

*The Two Gentlemen of Verona*  
Study Guide for Teachers

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Who's Who  
in  
*The Two Gentlemen of Verona*

DUKE of Milan	Christopher Saul
SYLVIA, his daughter and beloved of Valentine	Rachel Pickup
PROTEUS, a gentleman of Verona	Laurence Mitchell
LAUNCE, his servant	Andrew Melville
VALENTINE, a gentleman of Verona	Alex Avery
SPEED, his servant	Simon Watts
THURIO, a rival to Valentine	Zubin Varla
JULIA, beloved of Proteus	Vanessa Ackerman
LUCETTA, waiting-woman to Julia	Brigid Zengeni
ANTONIO, Father of Proteus	Patrick Romer
PANTHINO	Adrian Schiller
EGLAMOUR	Gary Oliver
OUTLAWS	Philip Edgerley Clifford Samuels Richard Clew

## **Synopsis**

Valentine, a gentleman of Verona, leaves the city to work in service for the Duke of Milan. His friend Proteus, remains behind to be near to the woman he loves – Julia. When Proteus’s father orders him to attend the Duke’s court, he is forced to leave Julia behind but swears an oath of constancy to her.

When he arrives in Milan, Proteus discovers that Valentine has fallen in love with the Duke’s daughter Silvia. The Duke however, wants Sylvia to marry the wealthy and idiotic Thurio.

Valentine confides in his friend Proteus and reveals his plans to elope with Sylvia. But Proteus has also become infatuated with Sylvia and betrays the plans to the Duke. When Valentine is discovered carrying a rope ladder, he is banished from Milan. In the wilderness he encounters a band of outlaws and is elected their leader.

Julia, disguised for her safety as a boy called Sebastian, arrives in Milan in search of Proteus. She is devastated when she accidentally overhears him declare his passion for Sylvia. In her disguise as Sebastian she enters Proteus’ service as a page.

Proteus sends Sebastian (Julia) with a message to Sylvia and Julia is encouraged to find that his advances have been rejected. Sylvia remains faithful to Valentine and with the help of Sir Eglamour, escapes from Milan into the forest to join Valentine.

The Duke and Thurio set out in pursuit, followed by Proteus and Julia (who is still in disguise as Sebastian).

Sylvia, captured by the outlaws in the forest, is rescued by Proteus. She again spurns him, and he tries to rape her. Valentine intervenes and rescues her.

Proteus is forced to confront his act of betrayal. Julia reveals her identity as Sebastian, and a reconciliation begins.

## Sources

Though the earliest mention of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* is by Frances Meres in 1598, it is believed by many to be Shakespeare's first play, and therefore to have been written well before then. Theatres in London were closed from 1593 to 1594 because of the plague, which prompted Shakespeare to stop acting and start writing, so it is highly likely that it was written during this period. It may be, however, that the play was written as early as 1587.

The story is usually attributed to a Spanish prose romance, *Diana Enamorada*. Shakespeare's Julia and Proteus were called Felismena and Felix, and an English play named after them was acted in London by the Queen's Men in 1585. This may have given Shakespeare a start, but he altered much, adding the character of Valentine and the treachery of Proteus.

The idealised relationship between Silvia and Valentine is influenced by the medieval tradition of courtly love, some of the details of the plot can be found in Arthur Brooke's poem *The Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet* (1562), and much of Speed's wit and Launce's clowning has its roots in John Lyly's early comedies.

## **Past Productions of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona***

Though the earliest mention of *Two Gentlemen of Verona* is by Frances Meres in 1598, it is believed by many to be Shakespeare's first play, and therefore to have been written well before then. Theatres in London were closed from 1592 to 1594, which prompted Shakespeare to stop acting and start writing, so it may have been written then. Others date the play as early as 1587.

Its first *recorded* performance is in 1762, with actor-manager David Garrick

An operatic version, with music by Henry Rowley Bishop ran for twenty-nine performances in 1821 and in 1895, it was staged by Augustin Daly at Daly's Theatre.

Early 20<sup>th</sup> century productions included a production in 1904 by Harley Granville-Barker, who also played Speed, at the Royal Court. The 1910 Stratford production was directed by F.R. Benson, who cast his middle-aged wife as Julia.

The most serious attempt to popularise the play was perhaps in 1926 when Robert Atkins staged it at the Apollo Theatre with Jon Gielgud as Valentine.

In 1960 Peter Hall, newly appointed artistic director of the RSC, chose to direct it as his first production. Other notable 20<sup>th</sup> century productions for the RSC include a 1970 production by Robin Phillips and 1993 production by David Thacker.

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## Pre-20<sup>th</sup> Century Productions

Presumably, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, was performed in Shakespeare's lifetime, but its first recorded performance is in 1762, on 22<sup>nd</sup> December, when actor-manager David Garrick mounted it for six performances in an adaptation by Benjamin Victor. He re-ordered and conflated scenes, even adding some of his own.

The Shakespeare Revival of 1730 to 1860 had Garrick at its forefront. Perhaps due to Garrick's friendship with Hogarth, the revival fuelled a new interest in theatrical painting.

The first recorded performance of the play in the original is in 1784, where it was performed once at Covent Garden. An operatic version, with music by Henry Rowley Bishop ran for twenty-nine performances in 1821, also at Covent Garden. It included songs from of Shakespeare's other plays and some of the Sonnets.

In 1895, it was staged by Augustin Daly at Daly's Theatre. He altered the play, making it as light as possible. George Bernard Shaw commented that it was 'not a comic opera but a vaudeville' and a "very pleasant evening for those who know no better!"

### Peter Hall

(1960)

When Peter Hall became the artistic director of the Royal Shakespeare Company, he decided to open his first season with *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. It was a bold beginning. The previous production had been in 1938, twenty-two years earlier. He wanted to show the chronological development of Shakespearean comedy, and billed it with *The Merchant of Venice* and *Twelfth Night*. Hall was also airing a new style of performing Shakespeare. It certainly shook up the critics...

*"SHOCK SHOW! A deafening orchestral fanfare of welcome in the foyer, a curtainless stage protruding right into the stalls- and a rustic actor sound asleep as the audience entered..."*

Harold Conway, *Daily Sketch*, 6<sup>th</sup> April 1960

Hall was sick of the declamatory style in which Shakespeare was acted, and wanted to create a more intimate atmosphere for Shakespearean plays. He pushed the actors and audience closer together and directed the actors to speak the words for sense, rather than for the beauty of the poetry. He also encouraged actors to use the language as if it were modern. He also wanted to quicken the pace of the plays, so used a revolving stage to speed up the scene changes.

The play was full of life, energy, movement and sound. There were trumpets playing, beggars crooning, birds twittering and people marching, all on a moving stage, so that the play literally rolled with activity. Hall's ground-breaking approach was, however, rooted in a traditional setting. Set designer Renzo Mongiardino used Italianate décor to create the Medici atmosphere of Renaissance Florence. The men wore dresses to their knees and there were isolated papier maché oaks, fallen logs, broken balustrades, fireplaces and watch turrets.

Although not all the critics were keen on the style, most agreed that the comic elements to the play were extremely successful.

### **Robin Phillips**

(1970)

With Helen Mirren in the part of Julia, the world of Robin Phillips' Aldwych production of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, was highly glamorous. It was Hockney's California or the Cote d'Azur, inhabited by playboys and girls with outfits from the King's Road. Wealthy financier Antonio strolled down and plunged into a pool on the forestage and, after manfully swimming a couple of lengths, held up his face for his servant to stick a fat cigar in his mouth.

The young lovers were aristocratic students and were observed wryly by a working-class Launce, played by Patrick Stewart. The Duke was a sort of Don, and Sir Eglamour an old scout master. During Sylvia's escape, the pool became an expanse of water for Eglamour to feebly carry her across; it also served as a bath, and a mirror. The carefree atmosphere of the play was reflected in its style, as the direction itself was highly imaginative and humorous. Outside the safety of Milan, the outlaws were dressed in animal skins. The actors, too, were confident and flip. The lines were frequently twisted cynically and Ian Richardson, as Proteus, swaggered, hands on hips and accepted his double betrayal as if the whole thing were a joke.

The dog, Blackie, was a particularly big star, and was discovered by Patrick Stewart at the Avon Dog Service who saved him from a destruction centre after he had been picked up as a stray.

### **David Thacker**

(1991)

Thacker's 1991 production of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, was set in the effete social world of the thirties among the bright young things of the salon society. The Milan Court became a party in an English country house. There was a Palm Court style orchestra on stage and a singer, Hilary Cromie, who sang songs by Cole Porter, Irving Berlin and the Gershwins. The actors, as public - school types, wore Coward style dressing gowns, Lonsdale evening dress and Wodehouse tennis gear.

The approach to the relationship between Proteus and Valentine was to play up their difference from one another and the sense of competition between them. Barry Lynch's Proteus was an Irish rogue, while Richard Bonneville's Valentine was reminiscent of Bertie Wooster; soft-hearted and foolish. The competitive nature of their friendship worked in that it gave an explanation for the impressionable Proteus to duplicate his friend's affections.

Richard Moore successfully portrayed Launce as a lugubrious end-of-the-pier comedian. The Outlaws were a ludicrous bunch of upper-class chaps. The effect of the songs was to subtly distance the production from the play, as Paul Taylor in the *Independent* put it, "raising an ironic...eyebrow over the whole proceedings". The night-time ructions in the last act were underlined in a tongue-and-cheek manner by the song *In the Still of the Night*.

## **Getting to Grips with Shakespeare's Language**

Assistant Director Gemma Fairlie asked the director and actors of the 2004 productions of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and *Julius Caesar* what it was like to work with Shakespeare's language.

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## **Fiona Buffini**

(Director)

Basically my take on the language is very simple. It's poetic language. It's not the same as *EastEnders* or a television drama. The characters are able to express everything they think and everything they feel in a distilled form. It's the difference between drinking beer and whisky. Shakespeare's the whisky – everything is distilled and stronger and more compact. My attitude toward the language is that if you can see the pictures of what you're saying, then the audience will see it. If you are living it, we will live it. Even if we don't understand every word, we'll understand your motivation, we'll understand where you're coming from and we'll understand the feeling of what you're saying if you truly inhabit it.

