

Good performance in *Two Gentlemen*



Lanier Leonard '80, here shown on a ten-speed bike, portrays Valentine in the MIT Musical Theatre Guild's production of *Two Gentlemen of Verona*.

By Kathy Hardis

The MIT Musical Theatre Guild is currently presenting a rock musical version of Shakespeare's *Two Gentlemen of Verona*. Their production benefits from energetic, talented leads and from a well-directed, well-rehearsed jazz band. They also have a large multilevel set, complete with ramps, a sliding board and a fireman's pole on which the cast *could*-have joyously romped, sang and danced their way through a Shakespearean play.

Somewhere, somehow, the production loses the vitality inherent in the script. Its problems seem to originate in apparently indifferent, unimaginative direction which does not make full use of either the given stage space or the actors' potential. The choreography of group numbers is generally mediocre and unspontaneous; visually, the production lacks life. Each performance has shown improvement, however, and by Thursday night the result could be worth seeing.

The musical version of *Two Gentlemen of Verona* originated as part of Joseph Papp's Shakespeare Festival in Central Park. The adaptation, only loosely based on the original text, doesn't resemble any traditional form of

Shakespearean theatre, although it does capture the essence of its comedy.

The scenes still take place in Verona and Milan, but the characters are drawn from the ethnic diversity of New York City. The "metamorphosed" *dramatis personae*, which includes blacks and Puerto Ricans, captures the energy of the city's street life. The dialogue is filled with multi-racial vernacular, and the music is a pastiche of rock, pop, blues and soul.

The role of Sylvia, as played by Carolyn Rose Towler '80, overflows with the kind of jubilation and effervescence which should characterize the entire play. Her singing and dancing are both excellent and uninhibited; her performance is outstanding. Valentine (Lanier Leonard '80) is a singer of equal caliber; his duet with Sylvia, "Night Letter," is one of the evening's high points.

Jerry Bisantz brings a professional air to the role of Proteus, especially in the singing of the calypso "Calla Lily Lady." Lisa Kaufman's performance as the naive (but just turned pregnant!) Julia is very good, but Thorio (Ron Lyon '79) is perhaps the funniest character in the play.

The superb jazz band, conducted by Howard Boles '76, is an act in itself. They conclude each

performance with a series of wild solo improvisations on the theme that keeps the audience standing in the aisles.

The band, unfortunately, is the production's last strong point. Though not entirely without clever ideas and effects — the Duke's Guard of unicycling Hell's Angels, for example — the direction shows a general lack of imaginative effort.

The choreography leaves most of the stage unused, and the dancing of the chorus is awkward and forced.

The lack of coordination in the costumes doesn't improve the production's already weak visual aspect. Some actors are dressed in street clothes, while others wear bright theatrical costumes. The two styles just don't mix. The lighting effects, similarly, are full of rough edges.

The follow spots never quite follow their targets, and the stage is often either too dark or too bright.

Most important of all, one wonders what has happened to the life and sparkle of the musical as a whole. The play's intrinsic joy and spontaneity are missing. The essential problems, apart from the production difficulties already mentioned, lie not so much in what is present, but in what is not. Too many of the story's loose ends are left untied, and a multitude of delightful effects which could have been profitably added just weren't.

Two Gentlemen of Verona is not a first-rate production. It is a collection of excellent performances by a number of very talented people, and to hear the jazz band alone is almost worth the price of admission.

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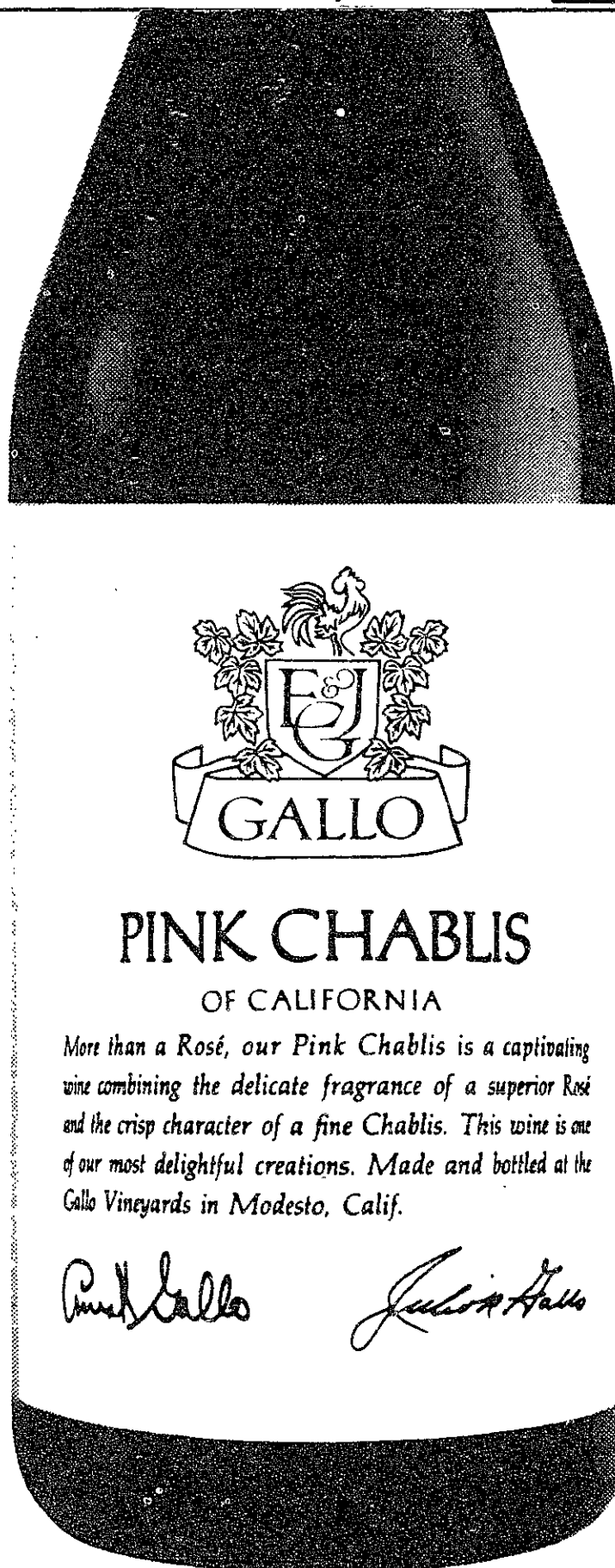
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