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To be worth the many millions of pounds spent on it, the new Bankside Globe must stage productions unlike those available elsewhere. It could be hoped that the authentic reconstruction would illuminate the plays written for the original Globe, but Jack Shepherd's production of The Two Gentlemen of Verona throws no new light on this half-botched romantic comedy by an inexperienced dramatist.

The decision to open the new Globe with a play widely acknowledged to be an artistic failure is probably not mere whimsy. The blame for an unsuccessful Two Gentlemen of Verona must fall partly on the dramatist, and credit can be earned for countering some of the play's many weaknesses. When reading the play the romantic hero Valentine is apt to appear a hopeless dolt who deserves to be double-crossed by his more attractive friend. To redress this imbalance 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, but 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 is which Rylance does this, squirming in discomfort while shifting his weight from one foot to the other, invites the audience's contempt and the Duke's surveying glance into the galleries confirms that he shares it. Like the weather for this Saturday matinee, Proteus was changeable but mostly wet, which pathetic fallacy suits the New Age sensibilities of the Globe's artistic director. On the curtain covering the central opening Hercules was represented as bearing on his shoulders not a globe, but a rain cloud.

Costuming was also mobilized to combat the play's dramatic flaws. "This fellow were a king to our wild faction", says an outlaw of his prisoner Valentine, but only because he is able-bodied. Some of the outlaws who limped around on crutches had them from the N.H.S, others improvised with boughs, and one toured the forest on a trolley-board. Had they first captured Thurio, a dramatic non-entity, they would have taken even him as their leader. 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 Launce and Speed with two of the outlaws might suggest that they 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.

The production 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 had got into her American hiking outfit of stout boots, lumberjack shirt, padded sleeveless jacket, and back-to-front cap (expecting a trip to the forest?), Proteus was too immersed in drunken self-hate to take advantage.
Some opportunities to ameliorate the play's deficiencies were missed. 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 about while Valentine bewails his sentence of banishment and Proteus reports Silvia's vain attempt to have it lifted. The play's dependence upon Italian commedia dell'arte analogues gives warrant for Launce to be active in his silence: reading his love-letter, miming his ecstasy, or mocking his masters. Instead he has only a mildly amusing difficulty distinguishing the dumb-struck Valentine from a statue of a discus thrower, a property brought on apparently for this sole purpose.

More serious than lost opportunities are half-baked insertions. The first Milanese that flat-capped and northern accented Launce meets is a mini-skirted prostitute; she does not actively solicit and he only stares. This idea comes from nowhere and is taken nowhere.

Much can be forgiven the first production at this unique venue, since it exists to explore how Elizabethan and Jacobean drama was staged. Some decisions have merely 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 stage balcony can be excused if modern fire regulations demand a tangible boundary between actors and audience. These did not subdue the much-vaunted audience involvement; Proteus was hissed and booed like a pantomime villain. Oddly, the same spectators seemed to initiate each of these occasional outbursts. When Anastasia Hille's Silvia became inaudible, a distinct request to "speak up" flew down from a gallery. Too distinct, perhaps, and perfectly timed. Does the management install agents in the audience to catalyze a supposedly authentic Elizabethan reaction? Hopefully not. But if they do, this project of discovery will become, from the start, a self-deluding confirmation of amateur prejudices about the behaviour of Elizabethan theatre audiences.