## **Alex Avery**

(Valentine)

I learnt more about the language in *Caesar* than I did in *Two Gents*. I think that's quite simply because *Julius Caesar* is a much better written play. I always thought it was one of the great plays but I really do think it's a phenomenal piece of writing.

*Two Gentlemen* doesn't have that. It doesn't have that sense of a line being somewhere specifically so that it can be referred to later on. There's a great scene of *Caesar* outside the Senate where no line is out of place. The whole thing is a chess game – it's manoeuvring pieces towards a checkmate. With *Two Gentlemen of Verona* it's much more up to the director and the actors to make sense of how to interpret. The language is not overly rich in classical allusions. It's actually quite simple which is great, but when you read it the outlaw scene comes across as being very juvenile, and I think there are a lot of problem lines in that scene, which we've managed to, or Fiona has managed to, walk over, because the whole play doesn't allow the weakness of that scene to shine through. In a lesser production it would, it would completely shatter everything you've done before. So you can get away with lines like 'Because you're beautified with goodly shape' or 'provided you do no outrages on silly women'. I think in Shakespeare's day these jokes would have been probably played for laughs. I think the whole play would have been played a lot more for laughs than we are. That's quite a nice challenge; to make these unintelligible lines for an audience intelligible. They may not understand what we're saying but they do understand why we're saying it and how we're saying it.

If you're going to talk about the language and the lines you have to talk about one of the last lines in the play, which for Valentine is the challenge, one of the reasons you take the part. It's the line that just does not work nowadays, 'All that was mine in Sylvia I give thee. You have to build the entire production up to that moment, so that the actor can make sense of it. I think we do that. That's a classic situation of a line in Shakespeare meaning something completely different. I genuinely think that when he wrote that line there would have been no problem for the actor saying it. The audience would have understood – there would not have been a problem, but with a modern-day audience you cannot get away with that line..... it was written for an audience that not only was full of men that were happy to have a laugh at a woman's expense,

but equally women who will not be offended by that. That's a reflection of their status. No one would be offended by that remark.

Equally I think it's at a time when the love between two men is a greater love for some reason. There seems to be a sense from what I've read that the function of a male/female relationship is purely for the family and to procreate, to have a family. But a love between two men is something that you choose. You have arranged marriages, and I suppose what I'm saying is that a friendship between two men is created by the desires and wills of those two men, whereas a relationship between a man and a girl is actually probably constructed completely peripheral to whatever the feelings of the said boy and girl are. That line becomes difficult because effectively I think what he is saying is quite genuinely 'everything I have in Sylvia is yours' i.e. I love you not only as much as I love Sylvia but more. A modern-day audience won't understand that. It's not because it's a homosexual relationship. It's just that they won't understand the values of male friendships in the same way that sixteenth century England valued them. That's why the line sticks out. However, if you're going to put on Shakespeare you don't cut lines because you can't get away with it. I think it's a challenge and you should see if you can make it work.

## **Laurence Mitchell**

(Proteus)

There were many technical things that I wasn't very good at when we started doing this – even silly things like breathing at the right place, and stressing the right words in a line. Often I just wouldn't understand the really basic thing, about how lines would be best understood if I stressed x instead of y, or something. Actually I think that's improved immeasurably, because I don't think I was very good at it at all three months ago. I don't actually consciously think about it now.

Fiona's thing, and she's absolutely right, is that most things that we do in 2004 are based on not saying things – on grunting and not expressing yourself really eloquently. Whereas these characters, whatever else they are, are brilliant at expressing how they feel, absolutely brilliant. That's why he's a genius, isn't it? He has the most incredible ways of saying things that I couldn't even begin to express in words. This man was obviously inspired – it must have been just dripping out of him all the time. So it's a great honour as well. I do think – and I know most of his plays – that this is one of the great undiscovered parts. No one talks about wanting to play Proteus, do they? It's a massive part, and a very, very interesting one as well.

People get hung up on the meter but it doesn't really matter that it's iambic pentameters or whatever it is. Ultimately it's just the way a person speaks. That's it – it's the way they communicate. I've spent a lot of time unnecessarily worrying about the fact that this was some sort of heightened language. Actually it's just the way in which a person communicates. It doesn't matter whether you're Proteus using this certain language or if you're Benny off Crossroads in the way he communicates. You're just a person in the world communicating in the way you communicate, and it's much better to see it like that.

## **Andrew Melville**

(Launce)

The big advantage in doing Launce is that it's not in verse, which is a great help to start with. The main problem with him in the language, is that there's a lot of double and treble meaning of words. To an Elizabethan audience it would have been very clear. We had to cut quite a lot of it, because nearly everything Launce says is pretty vulgar, particularly in talking about the woman he's intending to marry. There were a lot of phrases that you just thought 'They're not going to get this'. So what do you do? Do you just try to make it *sound* funny? Certainly you can't do that either. So we ended up cutting quite a bit of one of the scenes, simply because of the double and treble meanings that were sexual, that audiences today just wouldn't get, whereas an Elizabethan audience would have got. That meant trimming the text a bit, which you don't often like to do, because you try to be a bit pure about Shakespeare.

## **Philip Edgerley**

(Outcast)

Looking at Proteus, what I love about him is that he is a dark character and he doesn't shy away from doing some things that other people wouldn't like to think they would do. That can be quite hard for actors because they want to be liked by an audience, but it's a lot of fun to play a part where actually that doesn't happen. Hopefully they come round to acknowledging why the character does something if you're playing it truthfully. The soliloquies that Proteus has, where he's talking to the audience and sort of figuring out what he's going to do, have some incredible writing in them, and they show flashes of the genius that comes in later with *Julius Caesar*. In that you see this writer at his most extraordinary.

That's not to say there aren't faults with it – there are always faults with Shakespeare, in that he sometimes under-writes female parts quite dramatically. However, in *Julius Caesar*, and I found this incidentally in my main role in *Julius Caesar*, in playing Casca, the verse is so easy to play because the writing is there for you. You suddenly realise 'How did I, when I have seen these plays before, never notice these characters, whether they're small or large, because they're so distinctively written, each one of them. For example in *Julius Caesar* it's very specific to the conspirators, and even in *Two Gents* in things like the outlaws, they all are slightly different – the way they talk, what their little stories are. It's very easy to skip over those. But it's finding all that stuff that makes it really interesting, and makes it OK to be playing a supporting role as well, which some actors don't like doing, everybody wants to play the lead all the time. I think that's the main thing about speaking Shakespeare – it's not just about mouthing words that are clever or big or complex, it's about the thought processes that go behind it, and how still after five or six hundred years they're apparent – God, that's really impressive.

## **Themes and Ideas**

The main theme in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* is love. The play looks at it from three angles:

- Young Love (page 14)
- Sexual Desire (page 14)
- Mature Love (page 15)

## Young Love

*O, how this spring of love resembleth  
The uncertain glory of an April day,  
Which now shows all the beauty of the sun,  
And by and by a cloud takes all away.*  
(Proteus, I,iii, 84-87)

*The Two Gentlemen of Verona* explores the nature and difficulties of young love. Act I shows that Proteus and Julia have a great deal of trouble expressing and following through their desires because of the propriety of the society in which they live. When Lucetta brings Julia a letter from Proteus, Julia, though desperate to read the letter, scolds Lucetta for receiving it and makes her take it back. She is ashamed that Lucetta improperly accepted the letter in her name, because it will affect how she is viewed socially. She also feels that she needs to uphold a chaste image to Lucetta, and in order to prove that she is not interested in the letter rips it up before she has had a chance to read it. The extent of the regret she feels at doing this is reflected by the way she treats the torn pieces of paper, folding them, kissing them, and even placing them in her bosom. This indicates a high level of sexual desire.

*And here is writ 'Love-wounded Proteus'.  
Poor wounded name, my bosom as a bed  
Shall lodge thee till thy wound be throughly healed;*  
(Julia, I.ii, 114-116)

## Sexual Desire

*I'll love you like a soldier, at arm's length  
And love you 'gainst the nature of love: force ye.*  
(Proteus, V,iv, 57-58)

Julia's action of placing the torn words of the letter in her bosom not only indicates how strongly she feels for Proteus; it also implies that she has a high level of sexual desire. Placing the words next to her naked flesh is a way of taking Proteus' declaration of love to a physical level. It is the kind of desire associated with inexperience, because it suggests that this is as close to a passionate embrace Julia has been so far, and therefore that this is her first experience of sexual love.

Proteus' powerful experience of sexual desire (arguably connected to his immaturity) is so overwhelming that it becomes destructive. His desire for Silvia leads him to betray his life-long friend, his lover and to sexual violence.

## **Mature Love**

*“If you turn not, you will return the sooner.”*  
(Julia, II.ii, 4)

In contrast to the sexually driven Proteus and Julia, Launce, of the older generation, finds sexual desire of negligible importance. His mistress has “more hair than wit, more faults than hairs, and more wealth than thoughts”, but he is happy to take her because money is more important to him than sex. His attitude to sex is coarse in the extreme.

The older generation have a strong hold over the youth of the play. Proteus’ fear of his father prevents him from telling Antonio that he would rather stay in Verona with Julia than go to Milan. If Proteus had been given the freedom to express his wishes it is highly probable that he would have stayed with Julia.

In Milan, the parental control is even greater. Like Launce, the Duke has a practical attitude to marriage and wants his daughter to marry for wealth rather than love. Like Rapunzel, in the well-known fairy-tale, Sylvia is locked in a tower to forbid access from suitors. The Duke’s power over Sylvia and lack of concern for her wishes means that she must live unhappily or behave unchastely. The harsh punishment she and Valentine receive for their planned elopement proves, arguably, that they were right to conduct their love affair in secret. Sylvia, unlike Proteus, has the bravery to challenge her father’s wishes.

## Related Themes and Ideas

One of the most interesting things about *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* is that the themes and plot ideas which are touched on within the play are developed and explored later in the canon. The play can be likened to an overture to an opera, where we experience glimpses of themes which are later developed, or as a theatrical laboratory in which Shakespeare first experimented with conventions of romantic comedy which he would later treat with a more subtle complexity. Its immaturity, however, means that it has a particular freshness, which is its greatest charm.

