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THE TWO GENTLEMEN OF VERONA *** out of ****

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THEATRE FOR A NEW AUDIENCE AT POLONSKY SHAKESPEARE CENTER

It puzzles me, but audiences sometimes applaud the set of a show. A magnificent ballroom appears and they applaud. Or a bucolic country setting transforms before our eyes into a modern city street and they applaud. I'd much rather applaud a bare stage: then you know the actors will be relying on their wit and talent (and our imagination) to tell their story. Time and again, the best theater I see involves very modest props: a bolt of blue silk becomes the sea, a chair turned upside down and clutched in your hands becomes a prison and so on.

So I felt like applauding the handsome but spare set as soon as I walked into the Polonsky Shakespeare Center. Tony winning scenic designer Derek McLane crafted a gorgeous backdrop for the [Fiasco Theater](#) company. White flowers and white pages (Of a love letter? Of Shakespeare's plays?) created a beautiful but discrete frame for the action. Two pillars rose up with branches towards the top to suggest either a city or the forest depending on the scene and that was it (save for some modest little bulbs in the branches late in the show that seemed unnecessary to me). Tim Cryan's lighting design would make the most of this inviting canvas, imbuing it with color without ever calling undue attention to itself. Whitney Locher's subtly effective costumes also followed this less-is-more dictum.

Of course, having a minimal set is no better guarantee of success than having a lot of set. But coming off their great success with *Into The Woods* (which hopefully will return soon), Fiasco brought to New York City their well-traveled *Two Gentlemen Of Verona* with confidence and verve. It is perhaps Shakespeare's first play, it's certainly one of his less exalted and yet it's solid entertainment in the right hands. It has those here.

Valentine and Proteus are bosom buddies in this light romance that begins in Verona. Proteus is exuberantly in love with Julia. Alas, Valentine is off to see the wider world and prove his mettle in Milan and they part sadly. Proteus is soon ordered by his father to follow Valentine -- the lad needs some seasoning and a trip abroad is just the thing. Since Proteus has kept his romance with Julia a secret, he must part her with bitter tears.

Meanwhile, Valentine has wasted no time falling in love himself with the noble Sylvia. Proteus joins him and immediately -- and rather joltingly -- falls for Sylvia himself. Proteus immediately betrays his friend, his betrothed and his honor in order to win the real captain of his heart, the fair Sylvia. She of course will have nothing to do with such a fickle rogue but Proteus will have her, by burglary if necessary! Julia is disguised as a boy, haplessly serving as Proteus's servant so she can see his perfidious ways up close. It seems hopeless, but of course all's well that ends well and Shakespeare's early entertainment isn't about to frustrate the groundlings with a sad or complicated ending.

The challenge of this play -- and one not met by this production -- is of course Proteus. He behaves abominably, indeed nonsensically and ultimately threatens rape to possess Sylvia. At the last second Proteus repents and is immediately forgiven by one and all, including the much-wronged Julia. Shakespeare would do better.

It doesn't really matter when the general vibe is playful and fun, with actors sitting on benches along the side of the stage, watching the action and reacting along with the audience to the scenes being played. They play instruments, sing, cavort, try to crack each other up and create a spirit of fun.

Jessie Austrian plays the spurned Julia and co-directs with Ben Steinfeld. I wish she'd coached herself to be a little less broad in her goofy scenes of love with Proteus. I thought this approach might pay off later, but it didn't. She was immediately much more restrained and effective when disguised as a servant boy and certainly had a fun rapport with Emily Young, who played her no-fool of a servant Lucetta with humor.

Young also doubled as the much-admired Sylvia, a convincing object of desire that is worth the fuss thanks to her intelligence and sense of honor. I'm rarely a big fan of the clowning in Shakespeare but Zachary Fine was very winning as the dog and even more soulful and winning as the noble Valentine. Paul Coffey and Andy Grotelueschen play servants and other roles to varying degrees of success, none of them triumphs or failures of imagination.

Noah Brody has the tangled role of Proteus, one not unknotted here. Moment to moment he is effective, but the sudden love for Sylvia, the sudden lurch into real villainy and the sudden repentance all come rather...suddenly.

But let me be clear: a messy early work of Shakespeare is presented with fun and verve. High spirits predominate and the cast is winning throughout. Whatever bumps in the road may be presented by the text are minimized by talent, imagination and -- it must be said -- a pretty delightful dog.

THE VISIT ** 1/2 out of ****

LYCEUM THEATRE

Never count out a veteran. More than two years after Fred Ebb died, the legendary team of Kander & Ebb returned to Broadway with the original musical comedy *Curtains*. It wasn't very good, but by god it was a new Kander & Ebb musical. Then, more than six years after Ebb died, the legendary team of Kander & Ebb returned to Broadway again, with time with *The Scottsboro Boys*. It was a classic, a summation of their career (challenging material, brilliant songs, great cast) and proof they were still learning and growing right up to the end. (It will be revived some day soon and prove a hit.)

Now more than eleven years after Ebb died, they've returned to Broadway again, this time with their 2001 curiosity *The Visit*, a puzzle of a musical they and others fiddled with for years. It hasn't been solved, but it does provide a marvelous showcase for the great Chita Rivera. I can't wait to see what they do next.

