



Testing the “Academic Review Kit”: an Answer to Alan Armstrong. Review of Northern Broadsides’s *Romeo and Juliet* at The Rose Theater

by Peter Smith. Written on 2008-06-30. First published in the *ISE Chronicle*.

For the production: *Romeo and Juliet* (2008, Northern Broadsides, UK).

ST SERENDIPITY MUST BE THE PATRON SAINT OF THEATRE REVIEWERS. AS I TRAVELLED BACK ON the tube last night wondering how to sound positive about yet another indifferent production of *Romeo and Juliet*, I took out my newly received copy of *Shakespeare Bulletin*: essential reading matter for bored commuters everywhere. As if by magic, it fell open at Alan Armstrong’s wittily acerbic “*Romeo and Juliet Academic Theatre Review Kit*” (SB, 26.1 (2008), pp. 109-24) in which he devises and lists, as a series of tick-boxes, the most conspicuous features of various productions so that the contemporary reviewer has only to proceed through the multiple choice of his Identikit template to produce a coherent review of the latest version. Armstrong’s case, though irreverent, is not without some assiduously gathered ammunition since, as he states, he collected and analysed no fewer than “111 reviews of 73 productions of *Romeo and Juliet*, stretching back to 1987” (p. 118). As the most frequently cited contributor (I certainly had no idea that I had reviewed the play that many times which makes me worry about how many productions I have sat through when not writing it up), I feel especially entitled to engage with Armstrong’s article.

While in no way dismissive of what it is we do as theatre reviewers (and how could he be since Armstrong himself is one of our most prolific and experienced colleagues?), his Structuralist recipe of production features (reminiscent of Vladimir Propp’s *The Morphology of the Folktale* (1928)) reveals not only how conventionalised and unexciting academic theatre reviewing has become, subject as it is to the “reductive pressure of the traditional review format” (p. 119) but, concomitantly, how conventionalised and unexciting productions of *Romeo and Juliet* have become. The Nurse, for instance, in Armstrong’s scheme, can be “young and bawdy”; “old and funny”; or “brave and maternal”. Last night she was “young and bawdy”. Costumes can be “colour-coded: shades of red for Capulets and blue for Montagues.” Actually, the Capulets were

dressed in green but Armstrong is spot on about the blue Montagues. The ending of the play might involve Capulet and Montague in “each other’s arms, showing some hope for the future.” Spot on again. When Armstrong is able to write a review of a play in absentia or, even more strangely, write a review in advance of seeing a production, there is nothing left remarkable beneath the visiting moon.

While Armstrong could have chosen any one of a number of commonly performed plays around which to build his theatre reviewer’s kit, his choice of *Romeo* is especially apt to illustrate the sheer tiredness of contemporary performance styles. As his checklist demonstrates, productions of this play over the last twenty years have produced little distinctive or noteworthy. In fact there is an unspoken consensus among seasoned theatre-goers that, though not as straightforwardly tedious as *As You Like It*, this is the Shakespeare play which is most difficult to bring off. Probably, as Armstrong notes, “if you’re young enough to look the part [of Juliet and, we might add, Romeo], you haven’t got the experience or technique [to play it effectively]” (p. 112). Benedict Fogarty and Sarah Ridgeway who played the eponymous couple were both making their professional stage debut which certainly did not help. There was very little in the way of youthful excitement, naivety or – dare I say it – love, and the double suicide was nothing more than accomplished amateur dramatics, the distinctive characteristic of which is the satisfied declamation of a more-or-less accurate script which is short on vocal modulation as well as non-verbal reactions to other characters on-stage. The casting of the beefy Peter Toon as Mercutio meant that the character’s usually urbane and frequently fey qualities were missing here. His stance and shaven head gave him the appearance of a nightclub bouncer rather than Romeo’s homoerotic partner. Barrie Rutter, the director, played Capulet and a peculiarly over-emphasised Prologue, enunciating as he might if visiting an elderly relative in an old folks’ home. Sue McCormick’s Nurse was the personification of domestic comfort, clutching the tiny Juliet to her overwhelming bosom. The contrast with Lisa Howard’s slim and angular Lady Capulet was clear.

Broadsides pride themselves on minimal staging, rough and ready properties and costume, and the kind of transferable design necessitated by touring (this production is visiting a dozen venues across England). Even so, there were some peculiar decisions. Juliet’s balcony was a metal platform on stilts and accessed by a fire-escape set of stairs. But the Rose Theatre boasts a double-level balcony that runs round its upstage wall so this seemed redundant. Most conspicuous and bewildering was the use of a large square dais with two steps running round it much like the base of a cenotaph. The action took place on it, half on it (one character would address another who stood on the stage floor and was thus elevated above him) and off it. There seemed to be absolutely no logic as to when it was used or not. In likelihood its major role was

as a sounding board for the clog dance jig (a company trademark) of the Capulet ball but for the rest of the time it was simply awkward. The ball was accompanied by a live band: trumpet, guitar, double bass, banjo and trombone, and composer, Conrad Nelson, provided here and throughout a lively score. The use of handbells accompanying the entry of Paris was particularly effective especially in their swift transition from triumph to mournfulness as the “dead” Juliet was discovered. Again, though the stage fights needed further work (the killing of Mercutio was technically feeble), the vigorous drumming accompaniment was dangerous and aggressive.

In conclusion I should say a few words about the new Rose Theatre. Armstrong’s “Review Kit” notes that too little attention is paid to audiences. In the Rose, the audience is ineluctable since they stretch out on cushions at the foot of the stage. While the rear of the auditorium at ground level and upper levels is seated in the conventional way, the “pit” is a bare floor and offers space for audience members to prostrate themselves and look up at the stage. In its mixture of a conventional auditorium and a cut-down version of the Globe’s yard, it is the worst of both worlds. The lolling supine groundlings looked inert (and indeed several of the younger audience members were asleep throughout) which was distracting enough for those seated behind them but did little to encourage energised performances from the company. The theatre architecture was uninspiring. The low stage, conventionally shaped, is flanked upstage by six cement pillars and the predominant material is a light coloured wood. The whole thing has the effect of a civic centre or town hall which has been adapted for the local amateur dramatics club. In such dull surroundings and with such a lacklustre show, thank God for Armstrong’s review kit.