### **The Sonnets**

“...I find it impossible to read *Two Gentlemen* except in the light of the sonnets...I know that there is a heart’s blood in them. In *Two Gentlemen* it is clear that he has been given furiously to think about love...As a rule you will not take it all seriously. But from time to time the mask of lightness is withdrawn and a haggard face looks out.” E.K. Chambers, 1905.

### ***Twelfth Night***

Julia’s decision to dress as a servant boy, and the predicament that follows (being obliged to woo another woman for the man she loves), are revisited in *Twelfth Night*. For Viola, in *Twelfth Night* the consequences of cross-dressing are more complicated. To have the complexity of *Twelfth Night*, Sylvia would have to fall in love with Julia.

### ***Much Ado About Nothing***

“Shakespeare’s morality is less in his fables than in his characters; where the good are incitements to virtue and the errings dissuaves from vice. There are very few among us who are not compelled tacitly to acknowledge their similarity to Proteus, and to blush at the resemblance.” Charles Armitage Brown, 1838.

The callow behaviour of Proteus is recognisable in some of Shakespeare’s other young men. We see it in Romeo, (when he transfers his affections at the start of the play), and in Claudio in *Much Ado About Nothing*.

### ***A Midsummer Night’s Dream***

The group of four lovers in *Two Gentlemen*, in which one of the women is favoured vastly more than the other, is re-approached in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, where Shakespeare highlights the inexplicable nature of sexual attraction.

### ***Romeo and Juliet***

*Romeo and Juliet* examines and explores the urgent drama of young love, which is first identified in *Two Gentlemen*.

### ***The Merchant of Venice***

In *The Merchant of Venice*, a man’s deceit being framed in the gift of a ring, has its roots in *Two Gentlemen of Verona* where Julia is asked to give Sylvia the ring she herself gave Proteus.

## Interviews

The following interviews with director, Fiona Buffini and cast members of the 2004 production of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* were taken during rehearsals.

The show opened in Newport in September 2004.

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- Alex Avery (pages 23)
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## **Interview with Fiona Buffini**

*Director Fiona Buffini talks to Assistant Director, Gemma Fairlie, about her experience of directing the RSC's 2004 regional touring production of **The Two Gentlemen of Verona**.*

### **What were your impressions of the play when you first read it?**

My first impressions of the play, I'm very glad to say, were entirely from reading it for this production, never having seen it or read it before. I put an embargo on myself when I was about 25 to stop reading Shakespeare plays so that I could have the great pleasure of seeing them for the first time without prior knowledge. My first impressions of the play were that it was an adventure story and it's a romance. And I felt very clearly just from the play that it was about two young men going from one place to another place that is completely different, and having a great big adventure there. That was where I started from. Very soon after that I landed on the 1930s, being one of the great ages of mass emigration, and also being a time when two ages collided, when you had the remnants of Victorian England in old stately homes and estates, and the thriving modern city growing up as well. Something that I've found very clear in the play is the division between the rich and the poor, which also fits in very nicely with the 1930s idea.

I think honestly my first impression of the play was 'this is written by a very new writer'. It doesn't all make sense in a logical narrative form. The writer misses scenes we think should be there. Where's the scene where Valentine meets Sylvia, for example? He's constantly moving the reader and the audience on, and I think that energy was a very clear first impression of the play. We don't need this scene – we don't need this scene – just stick with me, because I'm telling a really exciting story.

Another first impression would be that it's not a complicated piece. In the writing there is one plot and not really any subplot. It's about the fortunes of four young people. It's very clear and pure. Also there's the fact that in the world of the play the virtues of the young triumph over the virtues of the older, the more corrupt, the more politically aware. And I think that's a very beautiful thing about the play, that love does triumph, and constancy triumphs, and innocence and naivety triumph over the forces of darkness. So I was very excited on my first reading of the play.

### **How did you settle on your concept?**

It's very difficult to explain how I arrived on this concept, because it was actually a feeling rather than an idea. I studied English at university, and it took me about six years to stop reading a play as if it were a text that needed an essay written about it, and to start reading a play with my heart. I think what I've just been talking about, the fact that love triumphs, means you have to give the play a setting where that is possible. To me one of the most romantic eras of all time is the 1930s. There were so many things going on in the world, but there were also all these wonderful Hollywood films about people coming to the big city. It's all about future and possibility and romance. I look at those 1930s films, and I buy the happy ending, because I've

suspended my modern disbelief of those things, because it happened then. And I knew the play had to be set in the past, so to me the 1930s was the perfect setting. In a strange kind of way it's one of the last ages of innocence. I think particularly after the Second World War, when the world, or certainly Western Europe, woke up to all the darkness that was possible – I think that was when Europe and America grew up. But I think in the 1930s the western world was still quite innocent.

### **What's at the heart of the play?**

I find that quite hard to answer, because if you could put the heart of this play down on a postcard you wouldn't have to see the play. It's multi-layered. I think what's at the heart of the play for me, and this can't be a one-word answer, is a universe that is benevolent where you know that the good are going to triumph over the not so good – it's about redemption, I think. I think that's a very important thing in the play. Constancy triumphs, and the mistaken, the wicked, even the slightly naughty are forgiven by the play, because I think at the heart of the play there is a belief that human beings are fundamentally good.

### **How was it working on one of Shakespeare's lesser-known plays? What were the advantages of that? What did you find the problems were?**

I found no disadvantages, personally speaking. I found it incredibly liberating to work on a play that not many people know – and a play that I don't know. So I've been absolutely just as creatively free as I would be working on a new play – even more creatively free, because the writer's been in the ground for 400 years. So I found that incredibly liberating, and not a problem.

Something I have found a problem is other people's attitudes towards the play, and I've fought like a tiger against this throughout the production. There is an idea about *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* that it is a sort of prologue to his greater writing. And I disagree with that, I think the play stands up on its own. And the difference between the Two Gentlemen and some of the plays, something like Hamlet – it's the difference between a seventeen-year-old boy and a forty-five-year-old man. A forty-five year-old man has experience of lies, has had his existential crisis or is indeed having his existential crisis, and is wondering about the meaning of life. A seventeen-year-old boy, on the other hand, is at the beginning of his life. And that's what this play represents. It's about possibility, future, hope, excitement and a belief that everything's going to be OK, which is what you're like when you're seventeen. And I don't think that's minor – I think it's major – I think that's part of the human development.

### **You added certain scenes to the play as well, and there was some editing. Where and why did you feel that was necessary?**

I've added two scenes that aren't in the play at all, which are our street scenes. They are not textually based, but I wanted the audience to experience Valentine's excitement of arriving in a new city. He's never been in a city before and it's a huge plot leap from leaving Verona at the end of Act I Scene 1 to the next time we see him in the text when he's already in love with Sylvia. We don't know who Sylvia is or the world that she inhabits. I believe very strongly that

in Shakespeare plays things shouldn't always make sense, and that the writer is able to bring his audience with him in a way that many modern writers aren't. So I didn't want it to totally make sense, but some scenes were so appealing to me that I wanted to see them, so I put them in. In terms of cutting the play we've cut very little, apart from some of the more obscure jokes in the comedy scenes – in the scenes, for example, between Proteus and Speed (Act I Scene 1) and some of the bandiage between Launce and Speed towards the end of the first half, in Act III Scene 1. I've pared those down. And I have also slightly rewritten Eglamour's story. In the text he agreed to go with Sylvia on her elopement, on her travel to Valentine, and in the text it's not clear why he abandons her. And I've tried to explain that scene in the form of a fight scene.

### **What were your working methods in rehearsal?**

The play's the thing. That's where it all starts. All of us in the room are there to serve the play. I like to work collaboratively. I have very clear ideas about the play myself, but they don't work unless the actors are living the play. I see my role as helping the actors towards the text, and helping the audience towards the text, because actually in performance the relationship is between the actors, the text and the audience. What I've tried to do in rehearsal is to take the play very seriously – I haven't treated it as a light comedy. Everything that happens in the play matters to everybody in it. So throughout rehearsals I've been encouraging the actors to take their predicaments seriously, however preposterous they might seem, to remove judgement in terms of 'my characters' bad', 'my character's good'. You've just got to play the text. If the actors believe in it then so will the audience.

### **How did you find working with the singing and the dancing and all the music?**

Absolute pleasure. I think that production for me has been a departure – I've never done a production like this before, which has had so much singing and so much dancing in it. I think the most I've ever done has been one song in a play before. However, to capture the energy of the city, to capture the energy of the court, which I think is quite a decadent and excited energy, we've got four dances in the play that aren't in the script. We've also got one song in the play that isn't in the script. The music to me is a vital ingredient in the production. It's set in the early jazz age, and the sound is very excited, very modern in a way. But to our very aching modern ears it's also very innocent, beautiful and vibrant. Without the music this production would not be the same. It is the energy of the play.

### **How did you decide on your design, and what were the problems working towards being in the mobile auditorium and having two shows that had to tour?**

Initially it seemed impossible. David's design concept for *Julius Caesar* and my design concept for *Two Gentlemen* seemed absolutely remote. David's doing modern industrial bleakness and I'm doing 1930s romance. How do those two things meet up? We knew we had to share certain elements of the set, being the floor and the back wall, and I think the design we've settled on serves both plays extremely well. For *Two Gents* the challenge was creating

three different universes. We have the universe of Verona, which is a kind of 1930s country house intimacy and stagnation, followed by the wild world of Milan. Both on the street and at Court this is a very sophisticated and energised world. This is followed by the world in which the play ends, the world of the outlaws, only referred to in the text as a hill outside Mantua. So we adapted it to be a forest. The action is very fast-moving and flowing so I've tried to be as simple as possible. For the world of Verona we are in a sepia world of browns and yellows and muted colours. It's a very warm world, but also a very stagnating world. In Milan we're in black, white, grey and red. It's very sharp. For the outlaws the staging is very simple and achieved through dappled greens and shadows. Each of our three separate universes are achieved both musically and through the lights. The music is the big signifier of where we are, the emotional universe we're in, as well as the physical universe.

