

THE TWO GENTLEMEN OF VERONA:

What's So Funny About Growing Up?

By Scott Horstein

You're tearing me apart!

— James Dean's Jim Stark in *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955)

Growing up is hard. Peer pressure, expectations that are too high or too low, parents who neglect or smother you, tough lessons in the classroom, and of course, your first true love. Our parents create a world for us to inhabit and inherit. But love makes us reject it and pursue things our parents have forbidden us. Our actions have consequences, and in taking responsibility for them, we become adults ourselves, faced with the question: What is the world we are creating for our children?

So it was in 1594, when William Shakespeare early in his career wrote *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. In it, he shows us four young lovers caught in the grip of their first desires, who wildly reject the world they are meant to inherit. The two young gentlemen in the play's title, Valentine and Proteus, fall desperately in love with girls, but for each of them a father stands in the way. In Valentine's case, it's the shady Duke of Milan, father to Silvia, Valentine's beloved. The Duke prefers the rich Thurio as a potential son-in-law over modest Valentine, and keeps Silvia locked up in a tower to maintain control over the situation. In Proteus' case, it's his own father, Antonio, who thwarts his desires. Antonio suddenly decides that Proteus needs to grow up and ships him off to get educated in Milan, tearing Proteus away from his beloved Julia.

The world these parents offer to their kids simply doesn't work for them. The parents are not just comically huffy; they are truly unsatisfactory. Their actions inflict real passion and pain on our lovers, who resort to desperate measures. Julia leaves behind her demure life at home and pursues Proteus to faraway Milan in the hope of winning him back. In running away, she risks her good name by assuming a masculine disguise. Valentine's lover Silvia, disgusted by her father's greedy and debauched rule, flees her high position in Milan for the lawlessness of the wilderness beyond, making herself vulnerable to predators. And the devoted Proteus finds himself abandoning his best friend and his childhood love in pursuit of a new obsession.

But it's the character of Valentine who may best capture this journey of transformation and rebellion, and we may well think of Valentine as the play's protagonist. It's true that Proteus has more lines and stage time than Valentine, and Proteus engineers the



JOY FARMER-CLARY AS JULIA, COREY SORENSON AS PROTEUS AND RYAN QUINN AS VALENTINE; PHOTO BY CRAIG SCHWARTZ.

important events in the plot. But his activity only highlights the quiet transformation of Valentine behind the scenes into the man who will inherit the kingdom. Valentine begins as a young lover whose love for Silvia brings him into conflict with the state. Because of this adversity, Valentine seeks out a new life in the forest. By the time he sees his friends again he has become a leader who can create order out of chaos at the end of the play, and is nearly unrecognizable to his friends. Valentine triumphs over the current Duke, wins Silvia, and becomes heir to the throne of Milan. Can he become the fair and just Duke that Milan needs? Or will his own children eventually wind up rebelling against him?

Shakespeare developed many of these ideas about desire and transformation by reading the works of the Roman poet Ovid, particularly his *Metamorphoses*. Ovid (43 BCE - 17 CE) told endless short stories about Greek mythological lovers driven by desire to deeds both great and foul, to both ecstasy and terrible violence. As a result, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* has a serious side. Critics have frequently criticized the play for lacking the snowballing comic sequences we find in Shakespeare's other comedies, as well as for an alarming turn of events just before the story ends. If Shakespeare were simply trying to write a light comedy, these criticisms would be valid. But he is instead trying to create a world like that which he found in Ovid, a world where love is powerful, unpredictable, and can permanently transform young people until they no longer recognize themselves.

The Two Gentlemen of Verona may be an early play in Shakespeare's career, but as a romance full of fun as well as passion and pain, it is very mature indeed.

Metamorphosis...would seem to be the inescapable underlying condition of the world of The Two Gentlemen of Verona, and some changes are shown to be better than others.

— William C. Carroll

COSTUME SKETCH OF VALENTINE BY FABIO TOBLINI.