

# The outlook changeable, but mostly wet

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Shakespeare

THE TWO GENTLEMEN OF VERONA  
Globe Theatre



Jim Bywater (Outlaw) and Anastasia Hille (Silvia)

The decision to open the new Bankside Globe with a work widely acknowledged to be an artistic failure is probably not mere whimsy, and Jack Shepherd's production of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, though ultimately unsuccessful, makes a creditable attempt to counter some of the play's many weaknesses. On the page, for example, the romantic hero Valentine is apt to appear a dolt who deserves to be double-crossed by Proteus, his more attractive friend. To redress this imbalance, the Globe's artistic director, Mark Rylance, plays Proteus as craven, fawning and insecure and Lennie James strives to minimize Valentine's stupidity. When Valentine is toyed with by his beloved Silvia and made "to write some lines to one she loves", the text indicates that his servant Speed can see that he writes to himself, though the master cannot. In this production, Valentine is allowed to get the joke, too. The elopement agreed upon, Proteus betrays Valentine by informing Silvia's father, the Duke. The manner in which Rylance does this, squirming in discomfort, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, invites our contempt – and the Duke's wayward glance into the galleries confirms that he shares it. Like the weather, Proteus is changeable but mostly wet, which pathetic fallacy surely suits Rylance's New Age sensibilities. (On the curtain covering the central opening, Hercules is represented as bearing on his shoulders not a globe, but a rain-cloud.)

Susan Coates's props and costumes attempt to combat the play's dramatic flaws. "This fellow were a king to our wild faction", says a forest outlaw of his prisoner Valentine, but only because he is able-bodied. Some of the outlaws limp about on crutches, others improvise with boughs, and one tours the forest on a trolley-board. Were they to capture Thurio, a dramatic nonentity, one feels they would take even him as their leader. The descent from stage balcony to main stage by rope, called for in their ambushes, cannot account for all of the appalling injuries to which their bloody bandages are witness. The doubling of the two servants, Launce and Speed, with two of the outlaws might suggest that the brigands are an underclass which has come adrift

from the very bottom of the chain of service. Thematic doubling, however, is inauthentic; more appropriate would be the virtuoso doubling of unlike characters, which seems to have entertained the original audiences.

Shepherd's staging flirts with a sociology of service, but without conviction. Lisa Jardine's recent work on "the eroticization of the dependent" offers directors a rich new intellectual vein for exploring boy-master relationships like that of Julia-as-Sebastian and Proteus, or Viola-as-Cesario and Orsino in *Twelfth Night*. But by the time Stephanie Roth's Julia has got into her American hiking outfit of stout boots, lumberjack shirt, padded sleeveless jacket, and back-to-front cap, Proteus is too immersed in drunken

self-hate to take advantage.

There are some missed opportunities. In Act Three, Scene One, Launce is unaccountably brought on with his master Proteus, despite having little to do. For fifty-five lines he stands idly by, while Valentine bewails his sentence of banishment and Proteus reports Silvia's vain attempt to have it lifted. Once they leave, Launce confides to the audience that he is in love. The play's roots in *commedia dell'arte* give warrant for Launce to be active in his silence – reading his love-letter, miming his ecstasy, or mocking his masters. Here, he has only a mildly amusing difficulty distinguishing the dumbstruck Valentine from the statue of a discus-thrower, a prop brought on apparently for this sole purpose. In a similarly arbitrary vein, the first Milanese that flat-capped Launce meets is a mini-skirted prostitute; she does not actively solicit, and he only stares. This idea comes from, and goes, nowhere.

Much can be forgiven a first, necessarily experimental production at this unique venue. Some decisions have been fudged, however. The long single interval in the middle of the performance is the only kind of interruption which cannot have occurred at the first Globe, where continuous performance was eventually replaced by the four short intervals found in later texts. The absence of spectators on the stage and in the stagebalcony can be excused if modern fire regulations demand a tangible boundary between actors and audience, although these have not subdued audience involvement; Proteus is hissed and booed like a pantomime villain. Oddly, the same spectators seem to initiate each of these occasional outbursts. When Anastasia Hille's Silvia becomes inaudible, a distinct request to "speak up" issues from a gallery. Too distinct, perhaps, and perfectly timed. Has the management installed agents in the audience to provide a supposedly authentic Elizabethan response? One hopes not. If they have, this project of discovery risks becoming, from the start, a self-deluding confirmation of amateur prejudices about the behaviour of Elizabethan theatre audiences.