**Did you do any specific research, or was there anything that really sparked your imagination for it, be it films or music or anything, that you thought 'yes this absolutely captures it for me'?**

It's a strange thing. What I always thought when I approached this play was that I was just trying to do the play. I know a lot through my past studies about the 1930s. But I think the thing that has most influenced it has been the experience of my own family. My mother and father are both Irish and they left Ireland in the 1950s. My mother was 17 and she left a farm in Donegal and came to London to be a nurse. And I think actually it's the way she talked about that experience that's bedded itself in my subconscious and has actually come out in this production. It's the excitement of coming from a tiny place, a place where not much happens, into a thriving twentieth century metropolis. And I think actually it's been personal experience or family experience more than any research I've done that has influenced the production. And it's also a personal taste – I just happen to love 1930s films, and I find them incredibly romantic. I abandon all my modern cynicism and I enjoy them, and I cry at the happy endings. I love *It Happened One Night* which is wonderful.

**How did you decide on casting? What were the problems in having to cast for both shows, and what were you looking for within the cast?**

The usual – very good actors. Also this isn't different to any other play I do, I like to cast good company members because I find it very difficult to work in an environment where there's any kind of outside strain going on, in terms of difficult egos. David and I luckily agreed taste-wise on all our actors. And it was actually very easy to cast, because although we saw many, many good actors, some were just perfect. For example, Simon Watts walked in the door and I said 'Yeah, you're Speed'. I must have seen 25 – 30 actors for Speed, and he was just my one. I think it really helped me that I had a very clear idea of the universe of the play and who everybody was, and also what style of production it was.

**How did you approach the problem of Proteus's changeable affections?**

I think that was also something going on in my mind when I decided to set the play when I did and how I did. It is difficult in the play that Proteus is totally in love with one woman and then is totally in love with another woman. Now if he is in the same environment for the whole of the play that becomes far less forgivable than if he is in one environment at the beginning, a very sheltered, claustrophobic and dead universe, and then he goes to the most exciting place in the world. I think Proteus falls in love with the city, falls in love with the lifestyle, and therefore falls in love with Sylvia. She's a star, she's the most famous person in Milan. I think he forgets his roots – I think he forgets who he is, for the duration of the Milan scenes, and then comes back to himself in the forest. So that was something I bore in mind. It's a difficulty in the play if Proteus is basically in the same environment – he's just a ghastly bloke, who just prefers one woman over the other for no reason whatsoever.

**What about the issue of the rape in the play?**

Well, it's in the writing. Proteus says to Sylvia that if she won't have him, after he's been so reasonable, he's going to take her by force, which is a difficulty to any woman, never mind a modern twenty-first century woman. That's a difficulty in the play – how do we retain sympathy with Proteus? My personal belief about Proteus is that even if he was allowed to carry on he would not be able to go through with it. Apart from the fact that Valentine's there in the bushes and interrupts him he would not have been able to carry it through himself.

**What about the end of the play, and the fact that you've got a lot of things happening in a very short space of time?**

I've got no problem with it whatsoever. I did when I first read it. I thought a lot happens in fifty lines. The Duke comes on, everyone is forgiven, and it's a happy ending. And I thought 'is this not preposterous?' But actually, given the energy of the play and given everything that happens in the play, given that it's about love, anything can happen. Given that the four protagonists are young, that's absolutely not a problem for me any more. I think it's a strange thing in the play that the Duke pops up at the end, but what I've tried to do is create an environment where the Duke also is out of his depth, just in the same way that the lovers are. The Duke and Thurio roll up at the end of the play, but they've met the outlaws who have stripped them of all their clothes. They arrive on stage in their underwear, and they are as vulnerable and as open to change as everybody else in the play.

## **Interview with Alex Avery**

*Actor Alex Avery talks to Assistant Director, Gemma Fairlie, about playing Valentine, in the RSC's 2004 regional touring production of **The Two Gentlemen of Verona** directed by Fiona Buffini. The cast rehearsed the play simultaneously with **Julius Caesar**.*

**Alex, how did you find the rehearsal period? What were the problems and the good things about it?**

I liked and I didn't like the rehearsals upstairs and downstairs. I liked it because it's very concentrating and you get very used to doing both plays at the same time. What I didn't like is that the management of time doesn't favour someone who needs to focus on a character. The energy as an actor is great, but actually developing a character is thwarted because if you're downstairs doing one thing and then you're coming upstairs and you're dancing, you're ending up much more about technical things and not actually thinking about how one scene leads to another. So the character development was much slower than I'm used to.

However, the energy as an actor was good, because you've got the feeling that you're in a company, and you realise that actually the important thing is the show rather than an individual contribution.

**What was it like working with both styles, and trying to jump between the two directors?**

Usually you learn to adapt to other people's ways quicker. David and Fiona and I would have adapted to our ways of doing things much quicker if it was concentrated on one show per week. When you're doing two shows you can quite often get to the fourth week before you realise what a director's asking you to do. They're set in their ways of doing things and they're not allowing you to do your thing, and likewise I'm set in my thing and I'm not responding to what they want me to do. So that whole process is much, much longer.

It's good because you get used to approaching a character in a different way than I would have otherwise done it. You also need to learn lines quicker if you're rehearsing both shows. It's not very forgiving, being pressured into learning lines when that's not the way you do things.

In hindsight, doing two shows at the same time, I'd rather have been cast earlier for them, and been able to study Valentine more, because there was just no time. Starting both plays from scratch there wasn't enough time to get a good solid foundation on where I'm approaching rehearsals from as Valentine.

**How are you feeling about them now that you're on tour doing both? How has that affected it? How are you responding to that?**

That's much better, because now you have the characters. All the stuff that I would have thought about in the first week of rehearsal I'm thinking about now, which is great because it

keeps the whole thing fresh. Ideally you'd have a sketch of the character in your mind before you start, and then the rehearsal process would provide a skeleton and then the performance would clothe it, and you would refer back to your original sketch. This way round, you don't get the sketch. Effectively you're given the skeleton, and it's only now that I'm developing the detail. That's true of both, Decius and Valentine. Doing them both together it's fantastic – you learn to relax and appreciate an audience when you're not doing very much, comparatively, in Caesar, although of course there are bits where you're busy. You can take that energy and put it into Valentine the next day. It's much more daunting though, it's a slower process, getting everything together, and realising that you have to take the whole play as one continuous journey, whereas in Caesar you can come in and out of it.

In most scenes that Valentine's in, he is driving them, whereas in the scene that Decius Brutus is in he's more reactive. In doing both you can enjoy the differences. Working with a company you feel slightly selfish when you're Valentine, there's no time to enjoy being part of the company as you're making sure you get everything right, whereas with Decius Brutus you can enjoy the company feel, and yet at the same time respect the people who are doing what I'm doing in the other show. So it's a nice balance.

### **What was your first impression of the play and of Valentine when you first read it?**

My first impression of the play was that it was fun, and not particularly focused, but just a general romance story. Therefore my first impression of Valentine was nice, because he's not Lysander in *Midsummer Night's Dream* – he's got more simplicity, he's not airy-fairy as Lysander – he's a bit more human. You can relate to him a lot more with modern emotions which was attractive.

The relationship with Sylvia is very quick and simple and easy, as is the relationship with Proteus – because it's Proteus who breaks that relationship, not Valentine. Then the meat is that Fiona's interpretation of the play has given it far more depth. I didn't have any doubts about the play as such, but for example the outlaw scene I saw as much more the Pirates of Penzance, not because that's the way I was judging the play but because that's the way it came up off the paper.

However, the way that Fiona has adapted it by making the outlaws a serious element of the play, and by setting the production in 1930's Verona and creating the New York/London sort of contrast she's made it a very clear production. You can then put things like the outlaws in and say 'now let's just take this seriously and see where that takes us.'

I don't think there's a lot of depth to Valentine. I think he's a fairly straightforward character in the sense that he is who he is. It was more the play in general which was a nice surprise, to make something really quite substantial out of something which originally didn't seem so.

### **How would you describe Valentine and what do you think drives him?**

He's just a nice bloke, really. He's intelligent, well grounded and trustworthy. A lot of people keep saying 'oh, he's naïve – here he is being duped again'. He's not, he just doesn't expect people to be manipulative or Machiavellian. He doesn't see that side, I suppose he doesn't need to. He's not manipulative in any way, and I genuinely don't see him as naïve or

stupid. Even in the scene with the Duke I don't see it as 'Oh God, poor old Valentine, he's got himself into another stupid situation.' He hasn't got himself into a stupid situation, other people have put him into a stupid situation. If people are trying to be clever around him, that's their problem, not his. Until he got to Milan he didn't realise that people needed to be more manipulative in what they do, more clandestine in how they go about things. I think that what takes him by surprise. I suppose in that sense he's naïve, but he pretty soon adapts. And by the end of it you realise that he is the nice guy.

**Why do you think he does the things he does? What motivates him throughout the play?**

He is someone who will look to maximise his situation. At the beginning to maximise his situation he has to leave Verona and Proteus, because there's obviously not much going on there. So he just says 'OK, well I'm old enough now to go off and do my own thing. It's sad, but if Proteus is going to be all melancholic then I'm not going to hang around.' He knows what he needs to do in order to maximise his enjoyment and happiness. Likewise with Sylvia he's not running away with Sylvia in order to be naughty or in order to be deceptive. I think he's genuinely running away because he and Sylvia don't belong in this glitzy 1930s Milan. All they want is each other, and they'd be happy in a forest together. So long as they're with each other they don't want all the fineries of Thurio's suits and the Duke's possessions. It's a very brave thing to do, to run off with the Duke's daughter. The only dilemma I would have with Valentine's character in this is why he doesn't approach the Duke? The problem is that it's not explained in the play. There are certain things you just have to do because that's the way the play's written. I don't think Valentine means to be dishonest, it's just that there's not enough time in the play to explain why he probably just couldn't get through to the Duke. I think Valentine running away with Sylvia his daughter is more because of the Duke's misgivings than Valentine's precociousness.

