrote this? William Shakespeare? Is he on set?” followed by an address to the “studio audience”: “Welcome to New York City, CBS Studios’ live TV broadcast.”

The production maintained the 1950s period continuity in everything from the music to the costumes. The television screens helped locate various scenes within this milieu; the opening montage of a college graduation evoked the Yale blue in the “Class of ’55” banner, and suggested a New York City/Connecticut suburban setting (described by the costume designer as Verona/Connecticut and Milan/New York). The center video screen projected a black and white New York cityscape for the Duke of Milan’s high-rise office, while Valentine and Speed cruised Coney Island in an onstage replica of a 1955 Thunderbird. Set-designer Riccardo Hernández also added a singer’s platform to the right side of
the stage, where a 1950s-style band, with lead vocals by Sasha Andreev, periodically performed songs from the play and additional music inspired by period crooners and rock and roll—with ample opportunities for full-cast dances.

The furniture was based on 1950s retro designs, particularly in the Duke of Milan’s sleek and sophisticated office, where a desk modeled after a George Jensen design from the 1950s vaguely invoked the television series *Mad Men*. The banishment scene between Valentine and the Duke was surprisingly nasty in this cosmopolitan setting; Lee Mark Nelson’s Duke was a cunning urban businessman who outsmarted Valentine and thwarted his plans for elopement by plying him with brandy from his elegant office bar. The Duke’s office also provided a playful space for Lance to take over and “play” the boss while the Duke was offstage.

All of these devices highlighted the artificiality of the production, which apparently was Dowling’s intent; the set designer commented in the program notes, “We realized the artificiality of the play is ideal for a television studio where the play—*The Two Gentlemen of Verona*—is being done for a live television audience.” The television scheme worked particularly well in a couple of places where the onstage camera was able to zoom in on actors’ faces at key moments: for example, we could watch a close up on the screen of Sun Mee Chomet’s Julia listening to Proteus sing to Silvia.

The ad-libbing of Jim Lichtscheidl’s Lance and his dog Crab was dependably funny, and provided a further opportunity to poke fun at the seriousness of “Shakespeare.” At one point, Lichtscheidl got a laugh from his line, “Help me out, it’s Shakespeare, people,” which perhaps could serve as a motto for this production. The extensive additions, from television studio equipment to 1950s music, gave “Shakespeare” a lot of “help.”

*Henry V,* the other Shakespeare production at the Guthrie this season, was notable for its sparseness, especially in contrast to the extravagantly supplemented *Two Gentlemen* on the main stage. Performed by a cast of a dozen actors, this stripped down production was staged in the black box space of the Dowling Studio. A bare set of wood and steel gave an industrial and minimalist feel to the usually intimate space of this theatre. Most of the cast were graduates of the University of Minnesota/Guthrie Theatre BFA program, a partnership inspired by Tyrone Guthrie’s decision to base his theatre in Minneapolis. The Acting Company, founded

in 1972 by John Houseman and Margot Harley and also based in Minneapolis, tours internationally, touting such alumni as Kevin Kline, Patti LuPone, and Rainn Wilson.

Rather than relying on the accoutrements of a television studio and 1950s costumes and music for support, this production of *Henry V* was actor-centered, with most cast members playing at least three different parts, and some playing as many as five. Every cast member except for King Henry took on part of the Chorus. Costume changes, minor set changes, and props were handled on-stage for the most part, with cast members also doubling (or tripling) as stage managers. The numerous character changes were aided by innovative asymmetrical zippered costumes in shades of grey and brown, with panels that could be zipped on and off to switch an actor from French to English (and back). Class differences were almost impossible to discern in these costumes, though quick shifts in acting style facilitated surprisingly believable character transitions: Andy Grotelueschen alternated between Ely, Bardolph, Orleans, Bates, and York, while Georgia Cohen played the Hostess, French Mayor, Herald, and the Queen, mixing gender, class and nationality with little aid from costumes or props.

The only cast member to play just one part was Matthew Amendt as a cool, sleek Henry V. He delivered a notably nuanced and moving performance in the wooing scene with Katherine at the end of the play. There were no remnants of a playful Prince Hal to be found in this interpretation—Amendt’s King was in complete control throughout the production with no sign of his “greener days” peeking through. Amendt’s youth, emotional versatility and depth as Henry suggest that he may well become one of the more renowned alumni of this program.

As part of the “Shakespeare for a New Generation” initiative (co-sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts and Arts Midwest), this production eschewed the sort of gimmicky tactics employed by Dowling’s *Two Gentlemen* on the Guthrie mainstage. Perhaps this is a hopeful sign—the Shakespeare offered to a “new generation” is a production concentrating on the play itself; the “new generation” may not need their Shakespeare staged as a television show in order to appreciate it.

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*The Shoemaker's Holiday*