

'Comedy' in Livermore a merry romp

By Pat Craig

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Shakespeare's topsy-turvy tale "The Comedy of Errors" was never meant to be taken the least bit seriously.

At its heart is one big chase scene punctuated by a mistaken identity created by two sets of identical twins, with a little lovin', some mishandled money and a father's search for his missing family.

It's one of the jolliest ways to spend a pleasant summer evening, lazing on the lawn of a Livermore winery as this early California carnival of silliness explodes all around you.

"Comedy of Errors" is this year's summer production by Livermore Shakespeare Festival. It's a thoroughly delectable production, set in the California rancho era on a gorgeous set, with lavish costumes and an attitude that pays slapstick homage to vaudeville, burlesque and generations of comedians who would do anything to make you laugh.

Director Lisa A. Tromovitch, founder of the festival, and her cast have wrung every bit of silliness from the script and added even more of their own invention, including a band that also supplies sound effects and gag signs to explain or make commentary on unfolding events.

She takes full advantage of a feature of the festival's productions, which might not last much longer if the quality of the shows continues at this level. The plays are staged on what is essentially the front lawn of the small estate winery, which allows for a very intimate feel for the productions. Theatergoers can enjoy a closeness to the actors and a very real sense of being part of this mad romp that has performers emerging from all around the place to enter the comic commotion.

The play has been well-cast, with age-appropriate actors, something that is not always possible but adds considerably to the richness of a production. And the talent featured in the play is tremendous.

Actors playing the two sets of twins, Nikolai Lokteff, Matt Ballin, Lee Simmons and Bryant Hoex, not only have the plum comic roles, but take full advantage of the production's possibilities with high energy and beautifully executed slapstick bits. Christine Macomber, who leads the orchestra and becomes a character in the play toward the end, is a delight, comically and musically, adding a playfulness to her role that makes the audience part of the joke.

John Hutchinson as Egeon, the father of two of the twins, delivers a beautifully timed performance with a wonderful subtlety and sly comic presentation.

Costumes and sets in the show by Cathie McClellan and Randall A. Enlow have been beautifully constructed and provide an instant connection to the time and place where the story unfolds.

And Tromovitch deserves huge praise for putting it all together and providing an excellent evening of summer delights.

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THEATER REVIEW

- WHAT: Livermore Shakespeare Festival presents "The Comedy of Errors," by William Shakespeare
- WHEN: 7:30 p.m. Fridays-Saturdays, 6:30 p.m. Sundays, through Aug. 4
- WHERE: Retzlaff Estate Winery, 1356 S. Livermore Ave., Livermore
- RUNNING TIME: 2 1/2 hours
- HOW MUCH: \$30, with student and senior citizen discounts
- CONTACT: 800-838-3006, <http://www.livermoreshakes.org>