**How did you develop your relationship with Proteus and with Laurence who's playing the part?**

I think Fiona had her idea of how she saw it, and I think it's fair to say it was more our job to fit in with that, which is fair enough because she had such a good vision of the play as a whole that you have to accept her vision of the intricacies of that master plan. The relationship with Proteus has probably been more led by Fiona's choices in the overall sense but the intricacies, such as the playfulness, are ours. We approached Act I Scene 1 playfully, and then we decided we should maybe make it more dour, but we actually came back to the way we'd originally played it. I think the writing naturally brought us back to a situation which is much more frivolous.

The first scene I find very natural, it's an interpretation of Valentine I would completely go with, he's easygoing and can't say goodbye, they're two mates – I have friends and I can relate to that very easily. The scene where it's slightly harder is where he is explaining to Proteus that, like him, he is completely and utterly in love and that life is altered now. That's the scene where I would say I'm acting more, in the sense that it's something that I wouldn't do. Equally it's much easier to act because it's not like I'm coming in as Lysander, who's saying 'Oh

the mists and dews of April dawns' and stuff. The language is much easier, even when he does have the speech about 'the sands are pearl, the waters // and the rocks pure gold.' The images are so clear that that its actually quite easy, and you just accept the language that he's using to describe his love.

Valentine uses very simple language, which makes it much easier to actually do something that I wouldn't usually do – I wouldn't be that effusive about love. And as a result there's a relationship between Valentine and Proteus which I think is purely born out of rehearsals. I don't think either myself or Laurence came into that scene thinking 'OK this is how we're going to do it', whereas we did in the first scene. So that scene kind of took care of itself. And I think myself and Laurence get on with each other, which I think is important. Most of what we do we've had a laugh with and we then brought that dynamic into the rehearsal room when and where we can.

**How did you feel about the technical aspects of the production – when it was set, the costumes, the dancing – how did that affect you and what response do you have to that?**

During the rehearsal process I'd rather not have been in so many of the dances but I would say that is what makes the production, to be honest. It's the sense of taking it away from the individuals and making it more about the circumstance. The first meeting I had with Fiona we sat down and she said her plans, and a play that was until that moment slightly wishy-washy suddenly made absolute sense. The dishevelled yesterday's money of two families in provincial England, trapped in stately homes that they actually really can't afford to run anymore. From this you suddenly go to New York, where it's the beginnings of the American dream. Everything's possible, and everyone has a massive drive to what they're doing. You've got an immediate contrast. By setting it in the 30s it's a very easy period to define. It has massive elegance, which is what you need from Sylvia, because really Valentine and Proteus fall in love with the elegance of Sylvia as much as the beauty of Sylvia. Proteus certainly falls in love with the picture of Sylvia, I think Valentine sees through her image much quicker. The picture of Sylvia is not necessarily true to her, it reflects a life and a period that they've never seen before. Proteus would probably have fallen in love with anyone who walked down the street in a silk dress and a fur coat, because he'd never seen it before, that sort of celebrity dazzle. You fall in love with the celebrity not the person. Setting it then ironed out so many of the problems of the play. It becomes about so much more than just 'oh, it's a play about somebody who falls in love with someone'. The characters, and the audience, have to fall for 'Milan' as well and the way you make an audience fall for Milan is by making it very stylised, very bright, very beautiful and very bold. The songs, the dancing and also the directed scenes, the street scenes are all part of a process to get the audience to react the same way that Valentine and Proteus reacted, which is just to fall in love with an idea, a concept. For that, the dancing and music is absolutely invaluable.

**On the regional tour you're going all over the place in areas that don't necessarily have much theatre. How have you felt that people have received you, and what do feel is important that people take from this tour?**

I don't feel that we have really met as many of the public as we would have liked. There are several reasons – one, because it's not arranged – two, because I think provincially people don't have a habit of hanging round in the bar afterwards and approaching actors – and thirdly, a lot of the places haven't had bars, so it's not been very obvious where you could meet the actors should you wish to. I think that's very sad on this tour because I think that's half of the point of it, to get the reaction of these local people, a lot of whom don't go to the theatre regularly, and some of whom may not ever have been to the theatre, or more likely haven't seen Shakespeare before. The people we have met, usually schoolchildren who are studying it, they're the ones with the confidence to come up and say 'Look, I'm studying it. I've never seen Shakespeare before. Can you tell us about what it was like? I thought it was amazing'. There was one girl saying that she never thought she'd laugh at Shakespeare, and she had a fantastic time.

There was a boy in Ellesmere Port who said 'I didn't understand anything that went on, but I really, really loved it. I loved the costumes, I loved the sets, and I loved the whole production. I really enjoyed the performances but I don't think I understood it. But I found it really funny.' I asked him 'Well, did you get the story?' He assumed that he hadn't because it was too difficult to understand what was going on because of the language barrier but when he started to explain it, it was clear that he had. He was probably putting himself down, because he hadn't studied Shakespeare, and thought it was the sort of thing that no one can grasp unless they've studied it.

What we're proving to people is that you don't have to – all you have to do is go along. I think the education side of the tour is fantastic and that's one of the reasons I did it. It's a shame that we don't interact more, you want to because you genuinely want to know what people thought. The more people I can meet who have never seen Shakespeare before, coming up to me and saying 'We really enjoyed that. We didn't think we were going to', that's the best praise you could possibly get. You do the show, and then I think that post-show discussions are as important to the tour as the show itself.

## **Interview with Laurence Mitchell**

*Actor Laurence Mitchell talks about playing Proteus, in the RSC's 2004 regional touring production of **The Two Gentlemen of Verona** directed by Fiona Buffini.*

### **How did you find the rehearsal period, and what were the problems and the good things you found in doing it?**

I always find the rehearsal period very interesting, very bewildering, very scary, very vulnerable. I think all actors should be vulnerable when they're rehearsing, or otherwise they play safe. I'm always mistrustful when actors seem to know what they're doing from very early on. I never know what I'm doing even when I'm doing it! I also haven't done any Shakespeare properly, professionally. It's very challenging – I don't think acting is easy at all, although some people would have you believe it is quite easy, or it comes natural to them.

### **What was your first impression of Proteus?**

It's a very difficult question to answer, when you've been with someone for three months or whatever it is now, you sort of forget, don't you? We do that with our friends, it only tends to be romantic situations where you have a very strong memory of how someone first was when you first met them.

I always look for the situation and what's going on, and it's an incredibly interesting situation, isn't it? Here's this boy who, like we all do when we're very young and full of life and not old and staid, (I've got to stop inferring things), he believes something totally, completely. He believes he knows exactly how the world is and he's found this gorgeous young girl and that's it.

Then circumstances are altered beyond his control, and his whole world is literally turned upside down. His belief system goes out of the window, everything is out of the window. That's a fascinating situation to play, particularly when everyone else all around you all seem to be trying to work out 'why is this person such a bastard?' That was said a lot. How are you going to justify this person's behaviour? How could you ever play Adolf Hitler, or Fred West, or anyone, if you can't? Of course that's a much worse example but what I'm trying to say is that one of the golden rules of acting is that you never, ever judge your character. You don't even come close to standing outside yourself and judging your character.

Many people would say that what Proteus does in this play is not right but actually from the very beginning, and I may be a bit mad but I never even thought, not for one moment thought 'that's not great, is it?'. I just thought 'that's interesting.' He's obviously a very impulsive person as well, and he follows his heart, wherever that may lead him. At any moment in the play he seems to totally believe what he's doing.

### **What drives Proteus?**

Do you want the short, crude answer? Because I do think that's a lot to do with it. It's a lot to do with the first proper awakening – I don't mean puberty, when we become aware of our own bodies – I mean there's a massive shift in all of us when we become aware that thing that I now have, now that I've gone through puberty, if it connects with a member of the opposite sex, is also something incredibly – I don't know how to finish that sentence! But I do think that's a big part of it.

There's a connection – and it has to be with Julia, as well, it can't be just some sort of romantic, idealised version of what love is – he wants to have sex with her as well. But its not just about sex, I do think that there's some sort of a romantic part, an ideal, behind it as well. Otherwise it would just be about trying to shag anyone, and he's very specific about who he tries to get with. He wants to be with the most glamorous and the most beautiful woman in the world, he's seduced – it's all her fault. It's not his fault – he's done nothing wrong at all, except remain open.

### **What do you think is the key to your character, and how did you find that?**

I think actually that the key to his character is loyalty. I think he's an incredibly loyal person. I really do – I believe that wholeheartedly. I think there's no turmoil if that's not true. For a start, he genuinely wouldn't care. I think his capacity to love is quite extraordinary actually. It's incredibly important in his relationship with Valentine, and it's incredibly important in his relationship with Julia. Actually it's not as important in the relationship with Sylvia but it's what he thinks is happening. This happens to us all, doesn't it, sometimes?

There's a big difference between love and infatuation. When I play it I do believe that I'm in love with her but at the end of the play he comes to the realisation 'what have I been doing?' – like we all have – we've all become obsessed and started thinking about only one person, all the time. Wayne Rooney. You just can't get him off your mind. And you see his freckles in everyone you look at. Or whoever it is you're obsessed with. Then something happens, and you realise that actually it's much, much more about you than it is about that person. It's projecting onto someone else, something which I do believe is ultimately nowhere near as profound as his love for his best friend or his love for Julia. He becomes spellbound, hypnotised.

### **What about his relationship with the Verona characters, with home, with dad? How does that factor into his character?**

There's only one scene with his father but it seems to me that they're quite distant from each other actually, and he's been left alone to deal with his life. I mean he'll have a nanny and things like that, people who do all the sort of domesticated things for him, but it's not unlike the relationship between the Duke of Edinburgh and the Prince of Wales, for instance. I think that by the time the play starts he's at a point where I'm not even sure he even questions it – it's just the way it is.

