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Shakespeare meets the Wild West

Theater Beat



ONCE UPON A TIME IN THE WEST: Shakespeare in the Park sets Michael Webber, Jared Wise, Zoe Burke and April Karber in the West, not Verona. Photo by Torin Andersen

by *Anne Welsbacher*
June 6, 2013

Wichita's Cowtown and Shakespeare in the Park come together this June — literally and metaphorically — in the theater company's re-visioned production of "Two Gentlemen of Verona," set in the fictional wild west town of Verona, Kansas. Described as a "comedic tale of friendship, love, betrayal, and a little dog," the play's action takes place somewhere between Dodge and Wichita in 1875. In addition to the theater's traditional park venues, a June 22 performance will be held at Cowtown. All performances are free.

Modern Shakespeare productions regularly mix it up in retellings, to varied degrees of success, and this frothy play, probably the Bard's earliest, is certainly a good candidate for such treatment. Kevin Sowers, here making his directorial debut with Shakespeare in the Park, came up with the idea of a wild west retelling nearly a decade ago during a production in Florida in which he played Launce, the servant of one of the two gents of the title.

"There are always challenges with the language," Sowers notes, "but this show is one of the easier Shakespeare shows as far as translating to modern English."

The production also bends a bit of gender: Sowers's previous role will be played here by Vonda Schuster, a longtime actor with Shakespeare in the Park (among other theaters) who last summer portrayed Brutus in the company's all-female production of "Julius Caesar." Danzel Muzingo Bond plays the other fellow's servant, Speed, and a handful of women play henchmen and outlaws, although these roles will be portrayed as women rather than Shakespeare's men.

As with Shakespeare's own Globe Theatre of the 1500s, all Shakespeare in the Park productions are held outdoors, requiring actors to project without assistance and often over the cacophony of lawn mowers, barking dogs, traffic, and the occasional egg-throwing passersby (the latter, from a couple of summers back, was so perfectly timed with the play's storyline that many audience members assumed it was part of the staging). But there are advantages to the wide-open venues as well.

"Outdoor staging gives you a lot more flexibility," Sowers said. "You can have as little or as much space as you want, whereas staging a show like this indoors limits your space, exits, entrances, and so on."

Although all performances are free, the theater also honors the traditions of its Elizabethan theater progenitors and provides a box to accept donations from audience members. (An unsubstantiated story holds that admission collectors traditionally collected money from the audience at the start of the show and then put the boxes in a room backstage — the "box office.")

Michael Webber and Jared Wise lead the cast as Proteus and Valentine, the two gentlemen who spend the evening falling in love with characters played by Zoe Burke and April Karber. The cast also includes Liz Anderson, Beth Wise, Heather Jewell, Kevin Dickson, Dan Schuster, Ben Blankley, Curtis Proctor-Artz, Stephanie Brean, Amanda Denning, Christina Dickson, Jessica Gaddis, Jessica Gagnon, Arietta Austin (also stage managing), and Juno Sowers. Angela Clark, Christina Larsen, and Crystal Jones are the dancing saloon girls and Jane Tanner provides costumes and props.

Show dates and locations: June 7, College Hill Park; June 8, Hap McLean Park, Park City; June 9, Riggs Park, Haysville; June 14, Buffalo Park; June 15, Central Riverside Park; June 16, Andover Sports Park, Andover; June 21, College Hill Park; June 22, Cowtown; June 23, Hand Park, Derby. All shows begin at 7 p.m. and run about two hours. After 6 p.m., a phone message line advises if performances are cancelled due to bad weather; call (316) 655-2017. Visit wichitashakespearecompany.org.

ALSO PLAYING: JUNE 6 TO JUNE 19

- *Little Women*, Crown Uptown Theatre, Thursday-Sunday; now through June 8; visit crownuptown.com or call (316) 612-7696.
 - *ALL Ways a Woman*, Cabaret Oldtown, Friday-Saturday; now through June 15; visit cabaretoldtown.com or call (316) 265-4400.
 - *Butch Cassidy and the Can't Dance Kid, or You Polka, You Brought Him*, Mosley Street Melodrama, Thursday-Saturday; now through July 20; visit mosleystreet.com or call (316) 263-0222.
 - *The Bilking of Lord Bilgewater, or Froggy Went A-Courtin'*, Doc MacDougal's Miraculous Melodramas, Thursday-Saturday; June 6 through June 8; visit docsmelodramas.weebly.com or call (316) 210-1567.
 - *Dixie Swim Club*, Wichita Community Theatre, Thursday-Saturday; June 6 through June 23; visit wichitact.org or call (316) 686-1282.
 - *You Take the Cake*, Kechi Playhouse, Thursday-Sunday; June 6 through June 30; visit kechiplayhouse.com or call (316) 744-2152.
 - *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Shakespeare in the Park, various locations, Friday-Sunday; June 7 through June 23; visit wichitashakespearecompany.org.
 - *Spamalot*, Music Theatre of Wichita, Wednesday-Sunday; June 12 through June 16; visit mtwichita.org or call (316) 265-3107.
 - *Say What?! Comedy Improv*, Cowtown-Empire House Live!, Saturday-Sunday; June 15 through June 16; visit oldcowtown.org or call (316) 219-4849.
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