

Life in LAMORINDA

Cal Shakes Brings Grungy Flair to *The Verona Project*

By Lou Fancher



The cast of Cal Shakes' world-premiere production of *The Verona Project*

Photo Kevin Berne

Writer/Director Amanda Dehnert gets many things right in *The Verona Project*, Cal Shake's hybrid rock concert/play, especially the tone of first love.

Inspired by William Shakespeare's *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Dehnert's comedic romance tells the tale of two childhood friends and the self-love, other-love, and can't-live-with-or-without-it-love that tests their friendship.

Bounding onto the bandshell-covered stage, eight actor-musicians swing immediately into song with all the grungy flair of a hard-core indie band.

Under the turquoise-tinged canopy, the characters narrate, rapidly propelling the plot; often describing their own thoughts and actions in an effective, third-person voice. There's an urgency to the delivery, the message, and the music, that makes the story fly like a runaway train.

Dan Clegg (*Proteus*) is provocative, easily portraying the teenager in early scenes. He's even more convincing as the self-centric man who, if he were to gaze in a mirror, regards the world and all of humanity as simply a part of his own reflection.

Arwen Anderson (*Julia*) and Nate Trinrud (*Valentine*), who form the initial trifecta of friends, display impressive musical chops. Anderson, who temporarily becomes "Sebastian," a mis-identified bodyguard, has a flair for comedy, displaying deft timing and tonal command in both roles. Trinrud is the perfect straight man (although his character is gay) to balance the extreme behavior of other characters.

A review that doesn't mention the

outstanding cast would miss the chance to describe Harold Pierce's wound-up wizardry as *Speed*, Marisa Duchowny's impressive range in multiple roles and on more than one instrument, Adam Yazbeck's smoldering touch on the accordion and royalty as *The Duke*, Philip Mills' rock solid *Sylvio*, which added depth without calling attention to itself, and Elena Wright's exuberant, twisted romp amidst the show's drums and drama.

The first half of the play, packed with music hinting at rock, folk, country, and Klezmer influences, coupled moments of tender resonance with childlike fun.

Three muses—Duchowny in cream, Wright in a mangled, rainbow-colored tutu, and Anderson in baby doll dress and boots—sang a quiet ballad before a graveyard scene. In another scene, a simple paper bird, operated by an organ-grinder mechanism reminiscent of a Buster Keaton prop, "flew"...until it was grabbed and torn to shreds. Throughout the play, peach and Penzoil cans connected by mismatched ropes conveyed the most intimate conversations characters had ever shared.

The juxtapositions were elegant, subtle, and fun.

Time and instinct, two recurring themes used to humorous effect, hit a minor stall after the intermission. Perhaps it was the shift to longer dialogues and monologues, with less music, that allowed the storytelling to meander.

Still, Dehnert's masterful segues from Shakespearean language to

modern day slang—likely the first time "douche bag" entered the lexicon of the Bard—and the sensitive, sophisticated characterizations of the cast, kept the production from dissolving into a trite tale of love and loss.



Dan Clegg as Proteus and Arwen Anderson as Julia in Cal Shakes' world-premiere production of *The Verona Project*

Photo Kevin Berne

The Verona Project runs to July 31 at the Bruns Amphitheater, 100 California Shakespeare Theater Way (formerly 100 Gateway Blvd.), Orinda. Single tickets range from \$35 to \$66, with discounts available for seniors, students, persons age 30 and under, and groups. All tickets are available through the California Shakespeare Theater Box Office, 701 Heinz Avenue, Berkeley; (510) 548-9666, or online at www.calshakes.org.

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