### **What about Proteus' – or indeed your – relationship as an actor with the audience?**

Starting to do the play in front of an audience threw up things that sort of shocked me when they first happened, like for instance when they laugh in the soliloquies. The first time they laugh is at the beginning of the first soliloquy, 'Remembrance of my former love. Is by a newer object quite forgotten', and I reveal that something really strange has just taken place when I was in the presence of this woman. I didn't think they'd laugh – I don't know what I thought they'd do. It's not for me to judge how the audience they want to take anything. All I can do is be as truthful with why I think I'm behaving in the way I'm behaving. Anything beyond that I think is incredibly unhelpful, because any audience is entitled to come to any opinion they want to, for a start. I do get much more of a sense than I thought I was going to get that they actually quite enjoy it all, as well.

There's a strange sort of collusion on their part, from their laughing I get a sense that they are with me. I often get a laugh at the beginning of the second half of the play, Act III Scene 2, when the Duke and Thurio ask me what might be done, and I walk downstage and I often smile at that point. They all laugh like 'we don't know what you're about to say, do we, you little toe rag?' I have got a lot of "tuts" as well. Last week, in the second soliloquy, when I was talking about getting Valentine banished, I had a whole bank on stage right who were tutting all the way through that, going 'ttt...ohhh...ttt...ohhh God...ttt'. I don't mind that.

We go to the theatre, we watch films, we read books, we watch all these stories so that we can understand things about our own lives, so everything should be up there, not just sweetness and light. The idea that someone could be unfaithful – it isn't the worst sin in the world, but it's not very helpful or conducive to everyone being happy, is it, and it's something that we are all aware of.

### **How does Proteus view the audience when you're talking to them?**

The realisation I've come to, is that despite everything I've just said, they're not there to judge you. Particularly in those soliloquies it has to be an incredibly safe place, like they're all collectively your best friend – except not my best friend in this case because I'm being disloyal to him. It's not therapy but it's not unlike the role a therapist would have, in terms of someone who's going to listen to you completely, without judgement, and allow you the space and time to find the answers yourself.

### **How did you find the world of the play, and setting it in the 1930s? How did that affect your choices and your process?**

I totally disregard it. It's quite strange, you see, when someone has such a strong concept, like Fiona. When I went to meet her for the audition she had already decided that this was how she was going to do this play and that this was the way in. So the whole thing comes as a package in that sense because we're not all sitting round and thinking 'where are we going to do with this? Where are we going to put this?' That has already been set up, you take it for granted – you have to, because that's what she's decided and she's the director. From the very, very beginning you're working with that.

So for me – I know this isn't true and it might sound a bit mad – but for me the *Two Gentlemen of Verona* is set in the 1930s, because my whole relationship with the play has been with that as well. I do think philosophically you could argue that it is the last great innocent age that we've had. Even though we'd had the Great War, the Second World War was much more devastating. Not in terms of numbers dead, but something profound happened after that, when we split Europe up and we went into the Cold War and everyone potentially could be dead within five minutes if the right crazy guy hit the wrong button, or the wrong crazy guy hit the right button. I agree with Fiona that the 1930's really does work as there's something very innocent about the play as well, and the way the play looks at the world, in spite of the fact that it goes to this very dark place in terms of what my character does in the play. The message of the play is one that's ultimately optimistic. Love and all the right things win in the end.

**For the people who come to see the show, what would be the one thing you would hope they would take from the show or from watching Proteus' journey?**

Ultimately they'd take whatever they want to take from it, whether that's exhilaration or they get really excited or they get bored stiff, and they think 'I never want to watch the RSC ever again'. Or whatever - it's ultimately up to them, what they want to take away from it. The only thing I hope, and it's nothing to do with me and it's nothing to do with the play even, I hope that they in some way start to love the theatre, or going to the theatre, because that happened to me when I was young. I just found it so exciting. That's why I don't think that television or film can ever win in that way, because we all love live theatre, we like to see things happening right in front of us. The smell of it, the excitement of being in there, I think that's it.

So even if you do a whole tour like this – I don't know what the figures are – how many people we play to, but it must be a few thousand and there's just three kids who come along out of 50,000 and their lives change in some profound way. Or one becomes a writer and writes the best thing you've ever seen on television in twenty-five years, and then influences another eighteen people to go and do something else. I'm not sure if that's what I hope happens, but I like the idea of that very much.

## Interview with Rachel Pickup

*Actress Rachel Pickup talks about playing Sylvia, in the RSC's 2004 regional touring production of **The Two Gentlemen of Verona** directed by Fiona Buffini. The play was rehearsed by the same cast simultaneously with **Julius Caesar**.*

### **How did you find the rehearsal period?**

It's my first ever time doing something in rep so that was something to get to grips with. Once I'd got my head round that, the rehearsals for *Two Gentlemen* were joyful, because the atmosphere that was created in that room was one where you could play or you could experiment. Also because of the nature of the play, and because of the way Fiona had set it up being about love, and wanting to take that very seriously, it was just a very loving environment.

With the joyful music from the period, and knowing that we would be wearing gorgeous things it really did help to infuse an atmosphere and make it a really nice place to be in.

Work-wise Fiona allowed us to be very free. She didn't impose anything on us. It was all just about finding details. She knew what she wanted but she let you get there in your own way. I think she's very good at working out what individual people need. I think that subtly she would work with people in different ways. She knew instinctively what people needed.

### **Was there anything you'd have liked to change?**

Occasionally, to be honest, I did think I was spending all my time on dancing and nothing on the text. But that's only what I felt at the time – I know with hindsight that it wasn't the case. And also I loved doing the dancing. I'm really glad we had the opportunity. It was amazing. As I said to Lynn (the choreographer) I would love to think that I could keep it up as a skill. I hate doing gym but I'd love to try and do that now.

If ever I'm unemployed again, which I'm sure I will be, I'll do dance classes instead of gym. It feels good and it's a brilliant skill to have as an actor. And it would make doing something like this again in the future easier, I suppose. It was hard work and frustrating when I didn't get it right *straight away*. But that's normal actor's frustration.

### **When you first read the play, what were your first impressions of Sylvia?**

It would be very hard to remember that, really, because I know where Sylvia is at now. On a really basic level I knew she was somebody young and inexperienced, and on the brink of life and love. When somebody is an innocent, I think a lot of things do come with that. I didn't think she was grand, I didn't think she was hoity-toity, or playing the young empress, she wasn't somebody with pretensions or anything like that. I thought she was an innocent, and full of life and full of hope, and romantic, deeply romantic. Beyond that, I think probably first impressions stopped there.

What Fiona did with the play was that she brought a lot more out of it than I at first saw. Hopefully any rehearsal period should do that. But the worlds that Fiona created, and the life that she's given particularly to Sylvia, because I think there's a lot there on the page for Julia, Proteus and Valentine but for Sylvia I think it's quite woefully under-written, she's really fleshed out my character's life, with the big party scene. That is Sylvia's life thirst. And in order to have the payoff in Act II you've got to really see the joy and the beauty of this glorious life first, which isn't in the script. It's not there, and she's given me that, which I'm really, really grateful for.

**What do you think drives Sylvia?**

Love and being honest with herself. Really simple, but that's what makes her brave, knowing very strongly that she must follow her heart, her gut.

**What did you find was the key to Sylvia's character, and how did you find it?**

For me there isn't one key – it's the cumulative process, and it's just every step, every element of the rehearsal room, and yes, the costumes, the music. Obviously it's what's on the page first and foremost, and just what you find.

**Do you have three words that describes Sylvia?**

Full of life, and all that that involves, and everything about that, which is obviously huge.

**How important is Sylvia's background and her family to the character and the choices she makes during the play?**

It is obviously very important. The choices that she makes in this play are made braver than they would be if she wasn't from a particular type of background. At that time, and in that kind of family, to go against your father is a big, brave step to make. I know it still happens now, in all kinds of different families and all kinds of different cultures, where you are obliged to make certain decisions that please your family. Sylvia was effectively being forced into an arranged marriage. Her father had discovered the man he thought was perfect for her because of the size of his possessions, and that was what was planned. So to go against that was a really, really big thing, and an unusual thing and a brave thing.

It's funny, we didn't do any sort of work on relationships – we didn't do relationship exercises and things like that. You just take certain relationships as a given, when you come to them. And when it's there in the script, when it's set up like that you just accept it. And no, when you're having to make that choice in Act III Scene 1 or whatever, to run away, the stakes are at their very highest. And that's what's crucial – for me that's what's crucial is playing that in a moment, rather than having done hours of background work on our relationship. I just accept that, because it's there.

**How did you research for her? Were there any images or anything particular that stuck out that really captured Sylvia for you?**

Whenever I'm doing any part I always find that subconsciously I find myself reading books or seeing films that just sort of drip-feed into what I'm doing. In fact when we were rehearsing this I found myself watching so many old black and white movies and musicals, partly to get a sense of the period and partly to get a sense of that – Fiona always described Sylvia as a superstar, going everywhere with a bodyguard. So watching things like *Singing in the Rain* again and just seeing how the film stars of that time were treated, which is the same way that Fiona wanted Sylvia to be treated just helps to remind you of the way people move and carry themselves – it's just feeding an atmosphere subconsciously into me.

**How did you come to terms with the text? Do you still have any problem lines, or were there lines during rehearsal where you thought 'I'm never going to get this.' Or any lines where you thought 'My God, this is my line – I'm so pleased'?**

Definitely there were some problem lines – one which I still particularly dislike a lot. It's a moment, as well, when there's not much else going on, though there are a lot of people on stage, and I always feel very observed, in the wrong way.

'His worth is warrant for his welcome hither. If this is he you oft have wished to hear from.'

It feels just rather wordy to me - it's in the part though. So I'm not delighted with that line at all.

Most of what Sylvia says I really like. There's just not enough of it, especially the way it ends. I had to flick through the last act of the script when I first read it, when I first found out I was being auditioned, I had to reread it and reread

about five times to make sure I wasn't blind, and hadn't missed that Sylvia was actually in there after 'Oh Heaven!' I was astounded that that was her last line, because it felt like a completely unresolved storyline to me but I'm absolutely thrilled that we pursued it, even if it doesn't quite work yet, or sometimes. I still think it's right to not cut it, especially the moment of 'All that was mine in Sylvia I give thee'.

