

SHAKESPEARE THEATRE COMPANY'S ROMEO & JULIET

While the Shakespeare Theatre Company's Sidney Harmon Hall in Washington, D.C. is now a year old, the thrust configuration that the theatre's design allows had its first outing with the company's current production of "Romeo & Juliet."

For an acting company, a thrust or open stage presents great opportunities but also a few drawbacks, because the audience surrounds the stage on three sides; however, for a Shakespearean company, it allows the enactment of a play in the manner that the Bard intended. Elizabethan theatres commonly had thrust stages rather than the proscenium arrangement more frequently seen in modern theatres. An actor on an open stage plays not only to the audience in front of him, but also to attendees on either side. Consequently, cognizance of how his actions are seen and voice projected in an arch of approximately 270 degrees is important. If making a soliloquy, an actor tends to stare at a single point or object rather than the audience in such a venue; whereas if three or more actors tread the stage, they will be arranged so that at least one always faced toward a segment of the audience. The Harmon Hall's stage takes up a great deal of the breadth and depth of the hall, and its company makes good use of it.

But this is not the only unusual attribute of this production. Unlike most modern productions of "Romeo & Juliet," the Shakespeare Theatre's cast is all male, as the cast would have been in William Shakespeare's own time. Women did not make their stage debut in England until the Restoration of the House of Stewart with Charles II in 1660. (At least two of Charles' mistresses were met at the playhouse.) The reopening of the theatres was one of Charles' first acts upon landing in England (and for which he is chiefly remembered in some parts of London to this day), and he allowed women to take the stage, as they had been able to do in France.

The play's set is minimal. There are two walls on the stage, with a railed balcony framed between them, and the thrust of the stage projecting out from there. On the stage-left wall, there are ladder-like rungs in a hopscotch pattern rising to the balcony. While the play normally calls for Romeo to climb vines to Juliet's balcony, in this production Romeo climbed these rungs. There are also several doors and wrought-iron grills when the vault appears. Rather than the set being colorful, the colors of the production come from the costumes of the actors, occasional tables with flowers (for the Capulet ball), the lighting upon the swish of flashing blades, and lots of candles and their holders (both human and otherwise). Set designer Scott Bradley's obvious intent was to focus the attention upon the actors rather than the sets. Jennifer Moeller's costumes, which indicated the period as Renaissance Italy, allowed for more visual distinction between who was "male" and who "female" in the all-male cast.

As "Romeo & Juliet" is amongst the most well-known and performed plays within Shakespeare's canon, and possibly within the canon of the English language. Most of the audience knew some of the lines and many knew most. All knew the plot, as this tragic romance has been adapted not only for the stage but also in ballet, opera, film, and the musical stage. Few Americans have never heard at least parts of Broadway's take on the play, "West Side Story." Consequently, few people needed to concentrate on the words to understand the story line. Therefore, the minimalist set design and the costuming drew the audience's attention to the actors, which is where it should be.

Unfortunately, that is where the problems began. While the acting is good, and in some cases first-rate – Drew Eshelman as Nurse to Juliet is a hoot – no fire, no passion, and no chemistry at all exists

between the titular leads. Although both Juliet (James Davis) and Romeo (Finn Wittrock) are relatively fresh-faced, and act their lines well, they clearly are simply playing roles. Both men are in their twenties, possibly even late in their twenties, playing parts that Shakespeare wrote to be played by teen-aged boys. In modern theatre, women impersonating young men are quite common, and convincing. However, men impersonating young women are much less convincing and require a significantly larger suspension of disbelief.

Director David Muse did not really attempt to hide the fact that male actors in this production played female roles – in fact, it was emphasized by the fact the "women's" bust lines were non-existent. In contrast to Romeo and Juliet, the actors playing the older roles like Nurse, the Ladies Capulet and Montague, and the women of the ball (played as a chorus of sorts) were quite convincing. The most startling observation I noted was that the older the role an actor played, the more convincing he became. The question I wondered from this observation was, "Do the differences between the sexes decline with age?" While this idea was obviously not the focus of the play, it was certainly implied by the logic of same. The passion of youth and the suppression of reason have an inverse relationship.

In this production, Romeo's passion is much more evident in his fight and murder of Tybalt than in his pursuit of Juliet. When they kiss, it is more akin to a peck a mother might give to her child at bedtime than the smooch of true love. Romeo has more passion at his dying moment than in his living time. The true oddity in this peculiar courtship is that Romeo exhibits more puppy-like youthfulness and irrationality in his confrontation with the aforementioned Tybalt than he should, but seems too rational in his restraint with Juliet. Indeed, Juliet herself is the epitome and embodiment of restraint in the balcony scene. One does not really believe her inducements and pleas for Romeo to ascend to her boudoir.

The one place where ardor does make a showing, and the only time it is believably displayed, is the courtship sequence set at the Capulet ball where Romeo first sets eyes upon his Juliet. In the circle dance, Romeo's eyes avidly, nay passionately, track Juliet; whereas Juliet's eyes watch Romeo more demurely and covertly. She is definitely and believably coy. The fact that the audience could observe the ocular tracking through a relatively complex bit of choreography says much for both the actors and the director – you can see the relationship launch. Unfortunately, the denouncement of the self-same courtship in the Capulet tomb follows in script, but not in feeling.

SKIP KEATS, CONTRIBUTING WRITER



Finn Wittrock as Romeo, Aubrey Deeker as Mercutio and Cody Nickell as Tybalt in the Shakespeare Theatre Company's all-male production of "Romeo and Juliet," directed by David Muse.



Finn Wittrock as Romeo and James Davis as Juliet in the Shakespeare Theatre Company's all-male production of "Romeo and Juliet," directed by David Muse.



The Shakespeare Theatre Company's all-male production of "Romeo and Juliet," directed by David Muse.



James Davis as Juliet (left) and Drew Eshelman as Juliet's Nurse (right) in the Shakespeare Theatre Company's all-male production of "Romeo and Juliet," directed by David Muse.