**THEATER REVIEW**

# Shakespeare cast rivals scene-stealing Labrador

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***ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE***

The only dog to appear onstage in a Shakespeare play is named Crab. He's the canine companion of a servant named Launce in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona,* and he has gained a reputation as a chronic scene-stealer.

The Arkansas Shakespeare Theatre production of the comedy, which opened Thursday at the Argenta Branch of the William F. Laman Public Library System in North Little Rock, employs a yellow Labrador retriever named Salem in the role. Salem's a real pro, with a gift for comic timing and a compelling stage presence.

He's not alone. Every member of the cast is extraordinary in a production that, despite starting over a half-hour past its planned opening of 7:30 p.m. because of technical problems, brings out the best in what is considered to be one of Shakespeare's earliest plays.

*The Two Gentlemen of Verona* is a forerunner of Hollywood's bromance genre (example: *Superbad*). It concerns best pals Valentine (Brendan Marshall-Rashid) and Proteus (Jordan Coughtry), who find their friendship challenged. That's because Proteus — who thinks he's in love with Julia (Caroline Brooks) — joins Valentine — who's left Verona for a place in the court of the Duke of Milan (Chris Fritzges)

— and is instantly smitten with Valentine's adored Silvia (Jessica Dean Turner). Jealousies, schemes, cross-dressing and clever bits of foul play follow, as does a touch of redemption.

If that sounds complicated, it's just the tip of the iceberg as far as plot. But the complexity allows for more characters, absurd situations and opportunities for physical and verbal comic relief on a hot, spring night.

The production, directed by Rebekah Scallet and vaguely set in the 1960s, takes a gamble by setting some of Shakespeare's poetic prose to music. It pays off thanks to the vocal and guitar skills of Marshall-Rashid and Coughtry, whose musical interludes sound as natural as if Shakespeare himself had incorporated them.

Three fine roles for women feature Paige Martin Reynolds as bold, witty Lucetta the maid, Brooks as fighting-for-her-man Julia and Turner, who plays the pivotal role of Silvia like a cross of imperious Sue on HBO's *Veep* and no-nonsense first lady Michelle Obama. That's a lot of power on one small, relatively unadorned stage under the stars.

The two-hour production will be repeated at 7:30 p.m. Saturday and Sunday behind the library at 420 Main St., North Little Rock. Admission is pay what you can. For more information, call (501) 450-3265.