It's quite easy to feel it should be when you're playing in a modern day, and you know that there is so much about women being weak, or objects, and stuff. You know that every woman in the audience is going to want the women on stage to be as strong as the men, which I really believe they are. I think the women are very strong, they're doers, they don't just sit there and get told what to do, they go out and go after what they want. So hopefully we do display that sort of strength. Yet there is that expectation of not being strong when your last line is 'Oh Heaven!' – I'm about to be raped! Save me! It's worrying. I don't want to be a weak 'damsel in distress' but she is, at that moment. And that's important to show, obviously. So hopefully there's been enough courage and strength shown elsewhere for it not to be undermined by that.

**Do you think the language changes depending on the style of production?**

Yes I do actually, yeah. What I hope both these productions have in common is that the language is our own. I think that's something which I'm really striving for. I can't bear Shakespeare being put at arm's length, and it sounding like 'Shakespeare'. I think that happens quite a lot. I think on lines like that one which I said that I hate doing I know it's not my own – I'm not owning it. So I'm saying one of Shakespeare's wordy lines, or making it sound like a wordy line of Shakespeare. But yes, the production does influence the approach to language and stuff, because for example even the 1930s when we've set this, it's still a period piece. So people did talk differently, and use language differently. But always with Shakespeare the language is the thing.

## **Interview with Andrew Melville**

*Actor Andrew Melville talks about playing Launce, in the RSC's 2004 regional touring production of **The Two Gentlemen of Verona** directed by Fiona Buffini.*

**Andrew, how did you find the rehearsal period? That involves problems, the good things about it, issues you had with it.**

On the whole it wasn't bad. I enjoy rehearsing. One of the problems with playing a comic character in Shakespeare is that it's always rather difficult, because you want to try and create a real person. You don't want to have someone that just does stick-on comedy, because the audience get very bored with that. I think that's the main problem, to try and create a real character. Also you want to have something so that the audience has sympathy with you, so that they like you from the beginning. If they like you, then they will laugh.

**How was it learning the enormous monologues that Launce has? How did you find that, and how did you overcome them?**

It was quite difficult, because I knew I was playing the part before I started rehearsals, and I did in fact learn them before I started rehearsals. It's always very difficult to do that, because as an actor you tend to panic a bit, and think 'I'll never be able to learn this! I'll never be able to learn this!'

I've got a balcony in my flat and I used to sit on that balcony on sunny days just going over and over and over it. You think you have it and then you start to rehearse, and of course you're then creating another world altogether. I find it helpful, if you can, to pre-learn. I was a bit panic-stricken by them, because they are long speeches, and they're to the audience. However, that's been the rewarding thing at the end of the day. Once you have an audience in you therefore get an audience reaction. Particularly when playing comedy you can then start to play with the audience, which is great fun.

**What were your first impressions of Launce, and how have those developed or changed?**

I don't know that they've changed an awful lot, because I think on first reading you realise that he's not like anybody else in the play. He's almost in another play. Everybody else is striving for something, and wanting to achieve something. Launce doesn't want to achieve anything. He's almost happy in his unhappiness. He's quite a doleful character and he really revels in it. In no way is he going to strive and please people. He just doesn't want to do it, and he takes life at his own pace.

I think that's what the key to the character was, in making it a real person. You have somebody who is different from this grasping society that the play is set in. You've got

somebody who, if not totally content, at least accepts his lot in life. That I find interesting, and that I think an audience can respond to.

**What is Launce's relationship with the audience, and how do you go about achieving that?**

I think originally Will Kemp, who played the part for Shakespeare, who was nothing like me at all because he was a great giant of a man, presumably had a dog, and he just went on and improvised a lot of this, and then Shakespeare probably rewrote round him.

Launce has a chat with the audience, mainly talking about how unhappy his life is and how things have gone wrong in his life, and also about his dog – this dog that he absolutely loves. There is the theme in the play about somebody loving someone who doesn't love them. Launce has this problem as well. He has this dog that he would practically die for. He says he's sat in the stocks, he's stood at the pillory, all because of this dog but the dog shows him no consideration whatsoever. I think what is lovely is the fact that Launce and the dog actually demonstrate through chatting to the audience what the problem for the rest of the play is, how hung up everybody is about love.

I just enjoy it as an actor, the fact that you're given this dialogue and you can have a straight look in the eyes of members of the audience and just talk to them. It allows you to do it without getting too high-flown. You can be very grounded, and I think that an audience likes when they come to see a Shakespeare play – to see somebody who isn't three feet off the ground, but is like them, just on the ground, and talking to them. That's the fun of it, once you know the lines and you feel quite secure about it, to just be able to chat to them. You develop a relationship, a lovely human relationship, between individuals in the audience. At least I hope that's what comes across.

**What was it like, working with Ria? Have you worked with animals before? What are the problems and what are the advantages?**

I don't think I've ever worked with any animals before but Ria was great. Obviously she's a trained dog, and she's a lurcher, she's a big, big dog. I found it a little bit intimidating, because I didn't want to hurt her. She's just all bone – there's lots and lots of bone there. I was so afraid of pulling her in case I hurt something. It's not like a strong, robust dog. She seems so delicate, though of course she's not really. It was great once we got to know each other because she's fine. Particularly when she knows I've got biscuits in my pocket, I'm her friend for life.

**What are the advantages of working with her? Obviously you are on stage with other characters but you spend a great deal of time with her alone.**

It's interesting. I was a bit afraid of it to start with, because I thought you walk on stage with this enormous big dog, and everybody goes 'Ah' and thinks it's wonderful, and I thought they're not going to listen to a word I'm saying, they're just going to concentrate on the dog.

However, I find that by keeping myself and the dog close together you become like one unit. The audience starts to respond to you as one unit, rather than man with dog. In fact I just

love working with her. As long as I give her a biscuit before we start everything's fine. Occasionally there has been the odd distraction, for some reason. One performance there was a man in the audience with a very white shirt, and that attracted her attention. On another occasion there were people in wheelchairs, and she thought 'Oh this looks different – I must go and investigate.' Fortunately her movement is very slow and once she starts to move I can grab the lead in time. She's OK 90% of the time, she just yawns, she's actually bored most of the time.

**Launce has sometimes been described as a bit of an anomaly within the play. There's debate as to whether he was added later, or what role he serves. How did you find approaching the text, or being a part of the world? Did you find yourself involved, or do you think it's important that the character isn't involved?**

I think he's involved in one sense, and in another sense it may very well be that it was written later. I think possibly it was a part that Will Kemp did, and Shakespeare or whoever extended it to fit into the play. He seems very much part of the play in the sense that his attitudes and his love for this dog is very much reflected in other people's love within the play. He is a bit of a commentator on life. I'm finding this one difficult to answer, because I can't actually think that there is much relationship between him and the other people in the play, and yet it's not just a comic turn. I think that's what is important, that Launce and the dog relate to the rest of the play. I think they do in the sense of reflecting this whole issue of love, or not being loved, or placing your love in the wrong place. What happens in the rest of the play happens to Launce as well.

## **Interview with Philip Edgerley**

*Actor Philip Edgerley talks to Assistant Director, Gemma Fairlie, about playing an outlaw and understudying Proteus in the RSC's 2004 regional touring production of **The Two Gentlemen of Verona** directed by Fiona Buffini. The cast rehearsed two plays simultaneously **The Two Gentlemen of Verona** and **Julius Caesar** for the tour.*

**How did you find the rehearsal period? What did you think were the problems and the good things about working on both plays?**

The good thing is being able to work in two completely different worlds, with completely different directors who had such vastly different visions, but also working on the same writer, and the writer at different stages of his ability and career. It was absolutely fascinating. One does sort of inform the other, because you get to be familiar with certain styles of how Shakespeare works. It's really interesting and challenging as an actor – to be able to do that is really good – it stretches you. It means that you do have to go from one room to the other and just be there ready to carry on with the scene. There's no time to muck around. However that's also the bad thing, because it was absolutely exhausting. Sometimes I would not be quite sure what room I was in or what I was doing, or what scene I was playing and which character. But you get through that and it's fine. So I really enjoyed it, but it was really hard work.

**In the rehearsal period for Two Gents you had a lot to do, especially within the crowd scenes. Talk to me about the street scenes and how you felt developing those, and how your journey happened in those.**

The street scenes were really interesting because I knew about those from Fiona at the audition, and I thought it was a really interesting idea to be able to see these principal characters arriving and doing all their things. Yet what happened, to my surprise, was that they weren't actually the focus. The focus was about creating this world, this 1930s, slightly geographically non-specific world, where every single person had a story to tell.

My story, as a photographer in two of them, and as an outlaw in a slightly smaller street scene, was really interesting. It means that even if you were playing what might be considered a minor role it still meant that there was a line, a through line, that wasn't written, but that Fiona had put in place for us to be able to just develop the characters. It fires your imagination. What was also very good fun about it was having big company scenes. Everybody was there and it was like a big boiling pot of 'let's throw it all in and just see what happens', and what happens I think is pretty amazing. It startles an audience, there's this burst of energy, and that's contagious for actors. When you work like that everybody picks up on each other's energy, and you all run with it, and no one lets the ball drop. So I found that really exciting to do. There are big focal points that make this particular production of Two Gents very individual. It's great to be part of that.

**As an Outlaw how did you find the outlaw scenes? They've been an issue in the past and people sometimes question the writing in them, so how did you approach them? What difficulties did you have with it?**

We did wonder about the writing in them to begin with, we were all quite open about that. Fiona said from the start that these were problem scenes. They are a problem because the writing in them is very dated. There's a lot of Shakespeare that isn't. Some of the specific problems with the outlaw scenes are that they are meant to be this hard group of villains, of criminals, but suddenly within in the space of half a page of writing they decide to make this complete stranger their king. What we did in order to resolve that and make it believable for a modern-day audience was to look at different ways that might happen. Were there ulterior motives? Do we take the text at face value? Or do we find out if there's something hidden going on that perhaps the audience doesn't see? – which is sort of the avenue we went down.

There was definitely an idea that these guys weren't silly, they knew what they wanted. It is a challenge when you're faced with a difficult scene to make it believable and the first thing you have to do is buy into it, which initially perhaps we didn't. Fiona was quite aware of that. But once you commit to it and people start throwing out open ideas, then half the work's done. They're really interesting scenes. Sometimes they can be received by an audience in quite a comic way and other times people really perceived a threat in them. I think that both of those elements are really important.

