



Galloping Apace: *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet*

By Gavin Hollis. First published in the *ISE Chronicle*.

For the production: *Romeo and Juliet* (2015, Shakespeare in the Square, USA). See production details at the end of the review.

FOR THE PAST FIVE YEARS SHAKESPEARE IN THE SQUARE, A COMPANY FOUNDED BY graduates of NYU Tisch School of the Arts, has been presenting free late-summer outdoor Shakespeare in Washington Square. This winter the company moved indoors for the first time. In 2013 the company presented a full-sized *Romeo and Juliet*, with three of the same actors. This return to *Romeo and Juliet* is different, however. Continuing the trend popularized by companies like Fiasco, whose *Cymbeline* was a huge success at the New Victory Theater and the Barrow Street Theater in 2011, Shakespeare in the Square has stripped down to a five-strong group of versatile actors. The pacey production manages to avoid many of the pitfalls of stripped-down Shakespeare, although its joyfulness and vivacity comes at the expense of its title characters, who aren't as well delineated as some of the secondary characters in the play.

There are several dangers with stripped-down Shakespeare: the play becomes incoherent; the actors lapse into caricature; and the fact that it is stripped-down becomes the main point of the production. To its great credit, Daniel Hasse's production by-and-large manages to avoid these pitfalls. It occasionally lapses into narrative incoherence, especially in scenes where a great deal is going on, but more often than not it manages to tell the story of the play with clarity. Indeed, two moments—the opening fight scene and the closing revelation of the bodies of Romeo and Juliet in the tomb—may even benefit from the confusion, even if the precise moments of storytelling fall away a little.

The production frequently makes a virtue of its actors taking on multiple roles and rarely mines it for cheap gags. Jack de Sanz deserves particular credit for managing to perform as the Friar and the Nurse in act three scene three not only without making it ridiculous but also clearly marking the emotional trajectories of both characters in the

scene. Chris Dooley manages the impressive feat of corpse-doubling as both the recently interred Tybalt and the freshly killed Paris in the play's final scene, a swift and unseen removal of spectacles the only marker of difference between the two characters: again, what could have been an inopportune gag served instead remind us that Romeo's passion has resulted in two murders. Constantine Malahias' Corey Feldman-esque Mercutio evinced deep pleasure in the vulgarity of his wordplay, although his turn as Lord Capulet is particularly strong, as the young actor managed to vocally and physically manifest a rage-fuelled petty tyrant.



Pictured: Taylor Myers (as Romeo), Constantine Malahias (as Mercutio). Photo: Erik Choquette.

Hasse makes a virtue of the production's limitations without fetishizing them. Before the play began and in the interval, members of company got ready in the auditorium (a choice perhaps inspired by The Globe Theatre's much-lauded *Twelfth Night*), chatted to audience members, and took turns singing songs ("Modern Love" by David Bowie, "Love Interruption" by Jack White, and, in the interval that immediately followed Mercutio's death, "Tears of a Clown" by The Kinks, sung by Malahias). This comfort between actor and audience also played a role in the play, as audiences sitting on the "gallant stools," placed right next to the stage in homage to the indoor theaters of Shakespeare's day, were invited by Peter to attend the masque at the Capulets and then invited on stage to play the role of party guests. The gallant stool tickets, available as the production's



Pictured: Elise Kibler (as Juliet). Photo: Jon Hess.

premium seats, come with a free drink, which was served to the audience members at this point in the production. The communal style of performance was very winning, particularly in the first half. But the production did not lean too hard on its own cuteness. Early on the production made a joke about the incomprehensibility of Shakespeare's language, when Benvolio and Mercutio look puzzled at some of Romeo's pontificating. This moment I confess made my heart sink, as it seemed like a cheap gag at the expense of the play, born of a lack of confidence in the actors and the audience. I shouldn't have been worried—as Hasse makes clear in his directors' notes, the production attempts to present "Shakespeare to the hilt, with a respect for the words and an awareness of original staging practices." The moment revolved around Romeo's

prolixity in his first scene, rather than the difficulty of the language, indicating a care taken to meaning, poetry, and character. Romeo is an overly wordy poet in his infatuation with Rosaline; only after Juliet's arrival in his life does he seem to get to the point quicker.

Dooley, de Sanz, and Malahias revel in their multiple roles, many of which fizz with energy and wit. What does get lost here is the title characters: Taylor Myers' Romeo begins well, clearly establishing out his poetic sensibilities by writing down his own melancholy witticisms, but as the play hurtled along Myers seemed more comfortable in his role as Lady Capulet, a turn both comic and affecting. Elise Kibler may be even more underserved by the production: her Juliet had great moments of youthful energy, and her performance in the balcony scene found a great deal of personality.

But at other points Juliet's eagerness for galloping apace resulted in all-too hurried line deliveries (a problem that if anything affected her portrayal of Benvolio more, a character who doesn't seem to show the impatience of the title characters). At other points the lovers were not helped by some poor blocking choices. The first meeting at the Capulets was presented downstage left, which blocked off the interaction from a number of audience members (including this reviewer). The Gym at Judson is not the most flexible of spaces lighting-wise, and sometimes the production was consigned to too much darkness. The effect of the gorgeous lighting of Juliet at the window in act two scene two was somewhat undone by plunging Romeo into too much darkness. Hasse's insistence on speed (even though based on the Folio, the production makes a point of trying to present a full text production in "two hours traffic") leads to a fiery-footed production, but it also leads to it losing its "winning match," the titular lovers, in the "loving, black-browed night."

Production Details

General

<i>Title</i>	Romeo and Juliet
<i>Year</i>	2015
<i>Theater Company</i>	Shakespeare in the Square
<i>Theaters</i>	The Gym at Judson

Cast

JULIET/BENVOLIO/FRIAR JOHN	ELISE KIBLER
MERCUTIO/CAPULET.BATHASR/ABRAM	CONSTANTINE MALAHIAS
ROMEO/LADY CAPULET/SAMPSON	TAYLOR MYERS
PARIS/TYBALT/PRINCE/LADY MONTAGUE/PETER/APOTHECARY	CHRIS DOOLEY
NURSE/FRIAR LAWRENCE/MONTAGUE/CLOWN/PAGE/GREGORY	JACK DE SANZ

Creatives

DIRECTOR	DAN HASSE
ASSISTANT DIRECTOR, ASM, VOCAL COACH	CALEB SHOMAKER
SET DESIGN, PROPS	PHIL FALINO
COSTUME DESIGN	LIZ MCGLONE
PRODUCTION STAGE MANAGER	CONOR PERKINS