Based on the play by Fredrich Dürrenmatt as adapted and changed significantly by Maurice Valency, it tells the story of the richest woman in the world, Claire Zochanassian (Rivera). After a lifetime away, she is returning for a visit to the small town in Switzerland where she grew up. The townspeople -- desperate for any signs of financial life -- hope this fabulously wealthy woman will make some bequest to them. Wisely, they try to keep her old love Anton out of sight. Anton (Roger Rees) wasn't just Claire's first love; he was also her first bitter regret. Anton loved Claire but rejected her for the safe future of marrying the daughter of a shop owner. As if that wasn't bad enough, he convinced two friends to perjure themselves and say they'd slept with Claire when she charged he was the father of her unborn child.

Shamed and belittled, Claire fled her hometown, married well and often and is now absurdly rich. Oh, she'll shower the town with money. She'll give each and every member of the town money, more money than they ever dreamed about. All they have to do is kill Anton.

This is Kander & Ebb territory, through and through. The presentation is more like a revue than a show with a pulsing storyline. They draw on various forms of European entertainment, like cabaret and opera. Carrie is attended on by a disgraced judge as her chauffeur and two eunuchs, sung by countertenors for the full otherworldly effect. The attitude is chilly and cynical; the tragic finale foreordained. One never really wonders if

the townspeople will kill Anton, just how they'll justify it to themselves.

And that's the heart of the problem for this rather static evening. It lacks suspense, drama and a pulsing heart. Even a bloody one would be preferable to the bloodless affair that prevails. First, the moral dilemma. Will the townspeople kill Anton just to get a lot of money? They make mild objections at the start, but that's about it. People immediately start buying fancy items on credit. Even Anton's wife and children start indulging in the expected windfall that will arrive when he is dispatched.

It climaxes with one of the show's best numbers, "Yellow Shoes," the symbol of all they crave. (That also includes some of the show's best choreography, courtesy of Graciela Daniele.) Indeed, there's barely any debate, any wrestling with conscience or even an amusing display of how they twist their ethics to permit such a crime. Without saying much of anything, everyone just accepts that Anton will die. Heck, I even thought there might be some suspense over whether he'd spoil the fun by killing himself but even this didn't really come up.

So The Visit's driving moral condemnation -- the corrupting power of money -- barely registers or feels ham-fisted, like the sickly green yellow-ish hue given to newly purchased furs and those shoes. And even this bleak take on human nature is softened. Anton doesn't just become resigned to his fate; he and Claire reach an understanding and her plan to entomb them forever almost sounds like a pleasant reward for this broken down old man. Worse, the final killing of Anton is staged out of sight, as if the show wanted to look away. Surely the guilt of the entire town could be presented more interestingly than this. We've been waiting for his execution and then it takes place where we can't see, where we don't have to face the ugly truth of what they're doing?

So we have a brisk, one-act revue of sorts, with a pre-ordained finale that is softened in varying ways before it occurs. Other problems present themselves. The set is an initially striking sort of grand, broken-down glassed-in pavillion. A raised walkway allows various characters to promenade in style and broken panes allow in shafts of moonlight. (It's almost always night in this town.) My guest felt it looked like the abandoned Batcave of one of the Dark Knight movies. I had to admit that the more one pondered this space, the vaguer and less satisfying it became. It certainly didn't evoke a small Swiss town or much of anything beyond a vague sense of menace. Presumably it was meant to allow the story to be timeless or universal, but it just felt purposeless.

Ditto the forced oddity of the eunuchs and other surreal, avant-garde touches. Ultimately, the symbolism, the heavy moralizing, the pre-ordained outcome and cardboard characters made The Visit seem like a medieval morality play, with all the dramatic thinness that can entail. It doesn't help that the marvelous actor Roger Rees is miscast as Anton. He's not much of a singer, but that's not even the main problem, which is that Rees even at 71 has an inherently youthful vigor about him. Despite makeup and a beard and muffling his voice, one is always aware of the more vibrant man underneath and that doesn't help the character.

So why do people keep wrestling with The Visit? The songs, of course. While it's not the full-bodied masterpiece that is The Scottsboro Boys, this show does boast more than its fair share of excellent tunes. The scene-setting "Out Of The Darkness" is effective, the romantic "You, You, You" captures exuberant young love nicely, "I Must Have Been Something," "Look At Me" and more all made a strong first impression. I can't wait to listen to the cast album.

And why would anyone go to this particular Visit? Chita Rivera of course. She commands the stage completely. Claire is front and center much of the time and anytime she is, Rivera bewitches you into believing this show is much better than it actually is. She's 82 years old and uses a cane. But through sheer force of will, Rivera makes that cane seem like a prop, a flourish rather than a necessity. When Claire dances with her younger self, every movement has purpose and style. You don't think about the poignant contrast of youth and age, you are simply riveted by Rivera and wish you had her presence at any age.

She has a few strong songs, but her eleven o'clock number "Love And Love Alone" is the capper. The audience would have willed any song into being good for the sake of the moment. Rivera would have used her alchemy to

make it great. But Kander & Ebb gave her a gift already worthy of this legend and Rivera capitalizes on that profoundly. Still, never count out a veteran: I can't wait to see what Chita Rivera does next.

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[Let The Right One In](#) **

Da no rating

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[Broadway By The Year 1915-1940](#) **

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[Broadway By The Year: 1941-1965](#) ***

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[It Shoulda Been You](#) **

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[Hamlet w Peter Sarsgaard at CSC](#) no stars

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