**There's obviously quite a lot of singing and dancing the production. Tell me about your response to that and how you felt dealing with that.**

If I had been told by Fiona at the audition 'you are going to be singing a main line in an accappella song, and learning to lindyhop, I would have turned the job down. I'm almost positive I would have done that, despite whatever I had in *Julius Caesar*, because the idea terrifies me. I was never a singer and dancer at college. I did a one-year post-grad course, so we didn't have that much time to focus on that sort of stuff. I am so, so pleased that I didn't know about that, because it has meant effectively that I've learnt completely new skills that I didn't know I had.

The dancing was extremely tough physically, and not being a dancer I don't have the mentality of a dancer, which involves all sorts of things that actors aren't. The discipline is different. I used to find myself during rehearsals not actually wanting the dance sessions to finish, because even though I could barely walk I wanted to absorb more. I think that's quite a big achievement for me personally, the dancing stuff – and actually not being too bad at it is quite amazing as well. I have not fallen over yet – touch wood.

The singing is a slightly different thing in that although I know that I can hold a tune I have no music training at all, and it is still the most nerve-wracking point of the play for me before I go on to sing the song. I'm absolutely terrified. If there was music supporting it, it would be different, but because it is an accappella you are very exposed – and when it goes wrong it can go really badly wrong, as has happened on one occasion. When it goes right it's beautiful and it's very enjoyable. It's quite nice still as an actor, after five or six years out of college and doing

quite good stuff, to still find those moments that scare the hell out of you, it's something to work off.

**As well as doing your main roles in both *Julius Caesar* and *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* you're also understudying Proteus and Brutus. Talk to me about your experience of understudy work – and why did you chose to do it?**

I've had experience of understudy work before, and it's not my favourite job in the world. It never will be. However, the roles are the most interesting and complex in both plays, I think, and therefore the challenge is dangled before you, and I find it very hard not to take up those challenges when they're put there. The practicality of doing it has been an absolute nightmare and with hindsight I wouldn't have done it. Yet, how do you say no when both directors are saying 'we need you to do this' and flattering you and doing all kinds of outrageous things to make you say yes, which they both did. It's nice, because it means that people know you can do it – they trust you in an emergency to be able to get on and make sure it works.

It's just the practicality of doing it – time management. Physically and mentally doing it is really difficult. It sounds like I'm being a bit lightweight about it, but it's about never having time off and always having your nose in a script. With understudying you don't get the time like you do when you're playing the roles, to set things in concrete in your head, to associate it with the moves, and run it with the actors you're actually going to be doing it with if you ever have to go on. This means the process of learning it and remembering it is infinitely harder, and you're doing all of this with the possibility that it may never actually be seen. That's the reality of it. However there is a real privilege, I think, in actually being able to speak some of the most beautiful verse that has ever been written. That's why we do Shakespeare, why people love Shakespeare, because it is amazing to dig into that and discover how genius this man was that wrote it. It's what makes me do it, and keeps me still doing it.

## **Comments on the Regional Tour**

In this section the actors and director of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* talk about their experiences of working on the 2004 regional tour - what they hope to gain from the tour and what it is like to rehearse two Shakespeare plays simultaneously (often both on the same day!).

- Fiona Buffini (page 43)
- Alex Avery (page 43)
- Laurence Mitchell (page 44)
- Andrew Melville (page 45)
- Philip Edgerley (page 45)

## **Fiona Buffini**

(Director)

### **How have you found working towards doing a major tour like this and coming to all the different venues?**

I've loved it – I think this is exactly what the RSC should be doing. I think any subsidised theatre has the duty, particularly the RSC and the National, being the two top subsidised theatres in the country, to take their work to people who otherwise wouldn't be able to see it, because everybody's paying for it. And I love going round to all our different venues, and feeling the differences in the audiences, and seeing how each town responds differently to the work. It's a very interesting thing for me to find out more about England, more about Wales, more about Scotland, and the differences between all those. And particularly the differences in England – we're a nation of many different nations. I think in terms of the casting we've cast a company who hopefully are going to be able to get on with each other for a year, which is almost as long as the contract lasts. And for me my excitement is that we are like the players in Hamlet. We roll into a town, we do our stuff and we roll out again.

### **What would you hope people would take away from the experience, whether it's the company of the tour or the audience?**

I hope they love the play. I hope anybody who comes to see the Two Gentlemen of Verona will think 'My God, I don't understand why this isn't done all the time. I think it's a wonderful play'. That's my main hope. I know the company love the play and I love the play, and so far the audiences seem to have loved the play. That's what I'd really like to have achieved – reclaiming the play from this preposterous idea that it's in some way a warm-up act to the rest of Shakespeare's work. I absolutely disagree with that wholeheartedly. So that's what I'd like, and I'd also like people, particularly young people in the audience, and this may be their first experience of seeing Shakespeare, I'd really like them to come out thinking, 'My God, I didn't know Shakespeare could be like this. I didn't know it could be such a good night out'.

## **Alex Avery**

(Valentine)

### **On the regional tour you're going all over the place in areas that don't necessarily have much theatre. How have people received you, and what do feel is important that people take from this tour?**

I don't feel that we have really met as many of the public as we would have liked. There are several reasons – one, because it's not arranged – two, because I think provincially people don't have a habit of hanging round in the bar afterwards and approaching actors – and thirdly, a lot of the places haven't had bars, so it's not been very obvious where you could meet the actors

should you wish to. I think that's very sad on this tour because I think that's half of the point of it, to get the reaction of these local people, a lot of whom don't go to the theatre regularly, and some of whom may not ever have been to the theatre, or more likely haven't seen Shakespeare before.

The people we have met, usually schoolchildren who are studying it, they're the ones with the confidence to come up and say 'Look, I'm studying it. I've never seen Shakespeare before. Can you tell us about what it was like? I thought it was amazing'. There was one girl saying that she never thought she'd laugh at Shakespeare, and she had a fantastic time. There was a boy in Ellesmere Port who said 'I didn't understand anything that went on, but I really, really loved it. I loved the costumes, I loved the sets, and I loved the whole production. I really enjoyed the performances but I don't think I understood it. But I found it really funny.' I asked him 'Well, did you get the story?' He assumed that he hadn't because it was too difficult to understand what was going on because of the language barrier but when he started to explain it, it was clear that he had. He was probably putting himself down, because he hadn't studied Shakespeare, and thought it was the sort of thing that no one can grasp unless they've studied it. What we're proving to people is that you don't have to – all you have to do is go along. I think the education side of the tour is fantastic and that's one of the reasons I did it. It's a shame that we don't interact more, you want to because you genuinely want to know what people thought. The more people I can meet who have never seen Shakespeare before, coming up to me and saying 'We really enjoyed that. We didn't think we were going to', that's the best praise you could possibly get. You do the show, and then I think that post-show discussions are as important to the tour as the show itself.

## **Laurence Mitchell**

(Proteus)

### **What are the good things and the bad things about being on tour?**

The very, very, very good thing is where we're going – all the places we've gone to. Often when you're in a play and you see the audience afterwards, they say 'Oh thank you so much, thank you so much for that.' And many of these places we've been they've all been saying, 'thank you so much for coming – thank you for coming.' That's brilliant – that to me is brilliant. That's what we should be doing. I much prefer it. I'm an inverted snob, anyway. I don't want to be on big number one tours where we go to lots of all the old familiar places. It's brilliant that we go to lots of places where it's exciting that the Royal Shakespeare Company, or whoever, are coming into their town and setting up.

Also, I'm completely in awe of the crew and what they do on this tour. It's absolutely phenomenal, isn't it? I know all these things are clichés but it is as much about them as it is about us. The only reason that we do those plays at all is because they come in and throw this theatre up in the ridiculously short space of time that they do, and take it down again. It's a shame that someone like me or whoever are the people that the audience come and say thank you to. Actually they should be going and saying thank you to Becky and all the guys, because they've actually brought the theatre, haven't they? We've just said a few lines.

## **Andrew Melville**

(Launce)

### **How was it rehearsing both shows at the same time?**

I found it a bit difficult, that, because they're both very, very, different. *The Two Gents* is set in the thirties and it's very fluffy and the *Julius Caesar* is very heavy, sort of militaristic. It's sometimes very difficult, particularly on the same day, to go from one to the other. You have to keep your mind in one while you're working in it, and then suddenly transfer your mind into a totally different world, but given that I started off doing two-and-a-half-weekly rep, I have learnt to adapt quickly. I think also that the years I've spent doing theatre where you haven't long rehearsal periods has helped. You have to learn to make decisions quite quickly, and stick to them.

## **Philip Edgerley**

(Outcast)

### **How have you found being on the tour and what do you hope the audience is going to take from it?**

The tour is a really interesting thing. We're going to some of the most rural and extraordinary places and bringing Shakespeare to them, and I don't think that should be underestimated. Sometimes when you do Shakespeare to audiences that are used to it, it can be a bit tired, you feel an audience have certain expectations and it's quite hard. I think what's joyous about this is that actually you're getting people coming in who've never seen Shakespeare and are absolutely loving it. And that's really important, that Shakespeare is out there. He's the greatest writer in the English language, and so if we can make that accessible then that is our job. That is what we do, neither more nor less than that. And I think that's what this tour is very good at doing.

### **If there could be one thing that you hope this tour achieves, what would it be?**

I think it's probably just that we're all part of some really incredible productions that are not traditional classical productions. There are two young, very vibrant directors with very strong visions and they've made the productions really real. And I think – I think actually all of us do feel it – that there's something about these productions, there's a bit of a buzz about them. They're unique, both from each other and actually from a lot of Shakespeare that's out there. I think if that gets across and we can sustain that for the year – and also get the four-week extension and go to Japan – then I'll be really happy. So far it seems to have, as everywhere we've been the reception to these productions has been really quite incredible, I've not been part of any other shows that have been received quite so enthusiastically. I think that's the main thing,

that we seem to have started off in a really positive way, with really encouraging feedback, and I just hope that that sustains for the run. I think it will.