

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

There Is Love...And Then There Is Love

Sylvie · Wednesday, January 31st, 2018

Shakespeare is in the air, nowhere more so than at South Coast Repertory (SCR) where an agile production of *Shakespeare in Love*, is serving up much of what was silly, sentimental and great fun in the 1998 Oscar-winning film of the same name. This film has been adapted for the stage by Lee Hall from the playful screenplay by Marc Norman and Tom Stoppard, and you know it's not easy to improve on Stoppard.

Wisely, Hall did not attempt such folly. He mostly attempted to be faithful to the comedy and fun that pervades the film. It's all that was required. It's a romp that does not demand depth so much as romance, zero compassion for ink-stained wretches, barbs aimed at the ruling class (smart queens excluded), and that spoofs the craziness of backstage life, as true then as it is now, with as many improbable ramifications as will fit on a stage.



Carmela Corbett and Paul David Story in *Shakespeare in Love* at SCR. Photo by Jordan Kubat.

If you enjoyed the film, you should get a kick out of this farewell fling from Artistic Director Marc Masterson, who staged this rousing swansong before his announced departure from SCR. It's a no-holds-barred, big, blustery, impudent production, performed on Ralph Funicello's fine replica of the Globe's 16th century wooden stage, its characters decked out in Susan Tsu's terrific costumes — from scruffy to sumptuous — and dispensed by an energetic cast of thousands. Well, a cast of two dozen, which may as well be thousands. If the comedy is a tad over-cast, overlong and overbroad, these are not major crimes. One major crime with this raucous show, however, is the sound editing. Whether it's due to poor projection, poor acoustics or both, it was hard to hear the actors in its quieter moments.



Paul David Story & Carmela Corbett in SCR's *Shakespeare In Love*. Photo by Jordan Kubat.

Standing out among the merry “thousands” are Paul David Story as Will Shakespeare, eager, young and desperately trying to finish a play titled *Romeo and Ethel* — and classy Corey Brill as Kit (Christopher) Marlowe. In the case of the former it's because he exudes a winning boyish quality; in the case of the latter, it's because he keeps his head when all about him are losing theirs, and a handsome head it is. (One of the more delectable scenes, for those familiar with *Cyrano de Bergerac*, is a tongue-in-cheek steal from *Cyrano* put in the service of the balcony scene from *Romeo and Ethel*, destined, yes, to become *Juliet*.)

Notable too are Bo Foxworth as addled impresario/company manager Henslowe, Bill Brochtrup as an almost defendably handsome Lord Wessex, while the regal Elyse Mirto, gives her Queen Elizabeth that eye-brow-raising touch of the commoner by exercising a salty tongue whenever she considers it needed.



Center, Elyse Mirto as Queen Elizabeth in SCR's *Shakespeare in Love*. Back left: Paul David Story and Carmela Corbet. Photo by Jordan Kubat.

A little more assertiveness would be welcome from Carmela Corbett as the willful Viola de Lesseps (alias Thomas Kent), the object of Shakespeare's adoration, but no such lack of brass lies in Amelia White's Nurse. She makes all the shrewd left-handed moves in her devoted protection of her cherished ward. Clever fun all around.

If you liked the film you'll enjoy the play. If you did not, wiser perhaps to stay away.

Top image: Front & Center, Paul David Story as Will Shakespeare, with the cast of SCR's production of Shakespeare in Love behind him. Photo by Tania Thompson.

WHAT: *Shakespeare In Love*

WHERE: South Coast Repertory, 655 Town Center Drive in Costa Mesa.

WHEN: Sundays-Thursdays, 7:30pm; Fridays-Saturdays, 8 pm; Saturdays-Sundays, 2:30pm. Ends Feb. 11. ASL-interpreted performance Saturday, Feb. 3, 2:30pm.

HOW: Tickets start at \$26. Available at www.scr.org, or 714.708.5555 or in person at the Box Office, 655 Town Center Drive in Costa Mesa.



Orson Bean and Alley Mills in *Alright Then* at Pacific Resident Theatre. Photo by Jeff Lorch.

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AND NOW WE COME TO *ALRIGHT THEN*...

OK. I'm an avowed Orson Bean fan, and I will be to the end of my days. He's a great comic, a fine actor, a gentleman and a sweetheart. That's a fact. I also have no reason to not be a fan of his wife, Alley Mills, since I don't really know her and because Orson, who in my view can do *almost* no wrong, had the good judgment to marry her.

I preface this review with this statement because the two-person event Mr. and Mrs. Bean have concocted between them and that opened last weekend on the shell of the former *Rhinoceros* set at Pacific Resident Theatre (hmm?) falls within range of that *almost*.

Alright Then, it hurts to say it, is a conversation in search of a play. Or you might say it's a conversation in search of a structure — in search of how to make something as intimate and elusive as real conjugal bliss become something to be shared with strangers. That's the tricky part.

Although I would never say never when it comes to what can or cannot constitute powerful theatre,

marital happiness — and I can confirm it exists — is perhaps too ephemeral, too evanescent not to fade to white under the glare of shared exposure. It is a deeply *private thing*, a unique event, part work, part sheer luck. But it is also, by definition, the absence of conflict. So part of me is overjoyed to report that *Alright Then* is simply not very... dramatic.

Since *Alright Then* is about their own happy marriage, these actors are inescapably up to their necks involved — it is *their* happiness — and even as capable a director as Guillermo Cienfuegos, who helped put *Alright Then* up on stage, may have been hobbled by the daunting enterprise of dramatizing two very happy people.

Another, smaller difficulty facing this show is that a number of key events that made *Safe At Home*, Bean's one-man show seen at PRT last fall, so impressive, have returned in this one. That echo needs some attention. It's true that not every audience will have seen the previous show, but still. They might. It is, however, a less significant hiccup than the absence of coherent structure. The show wanders, from interesting tidbit to alarming event and from stage right to stage left, but the through-line is too circuitous.



Orson Bean & Alley Mills in *Alright Then* at Pacific Resident Theatre. Photo by Jeff Lorch.

So for now let's agree that *Alright Then* is a lot of rambling, mostly benign, even inspired banter, generated by the improbable love affair of two engaging human beings. Despite a 22-year difference in their ages and complicated, even painful childhoods in each of their pasts, they have managed to create an enviably joyous marriage of more than 20 years and counting. And... let's agree that, so far, they haven't found the key to making it a play. Whatever *Alright Then* is meant to be is still in its cocoon: future undetermined.

Whether you can make drama out of happiness remains the open question. Perhaps conjugal bliss is simply something to be enjoyed and grateful for (which they are). And perhaps that's enough. The good news is that since this show is all in the family, its future rests entirely in their four capable hands.

WHAT: *Alright Then*

WHERE: Pacific Resident Theatre, 703 Venice Blvd., Venice CA 90291. Free parking in lot behind the theatre or on the street.

WHEN: Thursdays-Saturdays, 8pm; Sundays, 3pm . Ends March 25.

HOW: Tickets, \$25-\$34, available at <http://www.pacificresidenttheatre.com> or 310.822.8392. Senior discount \$3 and student discount \$5 (on Thursdays & Fridays). Student rush, \$12.

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